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Second half of the 15th century

Castilian Mudéjar Gothic Lectern

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Castilian workshop with Central European influence

Second half of the 15th century

Carved, pierced, and polychromed walnut wood

31.5 cm x 24 cm x 31 cm

Provenance: Mary Bellis Hungerford Collection

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Alejandro Villa del Castillo

On this occasion we present a carved and pierced wooden lectern which, due to its formal, technical, and decorative characteristics, can be dated to the second half of the 15th century, within the context of the Flamboyant Gothic style characteristic of the Crown of Castile. It was here that this style, originating in Central Europe, encountered the local Mudéjar artistic tradition. Owing to the small number of surviving examples, this type of object has received less scholarly attention than other forms of liturgical furniture, despite having played an essential role in medieval Christian liturgy as the physical support for sacred text during the celebration of Mass.

We are dealing with an altar lectern, formed by two boards joined by a hinge, allowing it to be folded in a scissor-like manner. This ingenious format, on the one hand, provides the stability and inclination required to support open books for reading during religious services, and on the other, allows for easy transport.

The lectern is composed of five pieces of carved and polychromed walnut wood (the two forming the larger leaf, the smaller leaf, and two mouldings nailed to the latter). The main decorative motif consists of four pierced rosettes on the larger leaf, arranged in a checkerboard pattern and formed by four teardrop-shaped petals. Both leaves end at their lower edges with cut-outs in the shape of ogee arches. The piece preserves traces of polychromy (a red ground and a perimeter band with gilded edges framing the four rosettes on the larger leaf).

Its state of conservation is reasonably good. It retains a beautiful patina resulting from the passage of time and shows some repairs (such as a metal reinforcement on one of its lower edges) that enhance its value as evidence of continuous use over the centuries.

An essential piece for the liturgy

The lectern, as a support for sacred books, became an essential element of medieval liturgical furniture. According to studies on etymology and liturgical use, the word *atril* derives from the Latin *lecturn* or *lecterium*, and its use in churches arose from the need to physically support missals (books of prayers and chants used in the celebration of Mass) during the liturgy, facilitating reading by the priest or deacon and reducing reliance on the acolyte, who had previously held the book by hand. With the help of the lectern, the reader did not have to strain their arms to hold what could be a very heavy book and could read with their hands free.

During the Middle Ages, the most common support for the missal was the altar cushion, documented as early as the 13th century in both French normative sources and widely circulated liturgical treatises. The cushion fulfilled a dual function: practical, by facilitating reading of the sacred book through a slight inclination, and symbolic, by underscoring the dignity of the missal as bearer of the divine word. This practice was codified in the *Missale Romanum* promulgated by Saint Pius V in 1570, which explicitly prescribed placing the missal on a cushion—a regulation that remained formally unchanged in successive editions of the missal well into the 20th century.

Nevertheless, this practice was never as rigid as the regulations might suggest. On the contrary, from the medieval period onward, cushions and lecterns—both wooden and metal—coexisted as alternative supports for the missal. The greater stability, versatility, and adjustable height of the lectern contributed to its rapid acceptance, especially in contexts where visibility and the comfort of the celebrant were priorities. By the late 16th century, prominent liturgical writers and reformers—such as Saint Charles Borromeo—explicitly permitted the use of the lectern, at least as a complement to the cushion, thus legitimizing a practice that had already become widespread. The decisive moment came in 1727, when a new edition of the *Caeremoniale Episcoporum*, promulgated under the pontificate

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of Benedict XIII, included for the first time the explicit possibility of using a small lectern of silver or artistically worked wood in place of the cushion. This inclusion marked official recognition of a practice already in general use, definitively sanctioning the lectern as a legitimate element of altar furnishings.

Although very few examples are known today, wooden lecterns must have been especially abundant in the Hispanic sphere. In Spain, a liturgical singularity developed that went beyond what was prescribed by Roman rubrics: the simultaneous use of two lecterns and two missals on the altar. Contrary to the general norm, which required moving the missal from one side of the altar to the other during the celebration, many Spanish and American churches permanently displayed two missals—one on the Epistle side and one on the Gospel side. This practice, widely documented from the 16th century onward through inventories, chronicles, and church accounts, occurred in cathedrals as well as parish and conventual churches and became a distinctive feature of Hispanic ceremonial.

From Its Trace in Art

Despite the loss of many of these objects, we have abundant representations of them in contemporary painting from the 15th and 16th centuries, where carved and pierced wooden pieces similar to the one discussed here are frequently depicted. Their prolific appearance in painting indicates that such lecterns must have been very common in their time.

One of the most interesting iconographic themes for observing lecterns in their original context is the Mass of Saint Gregory, a recurring subject depicting the eponymous pope celebrating Mass and receiving a vision of Christ on the altar. A good example is a panel attributed to the Hispano-Flemish painter Diego de la Cruz, dating before 1480 and housed in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (inv. no. 200701-0000). Positioned on the left side of the altar and adorned with beautiful Gothic tracery, the lectern supports an open missal (figure 1).

Another theme in which carved wooden lecterns frequently appear is representations of Saint Jerome. In one such work, painted by Joos van Cleve and titled *Saint Jerome in His Study* (1521, Harvard Art Museums; figures 2a and b), we see a piece that combines pierced tracery with ogee arches forming its base. A similar example appears in another Flemish *Saint Jerome* (ca. 1540, National Gallery of Australia; figure 3), depicting a piece that combines ogee arches with more modern, Renaissance-style decorations.

Finally, of extraordinary documentary value is a miniature depicting the French scribe Jean Mielot in his scriptorium (after 1456, from the codex *Miracles de Notre Dame*, f. 19, Bibliothèque nationale de France, no. FR 9198; figure 4). This illustration, strictly contemporary with our lectern, reflects the fashion for carving pierced tracery not only on book- and writing-related furnishings (desk and lectern) but also on other furniture, shelves, and cupboards completing the room.



Figure 1. *The Mass of Saint Gregory*, oil on panel, Diego de la Cruz (before 1480), Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (inv. no. 200701-0000, possibly from the Hieronymite monastery of Fresdelval, Burgos).

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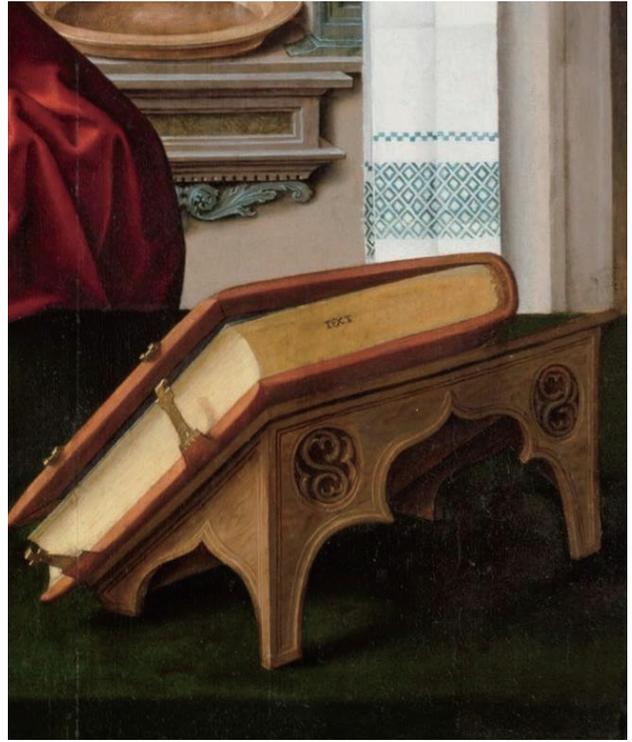


Figure 2a-2b. *Saint Jerome in His Study*, oil on panel, Joos van Cleve (1521), Harvard Art Museums (inv. no. 1961.26).



Figure 3. *Saint Jerome (Vanitas Vanitatum, Omnia Vanitas)*, anonymous (ca. 1540), National Gallery of Victoria, Australia (from Flanders).

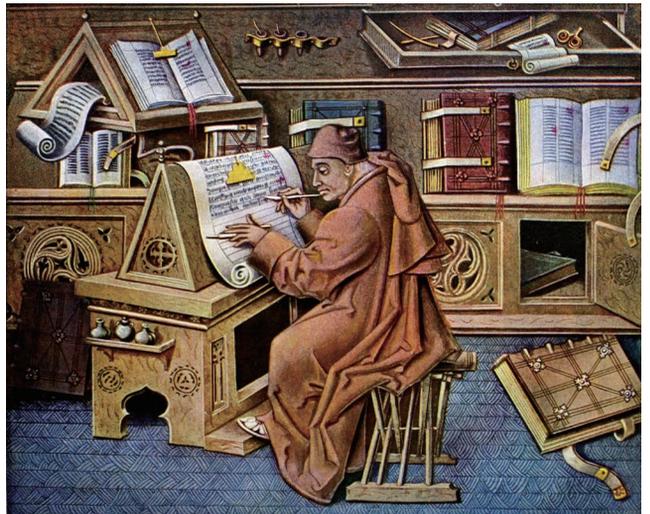


Figure 4. *Jean Miélot in His Scriptorium*, from *Miracles de Notre Dame*, f. 19 (Bibliothèque nationale de France, inv. no. FR 9198).

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To Collectors' Pieces

A small number of similar lectern furnishings are known from Central Europe, decorated with ogee arches and pierced tracery characteristic of the Flamboyant Gothic style, and closely related to the piece presented here. These include a series of fixed lecterns from the Cologne Museum (from the Rhineland region; figure 5), as well as examples from the parish churches of Schobüll (figures 6a and b), Saint Nicholas of Uelvesbüll (figure 7), and Notre-Dame de Joinville (France; in this case an ambo; figure 8). All of these, dated between the 15th century and the early 16th century, share the use of pierced tracery on the sides and, especially, on the lectern's reading surface. Beyond Central Europe, some English liturgical cupboards from the same period also survive, featuring panels decorated with the same technique and geometric forms (ca. 1490, private collection; figure 9).



Figure 5. Carved and pierced wooden lectern (late 15th century), Cologne, Museum für Angewandte Kunst Köln (from the Rhineland region).



Figure 6. Carved and pierced oak lectern (15th century), parish church of Schobüll.

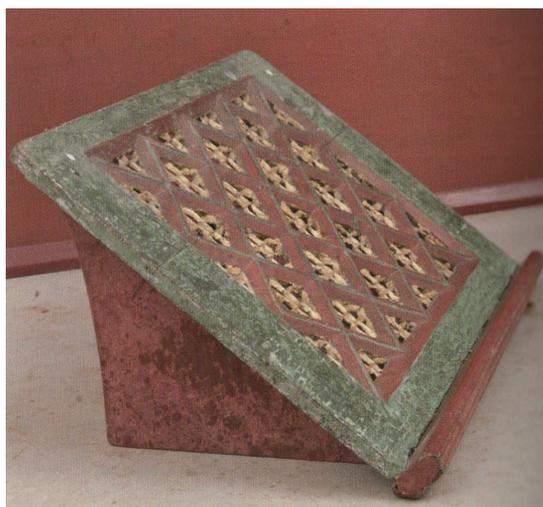


Figure 7. Carved and pierced oak lectern (15th century), Church of Saint Nicholas, Uelvesbüll.

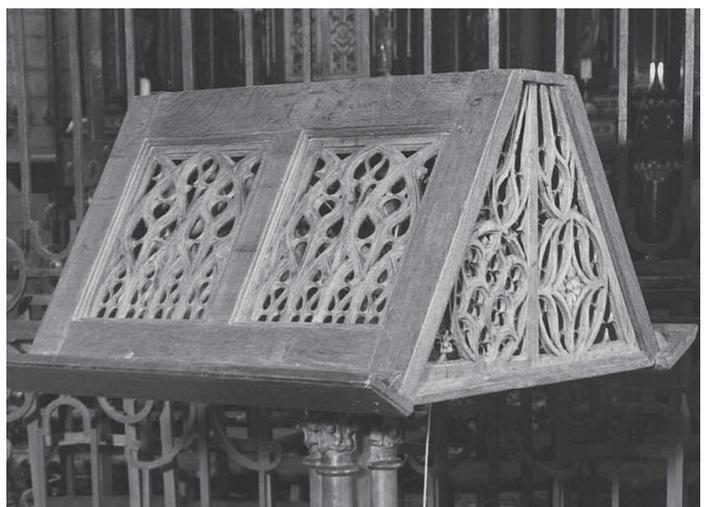


Figure 8. Carved and pierced wooden ambo, Joinville (Haute-Marne, first quarter of the 16th century), Church of Notre-Dame.

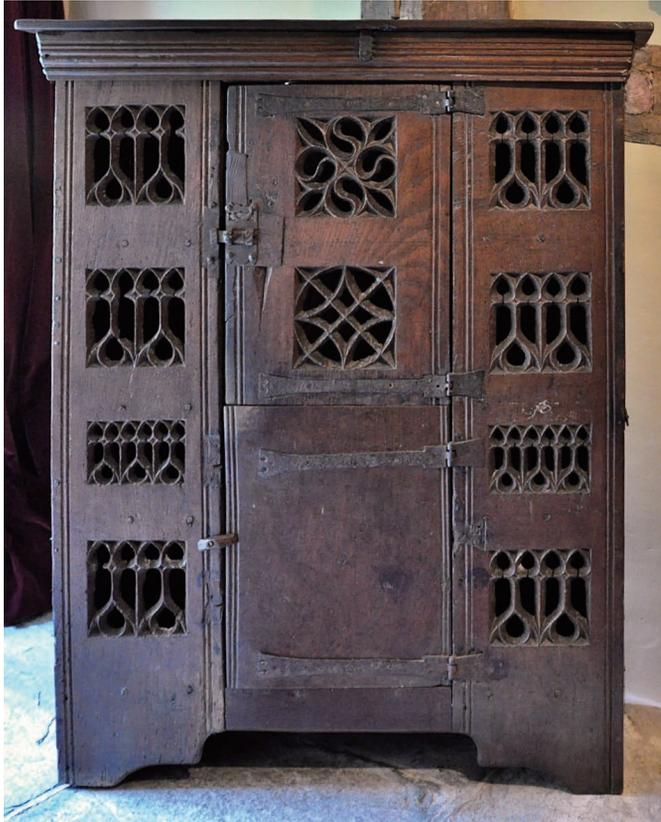


Figure 9. Liturgical cupboard, carved and pierced oak with metal fittings (ca. 1490), private collection.

Castile: Where Gothic and Mudéjar Merge

During the 15th century, the Crown of Castile experienced remarkable artistic flourishing, coinciding with significant social, economic, and political transformations. In this context, artistic currents from northern Europe—especially from the Low Countries (Flanders) and the German Rhineland—had a profound impact on Castilian ornamental production. One of the most significant contributions of these currents was the introduction and consolidation of Flamboyant decorative forms (from the French flamboyant, “flame-like”), characterized by complex and dynamic ornamentation of curved and sinuous lines reminiscent of tongues of fire. Traditional pointed arches gave way to compound curves, counter-curves, and lobed forms that appear to vibrate, flow, or burn. One of the undisputed protagonists of this artistic current was the ogee arch, composed of curves and counter-curves, like those incorporated in our lectern.

These trends soon reached Castile through multiple channels, one of the most important being the movement of artists and craftsmen,

including masters of northern origin or training, such as Juan Guas, Juan and Simón de Colonia, and Rodrigo Alemán. Figures such as Bishop Alonso de Cartagena, later Alonso de Fonseca, Archbishop of Seville, and Queen Isabella the Catholic herself acted as active patrons of works incorporating these stylistic innovations.

One of the fields in which Flamboyant influence is most evident in Castile is wood carving. Beyond altarpieces, carved wooden tracery was incorporated with particular intensity into elements such as choir stalls, one of the areas in which the Flamboyant language reached its highest refinement. Flamboyant motifs transformed flat surfaces into true wooden textiles, generating striking contrasts of light and shadow. Far from being a literal copy of foreign models, Castilian craftsmen integrated these elements with local motifs—especially repetitive patterns covering large surfaces, characteristic of the Mudéjar tradition of plasterwork—creating hybrid solutions that define the identity of late Castilian Gothic.

Thanks to this cultural exchange, and despite the scarcity of lecterns of this type in Spain, the best parallels (both typological and decorative) for our lectern are found in Hispanic works. Particularly noteworthy is a folding walnut lectern from 15th-century Spain, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. no. 41.100.136; figure 10). Although its heraldic and figurative decoration aligns it with European Gothic models, its scissor-like structure directly links it to the lectern studied here.

Although, as noted, wooden lecterns must have been very common in the Hispanic kingdoms from the 15th century onward, very few examples from this early period have survived. Lecterns made from other materials, such as metal, were also likely common, though these too have survived in very limited numbers. One reason for this scarcity is the custom of replacing older carved wooden and wrought-iron pieces with more luxurious ones (made from precious metals) that aligned with later

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Figure 10. Folding lectern, carved walnut wood (15th century), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. no. 41.100.136, from Spain).

tastes, generally during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. A good example is the Royal Chapel of Seville Cathedral, where early 16th-century documents record the existence of wooden lecterns. This pair, known only through documentary references, was replaced later in the same century by larger pieces made of repoussé silver, which are the ones preserved today.

Beyond lecterns themselves, Spain preserves a number of panels that originally belonged to other types of liturgical furniture. These feature carved decoration that blends Flamboyant Gothic forms with Hispanic Mudéjar art, characterized by repetitive geometric patterns and the absence of figurative decoration. Particularly close to the decoration of our lectern are two panels from choir stalls preserved in the Museo Lázaro Galdiano (inv. nos. 7300 and 7283, both from the second half of the 15th century). The first features a grid pattern formed by rosettes with teardrop-shaped petals (figure 11), and the second repeats the same cruciform scheme on a larger scale (figure 12). Another fine example is preserved in the Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas (inv. no. CE01642, in this case from a door), which reproduces a different design composed of the same ornamental units (figure 13).

Taking into account the technical and stylistic characteristics of the piece, as well as the functional and decorative parallels presented in this study, we can conclude that it is a work produced in Castile around the second half of the 15th century, combining both the traditions of Central European Flamboyant Gothic and the forms of Hispanic Mudéjar art.

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Figure 11. Choir stall back panel, carved pine wood (15th century), Madrid, Museo Lázaro Galdiano (inv. no. 7300).



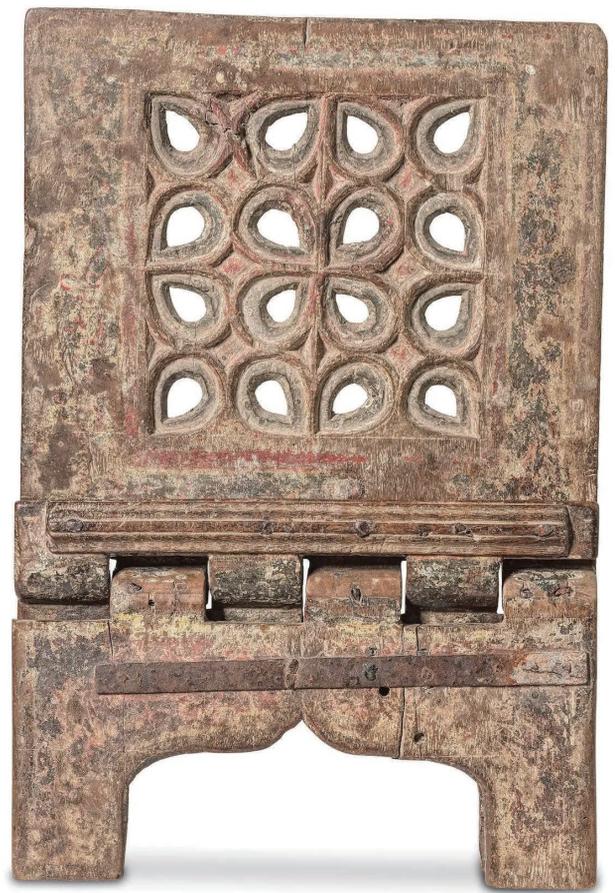
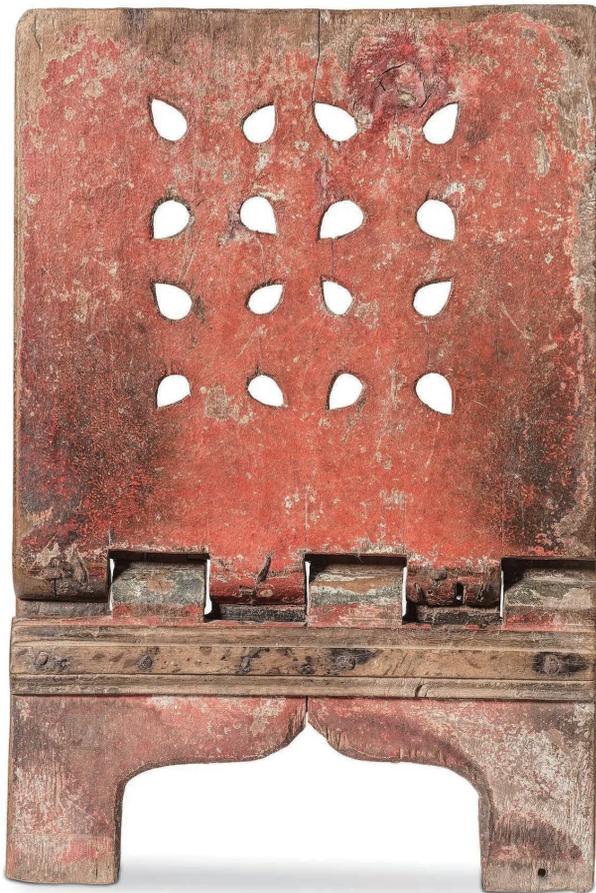
Figure 12. Carved wooden panel (probably from a choir stall, second half of the 15th century), Madrid, Museo Lázaro Galdiano (inv. no. 7283).



Figure 13. Carved wooden window panel (15th century), Madrid, Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas (inv. no. CE01642).

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