

Talk on Wednesday 18th June 2025 by Michaela Zöschg, Curator of Medieval Art, V&A Museum: *'The Deposition from the Cross: a rare and valuable 12th century ivory carving from Wakefield'*.

Lecture Notes by Stephen Hargrave.



“The Deposition from the Cross” is a late 12th Century ivory sculpture, held at The Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington, London. The sculpture was saved for the nation in 2024 with the help of an export ban and a significant fundraising campaign, to which WHS and several members contributed generously.

The sculpture is a depiction of Joseph of Arimathea, supporting the Body of Christ as He is taken down from the Cross as referenced in Luke 23; 51 – 53. Ms Zöschg highlighted the extraordinary artistic skill with which the carver has imbued the figure, the capture of the emotional qualities on Joseph’s face, the tenderness with which Christ’s Body is

being lovingly held and is technically of the highest level. It is carved from an unusually large piece of walrus tusk, weighing approximately a surprisingly heavy 300g. “The Deposition” is closely related to an ivory carving of “Judas at the Last Supper” which had been given to the V&A in 1949, with significant similarities in style, and of similar dimensions and scale. There is a belief that the two carvings could have been made in the same workshop, as part of the same ensemble. Stylistically, they fit into a Northern England late 12th century context, their place of production thought to be York, which was a major centre of sculptural production. Sculptors working both at York Minster and at nearby St. Mary’s Abbey at the time were aware of the latest artistic developments in France and the Low Countries. There are questions about the original location of the sculpture; a private place of worship, the parish church, Sandal Castle or even Newland Preceptory at Altofts all suggested.

An undated letter (c.1930) from Dr. Philip Nelson to Margaret Longhurst of the V&A refers to the “Judas at the Last Supper” carving being found in or before 1769 when a house was pulled down in Wakefield. A Sotheby’s sale catalogue of 1929 gives this same provenance when the item was part of an auction of items belonging to Sir Francis Sharp Powell of Horton Old Hall. In the 1960s and 70s, “The Deposition” was in the collection of collector John Hunt, but no information has come to light regarding how he came to acquire it. It was on long term loan to the V&A from 1982 to 2022 when the Hunt family decided to sell it. Following the successful fund-raising campaign and the safeguarding of the carvings, permanently homed in the V&A, Ms Zöschg highlighted the prominent position of both, with similar artworks of the same quality and period.

Replying to questions, Ms Zöschg extended an invitation to members of the Society to make a visit to see the carvings and the possibility of replicas being made for exhibition at the new Wakefield Museum.