

Bureau shrine

Made in China, probably
Guangzhou, in the 1730s



Dimensions: 279 x 107 x 58 cm

Background information

Suitable for ages 13 and up

This bureau desk, sometimes called a "secretary", opens to reveal a Christian shrine (where normally bookshelves would be). Below the shrine is a drop-down front that creates a surface for writing, and cubbyholes and drawers of many sizes.

Woodworkers in Guangzhou produced lacquered furniture like this for export in the 18th and 19th centuries. The surfaces are decorated in Chinese style, with complex landscapes of pavilions and pagodas.

The interior is enhanced with red and gold lacquer on the columns and framing elements of the shrine. The ivory figure of the Crucified Christ was carved in Goa around 1700. Figures of Saint Francis and Saint Anthony (replacements for lost originals) stand in the two niches next to the cross. When the doors are closed, the cross at the top hints at the special function of the piece.

Rise & Shrine!

You will learn about the materials used for this cabinet, and how it combines materials and designs from different parts of the world.

DID YOU KNOW?

The shape of this piece of furniture is modelled on an English "secretary" – a desk with drawers and book shelves. Adaptation of secular furniture into religious shrines was common in Portugal, but this is the only one we know of made in China!

GLOSSARY

Ivory is what makes up the tusks and teeth of some animals, including elephants, hippos, walrus, and whales. For centuries, ivory was extremely popular for making religious objects and other works of art.

But to obtain ivory, these wild animals are usually killed. Today, no museum or church would support production of ivory objects of any kind.

The ivory trade has been banned since 1989. Unfortunately, black markets still exist, and illegal trade continues.

"People who kill wild animals for consumption are cruel." To what extent do you agree with this statement?



LET'S LOOK CLOSELY

Use these guidelines to discover details about this object.

1. **EXAMINE** the object completely, then **LIST** all the materials you can identify.
2. **LOOK** closely at the carving of the crucified Christ. Why do you think the artist used ivory to depict him?
3. **FIND** the set of drawers. What might be stored inside these locked compartments?

DRAW what you might keep in your own secret drawers!

What might the key used to lock them away look like?



CREATE AT HOME

Continue the experience at home by doing these activities.

4. **IMAGINE** you are the owner of a bookcase or other piece of furniture that you wanted transformed. You need to hire an artist (or several!) to transform your bookcase into a shrine to hold and display something that is valuable to you.

WRITE a letter to the artist instructing them on how the shrine should look.