



In the early twentieth century, the chest was discovered at one of the New College holdings in Stanton St John and brought to the college. The chest is organised chronologically, presenting a series of tableaux.<sup>3</sup> The narrative begins in the top-right panel, where the Bruges Matins, the bloody massacre of occupying French troops at the hands of the Bruges townspeople, is represented.

The Courtrai Chest [detail]

To the left of this, either side of the chest's lock, the people of Bruges present the keys of the city to Gui de Namur and Willem van Jülich, son and grandson respectively of the count of Flanders, Gui de Dampierre, and

In the second row, the right side probably depicts the Flemish capture of Wijnendale Castle,

The Courtrai Chest [detail]

and the left side shows an array of Flemish footsoldiers, with a priest conferring a blessing in preparation for the battle;

The Courtrai Chest [detail]





also have aesthetic dimensions to them which may or may not be easily reconciled to their politics. As the music historian Carl Dahlhaus once put it, 'the distinction between works of music and political events . . . must on no account be obscured or minimised: the possibility of an aesthetic presence which can be recaptured in later performances distinguishes a work of music fundamentally and profoundly from a political event, which belongs once and for all to the past and only extends into the present by virtue of reports or remnants of it.'<sup>6</sup> Aesthetic aspects of artworks, according to Dahlhaus, are not reducible to their historical circumstances. This claim, which has its roots in nineteenth-century theories of aesthetic autonomy, has been challenged by critics of art, music and literature in recent decades.<sup>7</sup> Under the umbrella of New Historicism, scholars have demonstrated that works of art that are not ostensibly political can be shown, via close reading and deconstruction, to stem from and promulgate tacit ideologies. The intersection of politics and aesthetics has thus focused on works of art whose politics is implicit, while works









1 below) is consistent but lacks the sophistication found in most Old French song.<sup>22</sup> Care has clearly been taken, however, to end the sixth line of each stanza with the -rhyme ('-ois'): in some stanzas this is the only place that the -rhyme is stated, so it must be answered by the two -rhymes of the refrain. The return to the same words at the refrain and the -rhyme that requires an answering rhyme in the refrain together draw listeners' ears to the refrain, the focal point of French identity in the song. The performance conventions of the song may have heightened this centripetal effect. Although there is little surviving evidence for medieval performance practices, the stanzas were probably sung by a solo singer, and

The Courtrai Chest [detail]

Here the carver creates an interplay between the chest's form and its function, depicting the moment when the burghers hand the keys of the city of Bruges over to the nobles, Willem van Jülich and Gui de Namur. The depiction of a large key—surely disproportionately large within the composition of the scene, but perhaps almost the same size as the real-life key to the chest would be—in the hand of one of the burghers plays with the viewer's levels of perception: unlocking the chest, one would be reminded of the historic moment when nobles and burghers came together with greater equality than strict feudalism allows.<sup>26</sup> The act of unlocking the chest becomes a performative recognition of a centralised Flemish identity.

These two elements of form—*ductus* and centralisation—come together to enable audiences for the Courtrai Chest and *Mult lieement* to construct ideologically sanctioned historical narratives in their memories. Mnemonic technique was central to medieval education, both in teaching medieval readers how to read and memorise texts, but also in teaching craftsmen how to construct works of art and scribes how to arrange and copy manuscripts.<sup>27</sup> Key works on memory such as Cicero's *De inventione* and *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (misattributed in the Middle Ages to Cicero) were widely copied, taught and used in monastery and cathedral schools and universities. The art of memory that these works prescribed encouraged readers to divide texts or images into parts and to arrange these parts in rooms (or other kinds of structured spaces) in their memories: reading and memorising thus entailed the assignment of location and order to pieces of information, which would enable the efficient and easy reconstruction of the whole text or picture. Works like the Courtrai Chest and *Mult lieement*, which display their formal structure so proudly, encourage their audiences to use the formal structure for their own comprehension, memorisation,

---

<sup>26</sup> The greater equality between different classes is evident in the actions of the nobles, who dismounted their horses at the battle, putting them on a par with the burghers. Some thirty prominent burghers were knighted by Gui de Namur shortly before the battle, likewise blurring class distinctions: Verbruggen,





Spurs as inevitable. Its aura as an artwork is felt in its level of craft, which confers high status on the object itself and the narrative that it relates, while its affective power surely stirred deep emotions in anyone who looked at the carving. Both form and aura would have made it easy for audiences to memorise the narrative as it is presented on the chest in accordance with contemporary mnemotechnical theories: having memorised the events depicted, they would then reconstruct the narrative as the chest presents it, thus constructing a historical narrative for themselves that reflects the dominant ideological views of the chest's patrons and makers.

In this way, a close reading of the chest's construction shows how explicit and implicit ideology can be aligned in objects that function both as propaganda *and* as art. Such alignment is not automatic: it could be argued that *Mult lieement* fails as a song because of a misalignment between its explicit politics and the messages implicit in its construction. Outwardly, the song is a declaration of the military might and God-given power of the French monarchy in a period when the French crown was solidifying the boundaries of its territories and centralising its forms of government. As I have shown, specifically poetic and musical aspects of the song, which would not be found in a prose text, reinforce the message of the song. Yet by choosing a medium which, as Spiegel has argued, was considered untrustworthy, the poet-singer of *Mult lieement* simultaneously weakens the efficacy of his message as he tries to amplify it. The aesthetic elements of *Mult lieement* arguably work counter to its intended purpose of convincing listeners and claiming historical truth.

The Courtrai Chest is more successful, and radical, in its political claims. While the same concerns of historical inaccuracy and unreliability could be levelled at the chest, what I think is more salient is the unusual

