

We're lucky to have with us BBC radio journalist, Christopher Cook, and Marjory Trusted, senior curator in the sculpture department at the Victoria and Albert Museum. They are confronted with an object (no. 1459-1902, ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London) of unknown provenience (right). Apart from suppositions about traditional subject matter (a "virgin and child"), they uncover hidden markers that pinpoint where the object stopped along a global trajectory in the High Middle Ages.

CHRISTOPHER COOK: . . . [T]his object of devotion created for the western Catholic world had a remarkable eastern provenance.

The carver was probably Chinese and it may well have been made in the Philippines. The ivory itself came from Africa. So if this Virgin and Child tells a very specific Christian story, it also has a history that embraces conquest and colonial power by the 16th century's only superpower, Spain, with an empire that spanned the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It was after all Philip II of Spain who graciously lent his name to that archipelago of islands in the South Seas of China, the Philippines.

Well, here with me now is Marjory Trusted, senior curator in the sculpture department here at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Marjory, it's a small object. . . — absolutely exquisite, isn't it?

MARJORY TRUSTED: Yes, it's the Virgin and Child and it's got a very tender, intimate quality. The Virgin with very flowing drapery, is holding the Child and he's clutching onto her veil with one of his hands. It's also got beautiful traces of gilding and colour.

CHRISTOPHER COOK: Which throws the Virgin's face into relief and indeed the Child's really. In a sense, your eye is drawn to this crucial relationship between Virgin and Child.

MARJORY TRUSTED: Absolutely, yes. The stance of the Virgin, it's very graceful. There's a slight *contrapposto* but it's also a very solemn serious piece as well.

NETWORK

How objects can help "map" the material world



CHRISTOPHER COOK: Where would the idea of what the Virgin and Child should look like have come from for this Chinese carver - what would he have seen that said 'This is the model that I should carve from'?

MARJORY TRUSTED: Well, he would have had European models—possibly engravings, possibly wood engravings and that may explain this very linear quality, especially in the drapery—you can see it's very precise.

CHRISTOPHER COOK: Almost like the lines that you would expect to find on a wood engraving as the drapery falls to the ground.

MARJORY TRUSTED: Exactly, exactly. There may have been sculptures as well but prints were far easier to transport out to the Far East than sculptures, so that was the obvious model to use and sometimes Flemish prints, in fact, usually Flemish prints rather than Spanish.

CHRISTOPHER COOK: And these would've been given to him. The missionaries or the Spanish authorities would have said 'this is what you're to carve'.

MARJORY TRUSTED: There were various missionary orders—there were the Augustinians, the Franciscans, the Jesuits, the Dominicans and the relevant priest would have given a model, as you said, to the Chinese carver. Although, once the tradition got going, not exactly replicas but variants continued, so they had the general idea.

CHRISTOPHER COOK: Now, when you look closely, what can you see in this ivory that tells you that in fact it was made by a Chinese artist?

MARJORY TRUSTED: Well, you're right. [In spite of the fact that] it's a Christian subject, stylistically there is no doubt there's an oriental flavour.

I suppose the most immediate thing that strikes you is the faces—the face of the Virgin and, indeed, the face of the Child. The face of the Virgin [has a] very high forehead and heavily lidded eyes. . . . [T]here's also this wonderful detail at the back. . . . There's a tuck at the back of the robe, a very stylised little carved tuck which you see in Chinese statuettes as well and is actually rather beautiful but not as naturalistic as you'd expect—if it was a western European sculpture.

CHRISTOPHER COOK: When you look at the face of the Virgin, do you suspect that what you're also looking at is one of the traditional Chinese goddesses?

MARJORY TRUSTED: Well, that's another very interesting parallel. There is a Chinese goddess, Guan Yin, who is the goddess of fertility, and she was often presented with a child, her son, and what seems to have happened is that the Christian market for the Virgin and Child statuettes stimulated the market for the Guan Yin statuettes and indeed they started carving ivory figures of Guan Yin which were inspired by the Christian subject.

It used to be thought it was the other way 'round. It used to be thought the Chinese carvers were harking back to their own culture, but in fact it seems to have been the reverse and that's rather fascinating.

CHRISTOPHER COOK: Complete reversal of the traditional model in which the coloniser, wherever he or she comes from, imposes their own values by finding something equivalent in the culture they're colonising and this is quite different.

MARJORY TRUSTED: It's actually quite a fertile sharing of ideas, yes.

