

In Pursuit of Provenance

Provenance and the
Decorative Arts

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Selected Objects



John Spilman, *Ostrich Cup*, 1590 (Gallery 234)

Silver gilt and ostrich egg - 32 cm (12 1/2 in.)

This magnificent example of an ostrich cup, constructed from a silver gilt stem and lid that envelop a polished cream ivory ostrich egg, reflects a popular aspect of collecting that dates back to the days of the Renaissance. Ostriches and their eggs were considered highly exotic, and thus such objects were often acquired by wealthy families for their “cabinets of curiosities,” a conspicuous display of unique works that reflected both one’s wealth and intellectualism.

Now more than four centuries old, this cup still fascinates. A maker’s mark in the lid, an appearance in both a painting and a letter, and a special British export review make for a captivating tale of provenance.

Horace Walpole (designer)/(probably) William Hallett (maker), *The Brand Cabinet*, circa 1743 (Gallery 233)

Padouk and Ivory- 134 x 98 x 21 cm (52 3/4 x 38 5/8 x 8 1/8 in.)

Similar in the spirit of conspicuous display, this striking cabinet was designed by famed antiquarian Horace Walpole for his associate Thomas Brand. Walpole created this cabinet to house Brand’s burgeoning array of collectibles and other ephemera acquired while on The Grand Tour, a popular practice among aristocrats in the 18th century.

The cabinet’s appearance at a Christie’s auction in 1938 started its journey to Chicago, a trail that was complicated by questions of cultural patrimony and ivory export, elements to be expanded upon during our time together.



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Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (designer)/John Hardman and Company (maker), Chandelier, 1852 (Gallery 200)

Brass and enamels - 304.8 x 182.9 cm (120 x 72 in.)

Originally designed for Aldenham Abbey in Hertfordshire, England, this spectacular chandelier was designed by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, one of the most acclaimed designers of his day. Indeed, the prototype for this chandelier appeared at the famous 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London.

The story of this chandelier is an intriguing one as it involved some sophisticated sleuthing into diminutive, dangling coats of arms.

Léonard-Agathon van Weydeveld (designer)/Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory (maker), *Centerpiece: The Scarf Dance*, 1901/02 (Gallery 248)

Hard-paste biscuit porcelain and silver- 46 x 25.1 x 16.8 cm (18 1/8 x 9 2/8 x 6 5/8 in.) - Mark: "SÈVRES" and "T / 1901"

Crafted by one of the most renowned porcelain makers in all of history, and once owned by one of Chicago's most celebrated families, these figures offer another compelling case study on the topic of provenance. These beautiful hard-paste porcelain figurines offer one of the clearest cut cases of provenance, and yet they will also remind us that, for as many answers as we can find in relation to decorative art objects, there will an equal number of instances when such answers will elude us.

