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Michael Vickers
Oxford

A LOST IVORY DIPTYCH PANEL IN AN INDIAN PAINTING

Abstract: *It is argued that the composition of part of an Indian miniature painting in a private collection in Los Angeles is ultimately based on a late Roman ivory diptych panel, although the mechanism of transmission is uncertain.*

Keywords: *Collection; consular diptych; ivory; miniature painting; India*

The subject of this paper in honour of our colleague Ewdoksia Papuci-Władyka is an Indian miniature painting in a private collection in Los Angeles (Pl. 1) that I have known for the past 25 years or more. Every time I see it, I convince myself that the left-hand side is based on an ivory panel of the kind generally known as late Roman 'consular diptychs' (but the precise function of which is still the subject of scholarly discussion: Kinney 2009). I shall try here to convince others.

The miniature, which measures 16.1 x 11.8cm, shows two women in classical dress; both wear *chitones* of very fine material that reveal their breasts, beneath voluminous *himatia*. One plays a stringed instrument, while the other leans against a leafy tree that occupies most of the left side of the painting. A snake can be seen in the branches above her head. What is striking is the way in which this woman and her tree form a rectangular block, revealing – or so I would argue – the form of the model that ultimately lies behind them. Thus, the leaves of the tree do not simply come up against the left hand frame of the painting in a straight line, but the leaves and branches to the right of the tree form a straight line too.

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The remarkable shape of the tree that sits within the frame to left, at the top, and potentially on the right, is in contrast to the trees on the right which do not respect the frame and are cut through by it. Another peculiar feature is the way in which the woman's right foot is rendered, for it is very odd in terms of the present composition, but explicable if in the ultimate model it was, like the leaves of the tree, constrained by the right hand frame of a tall narrow rectangular panel.

Another phenomenon that encourages the view that such a panel lies behind the left side of the miniature is the uniformity of colour. There is only the lightest pale green wash on the leaves of the tree, and the trunk and branches are the same pale colour as the dress and flesh of the woman. By contrast, the leaves of the trees on the right are dark green and only the woman and the cityscape and the crudely drawn cliffs in the distance are light in colour. The woman apart, they are painted in rather a different style.

These features: the classicizing details, the rectangular form, the light colour, can be explained if we postulate as a possible model for the left hand side a panel from an ivory consular diptych. Most of the features present in our miniature are present on a small group of diptych panels whose classicizing features have recently been acutely characterized as an 'heirloom style' (Kinney 2008, 156):

The Symmachi/Nicomachi diptych

N. A woman in *chiton* and *himation* standing beneath a pine tree and holding two inverted torches above an altar; inscribed NICOMACHORVM. Paris, Musée Cluny. Delbrueck 1929, no. 53. (Pl. 3: 1).

S. A woman in *chiton* and *himation* and wearing bracelets, standing beneath an oak tree performing a sacrifice at an altar with the help of an assistant; inscribed SYMMACHORVM. London, Victoria and Albert Museum. Delbrueck 1929, no. 54; Volbach 1976, no. 55. (Pl. 3: 2).

The Asclepius and Hygieia diptych

A. Asclepius standing between festooned columns, leaning on a stick up which crawls a snake.

H. Hygieia in *chiton* and *himation* standing between festooned columns leaning on a tripod from which emerges a large snake. Liverpool, Museum on Merseyside. Delbrueck 1929, no. 55; Volbach 1976, no. 57. (Pl. 4).

And a panel only known from an 18th century engraving

F. A woman in *chiton* and *himation* (very similar to Symmachi [S]) standing before a temple of Mercury performing an sacrifice at an altar with the help of an assistant, a tree in the middle ground; later inscription.

Lost; formerly Abbé Fauvel collection. Montfaucon 1719, 190, pl. 83: 1; Cameron 1984, pl. 55, fig. 1. (Pl. 5).

The trees in the Symmachi/Nicomachi diptych (S and N), though smaller, behave in much the same way as the tree in our miniature, in that they respect the frames of their respective panels. The prominent tree wounds on the trunk of the tree in the painting, the result of too vigorous a pruning, find parallels in the tree wounds on the tree in Symmachi (S). The prominent breasts of the woman, all too visible through her flimsy garment, recall those of Hygieia in the Asclepius and Hygieia diptych (H), and even more so the chest of the woman in Nicomachi (N), concerning which Anthony Cutler (1994, 475) once enjoined us to 'observe the skill with which the sculptor exploited the grain (of the ivory) to model the figure's breasts and even to suggest her nipples'. Bracelets are worn both by our woman and the matron in Symmachi (S).

Dale Kinney (1994, 466) has some pertinent observations concerning what Cutler (1994, 477) has called the 'notorious obtrusive right foot' of the woman on Symmachi (S): 'Notorious … are the matron's right leg and foot, which are rotated an impossible degree from the plane of her hips to bring the foot over the frame on the right. Since her left foot seems to be aligned with the rear corner of the altar, and the altar slides behind the frame at the left, the result is an intolerable "spatial" ambiguity. Modern viewers commonly interpret this as a mistake. In light of the other reliefs …, however, the placement of the foot can hardly be called an error, much less … the blunder of a forger. On the contrary, the foot initiates the play with the frame that is the hallmark of this sophisticated, albeit mannered, group of reliefs.' The foot of the woman on a lost panel formerly in the collection of the Abbé Fauvel (F) is similarly playful with the frame of its panel, and in a way that comes close to the right foot of the woman in the painting. The pale green wash on the leaves of the tree, moreover, recalls the way in which ivory might be stained with a copper-rich colouring agent (e.g. Jehle 2008, 142, fig. 14).

When it was acquired some decades ago, the miniature was entitled 'Roman women' and said to have been a product of the Deccan school, painted *c*. 1850. R. W. Skelton, on being shown a photograph, expressed the view that it may have been produced in the north Deccan, but 'wherever and whenever the picture was painted it is based on a Mughal or Deccani model of around 1600' (personal communication). In other words, there was probably at least one stage between our miniature and any possible ivory prototype. It would have been at this stage perhaps that the woman

on the left received the unclassical feather in her hair, and that the composition on the right was devised, more in keeping with Mughal painterly traditions, but with more than a glance at our hypothetical original.

If there was indeed an ivory diptych from the west in an Indian setting, it could have arrived at any time between late antiquity and the 17th century. Trade between Rome and India flourished in early imperial times (Warmington 1928; Suresh 2004), but declined later, although a few finds of gold solidi attest to some contact (Suresh 2004, 155). At all events, India will have been the source of the ivory of some at least of our consular diptychs (cf. Cutler 1984, 82). Much later, there was a long tradition of Mughal courtly artists using western motifs in striking ways. The emperor Akbar in the 16th century received engravings as diplomatic gifts from Jesuit missionaries and encouraged the artists of his *kitab-khana* to 'examine, draw inspiration from them, even copy or adapt them according to their whim … Akbar's artists enthusiastically copied the European prints. They were attracted by the exoticism and novelty of the themes handled, even though the religious content held no meaning for them; they attempted to copy foreign models in their own way, either remaining scrupulously faithful or imitating only those aspects considered relevant. These elements would then be artfully transposed into a specifically Indian context, giving birth to original and oddly hybrid works' (Okada 1992, 23-26; cf. Bailey 1998). I illustrate here two 18th century examples of this sort of thing: a miniature of an Indian lady at a window (Pl. 2: 1), whose nimbus, martyr's palm and book betray a western Christian model ('Books appear to serve as an attribute of sainthood' Bailey 1998, 20), and a scene of uncertain meaning (Pl. 2: 2), but which is clearly based on an engraving of the reception by angels of a Jesuit saint into Heaven, where the artist has misunderstood a communion wafer and replaced it with a flower; an 'oddly hybrid work' indeed.

Such examples could be repeated many times, but they go to show how eclectic Indian artists could be, especially when faced with – for them – exotic models. There is thus no inherent reason why an Indian artist in *c*. 1600 should not have seen an ivory diptych panel of the kind postulated here even if the mechanism of transmission remains uncertain.

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Michael Vickers
Jesus College, Oxford
michael.vickers@jesus.ox.ac.uk

Pl. 1. ‘Roman women’, Deccan school, painted *c*. 1850, private collection, Los Angeles

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Pl. 2. 1 – ‘Female saint at a window’, Mughal school, *c.* 1760, private collection, Oxford
2 – ‘Angelic reception’, Mughal school, *c.* 1760, private collection, Oxford

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Pl. 3. 1 – The panel of the Nicomachi, Paris, Cluny Museum
2 – The panel of the Symmachi, London, Victoria and Albert Museum

Pl. 4. The Hygieia panel, Liverpool, Museum on Merseyside

Pl. 5. The Fauvel panel, from Montfaucon 1719