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Pyxis, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

FRANCESCA LEONI: Hello. My name is Francesca Leoni. And I am the curator of Islamic art here at the Ashmolean. There is a very lovely object in front of me, which normally sits in the Islamic Middle East Gallery. But I thought we would take it out of the display in order to look at it closely together.

We are also in one of the storage rooms of the Eastern Art Department. And this is where we keep some of our organic and inorganic materials. So you can see some pots behind me. But we also have works on paper and carpets.

So the object in question is a lid separated from its bottom - its container, which was effectively a cylindrical box known as "pyxis," which was roughly more or less this tall. And what we have left is only the lid. And it is made of ivory. And it is beautifully carved. And we are lucky enough to know quite a lot about where this object came from and who it was made for.

As a matter of fact, the object is inscribed at its base. And as you can see here, there is a long inscription that runs all the circumference of our lid, which tells us the name of the recipient - the person to whom it was dedicated. And I'll tell you a little bit more about this person in a moment.

There is much more to this object. But before I get to the decoration that is on the top, I thought I'll show you something inside. As you can see, these sort of circles resemble the circles in a tree trunk. And these tell us the age of the ivory tusk from which this section in particular was taken. And as a matter of fact, you can still see the little black hole where the nerve of the original tusk went through, and it crossed through the whole tusk.

Ivory was an important, precious medium - as it is today, as a matter of fact - which was imported either through trade or as a gift from West Africa. And we know that the time in which the casket to which the lid belongs was made, a considerable gift of ivory from Africa had been given to the caliph, which is probably the reason why objects made into this medium became so popular. They were produced between Córdoba in Medina Azahara, which are two cities in the south of Spain, which, in the course of the sort of 10th through the 11th century, were actually the seat of a caliphate of the Umayyad Dynasty.

The lid of the Ashmolean casket is, in fact, a fairly rare object. At the moment, in private and public collections, we are only aware of about 12 of these objects.

Let's look at what's on the object itself. The base has this lovely inscription in Kufic script which is sort of a term that we use for a very angular type of Arabic script, which is very widespread - very widely used on a variety of objects, as a matter of fact.

As you look at the top of the casket, following the same direction of the Arabic script in a sort of circular motion, you find four horsemen. Some have birds of prey on the back of their horses. Others have hares and deers.

I spoke about the inscription and the fact the inscription tells us the name of the recipient, as well as the date. And the date is 389 in the Islamic calendar, which corresponds to 998/ 999 in the Christian calendar.

And the man who was the man who received this beautiful object is Abd-ar-Rahman Sanchuelo, or "Little Sancho," who was the second son of a very powerful vizier, a prime minister, who gained power in the last decades of the 10th century in Spain, Almanzor.

And so his name is, as a matter of fact, mentioned right here, which is exactly where this lid would have been open. So it would be visible to anybody handling this object, whereas the date is at the very end.

And you may be wondering, how common is it that there are figures on an object produced in an Islamic context? Well, the question is a really complex one. And I think that sort of the easiest way to sort of address the complex nature of this conversation is to say that secular objects tend to be illustrated with both abstract and figurative iconographies.

It is far more difficult to find representation of living beings in sacred or religious context or devotional contexts. And therefore, when we are handling or looking at sort of objects such as these, the presence of figurative art is already suggesting that the context of use would have been a non-religious one, a secular one.

The decoration on this lid is somehow typical of the type of decorative motifs, the iconography that we generally find on ivory caskets of this kind, produced, again, in Spain in the course of the 11th century. And they have to do with either courtly themes, scenes of courtly reception, hunting, as well as vegetable themes. And the scholars who have worked on this interesting body of materials have, in fact, connected to choice of the iconography to the different users - potential recipients of the objects.

In the case of figurative iconography, with the horseman and huntsman, the object is often to be associated with male recipients, either members of the royal family or members of the aristocracy directly connected, closely related to the ruling family.

If the motifs, instead, on the caskets are of vegetable nature, scholars have tended to connect those with female recipients who are never actually recognised through their names, but only through their social and family role as mothers of heir or wives of caliphs, which is very interesting in the way in which women as patrons or as dedicatees, as the people receiving these objects, were seen and thought about.

What were these objects used for? They are beautiful containers. And they were beautiful wrappings, as a matter of fact, because they were designed to contain perfumes, aromatics, either ambergris or musk. Therefore, very precious, very luxurious gifts for equally distinguished recipients.

They are really to be understood as a sort of multi-sensorial experience. These objects were handled. They were turned to follow the inscriptions and the beautiful decoration. And then they were opened. And when they were opened, of course, the beautiful perfumes and aromatics that they contained effectively triggered all the senses. So in this sense, they were very beautiful luxury objects designed for very demanding and special clients.

So how did this lid eventually leave Spain? Well, we know a little bit about its recent history. We know in particular that after the Reconquista of Spain - the Christian Reconquest of Spain - these objects left the caliphal courts and entered church treasuries. And we know that this was, at some point, in a church treasury in Maastricht - in a church in Maastricht, although this attribution and this connection is today fairly contested.

It eventually ended up at the markets. And it came into private hands into a private collection in Liege. And it was there until the end of the 19th century, when it was offered on the market and it was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1922, although, following an article in 1927 by a specialist of the medium who deemed the bottom part of the box as a forgery, the Metropolitan Museum decided to deaccession it. Another point we kind of lose track of the casket until the lid itself appeared again for sale.

And this was when the Ashmolean Museum purchased it. And this was 1987. So this object has been in our collection since the late '80s. It is the only object from Spain that we have in the Islamic gallery, as a matter of fact, and yet representative of a very important phase of the Islamic expansion when Islam effectively spread over Europe.

And we know that the caliphate in Spain and Muslim presence in Spain in particular lasted over 1,000 years before Spain was eventually reconquered by Christian rulers. So in a way, the ivory lid's Muslim legacy is as much part of the Islamic tradition as it is part of the Spanish tradition, more specifically - and in a way, part of the broader European history as well.