

# Bodies by Rubens: Reflections of Flemish Painting in the Work of South German Ivory Carvers

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IN HER CLASSIC EXPLORATION of the inventiveness of German relief artists vis-à-vis their graphic sources, Erika Tietze-Conrat revealed how these artists still remained dependent upon two-dimensional compositions.<sup>1</sup> My purpose in this note is to suggest some heretofore unremarked ways in which the carvers of ivory figures in the round also reflect the influence of such sources and, in particular, the extent to which their art was permeated and transformed by the style of Peter Paul Rubens.

In the course of preparing *Liechtenstein* catalogue entries for two ivory sculptures which have recently been attributed to the Master of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (see Figures 11, 13),<sup>2</sup> my attention was drawn to two other carvings (one in Liverpool, the other in Buffalo, N.Y.), which, while not by the same hand, nonetheless appeared to relate to them in certain respects. Both previously published although not widely known, they are of considerable interest not only on their own account but also for the light they shed on the creative processes of their makers and the world of virtuoso ivory carving that flourished in southern Germany and Austria in the later seventeenth century.

Of primary interest to the student of imagery is the relation each bears to the work of Rubens. The first of these ivories is a sprawling male nude in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Long designated "The Unrepentant Thief," this has always been photographed in conformity with the conventional iconography of that subject. The powerfully muscled torso has traditionally been oriented vertically and frontally, the right arm stretched upward, the left arm bent and cradling the head thrown back in agony; the right leg is extended downward and slightly

out, the left sharply bent; and a cloth is draped over the left thigh, falling between the legs and over the genitalia.

Students of the ivory have long seen in it a comingling of Northern European stylistic traits with elements of classical antiquity. In the past it has been attributed to such disparate artists as the Fleming François Duquesnoy (1597–1643), or the Augsburg sculptor Georg Petel (1601/2–34), presumably on the basis of a generalized resemblance to Petel's much-replicated sculptures representing the Good and Bad Thieves from a *Crucifixion*.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently it was recognized as the work of a distinctly different hand, although later cataloguers still inclined to see in it

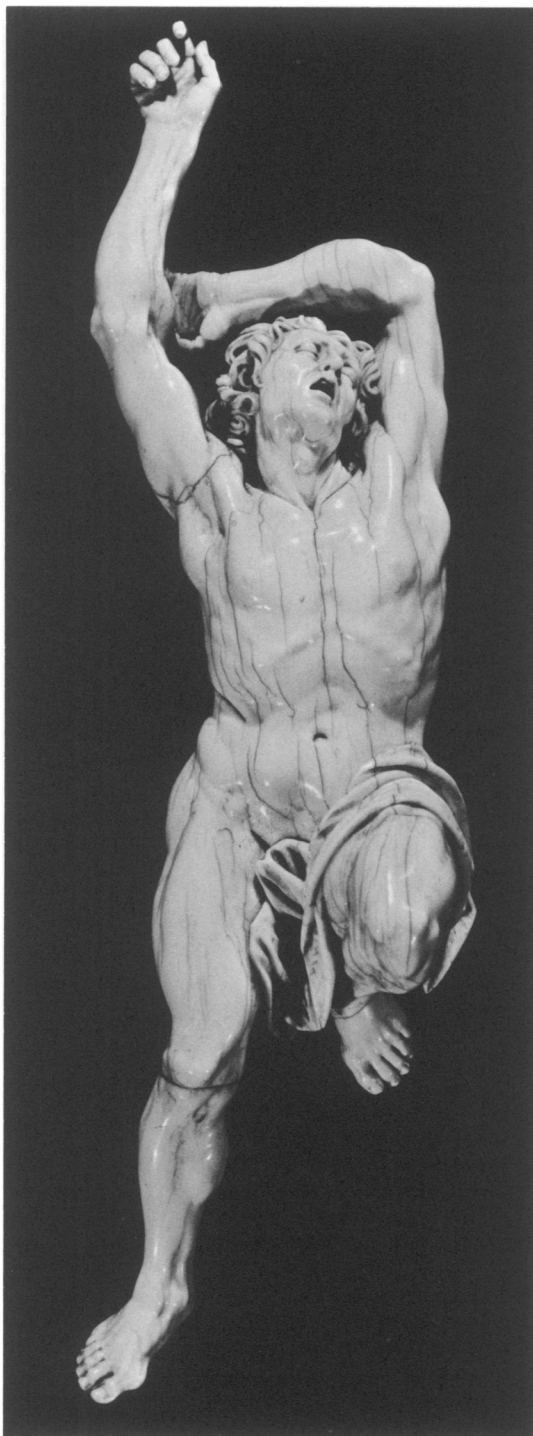
1. "Die Erfindung im Relief: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Kleinkunst," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 35 (1920/21) pp. 99–176.

2. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Liechtenstein: The Princely Collections*, exh. cat. (New York, 1985) pp. 97–100, nos. 65, 66, ills. The master is named after reliefs in Vienna and Linz (see Figures 9, 10). See E. von Philippovich, *Elfenbein*, 2nd. ed. (Munich, 1982) pp. 303–304, figs. 255, 256, where this master is identified, incorrectly in the view of others, with the carver J. C. Schenck. This theory is developed more extensively in idem, "Hauptwerke des Elfenbeinkünstlers Johann Caspar Schenck," *Kunst in Hessen und am Mittelrhein* 13 (1973) pp. 47–51.

3. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Steven A. Nash (with Katy Kline, Charlotta Kotik, and Emese Wood), *Painting and Sculpture from Antiquity to 1942* (New York, 1979) pp. 168–169. The possible relationship between this carving (acquired from Mathias Komor) and the Liechtenstein ivories was first pointed out to me by Dr. Reinhold Baumstark, Director of the Princely Collections, when I was studying the Vaduz pieces in 1983.

4. No examples of the Christ that was presumably central to the group are known but numerous figures of the thieves exist. The prime examples of these, in gilt bronze, are in Berlin; see K. Feuchtmayr and A. Schädler, *Georg Petel* (Berlin, 1973) no. 7, figs. 22, 23 and 27, 28.

1. Figure called "The Unrepentant Thief," probably South German, second half of 17th century. Ivory, H. 11<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (29.5 cm.). Buffalo, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, George B. and Jenny R. Mathews Fund (photo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery)



an awareness of Hellenistic sculpture, suggesting some sort of immediate Roman experience.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, little reason to infer such a direct acquaintance with the antique on the part of its creator. When the figure is viewed from a fresh perspective, recumbent on the ground (Figure 2), the parallel with Rubensian imagery leaps to the eye and it becomes apparent that, whatever distant connection the work may bear to the sculptures of antiquity, a far more direct prototype is available.

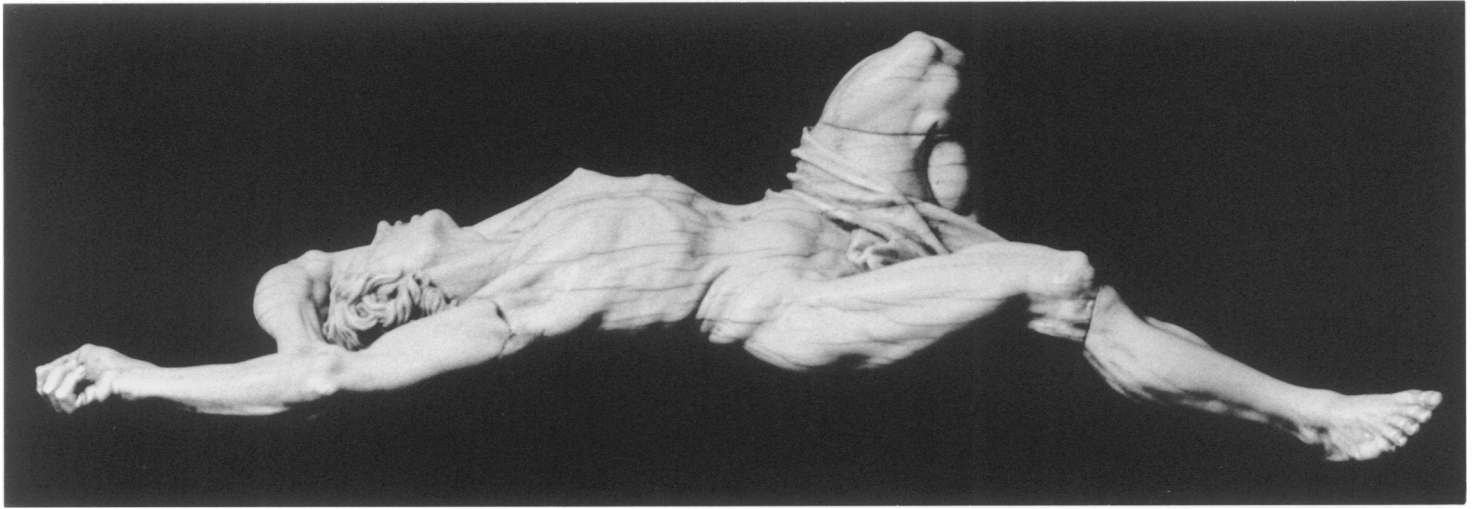
The general pose to which the present ivory corresponds is a recurrent one in Rubens's early painting, appearing over the course of several years, generally speaking between 1605 and 1620. Variations on the theme appear in paintings and sketches by Rubens too numerous to list here. Most, however, show the figure in a more dynamic pose.<sup>6</sup> The example closest to the ivory occurs in the painting depicting the Death of Decius Mus (Figure 3), one of eight canvases making up the great cycle in the Liechtenstein collection devoted to the heroic Roman's personal sacrifice.<sup>7</sup> There, stretched out the vast length of the picture and anchoring the tumultuous equestrian combat above, lies a moribund warrior. By virtue of its stark placement as well as the pallid glow it emits, this form at once heroic and pathetic stands out from the enormous composition almost more vividly than the figure of the wounded Decius himself.<sup>8</sup>

5. Schädler, who linked it to the Barberini Faun, put it in the circle of the Roman sculptor Alessandro Algardi (ibid., p. 90 n.), while the Albright-Knox, still seeing in it signs of Northern origin, published it as the work of a Flemish or German artist trained in Rome (Nash, *Painting and Sculpture*, p. 168).

6. The earliest appears to be the *Fall of Phaeton* of 1605 (M. Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy* [Ithaca, N.Y., 1977] col. pl. iv). Rubens's interest in the motif continued until as late as 1620, when he used it for the figure of Lucifer in the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (J. R. Martin, *The Ceiling Paintings for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp* [London/New York, 1968] pp. 5–58, figs. 8–16). See also note 16 below.

7. The relationship between the Liechtenstein canvases and the numerous sets of tapestries woven after Rubens's cartoons has not been conclusively settled, but because of the reversal of left and right it is only the painting and not the tapestry that can be at issue as the model for this ivory. No 17th-century prints of the paintings, which have been dated to 1616–18, are known. The pictures remained in Flanders until they were brought to Vienna by Prince Johann Adam of Liechtenstein, who acquired them in 1693.

8. While prototypes for the equestrian battle scene itself are too numerous to name, the *Battle of Anghiari* being generally considered the most important, none includes a moribund figure in the foreground. Rubens's conflation of these images is



2. The ivory in Figure 1 seen in a recumbent position  
(photo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery)

3. Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *The Death of Decius Mus*, 1616–18. Oil on canvas,  $113\frac{3}{8} \times 195\frac{3}{4}$  in. (288 × 497 cm.). Vaduz, Collections of the Reigning Prince of Liechtenstein (photo: Walter Wachter)



4. Rubens, *The Lament for Adonis*, ca. 1614.  
Oil on canvas,  
83½ × 128⅜ in.  
(212 × 326 cm.).  
New York, Saul P.  
Steinberg collection  
(photo: Geoffrey  
Clements)



Another instance of Rubens's use of the motif occurs in a radically different iconographical context: the *Lament for Adonis*, in the collection of Saul P. Steinberg, New York (Figure 4).<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that this painting includes only six figures (plus two dogs), its scale is nearly as imposing as that of the *Decius Mus*;<sup>10</sup> the recumbent figure, however, plays a very different role in the two pictures. In the *Adonis* the function of the motif is less emblematic and its interaction with the *dramatis personae*, as well as with its audience, is more poignant and tenderly intimate. However powerful and tragic an emblem the warrior fallen in battle is, he remains thematically and psychologically distant from the main action of the pic-

ture and thus relates to the viewer on a different plane. The body serves as a framing device, anchoring the somewhat schematic triangular composition, and as a vivid reminder of the corporeal reality of death, furnishing a gloss on the elevated and noble spirituality embodied in the main subject.<sup>11</sup>

Those who have previously noted the recurrence of this motif in Rubens's work have also attempted to find *his* source in the sculpture of antiquity.<sup>12</sup> But while in many instances his recollection of antique compositions is evident, and his acquaintance with the originals is often documented by surviving drawings,<sup>13</sup> here none of these identifications is really more than suggestive.<sup>14</sup> More to the point as far as we

not entirely seamless, but the dead warrior's air of isolation contributes to the power of his composition. In the closely related *Fall of Sennacherib* (A. Rosenberg, *P. P. Rubens: Des Meisters Gemälde*, ed. R. Oldenbourg, *Klassiker der Kunst* V, 4th ed. [Stuttgart/Berlin, 1921] p. 156), the slain figure is more fully integrated into the composition.

9. Royal Museum of Fine Arts, *P. P. Rubens: Paintings, Oil-sketches, Drawings*, exh. cat. (Antwerp, 1977) pp. 27–29, with previous literature; dated 1612–14; notes oil sketch in Dulwich.

10. The New York picture measures 212 × 326 cm.; the Liechtenstein canvas, 288 × 497 cm.

11. See H. G. Evers, *Rubens und sein Werk: Neue Forschungen* (Brussels, 1943) pp. 129ff., for a thorough discussion of the emotional impact of the compositional variants. It should also be noted that the oil sketch in the Prado shows a somewhat different emphasis. See J. S. Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Ru-*

*bens: A Critical Catalogue* (Princeton, 1980) I, no. 3a, where copies and other sketch stages of the composition are noted.

12. Günther Brucher, *Der Decius Mus-Gemäldezyklus von Peter Paul Rubens* (Graz, 1984) pp. 56–68. Among the ancient compositions the author cites as precedents are the *Dying Niobid* in the Uffizi Gallery (G. A. Mansuelli, *Galleria degli Uffizi: Le sculture* [Rome, 1958] I, no. 73) and the *Dying Gaul* in the Museo Archeologico, Venice.

13. Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy*, pp. 79–84, figs. 267–317; also G. B. Fubini and J. S. Held, "Padre Resta's Rubens Drawings After Ancient Sculpture," *Master Drawings* 2 (1964) pp. 123–141.

14. It is worth observing, however, that while at first glance the *Laocoön* would not suggest itself as a source for this figure as a whole, in his drawings between 1601 and 1606 (Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy*, figs. 306, 307) Rubens displays his evolving pre-

are concerned, none of these sculptures is the source of the ivory carving itself; the Rubens composition, whatever its minor differences, presents a far closer link to the figure in Buffalo than do the Greek or Roman prototypes.

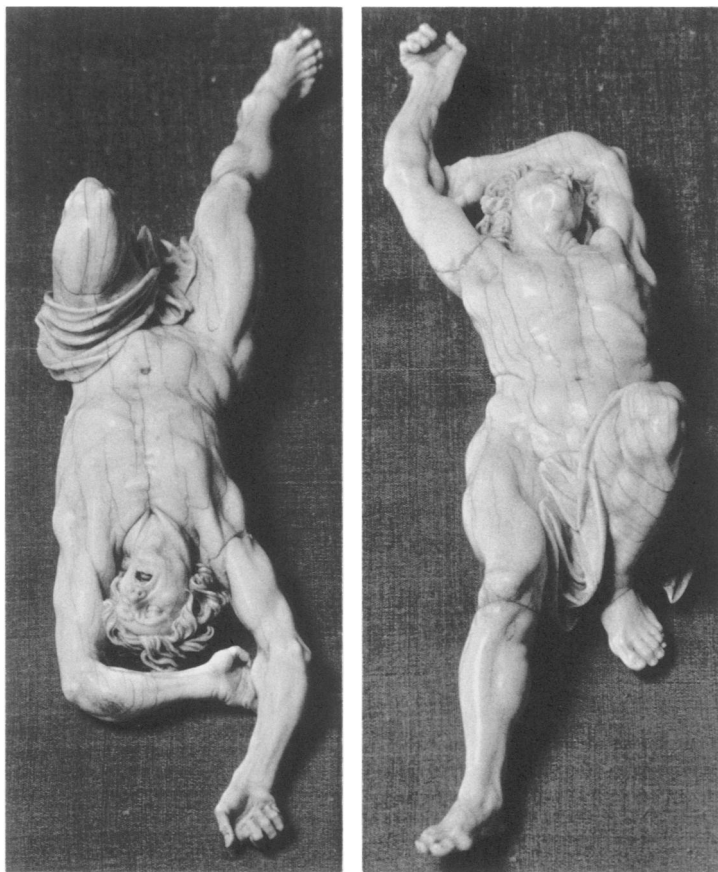
From the perspective suggested by the Rubens composition, the Buffalo figure conveys an entirely different impression from the one it creates in the pose of "Unrepentant Thief." The numerous awkward elements, the uncoordinated, disjointed, and sprawling quality, suddenly disappear, and odd compositional elements fall into place. Among them, what formerly seemed to be a strangely artificial fall of drapery, which when the figure was displayed upright appeared magically suspended over the loins, now appears far more logical. Further, if perhaps more subjectively, the oddly splayed and twisted right foot no longer strikes the viewer as unmoored from its ligaments,<sup>15</sup> and the vacantly clutching right hand

can be seen merely to have lost the weapon it was gripping at the moment of death. What now presents itself is a coherent and moving composition whose vivid outline evokes the masterly draughtsmanship of its Flemish source.

This is not to imply that the perspective corresponding to the *Decius Mus* composition is the only one that should govern one's view of this carving. Indeed, other views of the figure, recumbent, turn out to be equally rewarding, especially those that show the powerfully expressive face (Figures 5, 6).<sup>16</sup> Similarly, recognizing the source of the versatile motif does not impose any particular iconographic interpretation on the carving. One possible identification, however, although at variance with any of the Rubensian models, is suggested by a small pair of holes (now filled in) on either side of the right heel. The notion that the shaft of an arrow once protruded from the ankle is, perhaps, not farfetched, and could indicate that the carving may have been intended to portray the dead Achilles.

The second carving whose possible Rubensian connection I should like to point out is one in Liverpool (Figure 7), which by its nature suggests a narrower range of subject.<sup>17</sup> In an early publication, this prone, decapitated nude was described as Holofernes or, possibly, John the Baptist.<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that the

5, 6. The ivory in Figure 1 seen from other viewpoints (photos: Albright-Knox Art Gallery)



occupation with an aspect of that sculpture that parallels elements of the motif under discussion, in particular the raised arm and expanded chest. Rubens's perspective infuses the Hellenistic group with a degree of contortion even stronger than it would display from a normal point of view.

15. Although the figure's left foot and right leg below the knee are both separately carved (as is the right arm), only the left foot seems to be an obvious replacement. Another element of the figure's condition, its shaved-down backside, might be noted as well, as it tends to confirm the hypothesis that the figure was intended not to hang from a cross but rather to lie securely against a flat ground.

16. As noted above (see note 6), Rubens also drew upon the motif to serve other compositional functions. These sketches and paintings bring to mind particularly the Flemish artist's interest in the Sistine Ceiling. The image most specifically reminiscent of these more dynamic airborne creatures is the tormented figure of the crucified Haman (Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy*, figs. 9, 11).

17. The figure is now in the Merseyside County Museum. See British Museum, Department of British and Medieval Antiquities, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Ivory Carvings Lent by the City of Liverpool Public Museums, Mostly from the Mayer-Fejervary Collection* (London, 1954) p. 19, no. 52.

18. Burlington Fine Arts Club, *Exhibition of Carvings in Ivory* (London, 1923) p. 98, no. 183; called Italian, late 16th century.



Rubens composition it most closely resembles is the *Head of John the Baptist Presented to Salome* (Figure 8),<sup>19</sup> there is again no reason to believe that the sculptor adhered to the subject so closely. Taken on its own, the ivory might indeed represent Holofernes, as it is currently designated by the museum.

What is the implication of these connections for the student of sculpture? Unfortunately, the addition of these carvings to the already considerable list of small sculptures that derive from Rubensian imagery is of little assistance in narrowing the field of possible attributions. Many ivories previously linked to Rubensian sources have been attributed to Flemish artists (such as Duquesnoy, Artus Quellinus the Elder [1609–68], and Lucas Faydherbe [1617–97]); to the Augsburg sculptor Georg Petel, who also worked in close proximity to Rubens in Antwerp; or to carvers in Petel's circle.<sup>20</sup> The present carvings, however, point even farther south; they are stylistically just as plausibly linked to a somewhat more eccentric group of loosely related ivory works that derive from an area stretching from southwestern Germany to Vienna. These often virtuoso creations (sometimes more Rubensian even than those Flemish and Augsburg carvings which we know to have been done after Rubens's designs) have been attributed to a number of different artists who all share stylistic links

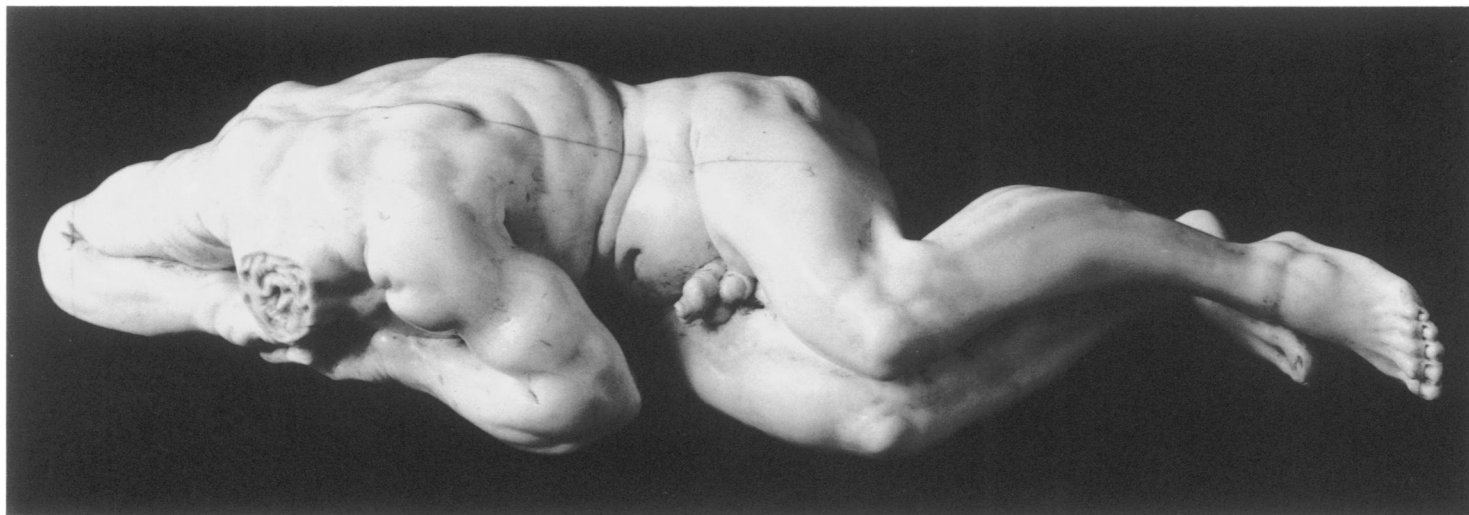
to the anonymous Master of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian.<sup>21</sup> Characteristic of the style in its purest form (most noticeable in those works attributed to the Sebastian Master's immediate circle) are distinct remnants of medieval Swabian carving technique: an

19. Unfortunately, neither the original painting nor its sketch has survived, but copies, one of which is in the Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, show this parallel most vividly. See Held, *Oil Sketches*, I, p. 572, no. 414; II, fig. 471. Somewhat further afield iconographically is the similarly posed but fully clothed figure of the sleeping St. Peter in Goltzius's *Agony in the Garden*, pointed out by Lionel Burman, Keeper of Decorative Arts, County Museum, Liverpool, in a written communication to the author.

20. Some of the ivories after Rubens drawings once attributed to the Flemish sculptor Lucas Faydherbe (see G. Glück, "Über Entwürfe von Rubens zu Elfenbeinarbeiten Lucas Faydherbes," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 25, no. 2 [1905] pp. 73–79) have been recently reconsidered. See, e.g., Feuchtmayr and Schädler, *Georg Petel*, nos. 14, 21; also K. Aschengreen-Piacenti, "Rubens e gli intagliatori di avorio," in M. Gregori, ed., *Rubens e Firenze* (Florence, 1983). For a general discussion of broader sculptural influences on Rubens and vice versa see W. Kitlitschka, *Rubens und die Bildhauerei: Die Einwirkung der Plastik auf sein Werk und Rubens' Auswirkung auf die Bildhauer des 17. Jahrhunderts*, diss. (Vienna, 1963).

21. Some other artists linked to this master's circle are Matthias Rauchmiller (see C. Theuerkauff, *Studien zur Elfenbeinplastik des Barock: Matthias Rauchmiller und Ignaz Elhafen*, diss. [Freiburg im Breisgau, 1965]; also V. Birke, *Matthias Rauchmiller* [Vienna, 1980]). The Monogrammist B. G. and the Swabian carver C. M. Maucher also show affinities to this group (C. Theuerkauff, "Zum Werk der Monogrammisten B. G.," *Aachener Kunstblätter* 44 [1973] pp. 245ff., and Wadsworth Atheneum, *J. Pierpont Morgan, Collector*, exh. cat. [Hartford, Conn., 1986] no. 30).

7. *Holofernes* or *St. John the Baptist*. Probably South German, second half of 17th century. Ivory, L. 8<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (22.1 cm.). Liverpool, Merseyside County Museum (photo: Merseyside County Museum)





8. *The Head of John the Baptist Presented to Salome*, after a lost painting by Rubens, ca. 1609. Oil on panel,  $11\frac{5}{8} \times 14\frac{3}{4}$  in. (29.5 × 37.5 cm.). Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle (photo: Staatliche Kunsthalle)

extreme linearity of detail (which manifests itself most notably in separate, parallel carved strands of hair) and a tendency towards exaggerated facial expressions that at times verge on parody.

The present carvings also share certain characteristics with this style. The Buffalo figure in particular, with its heightened expressiveness, exaggerated musculature, and flat, bony forearms, recalls the workshop of the Sebastian Master and the closely associated Schenck family.<sup>22</sup> The Liverpool figure shows some of these same characteristics, as well as others: for example, the parallel cords delineating the figure's calf muscles and the schematic configuration of the toes. At the same time, both figures exhibit a cer-

tain softness of carving and a lessening of the fanatic commitment to detail that we generally find in both of these workshops.

Whatever precise attributions and relationships may ultimately be established among these various objects and artists, what strikes one most in the end is the extent to which so many of them adhered to a graphic prototype and how fundamentally their art was grounded, in both conception and technique, in the act of carving in relief. Indeed, much of their style can be understood as an attempt to liberate their designs from the realm of the plane. This effort can be judged effectively through a comparison of the two *St. Sebastian* reliefs (Figures 9, 10). While the earlier version of the subject from the Sebastian Master's circle, dated 1655, is characterized by extremely high relief carving, the second of the two, dated 1657, scarcely appears to be a relief at all; rather, the figures almost resemble statuettes mounted against a relief background.

22. See note 2 above.



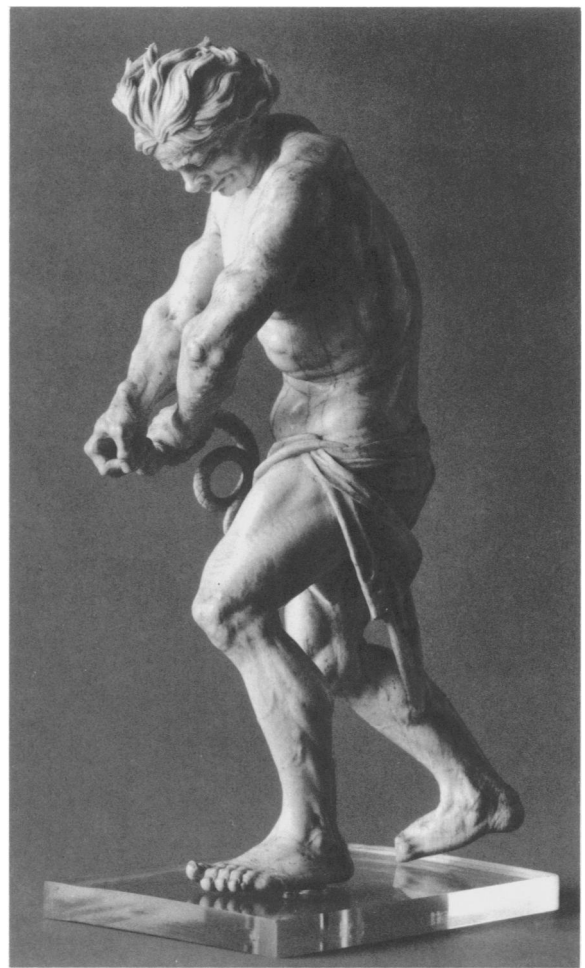
9. Master of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, South German or Austrian, dated 1655. Ivory,  $21\frac{1}{4} \times 31\frac{1}{2}$  in. (54 × 80 cm.). Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum)

10. Master of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (Workshop?), *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, South German or Austrian, dated 1657. Ivory relief,  $20\frac{7}{8} \times 31\frac{7}{8}$  in. (53 × 81 cm.). Linz, Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum (photo: Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum)

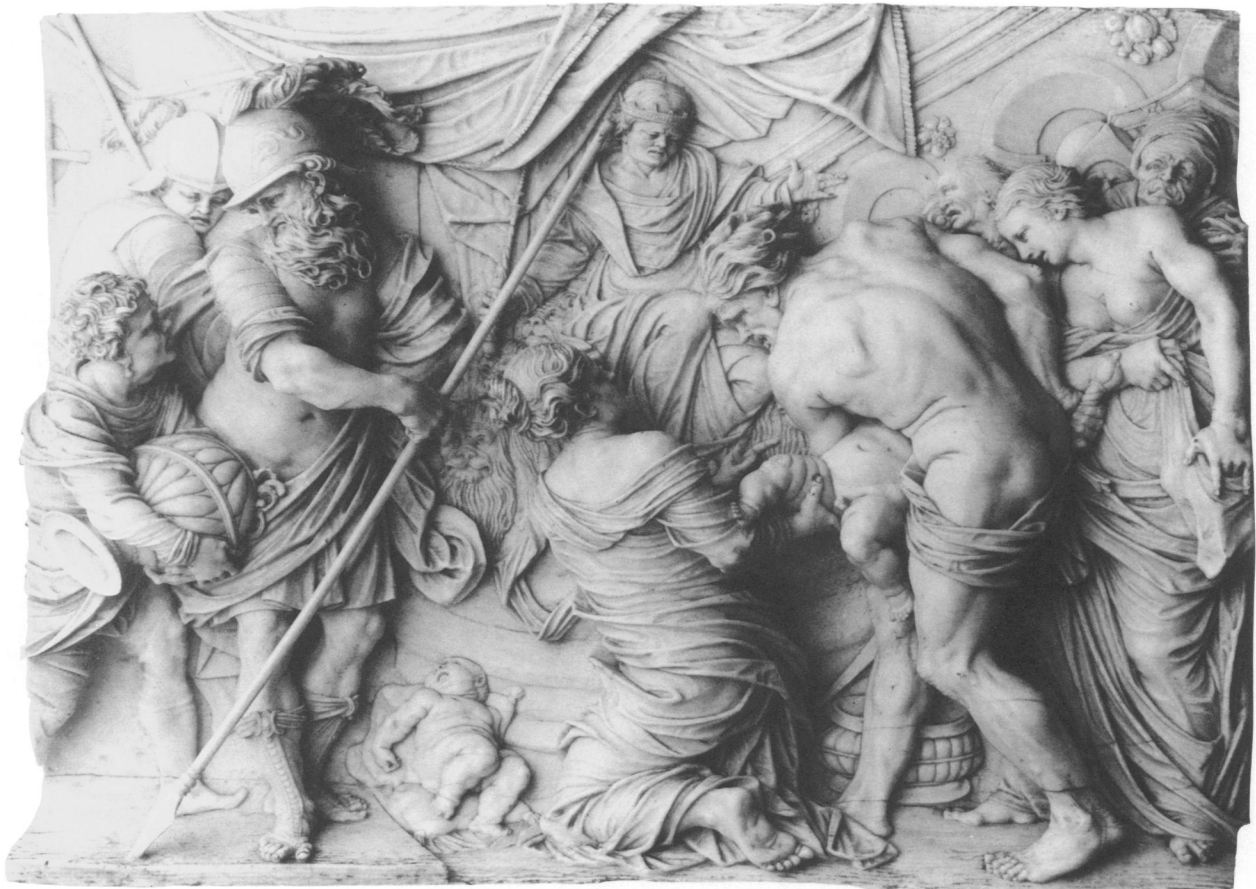




11. Master of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, *Man Struggling with a Serpent*, South German or Austrian, third quarter of 17th century. Ivory, H. 9 in. (22.8 cm.). Vaduz, Collections of the Reigning Prince of Liechtenstein (photo: Walter Wachter)



12. Attributed to the Workshop of the Master of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, *The Judgment of Solomon*, South German or Austrian, third quarter of 17th century. Ivory relief,  $5\frac{7}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{4}$  in. (15 × 21 cm.). Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum (photo: Hessisches Landesmuseum)





13. Workshop of the Master of the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, *Kneeling Captive*, South German or Austrian, third quarter of 17th century. Ivory, H. 4¼ in. (10.8 cm.). Vaduz, Collections of the Reigning Prince of Liechtenstein (photo: Walter Wachter)

In a similar way, the *Man Struggling with a Serpent* (Figure 11), one of the two Liechtenstein ivories mentioned earlier, also relates to a flat carving: the small, highly pictorial *Judgment of Solomon* in Darmstadt (Figure 12).<sup>23</sup> The graphic outlines of the statuette parallel so closely those of the executioner in composition that one imagines this aspect must surely have dominated the sculptor's imagination. The other Liechtenstein figure, a *Kneeling Captive* (Figure 13), also presents a dominant view that compels one to associate it immediately with the conventional bound figures that Rubens (as well as many others) utilized as attributes in depicting allegories of victory.<sup>24</sup>

The characteristic emphasis on powerfully bunched and craggy back and shoulder muscles that all these ivory figures share has a particularly enlivening effect on their sculptural outline; and whether or not one can identify specific pictorial models, one feels that some such source must have played a role in the conception of the object and the sculptor's approach to his task.<sup>25</sup> Hence the great interest of the Buffalo and Liverpool figures: their allusions to Rubens's compositions indicate that the broad swath cut by his artistic presence was one of the main routes through which the style of the classical Baroque entered the idiosyncratic and somewhat provincial world of the virtuoso South German ivory carver.

23. Philippovich, "Hauptwerke," fig. 6, there attributed to J. C. Schenck. This relief has recently been classified by Theuerkauff among the works he attributes to the workshop of the Sebastian Master. See C. Theuerkauff, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, *Die Bildwerke der Skulpturengalerie Berlin: II. Die Bildwerke in Elfenbein des 16.–19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1986) p. 285, no. 81.

24. See also Philippovich, "Hauptwerke," figs. 3–5, who points to similarities between this figure and the *Sebastian* reliefs.

25. Even such a fully sculptural creation as the *Hercules and Antaeus* in the Linsky Collection (*The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* [New York, 1984] no. 93, entry by James David Draper) reveals this graphic approach, both internally, in its delineation of detail, and in its overall con-

cept. The carving presents itself in a series of faceted views as if the carver were attacking the piece of ivory one side at a time, and engraving these images on a succession of flat surfaces. The most vivid example of this impulse, however, is the recently published *Adam and Eve* group in Hartford (Wadsworth Atheneum, *J. Pierpont Morgan, Collector*, pp. 106–109, no. 27). This ambitious and beautiful carving, which Theuerkauff also attributes to the Sebastian Master, has been connected to a drawing in East Berlin from which it nonetheless appears to differ in minor ways. The correspondence is, however, decidedly closer if one imagines the drawing distributed around a cylindrical form. The images of Adam and Eve correspond more nearly to the drawing if each is seen from the side, and they appear more physically coherent as well.