



**Casket decorated with horsemen and animals**

ivory with important remnants of the original polychrome with gilt copper mounts  
Siculo-Arabic, Sicily or Southern Italy, 12th century  
16 by 32 by 18,5 cm

As early as the 10th century, small wooden gilded and painted caskets which served as reliquaries were produced. Larger caskets were used to store valuable manuscripts and books. Around the 12th century, as change developed in the culture, starting from the South (Southern France) and spreading to the Courts in the North, the art, which until then had been almost exclusively served religious purposes, also started to be expressed in everyday medieval life.

Around the middle of the 13th century, a considerable amount of ivory carvings was produced in Paris. Noblemen and women, the rich bourgeois, and the clergy had ivory carvings made to satisfy their need for personal devotion and their desire for luxury. Ivory was costly and was highly prized as a material. In contrast to woodcarvings, ivory was only partially covered with paint and gold leaf. Small diptychs and triptychs with stirring scenes from the Passion and small ivory statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary were able to respond to the internalisation of a life of faith.

At the start of the 14th century, the Parisian ivory studios started to produce caskets for profane use. This type of caskets which were used as 'dowry case' for the storing of jewellery and documents, could have a size of up to 25 cm. They were often composed of carved plaques illustrating romantic scenes from, among others, the life of Perceval, Tristan and Isolde, the animal kingdom (the unicorn), the Old World and the Near-East. However, most of the profane caskets were made of wood, sometimes painted, carved or covered in leather (Pastiglia). During that period, Germany had a large production of painted caskets (the so-called 'Wismutkästen'). The paintings were applied with tempera on a thin bolus layer consisting of chalk mixed with bone glue.

These valuable objects, which were usually given by men to women, but also sometimes by women to men, reflected the status of the couple.

However, from the second half of the 14th century, it became necessary to produce special caskets for the storage and preservation of important documents and valuables. Polychrome wooden caskets can mainly be found in the Southern countries such as Italy and Spain.

Iron caskets, strengthened with additional ironwork and secured with a lock were usually produced for

the storage of money. Large iron trunks often had more than one lock so multiple so-called 'key holders' were needed to open a trunk. Initially, this type of secure caskets was not decorated, but from the 16th century on, the money trunks were already being embellished with carvings.

## Islamic art

Siculo-Arabic art is a mixture of European and Islamic art.

In the first centuries, the Arabic mother country and today's Syria and Iraq were important for Islamic art. After the year 1000, the influence of the Turkmen tribes from Mongolia and Central Asia started to dominate Islam and its art. In the 14th century, the equally Turkmen Ottoman Empire became the political and cultural centre of the Islamic world.

The religion was defining the character of Islamic art. Therefore, the first and foremost cultural-religious requirement was the building of spaces where the religion could be professed (mosques). Architecture took a centre stage; the other arts, painting, sculpture and especially the applied arts related to the decoration of the buildings. The non-figurative character of Islamic art, arising from the ban on imagery, is distinctive. In the South of Spain, we can find examples of Islamic architecture in Europe. Apart from religion, science, which however always has religious backgrounds, is an important factor in Islamic art; the building of schools, and writing, translating, and illustrating of scientific works kept pace with scientific development. Also, trade determined the construction and layout of towns and cities. Examples of Islamic art can be found in diverse art forms such as sculpture, painting, architecture, calligraphy and textiles. Well-known examples are mosaics and murals, such as in the Spanish Alhambra.

## Arabic occupation

Initially, the attack by the Muslims on Sicily in the year 827 was limited to the coastal areas. Gradually the Muslims moved their base to Palermo (832), and from there they carried out attacks and eventually occupied all of Sicily.

However, before this happened, Sicily resisted these invaders for many decades and forced them to temporarily retreat. But finally the Sicilians had to surrender, and the Islamic domination of their home country became a reality.

As soon as the Arabs came to power in Sicily, the islamisation was started by the destruction of churches, or by transforming these into mosques. The demographics also changed due to the admission of hundreds of thousands of Islamic migrants. In this way, a civilisation which had contributed to the creation of the Western identity since the 8th century before Christ was destroyed.

After three centuries [812-1072] of occupation, the Normans freed Sicily and returned the island to the Christian slaves. In 1127, Malta was also freed, and the Saracens were expelled.

Sicily remained under Islamic occupation for almost three centuries. Over time, the population was entirely converted to Islam, and not a single church had remained. They had either been reduced to rubble or had been turned into mosques.

When the Normans reconquered Sicily, they reversed history equally brutally; after the Norman liberation, no Muslims remained in Sicily, Malta, Sardinia and the surrounding islands. The Normans acted as an exorcist by repelling the influence of Islam on the population, and by bringing the lands back to Christianity.

## Siculo-Arabic art

Fundamentally, Siculo-Arabic art goes back to the Islamic art in Sicily, where, by means of their religion, Islam, the Arabs made their mark on art and culture. It is impossible to give an exact description of the characteristics of Islamic art because historically and geographically the boundaries of the Islamic religion are so far apart that this is not really a case of unity in art forms. From the 7th century, Islam spread across Asia, Europe and Africa, and comprised an area which extended from Spain to Indonesia, and from Yugoslavia to Sudan.

For more than two centuries, Sicily was under one or another form of direct Islamic control (initially Aghlabids, and later the Fatimids), before the island was taken over by the Normans in the 11th century.

Although a number of Arabic structures built by the Muslims survived this period of domination, the changes which were introduced by the Normans during this period were so far-reaching, that many of the buildings and works of art lost their original Arabic character.

### Siculo-Arabic Pyxis, 12th century

#### New art forms

However, under Norman rule, an interesting cross-pollination also took place, whereby the Normans introduced their own artistic traditions. Siculo-Arabic art combines Romanesque, Byzantine and Islam characteristic, and so new art forms emerged whereby the Romanesque sobriety was combined with more splendour and magnificence from the Islamic and Byzantine traditions. Muslim traditions also stemmed from the already existing local Sicilian Islamic traditions, as well as from Fatimid Egypt. The influences can be traced back to other parts of the Islamic world, including North Africa and even Persia.

The materials used in Siculo-Arabic art are mixed. Stone, brick and wood were mainly used for both structural and decorative purposes. Mosaics showing Byzantine influences were commonplace. The use of muqarnas in buildings was widespread, and in some cases they were even painted with figurative representations. The works of art fashioned from noble materials such as gold and ivory were extremely refined.

#### Muqarnas, Isfahan, Iran

Although the Quran only contains a prohibition of idolatry, representations of people or animals very seldom appear in Arabic art. This is probably because of the many hadith which did contain a prohibition of the representation of living beings. The so-called aniconism – prohibition of representations - is one of the characteristics of Islamic art, and for instance, leads to mosques seldom being decorated with illustrations of scenes from the Quran, but often being embellished with Quranic texts in calligraphy and with geometric patterns.

However, there were exceptions to this aniconism in Islamic art. Specific examples can be found in the art of the Umayyad, Persians and Ottomans.

### Siculo-Arabic casket, 12th century

#### Description

This ivory casket is part of a group of Sicilian caskets which were probably made in Palermo by Islamic ivory carvers shortly after the fall of the 12th century Norman occupation. The metalwork serves both as support for the delicate and fragile ivory sides, and also as a beautiful decoration. Many such caskets have painted details with clear Islamic influences, such as abstract subjects, flower motifs, animal and bird motif. To a lesser extent also human figures and imaginary creatures.

The actual casket is rectangular; the lid, however, is composed of two triangular panels, two upright trapezoid panels and one rectangular panel, which together form a type of 'gable roof'. No special technique was used to fit the panels together. On the sides, it can clearly be seen that the panels have simply been set against each other and fixed by means of gilded copper iron work with teardrop-shaped ends. In between the metal work, one can see a rich decoration. Although the colours have faded, we can still see that various colours, such as green, red, brown, and black were used.

At each corner of the casket and of the lid, there are two bands, resulting in five bands at each corner. The bottom is affixed with very thin ivory (or wooden) small dowels which serve as small nails.

At the back, we see two double hinges.

At the top of the lid there a gilded copper handle has been affixed, in the shape of an accolade, by means of two small round serrated plates unto which the handle is hooked.

The gilded copper lock plate is rectangular and sited in the middle. The straight latch – also with a teardrop-shaped end – which fits over the lock pin, is hinged to the lid at the top. The actual lock is missing. The key currently with the casket probably is not original. Both the lock plate and the latch seem to be original. The plate is fixed with a nail in each corner.

On the inside, it soon becomes clear that, in the course of time, the ivory sheets have been reinforced by transferring them to a new wooden formwork. They are affixed by means of tiny ivory or wooden dowels.

The entire casket is decorated with artful drawing which were originally elaborated in inks, the colouring of which has now faded. Some green and brown colouring is still visible in some places.

The decoration of course is highly symbolical, as this is undoubtedly a small love casket. It is therefore not surprising that the entire casket is covered in birds holding a twig or flower in their beak. Birds symbolise mutual love, a raised twig connected to singing birds signifies the desire for intercourse.

#### Decoration front panel

On the straight front panel, we see two double circles enclosing horsed riders, to the left and right of the lock plate. They are wearing a green surcote. They probably represent falconers, as they each carry a bird on a gloved hand. The horses are also festively caparisoned.

The falcon is the very emblem of nobility. It symbolises the astuteness of the hunt.

The circle is the symbol of eternity, of perfection, and therefore of God. It is the natural symbol of sun and moon. For primitive humans, sun and moon were equivalent. Visually they also are of the same size. The imagery of the Philosopher's Stone, the Knights of the Round Table, the circular snake biting its own tail, were the symbol of wisdom and immortality for the Gnostics. God is described as a circle of which the circumference is nowhere and the centre point everywhere. It is the universal symbol of creation and the expression of the force of creation.

#### Decoration front panel of the lid

The animals we see in the two round medallions on the lid are probably peacocks, going on the heads. They are standing two by two, and their necks are intertwined. Below the left-hand pair is a chalice, below the right-hand pair an inverted heart.

In Medieval iconography, the peacock is the symbol of Christ, of immortality and omniscience, but also of ostentation and vanity. Peacock feathers are a symbol of eternity.

#### Decoration back panel

In the middle, between the iron work we again find a round medallion with two peacocks at the tree of life. To the left and right, we see a bird with a flower in its beak.

At the top of the lid, there also is a circular medallion. However, the decoration has faded to the point at which we cannot interpret the image with any certainty. It is probable that this also depicted a bird.

#### Decoration side panels & panels to the sides of the lid

The side panels are equally decorated with circular medallions. The drawing on the left side has faded and is no longer recognisable, but on the right side we can clearly see a spotted feline animal. In view of the long tale, we believe that it represents a panther. It is surrounded by some branches with leaves. At the top of the lid, a panther or jaguar (spotted fur) and a tiger (striped fur) confront each other. On the other side, two birds confront each other. One bird has a twig in its beak.

The felines, such as the lion, panther, tiger and jaguar, were brought home as symbols by the Crusaders, who saw such animals in the paintings of the Turks and Moors. Heraldry, based on signs and symbols, originates in Arabia, and was brought to our countries by the Crusaders or Arabic overlords.

These animals are all positive symbols. The panther, loved by all other animals thanks to its fragrance, its gentle nature and its good sense. The Medieval person saw a symbol for Christ in both the panther as in the lion – noble and brave.

The size and rich elaboration of the casket are an indication that this casket was gifted by a wealthy man or woman of the nobility to his or her partner.

This love casket is rare in more than one respect. First of all it is an extremely large casket which furthermore shows all characteristics of the Siculo-Arabic production of the 12th -13th century (typical shape of the casket and the characteristic rich iron work). The images remaining on the casket make this object especially attractive.

#### Origin

Ivory with gilded copper iron work decorated with drawings  
Sicily, 12th – 13th century

#### Dimensions

H: 16 cm

W: 32 cm

D: 18.5 cm

#### Damage

Signs of wear. Several cracks in the bottom plate.

#### Restoration

A number of old restorations are visible:

In the edge of the lid, a number of small pieces of ivory have been replaced;

In the bottom plate and at the left back corner, small pieces of ivory have been replaced;

In the bottom plate we find some pieces of ivory with a drawing, it is possible the plates were reused or rearranged;

The lock plate and the handle on the lid appear not to be original.

It is possible that some elements of the iron work are not original.

Of course, the wooden inside formwork with red cover is from before our time.

#### Provenance

Art market UK , former private collection France.