

Focus on...

Cristo Vivo



Joseph Villermé (Saint-Claude 1660 - circa 1720 Rome)
Ivory
H 67 x W 42 cm
H 93.5 x W 50 cm (cross)
Franco-Italian, late 17th century

Director Nicholas Mullany explained:

‘This superb quality large ivory Cristo Vivo has been attributed firmly to the master craftsman Joseph Villermé. Born in 1660 in Saint-Claude, a commune in the Jura department in the Franche-Comté region of eastern France, Villermé studied under Charles Le Brun working in Paris at the Gobelins for some years before travelling to Rome where he remained until his death around 1720, an engraving of his portrait in 1723 leading to conjecture that his death may have occurred three years later.

Noted for his piety and humility, Villermé came to devote his working life entirely to the carving of crucifixes in either ivory or wood. Such single focus produced highly detailed evocative works of the most sublime realism and beauty. So devoted to understanding how the body hangs attached to the cross, to flow and movement and to communicating the experience of crucifixion, the sculptor conducted numerous clandestine studies and experiments with suspended corpses.

According to Pierre-Jean Mariette, the noted art historian, renowned connoisseur and biographer of French, Italian and Flemish artists, who met Villermé, this obsession to encapsulate detail and convey truth nearly cost the sculptor his life. Having obtained a corpse from a hospital, Villermé failed to take sufficient precautions to protect himself against the virulent infection that had killed the man. Having manoeuvred the torso and limbs into the crucified position, in his haste to produce a plaster mould, the sculptor tore the compromised skin of the corpse causing the diseased viscera and their contents to flood him and his studio leading to the contraction of a life threatening infection. Villermé did recover to continue to live an austere life consoled by his faith and devoted to a subspecialty providing an edifying but financially unrewarding career.

According to Dubus, the Marquis de Chennevieres, who published the handwritten notes of Pierre-Jean Mariette, declared that, of all the greatest sculptors of Versailles, the Gobelins, and even Rome, none had succeeded better at translating the art and the faith of his century and his country than Villermé.

By repute, a number of the master's crucifixes entered the collection of the Marchese Pallavicini, who, it is said, furnished an entire gallery with the sculptor's work. Few documented examples of Villermé's work have surfaced however.

One comparative ivory and rosewood veneered crucifix, formerly in the collection of Philippe de Chennevières, offered at Christie's, London, on 15 November 2001 (lot 114) was sold in the same rooms on 13 June 2002 (lot 65). That work was discovered by the Marquis de Chennevières in a 'marchands de curiosités' in the Corso, close to the via Vittoria, Rome, in the mid 19th century, before 1857. It is highly likely that he purchased it and brought it to France where it re-appeared on the market in 1889 and was bought in Paris by A. Dubus, a geologist and prehistorian.

The only other known similar example is found in the Musée de Brou, Bourg-en-Bresse, a large work attributed in 2004 by Philippe Malgouyres to Villermé (Inv. no. 982.235).

Our Cristo Vivo, a previously unknown and unrecorded masterpiece, is an important addition to the oeuvre of one of the most skilled creators of ivory crucifixes of the late 17th and early 18th centuries.'

Exhibited by London based Haute Époque dealer, **Mullany, stand n° 110**