

ACM WONDERS

Suitable for ages 13 and up

ACM

BUREAU SHRINE

Made in China,
probably Guangzhou,
in the 1730s

Background Information

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 in gold.

The interior is enhanced with red and gold lacquer for the columns and framing elements of the shrine. The ivory figure of the Crucified Christ was carved in Goa around 1700. Figures of Catholic Saints (replacement of lost originals) stand in the two niches next to the crucifix. When the doors are closed, the crucifix at the top indicates the religious function of the piece.



Bureau Shrine

Ivory sculpture of Christ on the Cross was made in Goa, India, in the late 17th or early 18th century
279 x 107 x 58 cm
Asian Civilisations Museum
2016-00032

LET'S DISCOVER

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

FUN FACT

The shape of this piece of furniture is modelled on an early 18th century English “secretary” – a desk with drawers and bookshelves. 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, walruses, 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.

International trade in ivory has been banned since 1989, but domestic markets still operate in many countries, and much illegal smuggling still occurs.

Produced by the Asian Civilisations Museum
1 Empress Place Singapore 179555
www.acm.org.sg
© 2021 Asian Civilisations Museum

LET'S LOOK CLOSELY

Use these guidelines to discover details about this object.

1. **EXAMINE** the object closely, 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 keyholes of each drawer. What might the keys used to lock them look like? **DESIGN** and **LABEL** your set of customised keys.

CREATE AT HOME

Continue the experience at home by doing this activity. If you have a public account, don't forget to tag us @ACM_SG.

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

SKETCH a design for the artist instructing him or her on how this piece of furniture should look.