



Hendrick de Keyser's *Honey Thief*

For Carla

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In 2012 the Rijksmuseum received on loan, as a promised gift, an extraordinary boxwood head of a screaming child, attributed to the Amsterdam sculptor Hendrick de Keyser (1565-1621) (fig. 1). When this expressive carving was sold at auction in Amsterdam more than a century ago, as part of the large art collection assembled by Simon Wolf Josephus Jitta (1819-1897), it bore an attribution – as absurd as it was optimistic – to Michelangelo.¹ An eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century label on the back refers to this and confirms that the outstanding quality of the carving evidently justified an attribution to one of the most famous sculptors in the history of art. While the sum the piece fetched at auction – 320 guilders – was admittedly considerable, clearly it in no way reflected the attribution to the great Italian. It emerges from a note of 13 October 1926 written by the then owner, Joseph Alfred Josephus Jitta, to the daughter of the Amsterdam art collector Otto Lanz, that Professor Vogelzang [sic] attributed the head ‘to the sixteenth-century Bavarian sculptor “Kilian”’.² This attribution is likewise based on a misunderstanding, since the Kilian family of Augsburg produced many engravers, goldsmiths and painters, but no known sculptors.

Eventually, in an article in this Bulletin in 1973, the art historian Charles

Fig. 1
ATTRIBUTED TO
HENDRICK DE
KEYSER, *Screaming
Child, Stung by a Bee*,
Amsterdam, c. 1615-20.
Boxwood,
16.5 x 13 x 9.2 cm;
tondo: diam. 25.4 cm,
thickness 2.7 cm;
total thickness
with head: 11 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-2007-24;
private gift from
Carla Josephus Jitta,
Amsterdam, 2007.

Avery convincingly linked the screaming child to the seventeenth-century Amsterdam sculptor Hendrick de Keyser, even though no other cabinet carving in wood by him was known at that time.³ Avery had not seen the original piece and based his attribution on an old photograph. The parallels with the crying bronze putti on De Keyser's *magnum opus*, the tomb of William of Orange in Delft (1613-22), and with mascarons of weeping children on the façade of Delft Town Hall are certainly striking (fig. 2).⁴ The likeness between the boxwood child's head and a small bronze bust of a crying child that Avery also attributed

Fig. 2
HENDRICK DE
KEYSER, *Weeping
Putto on the Tomb of
William of Orange*,
1613-22.
Bronze, h. approx.
80 cm.
Delft, Nieuwe Kerk.
Photo: Cultural
Heritage Agency of
the Netherlands.



to De Keyser is even stronger (fig. 3).⁵ Broadly speaking the two heads are identical, save for the fact that the bronze version was executed in the round, whereas the little wooden face was made as a high relief.⁶ The correspondences are so exact that the model for the bronze must have been based directly on the wooden version, with some minor modifications modelled in the wax.

All the stylistic similarities notwithstanding, there are also some very obvious differences. They are chiefly the finer detailing and greater three-dimensionality of the boxwood boy compared to his little bronze brothers, and are largely due to the limitations of bronze as a medium. The wooden child has spiky locks of hair standing out from his scalp, for instance, whereas in the bronze the curls lie flat on the head.



Fig. 3
 ATTRIBUTED TO
 HENDRICK DE
 KEYSER, *Screaming
 Child*, Amsterdam,
 c. 1615-20.
 Bronze, h. 32 cm.
 Los Angeles,
 Los Angeles County
 Museum, inv. no.
 M.84.37; purchased
 with funds provided
 by James E. Clark.

Fig. 4
Detail of the bee
(fig. 1).



The modelling of the boxwood child's skin also seems livelier, folded more loosely around the skull, and his ears stick out more. The most striking difference is the presence of an anecdotal detail that also provides the logical explanation for the child's extreme emotion: a bee stinging him just above his right temple (fig. 4). Although Avery believed he was seeing a reproduction of De Keyser's bronze in wood,⁷ the logical iconographical motif of the stinging bee and the greater plasticity and detailing actually suggest precisely the opposite: the wooden head is the original version and the bronze is a more decorative, simplified variant, designed to be produced in numbers.

The attribution to De Keyser is supported by his portrait bust of William

of Orange, which – like the screaming child – exists both in an all-round form and as a 'half' version in high relief.⁸ The affinity to the auricular ornamentation that began to appear on Dutch silver shortly after 1600 also points to its having been created in his circle. De Keyser must have found the work of the Utrecht silversmith Adam van Vianen (1568-1627) and Arent van Bolten's fantastical, grotesque designs for prints and sculptures particularly fascinating, and they were clearly a source of inspiration for him. The intricate shape of the child's protruding ears (fig. 5) – 'auricular' means pertaining to the ear, and in German the style is known as *Ohrmuschelstil* – the fluid lines of his features and even under his tongue immediately



Fig. 5
Detail of one ear
(fig. 1).

call to mind the Van Vianens' organic *snaeckeryen* (amusing conceits), which were published as prints around 1650 under the title *Constighe Modellen* (fig. 6).⁹ The ears give the contorted little face almost the look of a caricature, reminiscent of grotesque mascarons. De Keyser used imaginary masks like these – often with gaping mouths – as terminals for his busts and as decorative elements in his architecture.¹⁰ The parallel with an auricular Christ child in Ter Brugghen's *Adoration of the Magi* of 1619, which Avery noted, is not without significance in this regard.

The stinging bee is the key to the iconography of the image. The insect refers directly to the famous tale of Cupid the honey thief, derived from an idyll traditionally attributed to the

Greek poet Theocritus (third century BC): 'When the thievish Love one day was stealing honeycomb from the hive, a wicked bee stung him, and made all his finger-tips to smart. In pain and grief he blew on his hand and stamped and leapt upon the ground, and went and showed his hurt to Aphrodite, and made complaint that so a little a beast as a bee could make so great a wound. Whereat his mother laughing, "What?" cries she, "art not a match for a bee, and thou so little and yet able to make wounds so great?"'¹¹ The poem was available in various translations in the early sixteenth century – including an English one by Thomas More – and was generally interpreted as a warning against the sweet temptations of love. Dürer drew it in 1514 (Vienna, Alber-



Fig. 6
Engraving from
Constighe Modellen,
c. 1650, vol. 2, no. 29.

tina), and Lucas Cranach painted various versions of the episode around 1526.¹² Strictly speaking, according to the *Idylls*, Cupid was stung on his finger by a bee, but as early as Cranach the naughty little love god is also stung on his head.

Although there was no obvious local pictorial tradition of this episode before 1600, the tale did enjoy a degree of familiarity in the Netherlands in De Keyser's day in the emblemata literature. In the various editions of Alciatus's *Emblematum liber* (1531) and his *Emblematum libellus* (1534), which were extremely popular in the Low Countries, the honey-stealing Cupid appears in the illustrations to the motto *Dulcia quandoque amara fieri* (Sweetness turns at times to bitterness).¹³ Daniel Heinsius's *Nederduytsche poemata*, a collection of poems and emblems published in Amsterdam in 1616, was instrumental in its dissemination in the Dutch Republic. One of them is titled *Cupido honich-dief, uyt Theocritus* (fig. 7).¹⁴ The mischievous god of love also appears in the anonymous collection of poems *T(h)ronus Cupidinis*, the first edition of which was published without a privilege from the States



Fig. 7
Cupido honich-dief, uyt Theocritus,
emblem in
Daniël Heinsius,
Nederduytsche poemata, Amsterdam
1616, p. 42.

General in 1617, followed by revised editions in 1618 and 1620.¹⁵ The publisher was Crispijn van de Passe the Elder (c. 1564-1637), who was also responsible for the majority of the illustrations.¹⁶ Under the engraving accompanying the motto borrowed from Heinsius is the following verse, pithily capturing the moral of Theocritus's tale (fig. 8):

*Sweet-toothed Cupid with cunning tricks
Stole the honey from the hive; the angry
bees
Stung his hand: and from this we learn
how
He who seeks sweetness finds bitterness
instead.*¹⁷

The fact that Hendrick de Keyser should dabble in such emblems of love in his

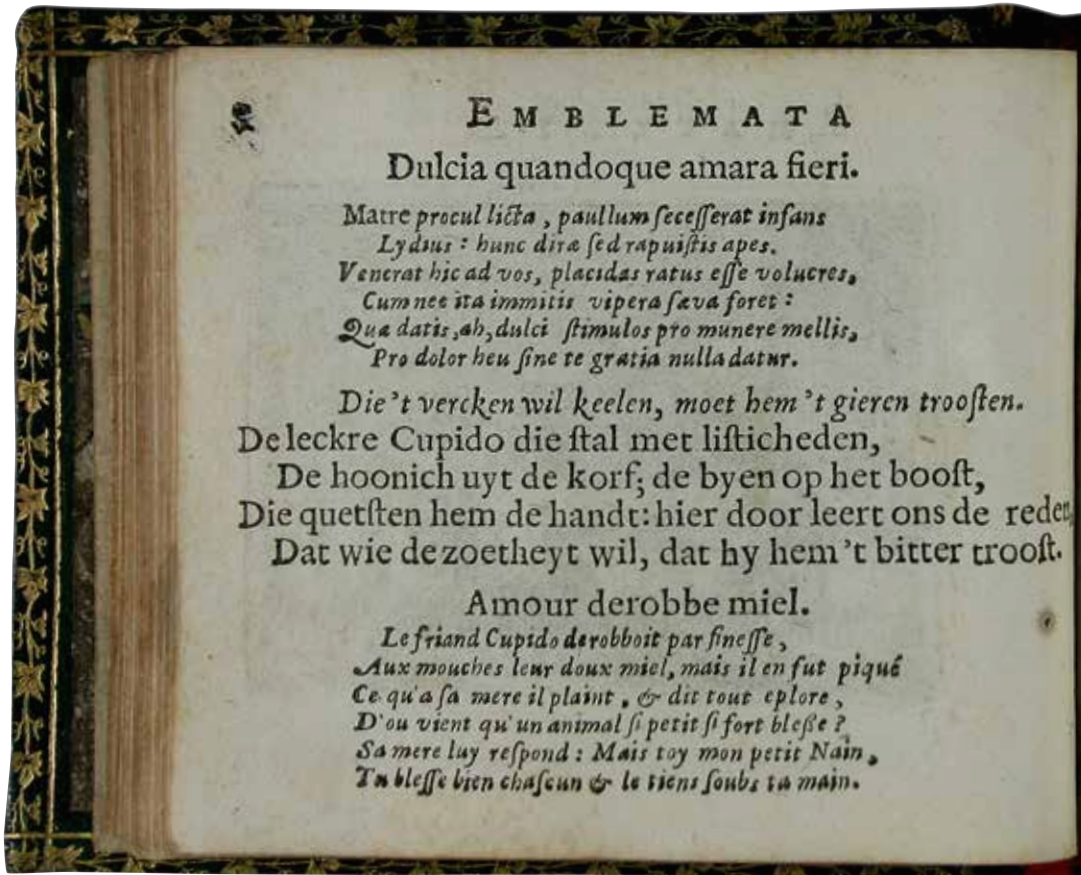


Fig. 8
*Dulcia quandoque
amara fieri*, emblem
in Crispijn van de
Passe the Elder,
T(h)ronus Cupidinis,
Amsterdam 1620
(third edition).

old age is not as surprising as it might appear, when we know that – at least in 1616 – he was a member of the Amsterdam chamber of rhetoric known as De Eglantier.¹⁸ Among his acquaintances we find prominent Amsterdam literary figures like Laurens Spiegel and P.C. Hooft; he designed a house on the Singel, the Dolphin, for the former, while

the latter regularly wrote odes to the sculptor's work.¹⁹ It is therefore likely that Hendrick de Keyser carved his Cupid for someone in this Amsterdam literary circle of wealthy rhetoricians and poets, who would appreciate this amusing rendering of the bittersweet subject.

De Keyser's *Honey Thief* is a relatively early example of the interest in

A M A T O R I A .





Fig. 9
 JOHAN CLAUDIUS
 DE COCK, *Bust of a
 Crying Child*, 1716.
 Terracotta with
 signature in ink,
 h. c. 20 cm.
 Present whereabouts
 unknown.
 Photo: John del
 Campa, Amsterdam.

the expression of emotions in the human face in sculpture, which did not reach its height until later in the seventeenth century – in part as a result of studies of the *Laocoön* – eventually culminating in F.X. Messerschmidt's series of character heads.²⁰ Heads of crying children do not occur regularly in the Netherlands until the end of the seventeenth century, for example in the oeuvre of Johan Claudius de Cock (1667-1735).²¹ It is possible that in some cases these unhappy little fellows were designed as pendants to laughing children – youthful, humorous parodies of the Classical philosopher pairing of Heraclitus and Democritus (fig. 9).²²

It would seem that De Keyser can be seen as the pioneer of the theme of the head of a screaming child; he must have explored it for the first time for William of Orange's tomb in Delft. In it he incorporated sorrowful putti and cherub heads in bronze which, as we have seen, bear a distinct resemblance to the little wooden head. The likeness is most striking in the putti holding torches and a shield on top of the monument and the winged mascarons that crown the memorial cartouche (see fig. 2).²³ An echo of the work can also be found in a head of a child in alabaster that was mistakenly attributed to him (fig. 10),²⁴ while Arent van 's Graven-

zande adopted the motif on the Van Brouchoven epitaph in the Church of St Peter in Leiden (design c. 1645) in the form of a weeping angel head (fig. 11). De Keyser's screaming and crying children also attracted followers beyond the Netherlands. Two mourning angels in a group of Christ as the Man of Sorrows by Gerhard Gröninger (1582-1652), now in the Church of St Mary in Ahlen (Westphalia), were evidently inspired by the bronze putti in Delft.²⁵ Echoes of De Keyser's *Honey Thief* can also be detected in some eighteenth-century German ivories, for instance three frontally conceived heads of weeping children in Braunschweig,



Fig. 10
Bust of a Screaming Child, Antwerp or Amsterdam?, c. 1620. Nottingham alabaster, h. 27 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, inv. no. 5515.

Fig. 11
ARENT VAN 'S GRAVENZANDE (DESIGN), *Detail of the Van Brouchoven Epitaph With Weeping Angel*, c. 1645. Sandstone. Leiden, Pieterskerk. Photo: Jan van Galen Fotografie.



one of which is attributed to Johann Christoph Ludwig Lücke (c. 1703-c. 1780).²⁶ His oeuvre also includes some less sentimental and more animated carvings of crying children, among them a swaddled baby and a signed miniature bust, both in London, and a small ivory medallion relief in Schwerin (fig. 12).²⁷ Although the similarities are often strikingly close, it is anything but clear how Lücke could have been influenced by the Netherlandish examples. The ivory carver worked in various towns and cities in North-Western Europe, including London, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Schwerin and Dresden, and possibly in the Low Countries too. He may have had access to various art collections in all these

places, but whether he could have seen De Keyser's *Honey Thief* in any of them remains open to question, since the wax seal on the back of the piece suggests that it was in a Polish collection in the eighteenth century.²⁸ A note on Lücke's little ivory in Schwerin conveys something of the admiration for such naturalistic expressive sculptures in the eighteenth century: 'A head of a crying child. The expression is so strong that that one can see the uvula on the palate.'²⁹ These words could equally apply to the *Screaming Child* which, with its assured balance between the observation of nature, facial expression and stylization, is a supreme masterpiece of Dutch early seventeenth-century cabinet sculpture.



Fig. 12
 ATTRIBUTED TO
 JOHANN CHRISTOPH
 LUDWIG LÜCKE,
*Medallion with a
 Crying Child*, c. 1765.
 Ivory, h. 11.5 cm.
 Schwerin,
 Staatliches Museum,
 inv. no. KH 1631.
 Photo: bpk / Staat-
 liches Museum
 Schwerin / Elke
 Walford.

NOTES

- 1 Sale Simon ('Sim') Wolf Josephus Jitta Collection, Amsterdam (Frederik Muller), 9 November 1897, no. 250 (as Italian, sixteenth century, attributed to Michelangelo). It was bought at the sale by his nephew Daniel Josephus Jitta (1854-1925) for 320 guilders, and passed by descent to his son Joseph Alfred Josephus Jitta (1890-1943); it was then bought by Joseph Alfred's brother Abraham Carel Josephus Jitta (1887-1958), who left it to his niece, Carla, Joseph Alfred's daughter, in 1959. She gifted it to the Rijksmuseum in 2007, retaining the life interest, and in 2012 physically transferred it to the museum. In the records of the Amsterdam photographer Bernard Eilers (1878-1951) there are two old pictures of the child's head, probably taken for Joseph Alfred Josephus Jitta (Rotterdam, Nederlands Fotomuseum, inv. nos. 2855, 2856). For the Josephus Jitta family see T. Toebosch, *Uitverkoren zondebokken*, Amsterdam 2010, where Simon Wolf Josephus Jitta's collection and Hendrick de Keyser's *Head of a Child* are discussed on pp. 96-97.
- 2 'aan den 16den eeuwischen Beierschen beeldhouwer "Kilian"'. Note from Joseph Alfred Josephus Jitta to Gertrud Kijzer-Lanz, 13 October 1926 (object file Rijksmuseum). The reference is to the Utrecht professor Willem Vogelsang (1875-1954), the first professor of art history in the Netherlands and an expert on medieval sculpture.
- 3 C.H.F. Avery, 'Hendrick de Keyser as a Sculptor of Small Bronzes: His Orpheus and Cerberus Identified', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 21 (1973), no. 1, pp. 3-24, esp. p. 21 and fig. 25 (reprinted in C. Avery, *Studies in European Sculpture*, London 1981, pp. 175-88). There is one other small boxwood carving that can be credited to De Keyser, a small variant of the large alabaster figure of St John the Evangelist (1613) that the sculptor made for the roof loft of the Church of St John in Den Bosch (London, Victoria & Albert Museum, inv. no. 165.1864), however its size and subject make it difficult to compare with the head of a child.
- 4 Avery, op. cit. (note 3), fig. 22.
- 5 There are two known examples of this bronze, one in a private collection (see Avery, op. cit. (note 3), p. 24, note 44) and the other in the Los Angeles County Museum (inv. no. M.84.37, purchased with funds provided by James E. Clark), former collection of David Weill, sale Paris (Drouot), 16 June 1971, no. 94; bought by the art dealer Cyril Humphris, London, 1972.
- 6 In view of the wax seal and the inscription on the reverse, the mount dates at least from the late eighteenth century and could well reflect the original shape. Cf. e.g. J. Gerchow (ed.), *Ebenbilder. Kopien von Körpern-Modelle des Menschen*, cat. Essen (Ruhrlandmuseum) 2002, nos. 1-4 (two *memento mori tondi*, 1589, with a head of a child in wax).
- 7 'It is difficult to assess the age of the piece from a photograph, but its relationship to our bronze appears to be derivative,' see Avery, op. cit. (note 3), p. 21 and fig. 25.
- 8 F. Scholten, 'Hele en halve hoofden. Kanttekeningen bij terracotta portretten van Hendrick de Keyser', in *Album Discipulorum J.R.J. van Asperen de Boer*, Zwolle 1997, pp. 185-95, esp. figs. 2-5.
- 9 *Constighe Modellen, van verscheijden silvere vaten, en andere sinnighe wercken, gevonden ende geteekent door den vermaerden E[delen] –, sijnde meerendeels door hem uyt een stuk silvers geslagen, seer nut voor alle liefhebbers van de conste: uytgegeven door sijnen soon Christiaan van Vianen tot Utrecht en in cooper geëst door Theodor van Kessel [1650]*; for the auricular style in the Van Vianens' circle see J.R. ter Molen, *Van Vianen, een Utrechtse familie van zilversmeden met een internationale faam*, Leiden 1984, vol. 1, pp. 49-50; also G. Luijten et al. (eds.), *Dawn of the Golden Age*, cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1994, nos. 65-69, 111-15.
- 10 See the busts of Vincent Coster (1608), Joachim van Twetwael (1606) and the fragment of a bust of Coster, all in the Rijksmuseum (Luijten et al., op. cit. (note 9), nos. 58, 59). For his architecture see K. Ottenheym et al., *Hendrick de Keyser. 'Architectura Moderna'. Moderne bouwkunst in Amsterdam 1600-1625*, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 6, 8-9.
- 11 J.M. Edmonds (ed. and transl.), *The Greek Bucolic Poets*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1912 (Loeb Classical Library, vol. 28), Idyll no. 19: *The Honey-Stealer*; Theocritus (transl. Anthony Verity), *Idylls*, Oxford 2003.
- 12 F. Winkler, *Die Zeichnungen Albrecht Dürers*, vols. 1-4, Berlin 1936-39, vol. 3 (1938), p. 80, no. 665 (Venus and Cupid); and G. Messling, *De wereld van Lucas Cranach. Een kunstenaar ten tijde van Dürer, Titiaan en Metsys*, Brussels/Tielt 2010, nos. 97-98.
- 13 In, among others, the *Emblematum liber* (Augsburg 1531), no. E4 and *Emblematum*

- libellus* (Paris 1534), no. 94; see the website <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/index.php> (consulted 20 March 2014).
- 14 Daniël Heinsius, *Nederduytsche poemata*, Amsterdam 1616, p. 42:
De soon van Venus soete man,
Die nimmermeer stil wesen kan,
Was opgestaen recht voor den dach,
Als yeder noch in ruste lach,
En ginck al heymelick bespien
De honich-korven van de bien,
Hy meynde 'thonich was soo goet,
Het was soo wonderlicken soet.
Maer eer hy haelde zijn geries,
De beesten prickelden den dief.
De lecker liep aen alle kant,
Hy spranck, hy blaesde vast in d'handt,
En toonde Venus die daer stont
Al schreyende de nieuwe wondt.
Hy seyde, moeder, hoe kant sijn,
Dat sulcken dier maeckt sulcke pijn?
De moeder sey de, sijt ghy groot
Die yeder brengt in sulcken noot?
- 15 H. Luijten and M. Blankman, *Minne- en zinnebeeld. Bloemlezing uit de Nederlandse emblematiek*, Amsterdam 2003, pp. 93-97.
- 16 See also the website of the Emblem Project of the University of Utrecht, the Digitale Bibliotheek der Nederlandse Letteren (DBNL) and the Emblem Digitisation Research Group (Glasgow University): http://emblems.let.uu.nl/tc1620_introduction.html (consulted 20 March 2014).
- 17 *De leckre Cupido die stal met listicheden,*
De hoonich uyt de korf; de byen op het boost,
Die quetsten hem de handt: hier door leert ons de reden,
Dat wie de zoetheyt wil, dat hy hem 't bitter troost
 Ibid. (note 16), at http://emblems.let.uu.nl/tc1620_facsimile.html?thumb=pb8a (consulted 20 March 2014).
- 18 Ottenheym et al., op. cit. (note 10), p. 22.
- 19 E. Neurdenburg, *Hendrick de Keyser. Beeldhouwer en bouwmeester van Amsterdam*, Amsterdam s.a. [1930], pp. 11-14.
- 20 For example in Bernini's *Anima Dannata* (c. 1619, see R. Wittkower, *Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque*, Milan 1990, p. 233, no. 7); Gabriel Grupello (see *Europäische Barockplastik am Niederrhein. Grupello und seine Zeit*, exh. cat. Düsseldorf (Kunstmuseum) 1971, nos. 31, 92); Andreas Schluter (*Barockplastik in Norddeutschland*, exh. cat. Hamburg (Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe) 1977, nos. 164-67); and Balthasar Permoser's *Bust of Marsyas*, c. 1680-85 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 2002.468).
- 21 Cf. C. Avery and A. Laing, *Finger Prints of the Artist: European Terracotta Sculpture from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections*, Washington/Cambridge (Mass.) 1979, no. 111 and fig. 2 (= Kunsthandel H. Nijstad, Lochem, 1973, and the J. Beekhuizen gallery, Amsterdam, 1977, a terracotta bust with an inscription in ink: *Joannes Claudius de Cock*); sale London (Bonhams), 11 December 2007, no. 525.
- 22 Cf. N. Penny, *Catalogue of European Sculpture in the Ashmolean Museum, 1540 to the Present Day*, Oxford 1992, vol. 3, pp. 17-19, no. 457; and sale London (Christie's), 24 April 2008, no. 414.
- 23 Luijten et al., op. cit. (note 9), p. 407, fig. 62a.
- 24 Ibid., no. 62 (Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst).
- 25 G. Jászai, *Das Werk des Bildhauers Gerhard Gröninger (1582-1652)*, Münster s.a. (*Bildhefte des Westfälischen Landesmuseums für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Münster*, vol. 28), pp. 132-33. Gröninger was in the Netherlands around 1619-22 in connection with supplies of marble for the high altar of Münster Cathedral. He may have visited Delft on that occasion.
- 26 C. Scherer, *Die Braunschweiger Elfenbeinsammlung. Katalog der Elfenbeinsammlung des Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museums in Braunschweig*, Leipzig 1931, nos. 226 (Netherlands, first half of the seventeenth century?), 327 (Germany, first half of the eighteenth century?), 328 (attributed to Johann Christoph Ludwig Lücke); C. Theuerkauff, 'Johann Christoph Ludwig Lücke – "Ober-Modell-Meister und Inventions-Meister" in Meissen, "Ober-Direktor" zu Wien', *Alte und Moderne Kunst* 27 (1982), no. 183, pp. 21-32, esp. p. 23 and fig. 9; M. Trusted, *Baroque & Later Ivories: Victoria and Albert Museum*, London 2013, nos. 77-78 (Johann Christoph Ludwig Lücke).
- 27 Theuerkauff, op. cit. (note 26), p. 23 and fig. 10 (signed *L.v.L.*; London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. A 2-1931) and K.A. Möller, *Elfenbein. Kunstwerke des Barock*, cat. Schwerin (Staatliches Museum Schwerin) 2000, no. 24.
- 28 Red wax seal with a helmeted escutcheon on which is a headless eagle under a six-pointed star, probably the arms of the Polish Orla (Szaszor) family.
- 29 'Ein schreiender Kinderkopf. Die Expression ist so stark, dass man im Munde den Zapfen am Gaumen bemerkt.' Möller, op. cit. (note 27), no. 24.

