Devotional Art as Socio-Economic Commodity: A Ciborium at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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An eighteenth-century ciborium of distinctive iconography lies in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (V&A). While little is known of its life cycle and transcultural nature due to a dearth of documentation, its significance lies in its ability to memorialise a small, now destroyed, Neapolitan church, and its rituals among the wider Catholic zeitgeist, alongside the inner workings of patronage and government within the Acquario district of Naples. It further represents the complex act of church donations, and the minor nobility's fidelity to the Church, exposing the power dynamics within this tradition. The ciborium's lifespan follows from its intended socialisation at the church of San Pietro a Fusariello, to an unknown acquisition following the church's demolition, to a private collection, and finally to its current socialisation in the V&A. Its context has therefore been altered throughout its history. The ciborium has not been physically adapted, despite one restoration, nor copied. Instead, its power lies in its *lack* of change, its ability to articulately present its specific past to the viewer. Through each life stage it represented a 'commodity of economic exchange,' undermining its traditional function as a vessel for the Host.[1]

The silver and gilded silver ciborium realized by Francesco Avellino in 1720 (fig.1), is identified by the artist's hallmark 'F.A.' on the base (fig.2).[2] Ciboria bore the consecrated Host for the Catholic Eucharist in receptacles shaped as covered cups. These resembled chalices, ciboria's counterparts, carrying wine. Therefore, the pair harboured both the body and blood of Christ after the transubstantiation, facilitating the Eucharist and the continued faith of its recipients. The location or identification of its chalice counterpart is unknown. Whereas similar objects such as monstrances display the Host, ciboria conceal it, owing to their function since antiquity in protecting the Host from sacrilegious attacks. Silver's expense suggests its essential nature within, and divine power associated with the Eucharist. The ciborium is constructed of two parts: the ciboria and lid. The coat of arms, found on the base, is of the Venato, one of six governing families of the Acquario district of Naples (fig.3). As patrons of the church of San Pietro a Fusariello, the ciborium was intended to function there, between S. Angiolillo and via S. Pietro a Fusriello in this district. This is reinforced by the engraved initials 'S. P. F.' which relate to the church's name (fig.4). Additionally, upon the ciborium's body are an engraved set of cross-keys, emblematic of St. Peter, the patron saint of this church. Guiseppe Sigismondo's contemporary identification of the Venato as

[1] Roberta Olson, "Introduction," *Renaissance Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 658.
[2] Elio Catello and Corrado, *Argenti Napoletani dal XVI al XIX Secolo* (Naples: Giannini, 1973), 99.

patrons of San Pietro a Fusariello affirms this link.[3] After a restoration of the church following flooding in 1711, the ciborium was likely commissioned to adorn the newly renovated church. The inscribed year '1720' correlates to an inventory of the church, performed in that year, during an archiepiscopal inspection, documented on the ciborium by the consular stamp, *bollo consolare*, of Geronimo di Benedetto, which reads 'G.D.B.C.' (fig.5). Therefore, the object was likely realised before its inscribed date, perhaps around 1712, during the renovation.

The ciborium's iconography is clear and deliberate. The gilt receptacle depicts a flaming heart. This imagery is common among objects of Catholic devotion of this period, representing the eighteenth-century cult of the Sacred Heart, which indicates love and courage alongside Christ's humanity and inner spirit.[4] The paramount importance of the heart is heightened by its containment of the Host. The choice of heart also affirms the devotional faith of the Venato family. Their crest's large scale clearly demarks another intended function, that of reverence to the Venato, from both congregation and clergy. It proclaims their patronage, status, and the church's financial reliance on them, ensuring their governing position.

Surmounted by a cross, it is easily identifiable as a Christian devotional object. The object's silver stem further reinforces its devotional function. It depicts an eagle, with outstretched wings, supporting the Sacred Heart. Eagles symbolize St. John the Evangelist, regarded as the most 'spiritually uplifting and revelatory of the four [Evangelists].'[5] The concept of St. John's contemplation of God alludes to the ability of the eagle to look directly at the sun; the ciborium is associated with divine inspiration. This is enhanced by the sunrays surrounding the cross, a typical stylistic choice particularly with monstrances of this period. The choice of an eagle, while common on lecterns, is rare on ciboria. Furthermore, it is not accompanied by designs of wheat and grapes, which typically visually link ciboria to Christ's Passion and the consumption of the Eucharist. However, the eagle's support of the Sacred Heart, outstretched wings and upwards head all allude to its position by the throne of God, and proclamation of his glory, documented in Revelation 4.7-8.[6] This eagle stands on a rock

[3] Giuseppe Sigismondo, *Descrizione della Cittá di Napoli e suoi Borghi* (Naples: Terres, 1788), 191.
[4] "Ciborium," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed February 20, 2023, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O36052/ciborium-francesco-avellino/.
[5] V&A, "Ciborium."
[6] Kirstin Kennedy, "Un Copón en el Victoria and Albert Museum, Londres, Procedente de la Iglesia de S. Pietro a Fusariello, Nápoles," *OADI: Rivista dell'Osservatorio per le Arti Decorative in Italia* vol. 8 (December 2013).

which is utilised to both ensure the object's sturdiness, and identify the object via inscriptions. Rocks allude to St. John's exile on the Isle of Patmos, where he wrote the *Book of Revelation* using God's guidance.[7]

The iconography, while not typical of the eighteenth-century, is explicable through its donors. The Venato coat of arms, depicting a lion roaming in a field, decked in silver, below three red bands, is seen replicated in monochrome on the base of the ciborium.[8] Documentation on the Venato in the eighteenth-century is scarce. However, Camillo Tutini mentions two sons of the family, Girolamo and Luigi of Malta, leading Kirstin Kennedy to suppose Luigi commissioned the ciborium; the crown surmounting the coat of arms resembles that of the Order of the Knights of Malta, to which he belonged.[9] Avellino's choice to merge devotional iconography of St. John with that of the Venato suggests his patron's intention in their donation to identify themselves as invaluable to the church; a ciborium's visibility enables its messages to be accessible to both congregation and clergy. Avellino's artistic choices not only serve to arouse devotion to God, but also to the Venato family, elucidating the *quid pro quo* nature of patron/artist relationships. Furthermore, the amalgamated iconography of the Venato and St. John creates both tension and an air of codependence between Church and nobility.

Within the church of San Pietro a Fusariello, the ciborium held the Host before the Eucharist. It would have been situated on the altar, the focal point of the congregation's eyeline and in the most symbolically significant place to communicate with God. Furthermore, while the size of the church is unknown, it was likely small, therefore the ciborium's comparative dimensions suggest its importance. At 29 x 11.5 centimeters at its widest point, weighing 904.6 grams, it was a large object for its intended socialisation and therefore a prominent visual feature of worship. Therefore, it directly served to connect the congregation to God, in its visible placement, ornate appearance, and devotional function. Outside services, it resided in either the tabernacle or aumbry. Some ciboria would travel to give Last Rites to the parish, however, due to its size I argue this is unlikely; a pyx would have been more appropriate. Therefore, it served as both a link between Catholics and God and was of great religious value. It would have remained in this socialisation with said

[7] Kennedy, "Un Copón."
[8] Carlo de Lellis, *Discorsi Delle Famiglie Nobili del Regno di Napoli* (Naples: Honorifio Sauio, 1654-1671), 178.
[9] Camillo Tutini, *Del Origine e Fvndatione de' Seggi di Napoli* (Naples: Raffaele Gessari, 1754), 15; Jonathan Riley-Smith, *Hospitallers: The History of the Order of St John* (London: Hambledon, 1999), 112.

functions until the demolition of the church at the end of the nineteenth-century to allow the building of Federico II University of Naples. By 1791 the Venato were extinct, observed by Francesco Cautillo, suggesting the ciborium remained in the church until its demolition.[10] This indicates the church was more dependent on the Venato than might first be observed; without their patronage, a sacred, six-hundred-year-old building, in a Catholic country, was demolished. As with the ciborium's duel-intended function – to serve both God and the Venato – so too does the church's significance appear intwined with that of the Veneto. Therefore, the ciborium, its iconography, and its movement into secular hands, holds a wider, political context.

While the ciborium's movement from Naples to the private collection of Dr Walter Leo Hildburgh in London is undocumented, San Pietro a Fusariello's demolition between 1880 and 1890 likely links to its sale. Since Hildburgh was born in 1876, it is unlikely he directly acquired it from the church, more probable that it was bought directly and sold to him latterly. It can be deduced that his collection was large, from his donation of over five thousand objects to the V&A over his lifespan.[11] He mainly donated metalwork and sculptures, suggesting he had many similar pieces in his collection.[12] This collection relates to wider collecting interests in the early twentieth-century, to the establishment of a *kunstkammer*, forming the impression of a widely educated gentleman for visitors to his house. Whether it was collected with a desire for thematic display, or simply as an eccentric object is unknown. However, its movement to Hildburgh's collection aligns to the period where objects began to be seen as 'art' rather than 'artefacts' of curious socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, the ciborium's function and socialisation changed dramatically. Its devotional function was negated by its placement among a collection of curiosities. Its previous value is evident in its (undatable) renovation, likely executed for Hildburgh, seen in the uncharacteristic brightness of the gild, suggesting its previous frequent use and respect alongside its new aesthetic function.[13] It therefore no longer held the consecrated Host, nor served a religious function, but instead a decorative one, fueled by fascination of its owner.

[10] Francesco Cautillo, *Dissertazione sulla Staurita di S. Pietro a Fusariello delle sei Nobili Famiglie Aquarie, alle quali Appartiene* (Naples: Migliaccio, 1791), 228.
[11] "V&A Archive Research Guide: Donors, Collectors and Dealers Associated with the Museum and the History of its Collections," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed February 24, 2023, https://vanda-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/2019/05/02/14/01/30/203468f3-777f-48b1-8b7e-13551dc47462/Donors_collectors_research_guide.pdf.
[12] V&A, "Archive Research Guide."
[13] Kennedy, "Un Copón."

Hildburgh's impetus, as an apparent atheist, for collecting the ciborium is inexplicable on all levels except the ethnographic and aesthetic. As a collector of a broad range of metalworks, it appears his interests negated its Catholic functions. This is reinforced by its situation in a non-Catholic country. Its context was determined by the objects around it, forming one of the greater 'community of objects'.[14] Through this change, the ciborium's capacity for complete cultural understanding was nullified, orphaned from its intended context. However, the new socialisation allowed it to act as a representative of eighteenth-century Neapolitan ciboria, and an informant on both the rituals and iconography of this era and geography. Its value was monetised when it was sold, yet it appropriated a new, aesthetic, and ethnographic value.

On Hildburgh's seventy-fifth birthday, the 30th of March 1951, he gave the ciborium to the V&A, where it was formally accessioned in 1952. The museum has no record of altering or restoring the object. Therefore, it is physically unchanged, yet culturally altered. It serves its afterlife as an ethnographic and historic artwork. An exhibition of Hildburgh's objects was held at in 1958, of which the ciborium was shown. It has further been exhibited, from 1980-2000, as an example of eighteenth-century liturgical silver, and has been shown among the museum's wider collection of European art since 2014. It is visible now in the 'Europe 1600-1815' galleries, Room 3. Placed among hundreds of similarly ornate objects, its original splendor is reduced, its impact drowned. Its value to the museum is simply as an example of eighteenth-century Neapolitan ciboria, that can readily be compared to other examples from 'Europe 1600-1815.' However, its gifted nature ensures its eternal relation to Hildburgh, forming both part of his self-definition, and his immortalization through his donations of commodities.

Therefore, the ciborium's lifespan demonstrates the commodification of devotional objects, alongside their change in function and negation of religious power. It offers historical insight into the inner workings of a small Neapolitan church and the political and financial nature of patronage and church donations. Furthermore, it relates to specific Catholic rituals and philosophy while identifying the importance of the Eucharist. Its lack of physical change allows this past to be viewed in the V&A today, despite its changing socialisations and functions.

[14] Philip Fisher, "Art and the Future's Past," in *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4-5.

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Figure 1, Francesco Avellino, *Ciborium*, c.1712-1720, silver and gilded silver, 29 x 11.5 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 2, *artist's signature detail*, Francesco Avellino, *Ciborium*, c.1712-1720, silver and gilded silver, 29 x 11.5 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 3, *Venato coat of arms detail*, Francesco Avellino, *Ciborium*, c.1712-1720, silver and gilded silver, 29 x 11.5 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 4, *location detail*, Francesco Avellino, *Ciborium*, c.1712-1720, silver and gilded silver, 29 x 11.5 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 5, *date detail*, Francesco Avellino, *Ciborium*, c.1712-1720, silver and gilded silver, 29 x 11.5 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.