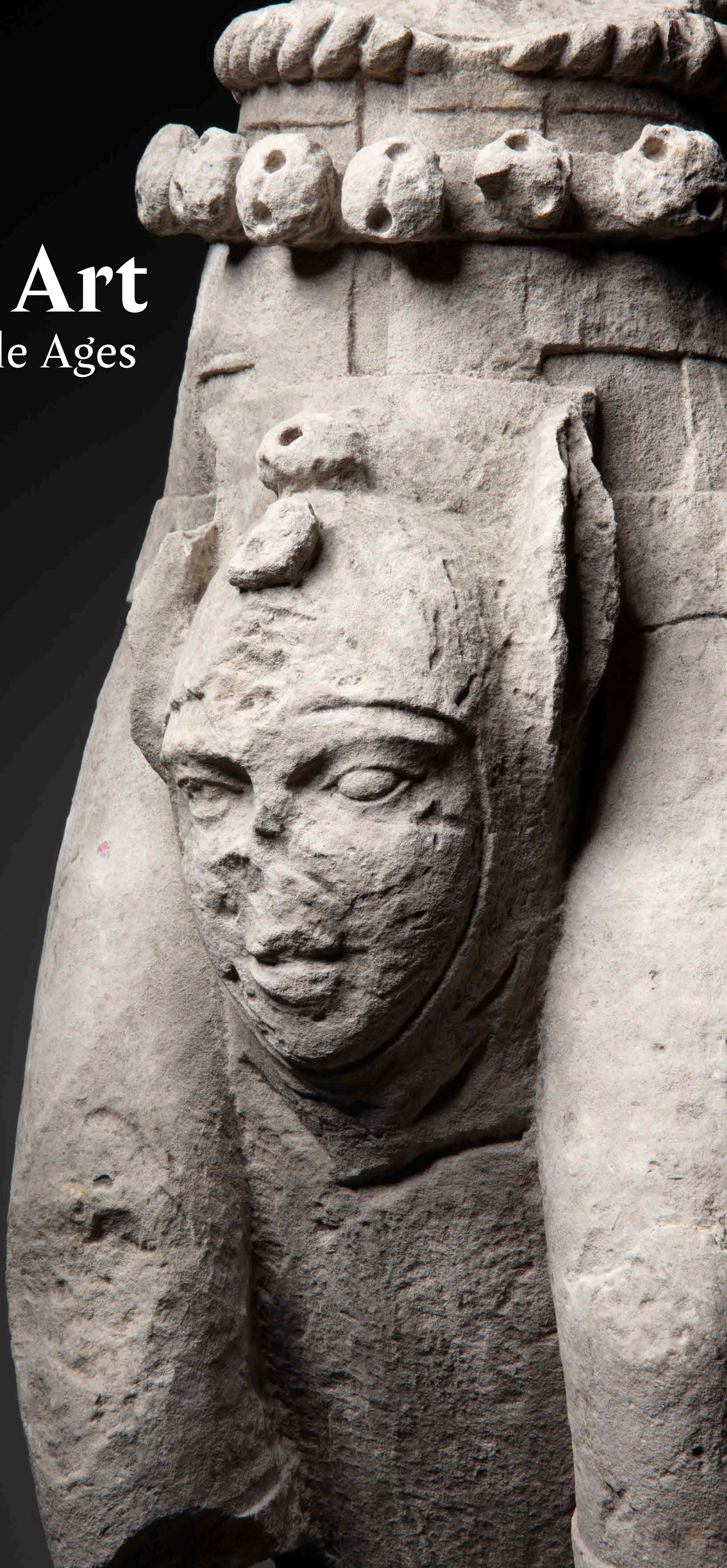
Secular Art
from the Middle Ages



SAM FOGG

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House & Home

Previous spread:
Francesco del Cossa (c. 1435-c. 1478)
Month of March, detail of the Triumph of Minerva showing women working at textiles, c. 1469
Ferrara, Palazzo Schifanoia, Salone dei Mesi

1

A late-gothic door

SPAIN, CASTELLÓN
LATE 15TH OR EARLY 16TH CENTURY
250 x 120 x 20 cm; Softwood, probably pine, with layered polychromy.

Made to mark off the privacy of a domestic space from the wider civic world beyond, and doing so while delighting in visual splendour and the possibilities of design, this late-gothic door perfectly encapsulates the present catalogue's entry into the secular realm. It was carved for a house in Sant Mateu, a small town in the province of Castellón, which hugs Spain's eastern seaboard at the northern end of the Valencian Community. Its cusped ogival apex, which ripples outwards across the jamb, is typical of the idiosyncratic style of Valencian gothic introduced by the Spanish architect Pere Compte and his school in the fifteenth century, and further developed in civic contexts throughout the sixteenth. The earliest example of this kind of cusped portal appears in the main entryway of La Lonja of Valencia, or the old public silk market of the city in flamboyant Valencian gothic style, dating to c. 1482-1492. The primary face of our door is constructed on a tight geometric plan, with two large square panels nestled within a design of tessellating hexagons and centering on a large foliate quatrefoil spray. The organizing structure of the design springs from the mathematical architectural developments of the Muslim kingdoms which ruled large swathes of the Iberian peninsula until their expulsion by the Catholic Crown in 1492. Mudejar ornament - designs and motifs heavily shaped by Muslim influence - flourished in the increasingly Catholic-dominated mercantile centres of Northern Spain in many forms and applications, including carved and painted woodwork, stucco, textiles, and glazed ceramics such as floor tiles. Our door would not originally have functioned as it does today – a work of art in isolation from its wider context – but as part of what was evidently a rich domestic interior, and one that would undoubtedly have been drawn together by a host of complimentary furnishings. For instance it is possible, even likely, that these included luxury tiles made in the productive Valencian kilns to the south, and which would have set off the tessellating design of the door's deeply recessed panels like counterparts within a harmonious, overarching framework.

2

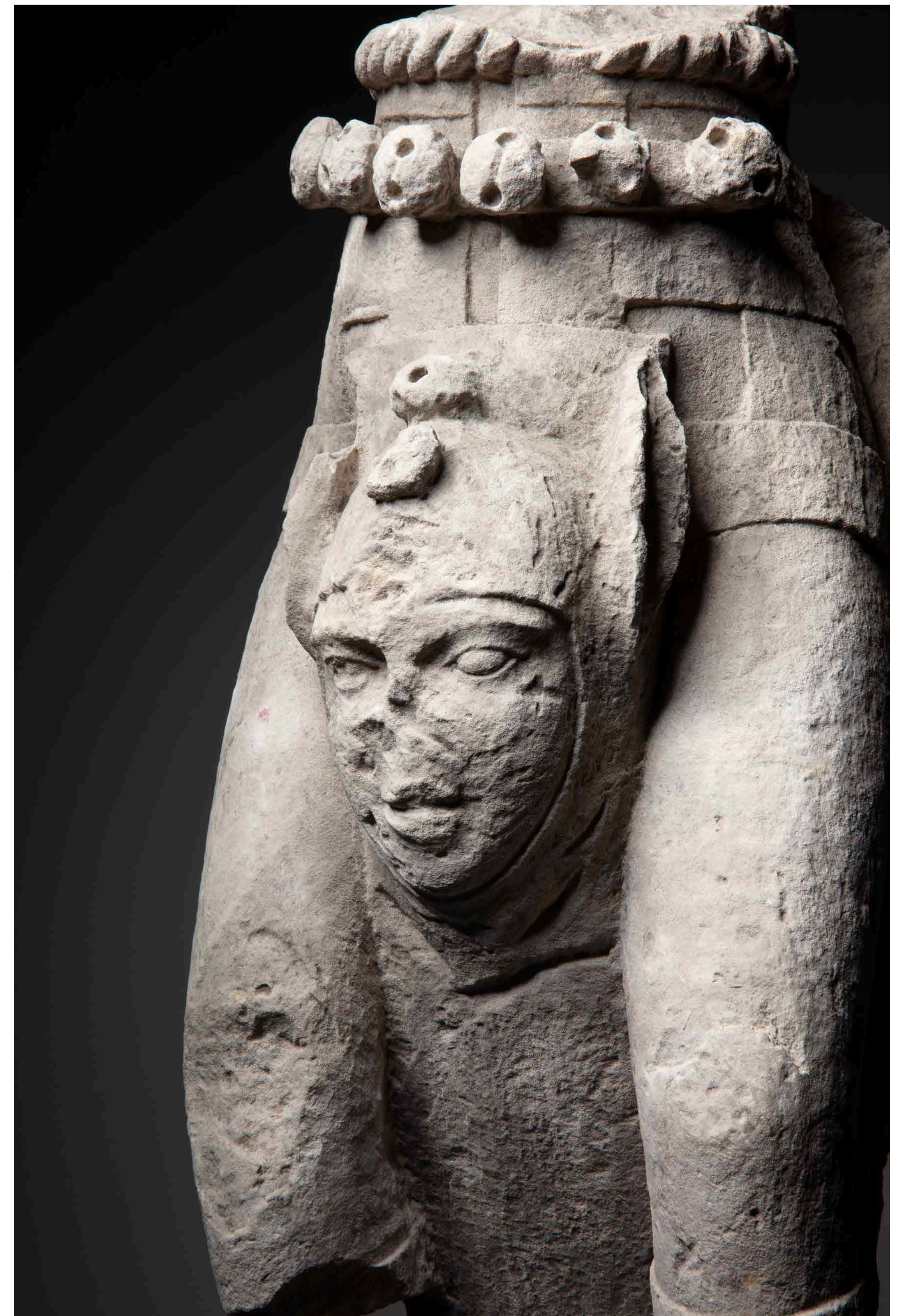
Two fools performing

FRANCE
SECOND HALF 14TH CENTURY
68 x 39 x 30 cm; Limestone.

Two acrobatic jesters, one perched atop the shoulders of his counterpart, perform for our delight. They wear costumes girdled with crotal bells, which would have rattled and chimed with every movement. Crotal bells of this design were produced between the mid thirteenth and mid fifteenth centuries, with the treatment and style of our jesters conforming to a date in the middle of this range. Their precise origins and context remain unknown, but they would more easily have decorated a wealthy house or town hall than a religious building. Few such imposing reliefs with figures of this scale, evidently from a decidedly secular context but carved from a high grade of French limestone, survive anywhere today. Some, cut from timber, can be found on early French houses or, where dispersed, have passed into museum collections in Europe and the United States.

Fools and jesters were the comedians of the Middle Ages. They told stories, performed music, poetry, riddles, plays and dances, and entertained guests at court festivities. Taking on the mantle of an alter ego, with donkey ears on their hoods, colourful garb, and bells or tassels, they were able to transgress social boundaries and rules of propriety without repercussion. They could uniquely touch on sexualising themes, and were considered both a danger and a temptation for aristocratic women. We often think of the Middle Ages today as an environment bound by societal strictures and a gruelling class structure, but fools helped blur those divisions and inject secular life with parody, wit and humour.

Carved gargoyles and other exterior decoration constitute some of the most exciting and skilful sculptural products of the whole Middle Ages, demonstrating the seemingly unquenchable medieval fascination with the carnivalesque as well as monsters and grotesques. One of the most eccentric features of gothic art, these great stone sculptures extended at times over a meter from the edge of the building's masonry, a strategic feat, testament to the skill of the stone masons, and making a dramatic and often terrifying sight from below.



3

The head of a king, almost certainly the terminus of a ridge tile

ENGLAND
LATE 13TH OR EARLY 14TH CENTURY
12 x 8.7 x 6 cm; Earthenware with a deep-hued lead glaze on a red clay body.

The head of a king, of grand scale and carefully potted with elaborate scratched and pierced decoration, projects with a cylindrical cross-section from the fragmentary remains of a larger structure, now lost. Once common, such heads are extraordinarily rare today owing to their function as decoration for ridge tiles, which capped the roofs of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century buildings. Ridge tiles would once have populated the roofscapes of every English city, but only one other survival closely comparable to the present example is known to us, an almost identically scaled green-glazed figure preserved in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. In ambition and skill, it is also comparable to the more famous 'Nottingham' knight jugs now known to have been produced at Scarborough. Only a tiny handful of these knight jugs have survived, but one example excavated in Nottingham in 1955 and now in the city's museum is especially analogous for its figures' raised and pierced eyes.

4

Window grille with addorsed 'S'-curls

SPAIN
EARLY 15TH CENTURY
91 x 67 x 4.8 cm; Wrought iron.

Three twisted cables anchor two columns of freely-flowing s-curls tied in pairs over four rows within a sturdy rectangular frame that imposes on its sinuous lacelike composition a hard-edged geometric rigour. It is at once a forceful and a refined example of the sorts of late-gothic ironwork surrounds which were made to guard and enclose the windows of wealthy domestic buildings. Whether in combination with shutters or in their stead, grilles allowed for the sights, sounds and smells of civic life to permeate the home while offering protection from its ills. Our example's net of addorsed s-curls bound in pairs was one of the most common and widely dispersed designs of the European Middle Ages, and can be found fully developed by at least the thirteenth century – as is evidenced by its incorporation on the famous Chichester Grille of around 1250, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Later iterations like our grille adopted the grand visual and material splendour developed earlier for the church, into domestic utility. Its supple, ribboning forms also perfectly encapsulate the reason why the medium came, in later centuries, to lend its name to a whole class of intricately voided Renaissance velvets, which are still known to this day as '*ferronnerie*' after their similarity to designs first developed in iron. For a medium favoured for strength and obduracy, our grille could hardly be more elegant or mellifluous in the visual impact of its fluttering forms.

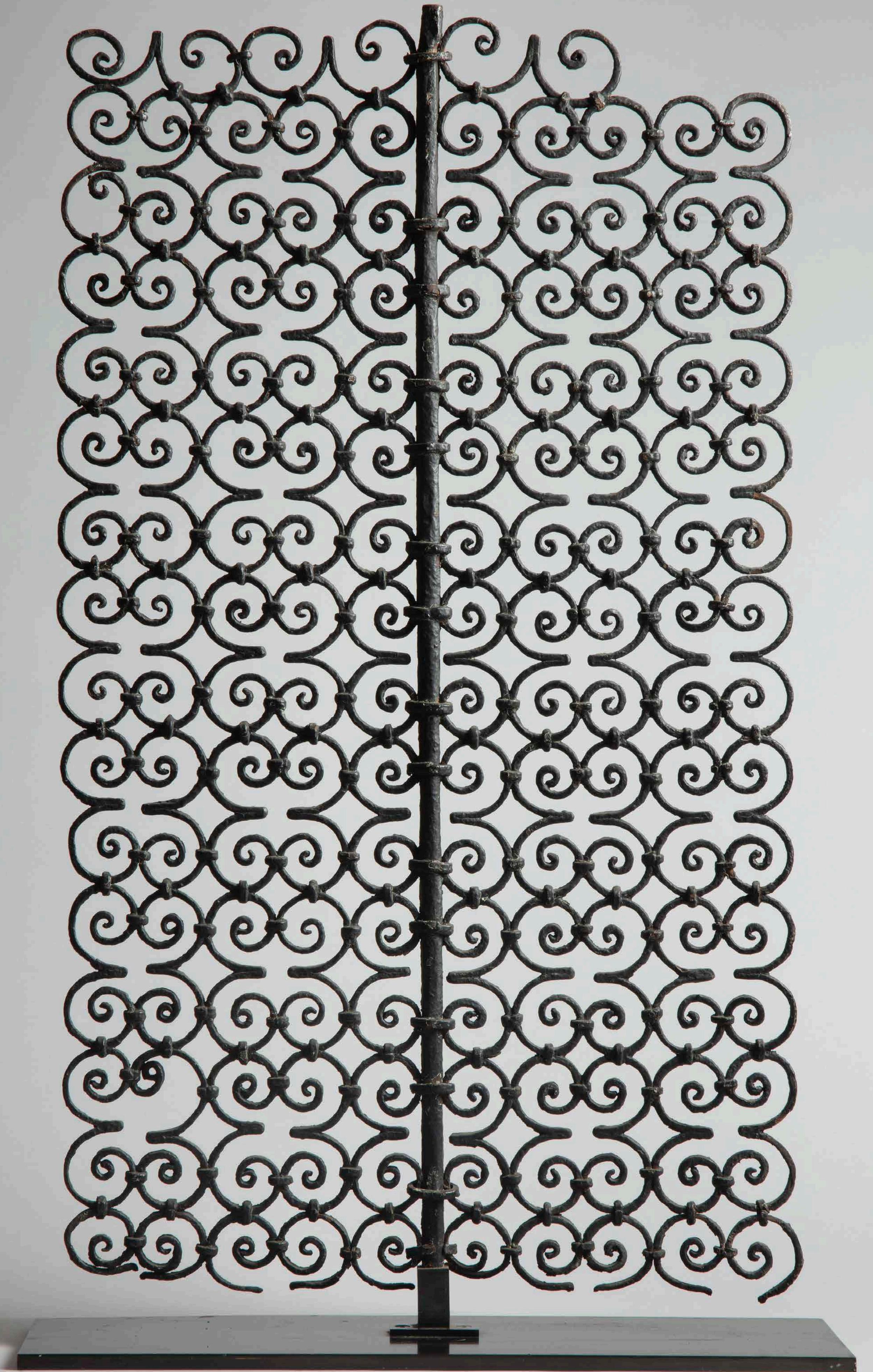
5

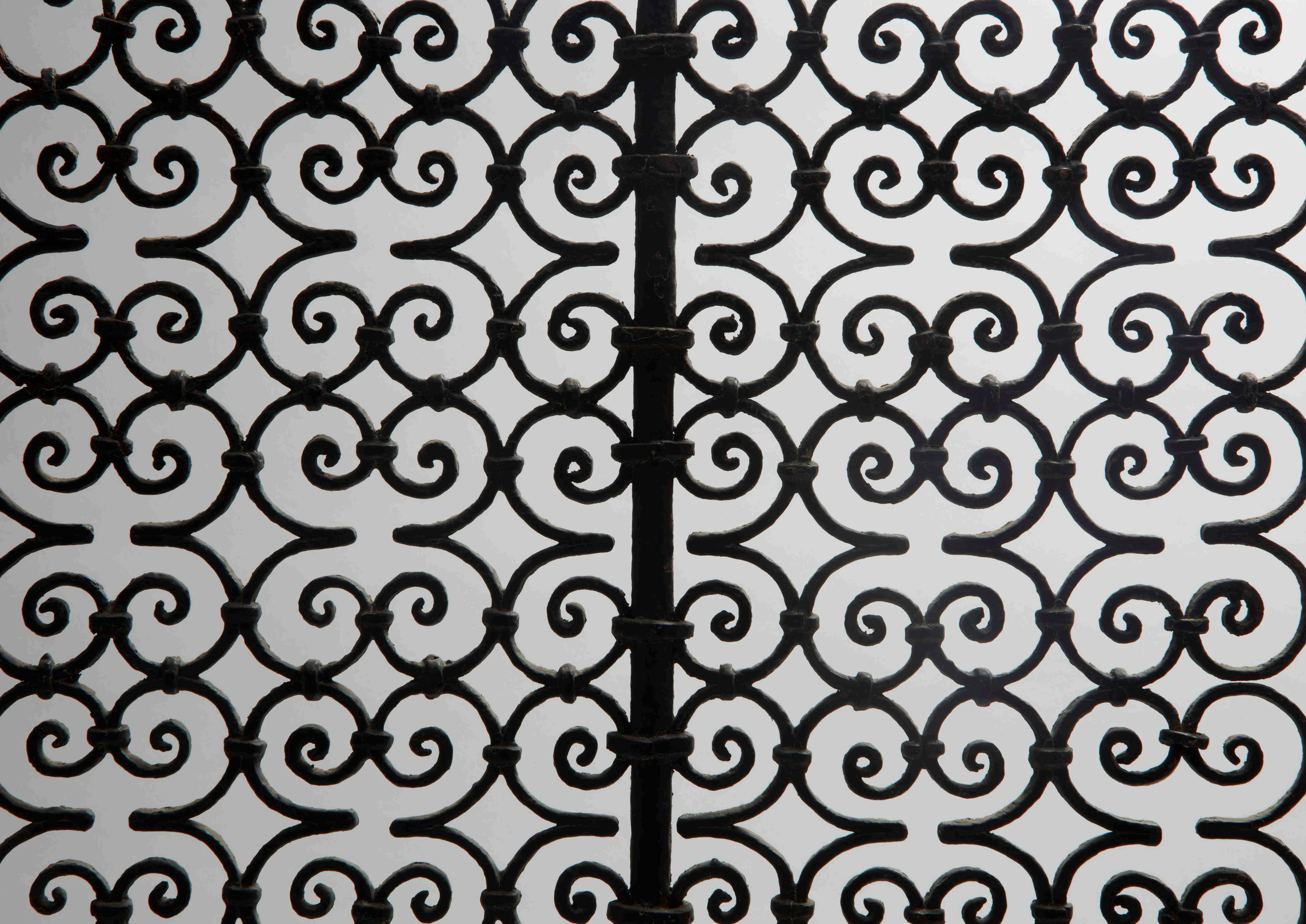
Screen grille with addorsed 'E'-scrolls

WESTERN EUROPE, MOST LIKELY FRANCE
13TH CENTURY
104 x 60 x 3 cm; Wrought iron with a painted surface.

Tight 'E'-scrolls, bound in a dense gridwork, pulsate and spin before the eyes on this delicate, free-floating grille. Moments of breathing space, in the form of cusped diamonds which jump out from the spaces between and around each set of bound cords, punctuate the design and provide a modicum of order, but the overall effect remains one of endless, wriggling movement that bewitches the eye. Constructed from hundreds of individual components wrought by hand, no two forms are identical, but rhythm and balance govern the design.

'E'-scroll ornament was prevalent in western-European ironwork during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, largely disappearing from its lexicon of motifs thereafter. It forms the basis of the mid thirteenth-century Chichester Grille now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the twelfth-century grilles at Conques Abbey and Saint Aventin. Ours has a subtle essentializing of forms that suggests a moment near the end of this date range. Both in delicacy and energy, it remains a fabulous example of Cyril Stanley Smith's observation that 'it is in objects that specifically exploit the behavior of hot iron under the hammer that iron's greatest beauty appears'.





6

A helmeted horn-blower holding a shield

FRANCE, TOURAINE, VOUVRAY
C. 1460
30.2 x 33.2 x 16 cm; Tufa.

This pale stone horn-blower, seated cross-legged in the crux of an obtusely angled moulding, was carved to decorated a late-medieval palace in the Loire. He wears a type of helmet called a sallet, with braided or twisted decoration around the rim, and rests a shield on his left shoulder while raising a horn to his mouth to blow. He is deftly cut with a rapid, planar approach to his forms and volumes, and is only cursorily finished on the back. This bold, economical approach to carving suggests that he was intended to placed high up within the building, mostly likely as part of an elaborate frieze where the effect of the whole displaced the focus of the viewer away from its individual elements. Nonetheless he is highly charming, and a vivid, accomplished work of domestic, secular art from a period where such statuary hardly survives ex situ. The obtuse angle of the ledge against which he is shown perching within indicates that he was removed from a stepped or 'breakfront' frieze design, most likely from the faceted sides of a chimney breast – a type of structure where imagery of this nature was once commonplace. Similar forms of decoration can be found in chateaux up and down the length of the Loire, and even into the Berry, where the palace of Jacques Coeur retains several such features despite the vicissitudes of its history. Stylistically, our figure falls into the same period as the Jacques Coeur palace decoration, which was completed by 1453. Its soft stone, known as Tufa, is common to the Loire Valley and was one of the region's primary building materials throughout the Middle Ages.

7

A ceiling brick with the shield of the Marqués de Dos Aguas

SPAIN, VALENCIA
15TH CENTURY
42.5 x 43 x 3 cm; Fired, unglazed red clay.

A flatfish decorates a leafy shield on this large square tile, which would have been mounted between the joists of a palatial ceiling to serve as decoration in low relief. It comes from the palace of the Marqués de Dos Aguas in Valencia, which now houses the the González Martí National Museum of Ceramics and Decorative Arts. Sixteen ceiling bricks of the same design are still preserved in situ at the palace but few survive ex situ. They are among the largest and grandest ceiling tiles created in Valencian kilns at any time during the region's ceramic-producing heyday in the fifteenth century and would have offered a richly textured addition to the aesthetic scheme filling their palatial home.

8

A wrought iron firedog

SPAIN
LATE 15TH OR EARLY 16TH CENTURY
117.5 x 92 x 24 cm; Wrought iron.

Typically, it is the hearth which lies at the heart of the domestic space, a beguiling source of light and heat in colder months and, well into the modern age, an essential tool for the preparation of family meals. In western Europe we have begun to wean ourselves off of our dependency with the hearth, and to consign its tools, components and accoutrements to the status of quirky, bygone folk-art decoration. But in reality the cast and wrought iron objects produced for the fire necessitate an immense amount of skill and experience, from highly-specialized craftsmen who work long hours in suffocating heat and whose body, hand and eye work as one. It is no coincidence that in Velazquez's Apollo in the Forge of Vulcan, any otherworldly or idealized physique which Apollo might be hiding beneath his orange mantle is almost completely obscured, and we are treated instead to an unimpeded view of the blacksmith Vulcan's own bared and glowing torso, shot through with muscles whose poise and agglomeration bespeak a lifetime of training and balance in the service of their profession.

This large wrought-iron firedog screen rings with the immediacy and invention of a blacksmith who innately understood iron's potential as a formidable sculptural material. It comprises a heavy horizontal bar raised on splayed feet and connecting two slender stems or stalks, which each terminate in a flaring, openwork basket originally used to hold flasks. Near the base of each stem an open-mouthed dragon's head – a feature typical of Spanish ironwork from the period – projects up and out on a delicate twisting neck. Their eyes are pierced, and may once have been adorned with rings that could be used to help carry the screen from hearth to hearth. Looped struts protrude from the sides of both stems as supports for utensils.

Firedogs, also known as andirons from the French landier, have been in use since antiquity. In their earliest iterations they would have been associated with only the wealthiest households, but by the Middle Ages they had become widespread and were no longer the preserve of the nobility alone. Ours is, however, a grand example of its type, unusually ornately decorated with protruding heads and twisted ornament cleverly alternating between loose and tight corkscrews in the metal, which lends each slender stem a subtle, rippling rhythm.

9

A three-legged anthropomorphic spit bracket

NORTHERN SPAIN
16TH CENTURY
40.6 x 23.6 x 35 cm; Wrought iron.

Anthropomorphic ironwork has been produced since ancient times, but it was in Spain during the Middle Ages that mythical beasts, fearsome dragons with gaping mouths, and striding animal forms suffused most profusely the blacksmith's art. This elegant beast belongs to a whole family of hunched, splayed-legged spit brackets incorporating bestial heads and legs produced in Spanish forges in the early years of the sixteenth century. It is, however, unusually elaborate, with a Santiago cross hammered from a thin sheet of iron and perched delicately atop its shoulder joint like a flower. The back of its head is serrated as if it were the carefully coifed mane of a horse, while stylized vertebrae or a flicking tail welded onto the arc of the back double ingeniously as notches for adjusting the level of the spit above the fire. The heavy twisting forced into the metal of the front legs and the subtle diagonality of their poise lend the animal a febrile, dancing energy, as if it were spring-loaded and ready to leap.

10

A massive fire dog with coat of arms and an anthropomorphic head

FRANCE
FIRST HALF 16TH CENTURY
73.5 x 28 x 59 cm; Cast iron.

A humourous, stylized head with bowl-crop haircut surmounts the front of this massive cast-iron fire dog or *landier*, which would have been used as one of a pair to cradle a fire grate or logs between them. It stares straight ahead, capping a design which also incorporates a panelled column of flamboyant blind fretwork and a crowned coat of arms surmounted by a fleur-de-lys – the symbols of royal France. An 'L'-shaped bracket for raising the grate or burning logs above the fire's falling ashes and allowing air to be drawn freely to the flames extends from the rear, while a thick, horseshoe-shaped double foot flares out from the pilaster's base, triangulating the points of contact with the ground and steadying the whole.

11

An oak chest front carved with beasts in a turreted arcade

NORTH GERMANY
14TH CENTURY
The chest: 73.8 x 112.9 x 54.5 cm; The chest front: 46 x 106 x 2.5 cm; Oak with iron mounts.

Once a rich source of imagery and an axial contributor to the whole aesthetic thrust of the domestic interior, only a tiny fraction of furniture produced in the Middle Ages has come down to us today, though we know from its presence in numerous contemporary panel paintings and manuscript illuminations just how fundamental it was to every home. This magnificent chest front, carved with six mythical beasts dancing in shallow relief through the niches of a turreted arcade, is far more elevated in design than the vast majority of carved furniture produced in the period before 1400, and once formed the centrepiece of a bedroom or hosting chamber in what must have been a palatial residence. It would have offered a potent and highly visible reminder of its owner's wealth, functioning imposingly and unmissably as secure, lockable storage for fine fabrics, metal plate, and the costliest family possessions. As with several of the half-dozen or so extant examples of its type, only the front panel survives, remounted onto a modern carcass at some point in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, but it would always have been the chest's most profusely carved feature and remains so today. Related survivals are concentrated in Scandinavian and north-German museums; a shorter example now in Copenhagen's National Museum was almost certainly carved by the same craftsman.

12

A profusely carved Gothic Monetiere

NORTHERN ITALY
C. 1480-1500
76.5 x 81.5 x 34 cm (chest); Walnut, boxwood, poplar and pine.

This walnut monetiere, or money cabinet, was made for a wealthy late fifteenth-century merchant and is among the earliest examples of its type to survive anywhere in the world. It would originally have served as a semi-portable writing desk, with its thirteen individual drawers used for monies, papers and writing tools that could be locked behind a hinged panel façade (now lost). Its design is breathtaking in its complexity and delicacy. Every one of its thirteen drawer fronts carry subtly varying blind-fretwork carvings in the form of regular and offset quadrifoliate compositions, excepting the two thinnest drawers above the central compartment, which, along with the running borders along the top and sides of the front consist of a gothic chainwork motif. No two drawer fronts are identical, each taking a different pattern dependent on its size, position, and format, varying from symmetrical pinwheels to offset quatrefoils and petalled diamonds. They are arranged around a large, central door of square format, with a figurative roundel at its centre depicting a long-haired female figure in a shell-headed niche. She wears a square-cut dress with high shoulders and a dark, double-stranded necklace made by singeing the wood with a hot wire. The treatment of her face, with rounded cheeks, stern brow, high forehead and flowing hairstyle, bears similarity to the work of the Venetian painter and printmaker Andrea Mantegna, as well as to that of his many followers and imitators, and the author of our cabinet would no doubt have been aware of their work in some form, perhaps through early tarot cards or other print sources (fig. 1).

Although the arrangement of drawers around a central compartment is a fairly standard configuration for monetieri, its profusion of dense gothic fretwork and tracery carving is extremely rare. A direct parallel can be found in the form of a large section of room panelling from the Castello di Torchiara, Parma, carved in the third quarter of the fifteenth century and now in the Museo delle Arti Decorative del Castello Sforzesco, Milan. Although few, the closest comparisons are to be found amongst late-gothic survivals from the regions of Piedmont, Liguria and Lombardy. A cassone front now preserved in the Dublin Museum, and examples of carved decoration surviving in situ in the Aosta Valley, at sites such as the castle chapel at Issogne, and in the town of Saint-Marcel, are particularly analogous.

Fig. 1
Follower of Andrea Mantegna
Temperance, from the Tarocchi Cards of Mantegna
Italy, Ferrara (?)
c. 1470 - 1480
London, British Museum, Inv. No. 1845,0825.331

People & Possessions

13

A misericord from the Château of Pierrefonds, showing two workmen wringing wraps of fabric

NORTHERN FRANCE, OISE?
C. 1490-1500
16.5 x 31.8 x 13.3 cm; Oak, with a single iron fixing hoop let into the reverse.

Removed from the chapel of the Château of Pierrefonds in the nineteenth-century, this carved oak misericord (a moveable seat used by the clergy to relieve leg aches during long periods of enforced standing in church) depicts two men dressed in thigh-length tunics, cloth caps and broad-toed 'bec-de-cane' shoes flexing twists of fabric or leather over their right knees. Their hands bend at the wrist to grasp and grapple with the bundles, and they sit with closed mouths – evidently silent in concentration. At some point in their history their lips and noses were hacked off with the point of a chisel by fervent iconoclasts.

Our carving belongs to a large corpus of gothic misericords made for use in a religious context but which document secular, daily life in late-medieval northern Europe. Misericords occupied a privileged position at the heart of the most sacred spaces within church and chapel buildings, but at the same time they inhabited a liminal realm, on the margins of the social and psychological environments of the age. Out of sight when flipped down, their imagery could be completely hidden from view. Because of this, carvers of misericords often injected them with profanity, irreverence, and humour. Their scenes and figures routinely poke fun at the clergy, and at people in any position of power and wealth, but they are also searingly vivid and occasionally tender documents of real life and the struggles, fashions, working processes, and responsibilities associated with all strata of medieval society. Our misericord is just such an example, showing two working men engaged intently together in their profession (perhaps hounded by an unseen client).

14

An albarello with the figure of a man shown at bust length

ITALY, UMBRIA, DERUTA
C. 1500
21 cm (height) x 12.2 cm (diameter); Tin-glazed earthenware on a pale buff-coloured clay.

This stout Deruta albarello depicts a strawberry-haired youth turned in profile and dressed in garb emblazoned with a variant of the arms of the Baglioni family, who ruled over the city of Perugia between 1438 and 1540. He may be a member of this powerful family or more likely intended to represent one of the household valets, poised, alert and ready to serve, which would echo the function of the albarello as a storage jar for useful ingredients while playfully exploiting the visual potential and propaganda of the Renaissance livery. A floating scroll framing the figure's profile records the contents of the jar as 'butiru[m] va[cca]' – cow's butter – which would have been a useful household ingredient as well as a salve for the skin.

15

Oak relief with the Arms of Sir Piers Dutton (d. 1545)

ENGLAND, CHESHIRE, DUTTON HALL
C. 1539-1542
94 x 42 x 18 cm (depth); Oak, with vestiges of original and later polychromy.

This monumental armorial, carved from a single block of oak, originally decorated the porchway surrounding the grand front entrance to Dutton Hall, Cheshire, which was enlarged and decorated by Sir Piers Dutton between 1539 and 1542. One of England's greatest extant Tudor houses, the entire hall was dismantled and relocated to Essex in 1933, with large sections of its sculptural programs (including this coat of arms) sold off during the process.

Picked out with pigments and sculpted in deep relief, our panel with its depiction of the Dutton arms supported by griffins, was among the hall's triumphant centrepieces (fig. 1, overleaf). Details such as its scroll-bearing angels have so much in common with English late-medieval alabasters that it was almost certainly produced by a sculptor trained in the carving of both stone and wood, perhaps in the Midlands where the alabaster quarries, and therefore also its carvers, were based in large numbers. Because its dating is known with certainty, it stands as a hugely important document for our understanding of stylistic developments in English sculptural output on the very eve of the Reformation and the terrible image-breaking that would occur during the Henrician purges of the 1540s. Sculptors whose entire livelihoods had centred around the patronage of the Church were suddenly forced to hustle for work in private spheres. The artist responsible for Dutton's coat of arms and Dutton Hall's other decorative carvings may have felt more than a little irony when he looked back on the commission; an eminent figure in Tudor England, Sir Piers Dutton went on to play a central role in Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and was appointed by the King as commissioner for the assessment and liquidation of monastic properties in Cheshire.

Fig. 1
Oak relief of the Dutton Arms in situ at the entrance porch of Dutton Hall.

16

A man washing the mouth of an ass

ITALY, DERUTA
C. 1550
40.4 cm (diameter) x 8.6 cm (depth); Tin-glazed earthenware with cobalt blue and a pale yellow-hued lustre over a deep buff-coloured clay.

'A lavare la testa dell'asino si perde sia l'acqua che il sapone' – he who washes the head of an ass wastes both water and soap. So goes the medieval Italian proverb which warns us about wasting our time and energies on something that cannot be changed. On this showily decorated mid sixteenth-century maiolica dish the popular wisdom of such a common proverb, and its application to the lives of a working populace, takes centerstage. Painted within its concave well is a man of no elevated status. His sleeves are rolled up to the elbows, an apron is tied around his waist, and a beretta hat sits over his shaggy hair as he engages himself in washing the mouth of an ass while it sits on an elaborate chair at the centre of a verdant landscape. A bowl of soapsuds is perched between the animal's raised front legs, and a towel is slung over its shoulders in a manner that would not have been out of place in a typical barbershop. The broad rim, which rises subtly up and outwards toward a robust outer moulding, is divided into four quadrants by a design of striped cords, oak leaves, and sinuous curling foliage sprays.

A handful of Italian Renaissance maiolica dishes depicting this lively genre scene have survived, suggesting wide demand for its wit and wisdom in sixteenth-century domestic settings. Perhaps its owners brought it into discussion when hosting a dinner party, or referred to it as a moralizing truism when chastising their children for behaving thoughtlessly. Did a wife remind her husband to spend his energies more wisely when he came home from the office and yet another fractious meeting with a supplier? Think. Pick your battles. Do not be like the hapless soul who scrubs foolishly at the donkey's mouth, it admonishes.

17

A pair of misericords depicting children's games

FLANDERS
C. 1500-1510
24 x 41.6 x 13.5 cm and 24 x 42.5 x 13.5 cm; Oak.

This pair of misericords is disarming in the startling vividness with which they portray common children together at play. One shows four young figures engaged in horseplay, quite literally. Two ride the backs of their friends, grabbing on to their heads to steady themselves (much to the upset of one of those being ridden, who grimaces uncomfortably from the rough handling). The riders, starting back-to-back, hold each other's hands while their 'steeds' attempt to crawl away in opposite directions – testing their own strength as well as the grip and endurance of the duellers on their backs. The winner, it is implied, will be the one who can hold on the longest and pull their opponent from his mount, but it seems much more likely that the game will end in tears with everyone sprawled on the ground. The other relief shows two young men gesticulating wildly. One, elegantly dressed in cap and robe, looks on amused as his tousle-haired counterpart falls over while attempting to walk on a pair of stilts. The face of the hapless victim – only witnessed, or was he pulled off by his friend whose now empty right hand once held a switch or pole? – flashes anxiously as he extends his right arm to break his fall.

The broad-toed 'bec de cane' shoes, flat-collared overcoat, and modish beretta cap worn by the onlooker in the game of stilts all help us to date these reliefs to the first years of the sixteenth century, when such fashions swept across western Europe. As with the single misericord in this catalogue, they were made to decorate the hinged seat of a bank of choirstalls in a chapel or church space, and yet they delight intensely in the profane, and in the jocular pursuits of children at play. Among the greatest, and certainly the most visible and widespread, corpus of medieval imagery to depict secular life and common experiences survives in the form of misericords and other carved liturgical furniture used in the service of the Church. They offer a startling glimpse into the 'other side' of medieval existence and the humour, triumphs, and calamities of common life in the period, breaking down boundaries between rich and poor or high and low within an aesthetic arena in which they hide in plain sight.

18

An albarello decorated with portraits of a couple

DERUTA, PESARO, OR URBINO
C. 1490
21.5 cm (height) x 13.5 cm (diameter); Tin-glazed earthenware with orange, green and blue over a buff-coloured clay.

This elegant albarello is dominated by the haunting portrait of a young girl in elaborate attire. Her face perhaps suggests a slight anxiety about an early marriage, customary in the Renaissance, since the other side shows an equally puzzled-looking young man!

Bust-length profile portraits of couples made their appearance on maiolica from around the third quarter of the fifteenth century, and virtually disappeared after the beginning of the sixteenth. They reflect the influence of mid fifteenth-century painting and sculpture, in which profile portraits became highly fashionable, in turn inspired by hieratic portraits on medals. Portraits of couples are often depicted on the sides of vases, side by side or, more rarely, in front of each other. The same iconography appears on dishes accompanied by amorous inscriptions or allegorical animals referring to fidelity and fertility, such as dogs or stags. Such decorations indicate the purpose of these wares; they were made in association with betrothals or weddings.

Courtship ritual was elaborate in Renaissance Italy. An albarello with portraits of a couple would have been an appropriate courtship gift. In his famous twelfth-century treatise De Amore (On Love) Andreas Capellanus stated that ‘a lady can accept from her love whatever small gift may be useful in the care of her person, or may look charming, or may remind her of her lover’.

Wedding celebrations could last for days, involving gift-giving, processions and many lavish meals during which speciality foods would be eaten. This albarello might have been given as a gift from a groom to a bride, perhaps full of sweetmeats, later to be used in their new home. Slender albarelli such as this one were adaptable to multiple uses, from a flower vase, as visible in contemporary paintings, to a container for kitchen ingredients or home remedies.

19

A silver-gilt girdle decorated with fantastical beasts

SERBIAN EMPIRE
C. 1350-1400
4.3 x 126 x 1 cm (width at widest point x total length of girdle x depth at thickest point);
Silver-gilt mounts on later red velvet.

Clothing has always been a potent sign of wealth and status. In the Middle Ages, fashions in wealthier homes and courtly contexts made use of large quantities of fabric, which needed cinching around the body by way of a belt or girdle. This shimmering example incorporates 17 slender silver-gilt adornments enclosed at either end by larger cast plates. A looping buckle in the form of a pulled bow with a sturdy cusped bar against which the fixing pin strikes is decorated with two fantastical beasts known as Senmurvs. They are depicted in a pseudo-heraldic rampant pose, turned in profile to face each other on either side of a central sprouting fleur-de-lys. A round-ended pendant is similarly decorated, with a griffon in profile above a scrolling, freely-floating rinceau.

Belts and girdles were luxury showpieces, popular throughout the royal courts of Europe since their earliest appearance, with secular and fantastical imagery of the type employed on our example becoming popular from the thirteenth century onwards. Although visible on examples of contemporary sculpture and painted royal portraits, only a tiny handful of the objects themselves have survived, far fewer in complete form. They were a favourite accessory at court, since they were by nature highly exposed adornments visible from all angles, emphatically shapely and elegant, and conducive to ostentation and material richness. They were also created to show off the extraordinary refinement that could be achieved by the most highly skilled court goldsmiths, standing as objects of the greatest luxury and beauty. They were worn around the waist (or higher, under the ribcage) by both men and women over a long-sleeved garment called a houppelande, with the pendant allowed to hang down at the front, almost to the ground in many cases. Examples like ours could be bought ready-made on the open market or from travelling salesmen, as is evinced by their prominent inclusion in early illustrations and books of trades, but our understanding of personal adornments and courtly fashion during the second half of the fourteenth century remains fragmentary, since few purely secular objects of this richness and splendour remain.

The Table

20

Wall hanging with pomegranate pattern

GERMANY, POSSIBLY NUREMBURG
C. 1475-1525
99.5 x 155 cm; Tapestry of wool and bast fibre wefts on an undyed linen warp

Two variants of a spiky-leaved 'pomegranate' motif placed over staggered rows separated by running horizontal swags of acanthus sprays and flowerheads form the decorative pattern of this woven wall hanging. Its bold design and vivid colour palette combine to give the illusion of a family of fine silk damasks and cut velvets produced in southern European weaving centres, and particularly in northern Italy, during the second half of the fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth. But in southern Germany, where this tapestry was woven, such silks and velvets would have been comparatively rare and were the costliest textiles available, reaching a clientele confined to only the wealthiest households. A tapestry (itself a hugely expensive object to commission and create) made to imitate another type of textile altogether, would have been received both as an homage to a sister art, and a playful visual pun.

Only a few tapestries with simulated velvet patterns like this example are known. A tapestry of an identical pattern at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is without doubt from the same workshop, if not part of the very same hanging. They would most likely have covered the walls of a domestic interior, enclosing and warming the space of a dining room or bed chamber and providing the backdrop to daily life among Nuremberg's burgeoning mercantile elite.

21

A pile of nested weights, commissioned by the King of Portugal Manuel

LIKELY CAST IN NUREMBERG, BUT HANDLED THROUGH A FLEMISH AGENT
DATED 1499
14.4 x 20 x 16 cm; Cast, chased, and engraved copper alloy.

Triumphantly emblazoned with the two personal emblems of Manuel I, King of Portugal – his royal coats of arms and the armillary sphere (the central symbol of Portugal's maritime prowess) – this remarkable set of nested weights represents the crowning glory of Manuel's successful drive towards standardization at a scale never-before attempted, for one of the richest trading empires ever established.

In a letter dated May 1503, the King of Portugal announced the introduction of a new standardized weight of measurement across all of his empire's municipalities and territories, using a binary system based on the marco de Colonha, the Portuguese variant of the Cologne marc. In each case a set of weights emblazoned with his royal emblems, coats of arms, official stamps, and dedicatory inscription was sent out to every municipality for use. It was an ambitious, costly, and logistically gargantuan endeavour which took years to accomplish, the purpose being to better facilitate trade and tax collection while simultaneously uniting the entire nation with a single set of standardized unitary measurements, and introducing a completely centralized governing system for the first time in the kingdom's history.

Weights were sent not only to the mainland comarcas (provinces), cities and towns, but also to the country's overseas dominions such as Madeira. Influenced by similar, but less systematic metrological reforms occurring in Castile, England, and previously in Portugal under his predecessor Juan II, Manuel I first set the new reforms in motion as early as 1497, but the production of the piles would not commence for another two years, as testified by the dates punched into their sides. This is partly because of the vast logistical task at hand, but also because the king had been forced to look outside of Portugal for the casting process. It is known from documentary evidence that he commissioned an agent in Flanders to oversee the production of the weights, and it is believed that they worked closely with a number of workshops based in Nuremberg, the absolute leading centre for the production of weights and measures anywhere in Europe.

Delivery of Manuel I's new standardized weight piles right across the Kingdom of Portugal and its overseas dominions began in July 1503, accompanied by printed books of regiments outlining their use, but in the King's own ordinances a reprieve of six months was granted between the date of the new weights' receipt and their official introduction into usage. As a result, by January 1504, all recipients were expected to have transitioned over to the new system. It has been estimated that perhaps as many as 600 weight nests could have been made and distributed by Manuel I, their size dependent on the population of the municipality to which they were to be sent. Of these, fewer than 120 sets are thought to have survived.

Of enormous difficulty to produce, distribute and enforce (economically, socially, and logistically), the weight piles of King Manuel I represent the single most important and widespread metrological standardization in the whole of Portuguese history prior to the introduction of the Decimal Metric system. As objects of trade and connectivity across the empire (and by extension, a great swathe of the Earth's surface), these remarkable weight sets played a significant role in shaping the modern world map.

22

A one-handled mortar decorated with heads and fleurs-de-lys

SOUTHERN GERMANY, PROBABLY NUREMBERG
C. 1450-1475
17.8 cm (height) x 15.7 cm (diameter at rim) x 17.2 cm (depth including handle); Weight 3.2 kg. Cast bronze with a dark patina.

Mortars were common household implements from the early Middle Ages, used for grinding, crushing, and powdering all types of foodstuffs as well as herbs and spices; they were equally useful in the preparation of medicinal mixtures, both for domestic and commercial distribution.

Slender, elegantly drawn, and with an emphasis on perpendicularity underscored by the delicate vertical stems sprouting fleurs-de-lys on its body, this is a brilliant example of the decorative refinement witnessed in southern-German mortar casting around the middle of the fifteenth century. The vessel's tapering form is typical of mortars cast in this region, and was perfectly suited to its function. Less typical, however, are the characterful heads emerging from its base, which provide anchoring points for the vertical stems above but which more commonly feature lion paws or claws rather than human faces.

23

A pharmacy mortar commissioned by Perinello de Filippo

ITALY, UMBRIA, PERUGIA?
DATED 1467
12.5 cm x 17.3 cm (diameter at rim) x 19.2 cm (width including handles); cast bronze

The beautiful Latin inscription encircling the rim of this lavishly decorated mortar proudly attests to the details of its creation. It reveals how it was cast in 1467 and commissioned by 'Perinello de Filippo', who 'had me made' ('me fa fare'). This Perinello was without doubt a member of the prominent Perinelli family of Perugia since their coat of arms, with its repeating chevrons and three lions' jambes, appears directly below his name. He may also be the same man as the 'Filippo de Perinello' mentioned in a document of 1460 now in the Archivio di Stato in Perugia, and which records a payment of 16 florins made to the painter Benedetto Bonfigli (c. 1420-1496) for work in the chapel of the Palazzo dei Priori. Evidently he was a man of some social and political standing; during the Renaissance his family were known for their roles in local government and such close association with the decoration of the city's largest Palazzo suggests an elevated sphere of influence.

Characteristic of mortars produced in Italian workshops, this example has a far shorter and wider shape than those produced north of the Alps. It consists of three main parts: a ribbed base, a body which incorporates the main decorative frieze, and a rim with a dedicatory inscription, as well as a pair of rounded, braided handles. While German mortars tend to have plainer surfaces with less decoration but more varied shapes, this example is almost fully covered in decoration. The pattern on the decorative frieze consists, on each of the main sides, of a pair of two entwined serpents, framing respectively the Perinelli coat of arms and a tear-drop armorial surmounted by a cross. Around this arrangement other, smaller motifs including flowers and stars as well as the date and the initials 'G' and 'C' (the latter crowned).

Metal mortars are known to have been in use in Europe by at least the twelfth century, since Theophilus (1070-1125) describes an example cast from copper and tin in his treatise on the processes of medieval craftsmanship *On Divers Arts*. They were the workhorses of home and pharmacy alike, cast by the same craftsmen responsible for the period's church bells and water-pouring aquamaniles. Yet bronze mortars were expensive to produce, and examples as ornate as this one, which necessitated a bespoke mould, would have been reserved for wealthy pharmacies and only the richest domestic kitchens. The recurring decorative element of two serpents entwined around a rod resembles the caduceus, a traditional symbol of Hermes, associated with alchemy and wisdom. The armorial surmounted by a cross on the face of the mortar which also bears the date of casting belongs to an as-yet unidentified pharmacy, most likely one of those located in proximity to Perugia, from where the Perinelli family hailed. Numerous pestle impressions knocked into the surface of the metal within the central well evidence a life of rich and active use within the pharmacy.

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24

A ‘Perugia towel’ with confronted birds

CENTRAL ITALY
LATE 15TH OR 16TH CENTURY
228 x 56.5 cm (with an upper extension of 45 cm added at a later date); Woven linen in two colours.

Three friezes of unequal height, filled with complex tessellating compositions of confronted birds among vegetal sprays and geometric diamond patterns repeated in mirror image, march across the entire width of this elaborate woven linen tablecloth. Textiles such as this are commonly described in English as ‘Perugia towels’ after the region in central Italy where they have been found in large numbers. Here, bands of decoration highly stylized to suit the weaving technique are interspersed with pairs of plain bands and two fictive text-like registers, all in the characteristic colours of blue and white. Perugia towels have no reverse or ‘wrong’ side, as the pattern appears as white on blue from one side, and as blue on white from the other. Even the white main body of the towel is decorated, featuring a delicate twill weave of concentric lozenges which subtly scatter the light when it is hung, held, or moved in the hands. The decorative bands are concentrated at one end of the towel, but originally it would have had similar bands at both ends, featuring either the same or different patterns readable from opposite directions.

The frequency with which Perugia towels form the backdrop to life in late-medieval and Renaissance paintings attests to their importance across both the domestic and religious spheres. They are commonly depicted as tablecloths, as in Duccio di Buoninsegna’s *Wedding at Cana* (Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Siena) and frescos of the *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci (Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan) and Domenico Ghirlandaio (Cenacolo di Ognissanti and San Marco, Florence; fig. 1). But they were evidently also employed to dry the hands after washing (as implied by the appearance of a blue and white cloth alongside a hand-washing laver in the *Annunciation* scene on Hubert and Jan van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece*), as well as during childbirth as midwives’ aids (*The Birth of the Virgin*, by Giovanni da Milano, Cappella Rinuccini, Santa Croce, Florence).

The rhythmic order and rich and varied patterns of Perugia towels maintained an enduring popularity: depictions can be found as early as the late thirteenth century (*Christ Glorified*, Maestro di San Felice di Giano) and versions of their designs were woven well into the eighteenth. Initially patterns of plain stripes were used, followed by the addition of simple geometric and figurative motifs. More complex patterns, such as those on our example, appear from the fifteenth century onwards. From the most elevated settings to the humblest, few other classes of textile can claim to have so vividly contributed to the visual texture of daily life over a period spanning some five centuries.

25

A ‘Mill Green’ jug

ENGLAND, ESSEX
LATE 13TH OR EARLY 14TH CENTURY
35.5 cm (height) x 16.7 cm (diameter of body) x 17.5 cm (depth including handle); white slip and green copper glaze with sgraffito decoration on a red earthenware clay.

To say that Europe’s late-medieval populace had access to fine artforms on any regularity outside of their experience of the ‘public’ art of the Church would of course be untrue, ignoring the vast disparity of wealth that separated classes from one another and anchored artistic output firmly within the reach of only the highest social strata. But that everyone during the period, of every age, sex, race, and social standing, universally used and held pottery of some form, and that they did so on a daily basis with a plethora of applications, is without doubt. Ceramic table wares have been developed by every human culture and in every corner of the globe for millennia, they appear in visual and documentary records of all kinds, and they habitually inhabit depictions of daily life from work to leisure, from the carting of goods to market to the celebration of feasts and festivities, and from barnyard interiors and fields during harvest time to the gold-strewn dining tables of popes and princes. Indeed, it remains true today that no artform produced by human hands is more widely consumed or has a greater variety of forms, functions, or decoration. No other artform more profoundly bespeaks communal gatherings, shared meals, the regular necessities of humanity, and the containment and preservation of hard-won collective produce, or does so by utilising the very clay beneath our feet.

With its distinctive baluster form, this imposing glazed jug would most likely have been used to serve ale but possibly also, on occasions, wine. Its tall, elegant shape is almost entirely covered in white slip and decorated in a rich mottled green glaze with a subtle pattern of incised combed lines that reveal the redware body beneath. It is applied with a strap handle ‘eared’ with two distinct thumb impressions at the top. These characteristics identify it as the work of the prolific and exceptionally skilled medieval potters of Mill Green at Ingatestone in Essex. At the height of its popularity, Mill Green ware is thought to have supplied up to a fifth of all pottery used in London and has been found as far afield as Norway. Excavations of medieval waterfronts at Trig Lane and Seal House suggest that it was first introduced between around 1240 and 1270, but that its popularity declined by the 1350s with the advent of new forms and evolving production centres.

Bernard Leach, the pioneering early twentieth-century advocate of what has now become known as ‘studio pottery’, greatly admired Mill Green ware as the apogee of English medieval pottery and set about reviving its forms and language of decoration for the modern era.

26

A ‘border ware’ jug with ridged collar decoration

ENGLAND,
LATE 15TH OR EARLY 16TH CENTURY

28 cm (height) x 16.7 cm (diameter of body) x 18.5 cm (depth including handle); lead glaze enriched with copper, over a white slip on a red earthenware clay.

The brilliant speckled green bib which runs unchecked over the front of this large, sturdy jug, was made by pouring white slip over the clay before sealing it in place with a lead-rich glaze suffused with copper. When subjected to the fierce heat of the kiln, the lead ran clear while the copper particles burst and bloomed into a mottled cascade; part waterfall and part starry constellation. Aside from its rich decorative effect, this coating glaze was intended to allow for beverages such as ale to be poured repeatedly from the spout without being absorbed into the clay and soiling its fabric against further use.

Both in its form and materials, our vessel conforms closely to a well-studied family of pottery known collectively today as ‘Border Ware’, and its red clay body gives it the subgroup name of ‘redware’. Produced in north-east Hampshire and west Surrey from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, red ‘Border Ware’ products using clays from the lower seams of the Reading beds fuelled the intense demand of London’s homes, hostelries, and dockyards on the ceramic-producing regions ringing the capital from east to west. The durable rod handle bridging the rim to the body, and the clever use of elegant, ridged detailing around the collar, which doubles as a strengthening tool against knocks, make it perfectly suited to the exuberant theatre of the dining table on which it would have played a leading role.

27

A large knife handle depicting a crouching figure embraced by an eagle – The Abduction of Ganymede?

NORTHERN ITALY
LATE 14TH OR 15TH CENTURY
9.7 x 4.7 x 3 cm; Bone.

The figure of a boy naked save for his conical hat, which he clutches with his left hand, crouches on a tall octagonal plinth. He cranes his head upwards as if to kiss a large eagle, shown almost framing the figure from behind and curling its beak round to return the boy's gesture. Its wings, deeply engraved to suggest a fine net of imbricated feathers, partially unfurl to completely cover the reverse of the object.

The form and decoration of this hollow, octagonal bone knop spring from the tradition of carved knife handles and *gravoirs* made for the secular settings and domestic spaces of the richer echelons of late-medieval European society. Such objects had real utility and function, but many are so lavish and costly that it is clear they were also intended for display when not in use. Only occasionally featuring saints and Virgins, the majority of these survivals instead revel in themes of love, chivalry, mythology and heroism, which abounded in courtly contexts but simultaneously seeped into the privacy of the home. The sharp, geometric shapes on our example have a passing similarity to the bold and angular cutting style found in the output of the famous bone-carving workshops of the Embriachi dynasty, which sprang up in Florence and Venice from around 1375 to feed demand from the wealthy mercantile classes for showy tableware in imitation of earlier Parisian ivories. And yet its iconography appears to be unique in the context of medieval bone carvings. It seems to depict the famous ancient myth of the Abduction of Ganymede, in which the young Trojan prince is carried off to be a cup-bearer on Mount Olympus by Zeus, disguised as an eagle. Details such as the boy's conical Phrygian-type cap, the crouching stance, the comparative scale of the two figures, and the way in which Ganymede's form is encircled and framed by the eagle positioned directly behind him, suggest that our carver was aware in some capacity of classical images of the subject. This is not without precedent, since it is known that French gothic gravoirs took inspiration from Roman hair pins in silver and bone, thus transposing ancient forms to a distinctly medieval context. The size of our knop indicates that it once decorated a much larger object, such as a grand steel cutting knife, of which many examples with similar octagonal or lozenge-shaped cross-sections have come down to us. It would have been fixed in place using small metal pins passed through the two drilled holes on either side, low at the base of the socle. When gripped in the hand in an upright position, forefinger and thumb nestle pleasingly in the curved section of undercutting beneath the boy's head and the eagle's beak. Likewise, the roughened texture of the feathers covering the eagle's back offers ample friction and grip for the palm. Both features seem no mere coincidence, and given the need for a knife of any considerable weight and size to be firmly and comfortably gripped by its bearer, were doubtless considered carefully during its carving.

28

Bronze candleholder depicting a Wildman

GERMANY, PROBABLY NUREMBERG
C. 1525-1550
18.4 cm high; Lost-wax cast, chased, engraved and punched copper alloy.

A Wildman figurine poised mid-stride, with both hands raised and the crown of his head encircled by a laurel wreath. His body is engraved with rows of incisions indicating a covering of thick, wiry hair. His skilfully rendered face is characterised by large eyes, an upturned nose and an exaggerated moustache. The fingers on his right-hand wrap around a drilled socket originally used to support a candleholder.

The wild man was a hugely important element of medieval and Renaissance secular mythmaking and contemporary imagery, especially in the German-speaking world, was saturated with his image. But who or what was he? Medieval literature clearly suggests that writers and thinkers did not entirely agree on the identity of this giant creature, and so he often inhabits a marginal realm, where he is neither holy nor profane. He is typically discussed as being covered in thick hair, only his face, feet and hands exposed. Often crawling on all fours, he dwells in the forest and is somehow neither man nor animal. As a complete contrast to the ideal Christian man, the Wildman is unable to resist his animalistic urges, a symbol of uncontrollable natural forces and of sinfulness. Although he looks like a man, he does not possess those abilities which defined medieval people, such as speech, religion, or rational thinking. Yet, he possesses extraordinary powers, such as supernatural strength, and while deplorable in character he became deeply embedded in the period's storytelling and image-making. Our bronze figurine, with its careful engraving and chasing, is brilliantly illustrative of both the medieval world's fascination with this extraordinary creature, and sixteenth-century Nuremberg's highly skilled bronze-casting workshops.

Knights, Lovers & Courtly Pursuits

29

A painted 'minnekästchen' casket with iron furniture, decorated with a courtly triste

SWITZERLAND, PROBABLY BASEL
C. 1480-1490
26 x 17 x 10 cm; Beechwood painted with bismuth and oil, with ironwork furniture.

Three figures cavort around a low-walled octagonal fountain – a symbol of secular, courtly amorous pursuits – on the lid of this large domestic casket. Its sides are loosely painted with floral sprays in a combination of green, white, and dark metallic paints over a brick-red ground. On the front of the casket two birds, perhaps goldfinches with their bright red heads and chest markings, frame the original lock plate.

Medieval coffrets and caskets of this type are typically known by the German descriptor *minnekästchen*, which freely translated means 'gifts of love', or more literally 'boxes of love'. Surviving accounts from the time of their production refer to them more simply as kistlin, or ledlin for those made of leather, and the term minnekästchen was not in fact coined until the nineteenth century to describe their courtly and amorous iconography. Like ivory examples produced in France during the period, minnekästchen would have functioned as keep safes for jewellery and other treasured possessions, and are likely to have been given as gifts. They are generally united in their use of a reddish ground colour and a bold, limited palette of blues, greens, reds and whites over the top. Alongside these the metallic element bismuth, painted in liquid form to give a lustrous tin-like sheen to certain details, is a typical component in their decoration, and its use may have begun in imitation of imported Islamic examples.

Of the early minnekästchen to have survived, only a small handful have complex figurative decoration, and the present iconography with its courtiers serenaded by a lute player is apparently unique to our example. It may have been taken from contemporary secular and moralising texts, such as Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*, published in Basel in 1494. Amorous couples hopelessly lost in love feature prominently in Brant's compendium of tales, and the many woodblock prints that accompany his text in early printed editions depict figures of a type compellingly close in style to those decorating our casket.

von hoher

30

Courtly couples hunting with a falcon

NETHERLANDS, LEYDEN?
C. 1500
20 cm diameter; Green-tinted clear cylinder glass with silver stain and vitreous paint.

Two couples clad in fashionable dress stand apart from one another in a hillocky landscape, the men wearing short, belted coats with standing collars and slashed sleeves, and the women full-length dresses. Each figure sports a different style of headgear, individualizing them from one another while simultaneously alluding to the competitive self-fashioning of rich young aristocrats enjoying the benefits of a disposable income. They are clearly out hunting, since the lady in the foreground supports a large, hooded falcon on her wrist and a hunting dog lies attentively by her feet.

Hunting was a favourite pursuit of the nobility throughout the Middle Ages. It offered an outlet for engagement with the opposite sex and, aided and abetted by contemporary romance literature, its teasing, predator-prey relationship was associated early on with the hunt for love that evolved under the rules and strictures of sexual conduct during the period.

Roundels were the first form of stained glass to be made in the service of domestic settings rather than religious architecture. Their production exploded in the years around 1500, fuelled both by rapidly-evolving production methods and the demands of a burgeoning mercantile class hungry for profane imagery which which to decorate its homes. Our example was most likely used to decorate one of the upper lights of a larger mullioned window opening in a grand private setting, though many roundels at this date were also destined for imposing civic buildings such as town halls and guild houses.

31

A jousting knight on horseback

FRANCE
C. 1500
13.5 x 13.4 cm; White slip over a stamped orange-red clay.

This tile once decorated the floor of a grand chamber at the heart of a rich domestic setting. It was made with a stamp and depicts a knight dressed in jousting armour, an elegant lance, a plumed helmet and spurs, while his horse sports decorative bridle and saddle trappings. The style of the horse furniture and the relatively large size of the tile places it in the late fifteenth century.

Carved, cut, or cast stamps found widespread use throughout the Middle Ages to impress clay tile slabs before the grooves were filled with slip of a contrasting colour and then fired ready for glazing. The clarity of the present design suggests that the stamp may have been of metal. This would have been expensive to produce and suggests provenance from an active and commercial production centre filling demand from a wealthy urban clientele.

32

Enamelled gemellion with knights in combat

FRANCE, LIMOGES
C. 1240
23 cm (diameter) x 3 cm (depth); Champlevé enamel on copper, with traces of gilding.

Gemellions, which appeared in the thirteenth century in the southern French enamel-producing city of Limoges, were used for handwashing in both secular and religious contexts. The overtly chivalric, knightly imagery on this example would suggest that it was made for a rich private patron rather than a clerical audience. Its central medallion depicts two soldiers locked in deadly combat, one carrying a broadsword, the other wielding a mace. Both protect themselves with small *bucklers*, a form of lightweight conical shield that can be supported with a clenched fist. They are clad in long robes, delicately incised with pleated folds that can still be discerned despite the wear and abrasion sustained by the copper. Regularly spaced around the central vignette and extending up the sides of the bowl are four smaller medallions, each depicting smaller figures engaged in combat with human and bestial adversaries. At the top, a knight transpierces a fox with his lance. At 3 o'clock another wards off a large winged dragon with his club. At 6 o'clock a figure who appears to be a saint, since their head is nimbed by a circular halo, tames and rides a large bird, grabbing it by its neck and tail with their hands. At 9 o'clock two knights battle in a composition similar to that in the central roundel. The whole composition is enclosed by a light blue dentil moulding and encircled on the rim by a dynamic sawtooth or '*dents-de-scie*' design in blue.

As their name indicates (derived from *gemellus*, the Latin word for 'twin'), *gemellions* are thought to have been produced most commonly in pairs, with one bowl incorporating a small spout to pour water over the hands, and the other serving as a catch basin. Ours functioned as the latter, since it lacks a pouring spout. Although the production of engraved bowls was widespread across Europe by the twelfth century (and some scholars have suggested they took influence from the importation of contemporary Islamic metalwork), it wasn't until the second decade of the thirteenth that *gemellions* inlaid with vivid enamels began to be produced in Limoges. Today they are recognized as among the most inventive products of the city's master enamellers, and occupy a liminal space between church and home that cannot be said to be the case with their more widely known creations – pyxes, croziers, bible covers and reliquary chasses. Given the fact that these objects were used frequently, the survival of almost all of our *gemellion*'s original enamel is particularly remarkable.

33

Manuscript leaf with two scenes: a couple discussing legalities with lawyers, and two lovers in bed, from a Decretum Gratiani

SOUTHERN FRANCE, PROBABLY TOULOUSE
C. 1320
42.5 x 29 cm; Ink, tempera and burnished gold on parchment.

This grand manuscript leaf with its illuminated images of a couple discussing legalities and two lovers embracing intimately in bed comes from a *Decretum Gratiani*, a legal textbook first written in the twelfth century by a jurist known as Gratian. It remained an essential source of canon law right up until the Catholic legal reforms of the early twentieth century and this leaf recounts a complicated case in which a wife seeks divorce. Her husband apparently became impotent, leading the wife to take a lover, whom she went on to marry. When the husband regained potency, he claimed his wife back, only to take a vow of celibacy without her permission. Gratian outlines the various legal dilemmas of this case, making suggestions as to how it should be handled and citing various theological authorities to back up his claims.

Our leaf comes from an extravagant manuscript version of the *Decretum* which was almost certainly produced in Toulouse, a major centre for the study of law during the Middle Ages. Its richly illuminated miniature depicts a crenelated building with two pointed arches. Within, a cleric gesticulating with his arms acts as a judge between the husband and wife, who stand on one side, and two lawyers, who stand on the other. While the husband raises his hands in embarrassment, the wife smiles and points to an arched space in the lower part of this scene, which illustrates her in bed with her lover.

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34

Cuir ciselé letter case incised with ‘Praise be to God through Love’

ITALY, LOMBARDY
C. 1450-1475
24.3 x 23.5 x 3.5 cm; Goatskin.

The leather on this exceptionally large letter case is profusely worked in the *cuir ciselé* (cut leather) technique, comprising a large rosette at the centre of each side surrounded by foliate tendril ornament which terminates in smaller rosettes at each corner. The narrow sides are decorated with variants of the same motifs. Running horizontally across the lid on the front and back is an inscription in Latin, flanked by two suns: ‘*LAUS DEO*’ and ‘*PER AMORE*’ (‘Praise be to God / through Love’). It suggests that the case functioned within a secular, courtly realm, perhaps to transport or safeguard letters sent by a couple to one another.

This is one of only nine known *cuir-ciselé* book and letter cases of its type to have survived. They were made in Northern Italian workshops, most likely located in the Veneto or Lombardy, using cowhide and goatskin carefully manipulated by tanning, boiling and shaping, before being left to harden and, finally, carved with decoration. The most famous of those to have come down to us holds Cardinal Bessarion’s act of donation of his library to the Venetian Republic in 1468. Others bear the arms of Borso d’Este (1413-1471), Duke of Ferrara, and Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1444-1476), Duke of Milan. A smaller example but one with a similarly worked phrase along the sides of the lid, and rinceau ornament on its primary faces, is held in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

35

The Dunois Master
Lancelot with the slain giants

FRANCE, PARIS
C. 1440
9 x 9.2 cm; Illumination in ink, tempera and burnished gold on vellum.

In a woodland setting, Lancelot on horseback, leaving behind the bodies of the two armoured giants he has just slain, approaches a man on horseback and a man on foot. Our protagonist, proudly dressed in shimmering armour with a golden pavise slung over his shoulder, was an ideal of chivalric strength and courage who found great currency among the nobility in the late Middle Ages and profoundly informed the self-fashioning of knights and courtiers during the period.

This jewel-like miniature was painted in the years around 1440 by an as-yet unidentified illuminator known as the Dunois Master after his eponymous manuscript, the book of hours of Jean, Comte de Dunois, now in the British Library in London. He seems to have trained under the Bedford Master and was the dominant figure in Parisian illumination following the latter's death. It was apparently removed from a lavishly illuminated copy of the *Livre de Lancelot del Lac* at an early date; all of the known miniatures have numbers between 1 and 152 on their reverses in an apparently sixteenth-century hand. It was exhibited as number two in the *Early Fifteenth Century Miniatures* exhibition at the Alpine Club Gallery, London in 1962, where its outstanding quality was recognized by its selection as one of the two reproduced in colour in the accompanying exhibition catalogue. It illustrates Book III, 206.40, where the two men should also be knights: Ywain who gives his horse to Lancelot to replace that slain by the giants (perhaps the man holding up an animal as the result of an ambiguous instruction to the illuminator) and Lancelot's former adversary, behind whom Ywain now has to mount.

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Spring, with Venus and Cupid, after a design by Maerten de Vos

SOUTHERN LOW COUNTRIES, ANTWERP
C. 1590 (AFTER 1587)
25 x 19.2 cm; Clear glass with silver stain, red and black vitreous paints, and blue and red enamel.

Venus, Goddess of Love, sits on a stone perch in the centre of a hilly, verdant landscape backed by trees and the gardens of a rich country estate. She holds a posy of wildflowers in her right hand and has knotted more into a wreath which she wears on her head. A blue dress falls away from her naked body, as she reaches down with her left hand to pacify the figure of her son, Cupid, who brandishes his bow and arrows in both hands. A couple gambol through the mansion's parterre garden behind them to the left, while a huntsman chases a stag into the forests at the far right. Above Venus's head the letters 'VER' – from the Latin for Spring – are framed between puncti.

The inspiration for this ravishing roundel was an engraving produced in 1587 by the talented Antwerp-born printmaker Adriaen Collaert (1560-1618) after a design by Maerten de Vos (1532-1603). It does away with the smallest peripheral details found in the printed version in order to fit the image to an oval format rather than a rectangular printing plate, and in so doing focuses our attention on the central figures of Venus and her son, whose muscles and anatomies are meticulously picked out using a deep, chiaroscuro stippling effect worked back into the paint surface using a sgraffito technique known in glass decoration terminology as 'sticklighting'. It was most likely produced for display in a private home as part of a series showing each one of the four seasons – a format and image type popular amongst the rising class of mercantile patrons populating the port of Antwerp in the sixteenth century.

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Cat. 18 draws on an earlier essay for this albarello by Elisa Sani
Cat. 24 draws on an earlier essay on Perugia towels by Rosamund Garrett

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