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ARTS & ANTIQUES

**AN EXTRAORDINARY
AND VERY RARE
COLLECTION
OF EIGHT IVORY
MICROCARVINGS
SCULPTURES**



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*An Extraordinary and very rare Collection
of eight Ivory Microcarvings Sculptures*

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Ivory comes from the tusks of elephants, but it can also be obtained from other animals, such as walruses or mammoths. According to Margarita Estella, the ivory size and quality, i.e., its hardness, consistency and brightness depend on its place of origin and on the animal from which it is derived; and, let's admit it, the animal will soon die without its defenses. The color ranges between bright white and yellowish, sometimes slightly pink, shades. Protected from ambient air, ivory perfectly maintains its original white.

The physical qualities of ivory have attracted man since prehistoric times: its soft luster, its smooth feel and rich texture showed it as the ideal material for performing beautiful works. While miniature ivory carving has its origin in East Asia, microscopic-sized works did not emerge in the East but in Europe, which would obtain ivory through eastern Mediterranean ports, particularly from India, Sri Lanka and Africa. The best-known ivory carving workshops were located in southern Germany, and also in Switzerland and in France. These pieces show the rococo taste for what was unusual, rare, in this case for what was tiny, small-sized and delicate.

The few artists specializing in microcarvings, proud that their works were immune to plagiarism, enjoyed the widespread demand by art studio owners and by treasury chambers. Maria Theresa, Catherine the Great and King George III, for example, owned some of these works. Microsculptures were created only from 1770 to the late eighteenth century. With the French Revolution, this discipline disappeared, since the sculptors that had specialized in it lost the required skills as they grew older, and younger artists were no longer familiar with the technique. Today, among private collections and museums, some hundred pieces of this kind are known.

Microsculptures are small ivory reliefs, where the size of the microscopic details is often not larger than a hundredth of a millimeter. Their execution required tools similar to those for carving hard wood – saws, files, burins, etc. –, but significantly smaller in size, that is, less than a hundredth of a millimeter. In fact, an ivory microcarving is deemed closer to the carving of precious materials. Since it was not possible for the fine knife to cut the hard ivory at a stroke, successive gentle knocks on a single point were necessary, so it is likely that metal guides may have been used during the carving process. We should bear in mind that, in order to make the tree branches, for example, the tool should not slip even by a hundredth of a millimeter, and this made it impossible to carve freehand.

For decorating the background, enamel with a blue pigment made out of finely ground cobalt crystal was used, applied with a brush, or dark Bristol blue glass, or else colored aluminum foil. Once the work was finished, because of its extreme delicacy, it was placed on a permanent mounting, fastened to a protective clear glass or rock crystal cover. This protection was essential, since without it the piece could not survive, even if treated with the utmost care. Later, once in the buyer's hands, the piece would often be placed within another support, to be used as a ring, a pin, a pendant, earrings, a watch key, etc.

The motifs represented in these small reliefs are associated with painting genres and, sometimes, with sculpture. In the late eighteenth century, decorative arts in general are strongly influenced by the discovery of the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Thus, ivory carving is inspired by Italian art motifs, either by ancient classical works, such as Hadrianic reliefs, with ancient buildings with columns – as we can see in one of Haager's pieces in the collection –, or by the very paintings from Herculaneum, disseminated by the well-known *Antichità di Ercolano* editions, illustrated with engravings representing round temples and ruins. In another piece from the collection we notice, behind a medieval round tower, what might be two temples or small temples with Doric columns. Other very recurrent themes in microcarvings are pastoral idyllic scenes, greatly appreciated during the late Baroque and Rococo periods, such as the motif of the "maiden at the well", very popular as an engagement or wedding gift, as it accounts for the biblical

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theme of the maiden that encounters her beloved as she goes to fetch water. Besides temples, allegories and flowers, seascapes and port scenes are also very common, with buildings, towers, lighthouses and sailboats sailing near the shore, suggesting fantastic adventures and remote phantasmagorical places.



C. Haager, Hague

(Belgian, active in London

ca. 1773)

Marine Scene

ca. 1770

Signed C. Haager Fec.

Micro Ivory Carving Relief

Silver mounting

Overall measurements: 13.5 x 12.5 x 3.5 cm

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C. Haager (with his name written in different ways: Haguer, Hagar, Hager, Van der Hagen, G. Haagar) was an ivory carver and sculptor from the city of The Hague (in Dutch, Den Haag, hence Haager may be translated as “the one from The Hague”), and he is considered the last ivory microcarving artist from the Netherlands. A specialist in microcarving works, he settled in England around 1773, specifically in London, where he took part in an exhibition held by the Société des Artistes, showing some portraits in relief.

On that occasion, art critic Horace Walpole spoke about three of his works, labeling them as “very small sculptures”. Haager had been trained at the Hess brothers’ studio in Brussels, where he was particularly inspired by the work of Paul Johann Hess, the youngest of the two brothers, active in Brussels in 1767, and who worked for the court of Prince Charles Alexandre of Lorraine before finally settling in Vienna, where he worked for the imperial court and czarina Catherine the Great, among others. Hess, deemed a virtuoso in his field, developed pastoral themes, which often included imaginary ruins, and also messages written in French, thoroughly boring into the ivory so that the background could be seen through it.

Haager’s works are easily mistaken for those by his master, unlike other pupils of him, who developed a style of their own.

He uses similar motifs, he paints backgrounds in a very similar way, and he distributes trees following much the same pattern. To distinguish him from Hess, apart from the signature, we should examine the foliage work, more akin to that of his colleagues from The Hague: the leaves, made out of splinters of ivory and placed among the branches pierced by the burin, are neither so thin nor so thick as in Hess. Sometimes small areas of smooth ivory can be seen among the branches. Haager is a specialist, among other things, in laying in front of the architectural elements a composition of ancient-style statues, or small human groups, as can be seen in some of the pieces from the collection. He also introduces elements of nature: thus, in one of the pieces the shrubs have grown above the temple ruins and, in another, some rocks form a kind of cave where a rambler is entering. All this recreates a sophisticated staging, where he places the boats or the vessel, the key figure occupying half or more of the worked surface. We can assert that Haager’s specialty is seascapes. Besides these pieces, others made by his hand are known, where the scene portrays boats docked at the port, always taking special care about the representation of the rigging. Haager lays the composition from the protective crystal to the background, occupying several planes within an 8 or 10 mm space, which renders the ensemble extremely lively. The signature, as we see it here, reads: “C. Haager fec.[it]”, *made by C. Haager*, using a Latinism that was very common among artists in The Hague.



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C. Haager, Hague

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Medallion with Marine Scene
ca. 1770

Signed C. Haager
Micro Ivory Carving Relief
Glass, metal, cloth
Diameter: 10 cm

Medallion with a relief showing a maritime scene. In the foreground are three figures of peasant women, and two children, one of whom is fishing, in the center. One of the women has her back turned, observing a three-masted sailboat. The ship centers the scene and is arriving to port, represented on the right with two circular towers, one of them crowned by a flag. Shiny fabric has been placed behind the medallion, of the same color as the ivory. Around the edge, a braid carved in ivory encloses the entire border. Garlands hang below the scene. The artist has distributed the shapes over the surface fully aware of the conditions created by the circle: so, for example, the thick trunk of the tree on the left adapts its curvature to the circular edge of the frame, expressing a savoir-faire that recalls the Renaissance period.

Similar medallions are found in the collection of the Dieppe Museum, with miniature landscapes and farm scenes showing women and animals, worked in very low relief. The circular form of this kind of medallion tended to be used to decorate the lids of boxes of different sizes.

One of the medallions from this Museum, possibly from Dieppe itself, and attributed to Belleteste, is dated to the first quarter of the 19th century, and also shows a landscape with a sailboat in the foreground, and architectural elements to the rear, which help to define the spatial depth. This work is of interest because it contains a number of elements identical to the present piece, including the relief ivory braid bordering the whole medallion, and the horizontal line across the foreground of the scene, which contains the figures. Likewise, between the lower part of the scene and the braid around the edge of the medallion, a number of decorative elements hang like garlands.

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C. Haager, Hague
(Belgian, active in London
ca. 1773)

Pair of Marine Scenes
ca. 1770

Signed C. Haager
Micro Ivory Carving Relief
Metal mounting
Overall measurements:
8.8 x 8.5 cm.

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C. Haager, Hague

(Belgian, active in London
ca. 1773)

Pair of Marine Scenes

ca. 1770

Signed C. Haager

Micro Ivory Carving Relief

Metal mounting

Overall measurements:

7.2 x 4 cm.

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Beauty Spots Case
mid 18th century

Ivory, glass, metal, velvet
Length: 9 cm

During the absolute monarchy of Louis XV, it was possible to find the rich ladies of the court in their private rooms next to the bedroom (the *toilette*), sitting before their dressing tables grooming themselves for hours. First they smothered their face with plaster, and to disguise the traces left by the effects of the frequent smallpox epidemics, they resorted to the happy solution of beauty spots. Among the gilded silver mirrors and the perfume bottles, they had little boxes like the ones in the collection. Inside there was a small mirror and tiny gummed pieces of black silk, cut into shapes such as a heart, half moon and star. They could apply one, two, three... or as many as seventeen!

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These were the so-called *mouches* – flies – which were dotted over the face, and even on the neckline, following the strict dictates of fashion. The distribution of these fake moles across the face constituted a veritable language of signs. According to the code established for the placement of beauty spots, one that was located above the lip, for example, came to mean “I want to flirt”; one next to the eye signified “incandescent passion,” and so on. Once the beauty spots were positioned, the ladies kept the box in their pockets, just in case.

This is an indication that in the palace setting all kinds of games and secret messages were used, languages in which the women became very dexterous. Some of them achieved such skill in these secret languages, entanglements and manipulations that, mixing love affairs and politics, they easily won influence among the ruling figures of the court. The use of games of mystery in this box from the collection should not surprise us. With the death of Louis XIV the austerity imposed by the monarch on the French court came to an end, and the excesses of the Rococo period burst onto the scene. This ivory case for beauty spots can be considered a paradigmatic object from the realm of frivolity of 18th century France.

The lid presents a carved ivory triptych. The left-hand oval is decorated with a scene depicting two kissing doves, a branch of foliage in the center, and a band with the inscription:



Faisons la guerre aux inconstans

Disguised as an apparent love scene, this could be an allusion to the monarchs, and to the nobles who supported them, inspired by the famous phrase of the disappointed Frondist La Rochefoucauld: *J'ai fait la guerre aux rois, je l'aurais faite aux dieux*, which expressed the desire of the aristocracy not to lose their privileges, against the concentration of power around the monarch.

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In the central elongated octagon a sailboat is shown on the sea, with a tail star, and to the left the image of a port, with a monument. It bears the inscription:

Elle m'a bien conduit

This is a recurrent phrase in the engraving of precious stones from the second half of the 18th century, always accompanied by a sailboat that, steered by Cupid, arrives safely at port, guided by a tail star.

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In the third scene, there is a column surrounded by foliage, a lion with a long tail and mane, sitting on the left, and a shield resting on the foot of the column, inside which a hieroglyph has been inscribed. It is a linguistic game, which turns the message into an enigma that must be deciphered.

If the letters and numbers “M. E. 100 CC” are read out loud, phonetically they spell out the phrase:

Aimer sans cesser

The Count de Lauzun, Louis XIV’s favorite, had a similar message inscribed in Latin on his coat of arms: *Ne despice amantem* (“Do not despise those who love him”). Anne-Marie-Louise d’Orléans, Duchess de Montpensier and a cousin of Louis XIV, was secretly in love with Lauzun, though she had been sent into exile for the part she played in the Fronde. It may be that some of the mottos on the little box express nostalgia for the times when the nobility fought to retain their privileges and their share of power. Indeed, in 1662 La Rochefoucauld wrote the book *The Princess of Montpensier*.



The hieroglyph written on the column and its base must be deciphered to discover the code it conceals. The enigmatic phrase *Pir un vent vient venir d'un* only makes sense if we add the suffix *sou* – before each word: since *un* is below (*sous*) *pir*, that gives us *soupir*; since *vient* is below *vent*, it becomes *souvent*; and finally *d'un* is written below *venir*, giving *souvenir*. The result is a well-known refrain, one that is common among the French right up to the present day:

Un soupir vient souvent d'un souvenir

This phrase is attributed to Voltaire, and evokes the nostalgia of the nobility who, in the mid-18th century, one hundred years after the pseudo-revolution of the Fronde, still dreamed of a return to feudal rule and an aristocratic republic, as defended by La Rochefoucauld. The mysterious message of the little box could therefore be situated in the context of an aristocracy who – blind to the dominant reality of poverty and hunger in the country – still felt nostalgia for the century of Louis XIV, expressed first by La Rochefoucauld (1662), and later by Voltaire (1751). The secretive character of the message is due to its having been produced during the reign of Louis XV, a time at which glorifying Louis XIV signified a criticism of Louis XV.

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Pendant with Sailboat

France, first quarter of the 19th century

Ivory, metal, crystal, paint

Diameter: 3.8 cm

The origin of boats carved in ivory, either in bas-relief or in the round, should be placed in the Far East, from where they spread to Europe throughout the eighteenth century, through British decorative arts. Ivory nautical models, as well as ivory fans or lacquer objects, were not part of the trade between China and Europe, but simply a popular souvenir from Canton, which westerners used to buy from time to time on the commercial trips made by the East India Company, responding to the stereotyped image they had of China. The British started, but these delicate pieces would also reach Spain: in 1788, for example, the landing of eleven trunks from the Philippines is documented, containing many Chinese curios, including a beautiful ivory ship. The Maritime Museum of Barcelona keeps one of these Chinese ivory ships, with colored flowers and characters, which used to be called “pleasure boats”.

The refinement of making the tiny piece and placing it within a crystal pendant, turning it into a medallion or ring, emerged in Europe.

In late eighteenth-century England, rings were usually given as presents with miniature ivory sailboats inside, as a reminder of those sailors that would not come back. For a long time the tradition continued of giving this ring associated with the phrase “That’s life”, referring to the inevitable absence of sailors at their ports of origin.

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In France, these pendants, or “fancy jewels”, were also given to children as treats. Hence these artifacts were usually called *jouets*. And two of these toys were given to the son of Napoleon and Marie Louise, on New Year’s Eve 1812, when the crown prince was not yet one year old, but he was already king of Rome. One of these was an ivory frigate, perfectly carved and decorated with all the rigging, on whose bow a child’s head had been carved representing the king of Rome, with a scarf around his forehead reading: “Like his illustrious father, he will know how to steer the ship of the State triumphantly”. Possibly the craftsman who made this piece was from the French village of Dieppe, whose ivory carving tradition was well-known because of its virtuosity and long history.



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Throughout the eighteenth century, the technique of carving miniature scenes in ivory was very popular in France, and the center of production were the workshops in Dieppe, where many Neoclassical-style pieces would be made. The official visits to Dieppe by Napoleon and Marie Louise are well documented. One took place in 1820, during which they were offered several ivory figures and ornaments. Similarly, in 1822, Jean Norest, an ivory carver from Dieppe who had settled in Paris, made a bust of Napoleon III out of this material.



A model from the first quarter of the nineteenth century, very similar to the one in the collection, is kept at the Dieppe Museum. It is also a three-mast vessel, carved out of ivory in bas-relief, sailing the sea, with rigging, hoisted sails, ladders and yards. Between 1824 and 1829, the duchess of Berry's visits to this northern coastal city made sea bathing fashionable, and ivory craftsmen saw elegant customers starting to arrive, to whom they hurried to offer small ivory boats to take home as souvenirs. For the duchess of Berry they created the jewel described above, with the model reproducing the vessel that the village of Dieppe had made available to her.

Also emperor Napoleon III visited Dieppe in 1853, and like his predecessors he showed interest in the ivory industry. On Napoleon III's inventories there are medallions and large glasses for banquets, made out of silver and carved ivory, depicting hunting themes or, for example, the taking of Malakoff. Maybe the miniature boat in the collection is celebrating another landmark in Napoleon's policy, as important as – or more important than – having an heir or winning a battle. Numbers XXI and XI in Roman numerals, engraved on the bow of the sailboat, might be related to the date November 21, 1806, on which Napoleon, for the purpose of causing a financial crisis in all-powerful England, issued the Berlin Decree, ordering the blockade of the transportation of goods to the United Kingdom, whereby all European ports under his authority should reject the mooring of British ships, and all French and neutral vessels that may have moored in a British port should be intercepted before returning to the waters of a continental port. What better symbol of that economic strategy than the figure of a vessel, made from one of the commercially most prestigious materials – ivory!