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Art Histories Before 1400 (ART-2211-HYB01)

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### Formal Analysis

Object: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_1861-0416-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1861-0416-1)

The object is made predominantly out of ivory. It consists of one piece of rectangular ivory in between two smaller pieces. All three pieces contain carvings of people. Connecting the outer pieces to the center are two sets (one on each side) of three metallic hinges. The ivory also has dark lines and marks visible across the surface in no particular pattern or order.

I will start with describing the images present on the central piece. On bottom half, there is a man crucified on a cross. Nails are shown piercing both of his hands, one for each, and his feet, one for both, and holding them to the cross. The man has a trim/medium beard and long wavy hair. He appears to be wearing a crown of some sort, or like a ring around his head. The only clothes that he appears to be wearing is a cloth wrapped around his waist. There is a cut on his right lower breast. His eyes are closed and his face is expressionless. On his right side, there are what appear to be three women. One woman appears to be fainting/have fainted and is being supported by another woman, who is wearing a hood-like head covering. On the central figure's left side, there are what appear to be three men. Two of them, more in the background, appear to be wearing suits of armor. The third, and more prominent, has his hands clasped together. He is leaning and looking away from the crucified man. At the top of this images "frame" there is an

“arch” in a shape similar to the top of a fleur d’lei (not sure about spelling) with four flowery shapes above it. All tops of frames of images are somewhat similar to this.

The top half of the central piece shows a man sitting to the viewers left, mostly facing the viewer. He wears a crown and has long hair and a substantial beard. He is holding a spherical (or sphere-looking) object in his left hand, and with the other is gesturing towards the figure sitting adjacent from him, with two fingers pointed up. The figure next to him is a woman, wearing a crown, whose palms are put together. They are seated on what appears to be a bench or pew. On the viewers lower left side, there is a figure holding objects (not sure what). On the lower right, there is a man dressed as a Catholic bishop, with a hat on and a staff topped with a cross. In the top right, a man appearing sad is holding a tiny church building in his left arm. On the other side, a man who is quite bald on the top but has long hair and is holding a sword on his left side and what appears to be a book (similar to the bottom right figure) on his right.

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## Object Historical Analysis

The object displays the coat of arms of the Grandisson family, specifically with the modification of a mitre occupying the central portion, which points to it being commissioned by John Grandisson (“Grandisson Triptych” and “trptych”). John Grandisson was the Bishop of Exeter, in England, from 1327 A.D. – 1369 A.D. (“John Grandisson” and Bevan, et al.). During his time as bishop, the city was hit by a devastating plague: “Plague ravaged the city from 1348 and caused significant social and economic upheaval,” (Bevan, et al.). However, the British Museum dates the object’s creation from 1330-1340, so it appears that this plague, known as the Black Death, did not play a role in the objects style or originally intended use. Bishop Grandisson appears to have come from a well-to-do family. He was son of Sir William Grandisson, who was a friend of King Edward I, and Sybil Grandisson, the daughter co-heir of another knight (or at least another Sir) (“John Grandisson”). He went to school at Oxford, and went on to study theology at the Middle Ages’s flagship university for the subject, the University of Paris, where he studied under a future pope (“John Grandisson”). He eventually returned to Oxford years later (“John Grandisson”). At Avignon, he befriended Pope John XXII (“John Grandisson”). All of this considered, along with his clerical status as Bishop of Exeter, it is not too much of a stretch to infer that Grandisson likely had the means to sponsor the creation of this object. According to *Wikipedia*, this object, a triptych, was made for private devotion (“John Grandisson”). The same source touches on Bishop Grandisson’s relationship (not personal) to one of the figures depicted on the *John Grandisson Triptych*, Thomas Beckett, when referring to his involvement in the construction of a cathedral: “Grandisson’s main interests for the cathedral

were his own chantry chapel [perhaps where the triptych may have been used], some of the roof bosses (especially the one depicting Thomas Becket's murder — [apparently not quite the right punctuation mark] a particular interest of his), and probably the minstrel's gallery." ("John Grandisson"). Thomas Becket, the archbishop of the King Henry II of England, challenged the king's judicial expansion including royal legal jurisdiction over clergy, and was murdered in his cathedral by the King's men (*Making of the West* 293). This, perhaps, may point to an interest of Grandisson's in the role of the Church and the state in medieval society/politics. The Met's Sarah Guérin connects the prominence of ivory in medieval Europe to the trade of a different material: "In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the ivory trade was closely linked to the international markets that supplied dyestuffs to the textile industries of Northern Europe....The Atlantic route directly from the Mediterranean to the English Channel through the Straits of Gibraltar carried not only bulk shipments of the essential color fixative, alum, but also a choice selection of precious goods from the Far East and Africa, including elephant tusks." ("Ivory Carving"). Interconnectedness industries played a role.

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Purdue OWL used for citation assistance.

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### Iconographic Analysis

I will begin with the two scenes depicted on the upper and lower halves of the centerpiece respectively. The top half appears to depict the Coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven by her son Jesus Christ (“triptych...”). Mary is wearing a crown as the *Regina Caeli* (Queen of Heaven, and Christ, who is the King of Heaven and Earth, is also wearing a crown. The bench like “structure” that they are seated on resembles a church pew, but this may just be my view. The Blessed Virgin is slightly bowed and has her palms put together in reverence, as, even though she is the Queen of Heaven, she seems to, in her humility, recognize that she is not on the level of Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Christ is holding a sphere shaped object in his hand. This is likely the globus that is so prevalent in depictions of Christ as King. The inclusion of the globus may be derived from the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of perfection relating to spheres, particularly in a cosmological/astronomical sense. Thus, it makes sense that Christ, who is divinely perfect, would be shown with a sphere. The bottom half of the centerpiece depicts the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The wound on his right side is apparent. The infliction of this wound is described in the Gospel of John (who is depicted himself in the scene), after the Roman soldiers broke the legs of the other two who were crucified with Jesus to speed up their death: “But after they were come to Jesus, when they saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs / But one of the soldiers with a spear opened his side, and immediately there came out blood and water.” (*Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition*, John 19:33-34). The two men to Christ’s right who are dressed in what appears to be medieval knights’ gear, likely symbolize Roman soldiers. The man in front of them likely symbolized the Apostle John, who was present at the Crucifixion. Three women stand are to

Christ's left. John's Gospel helps us to determine who they might be: "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus, his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalen." (John 19:25). The one who has fainted is likely Jesus's mother. Now to the four figures shown on the two outer pieces of the triptych, two on each piece. The figure on the upper left, to the viewer, is Saint Peter, who is holding a church building in his right arm and has what are likely the keys to Heaven on his left side, and below him appears Saint Stephen, whose martyrdom is depicted in *Acts* ("...Grandisson Triptych," "triptych..."). To the viewer's right, the man with the sword appears to be Saint Paul, while the figure below him with the crozier and mitre appears to represent Thomas Beckett ("...Grandisson Triptych," "...triptych"). Triptychs served as altarpieces ("altarpiece").

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