

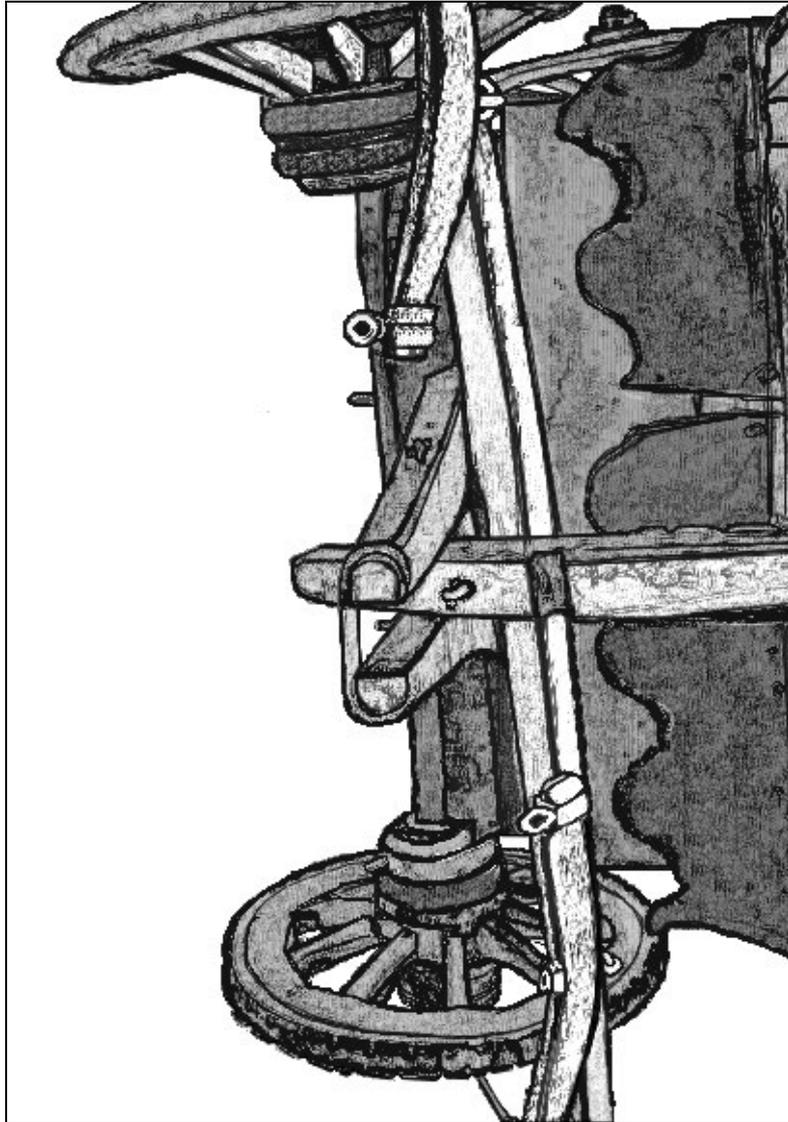
CORPUS CHRISTI, VALENCIA

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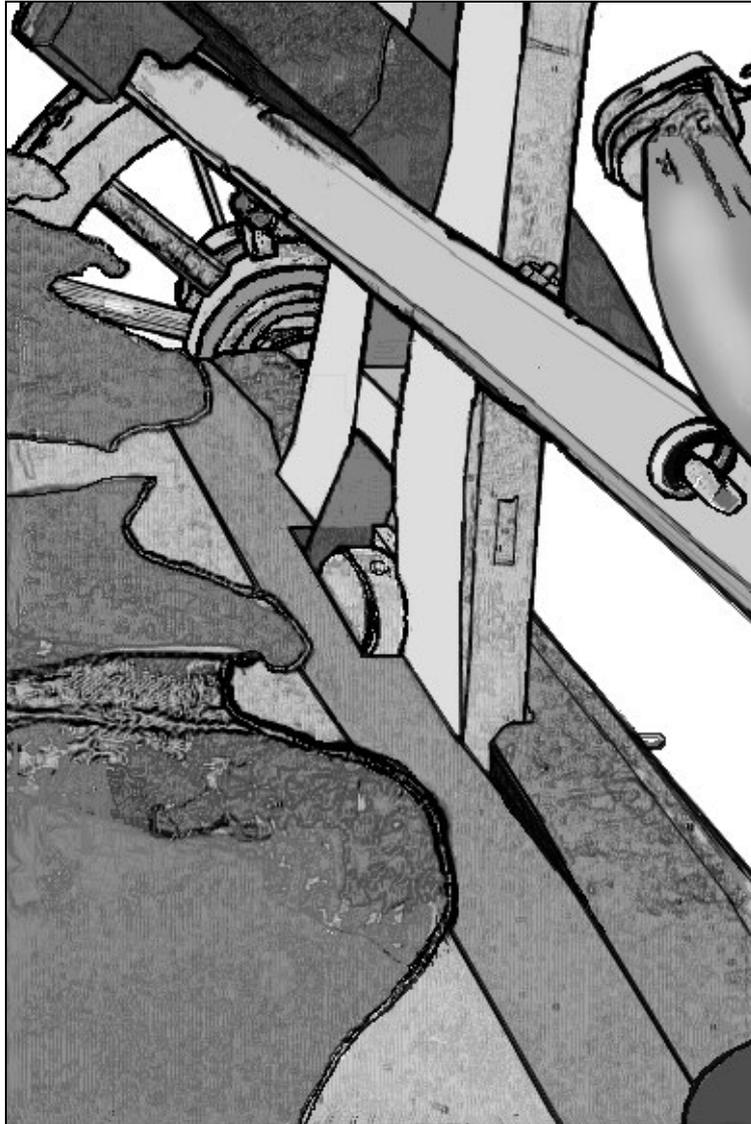
Spain tantalises the medieval theatre specialist with an ostensibly continuous tradition in festival represented by Holy Week processions, Corpus Christi celebrations, and the sung drama of the Assumption of the Virgin from Elche. All are civic and amateur in their provenance, occasional in their production, and employ scenic devices which delight and amaze the Northern European or American medievalist familiar with pageant waggons and ingeniously opening heavens only from manuscript illumination or from account books. But, as theatrical performance is by nature ephemeral, it is usual to discover that what is enthusiastically preserved is a product of largely unselfconscious evolution rather than of cultural atrophy.

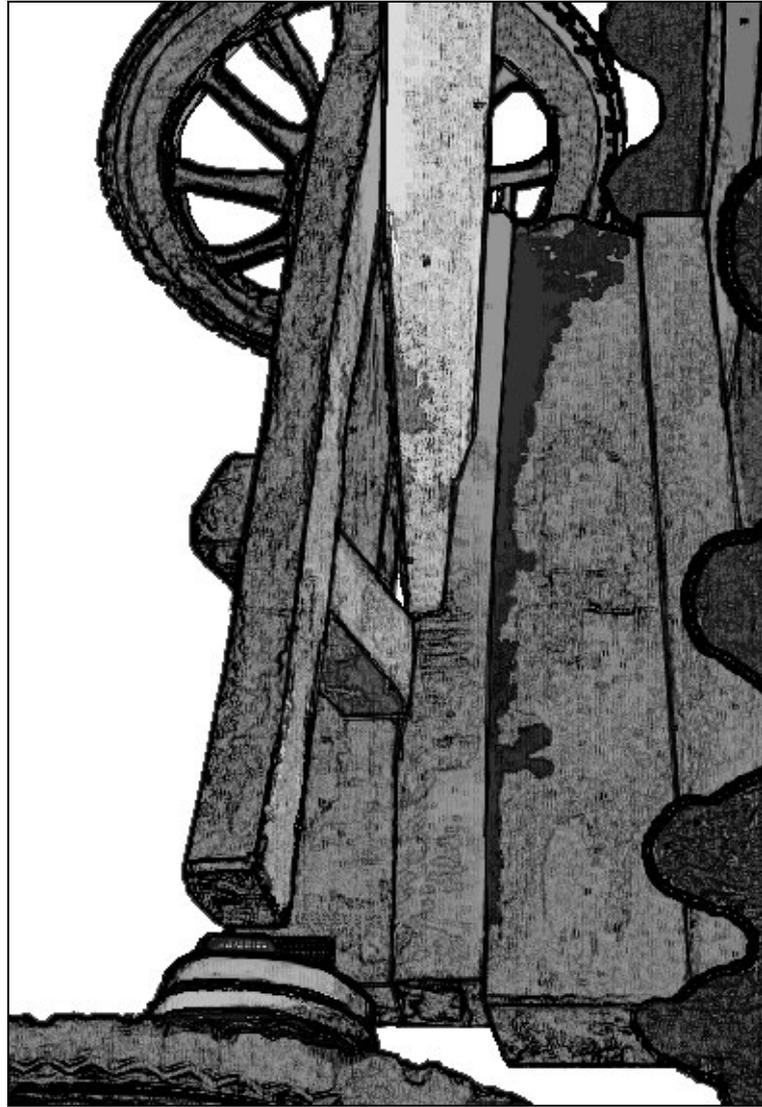
Valencians show you the Holy Grail in their cathedral, and Corpus Christi is the major event in their busy liturgical calendar. The real treasure for the medieval English drama specialist, however, is the survival of a set of waggons, four of which are actually survivals from the early sixteenth century. For those of us who are interested in the structure of the English fifteenth- and sixteenth-century pageant waggons, these provide rare examples of contemporary construction. In particular the sub-structures demonstrate a type of contemporary steering axle, pivoting on a single pin.¹

The front wheels, which are smaller than the rear ones and are contained under the superstructure, are attached by means of stub axles to the lower of a pair of massive horizontal axle beams. This double beam is held together by bolts, secured at the bottom through a metal plate. The pin which acts as the steering pivot appears to pass through both axle beams as well as the lateral centre beam, the end of which can be seen in a recess cut between the axle beams in the middle. How the pin is secured at the top cannot be seen. The central shaft which is used for towing and steering the vehicle is then spliced into a fork which passes through the double axle-beam on either side of the steering pin, and is finished under the waggon with a cross-piece. The whole is an ingenious piece of engineering which copes with a range of huge stresses and weights from a period before materials which are really strong under stress were



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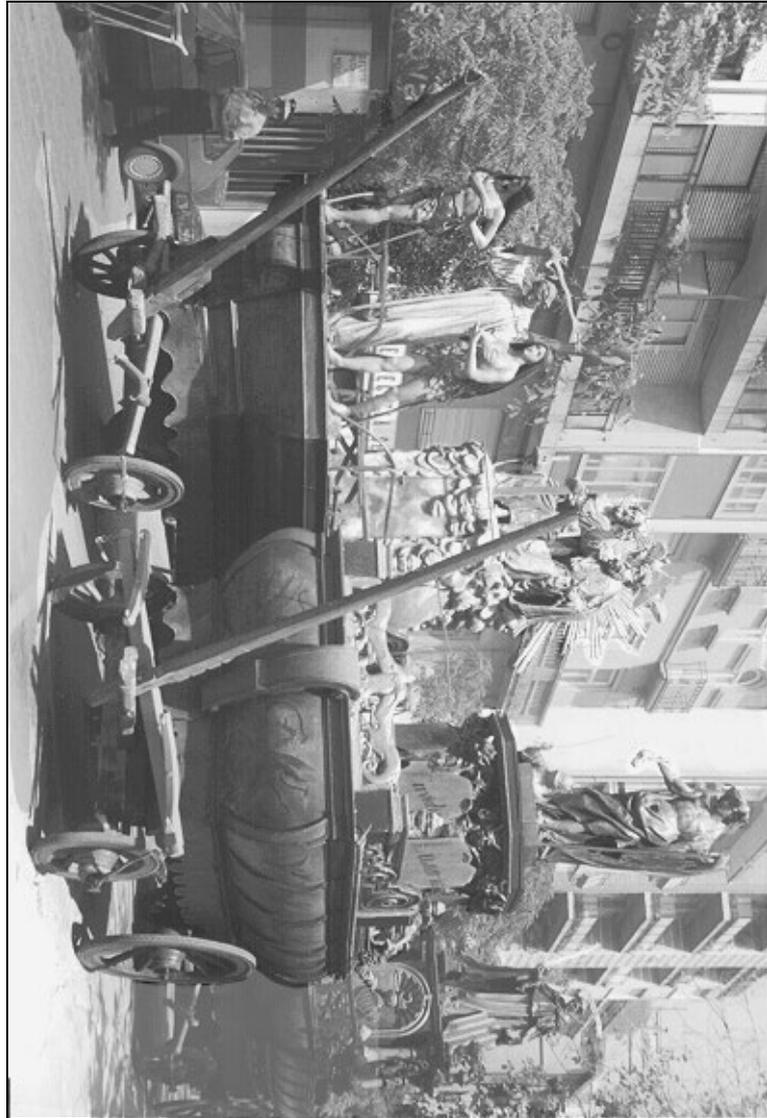
available. Its longevity under fairly rough use is a mark of its success as a design, and it is completely invisible, hidden beneath the waggon skirts when the vehicle is in use.

The waggons are stored all together in their original pageant house, with its flat for a caretaker on the roof forming part of the original construction. Their decking, bellied like a ship, resembles the pageant cars illustrated in seventeenth-century triumphs, as do the accompanying wheeled beasts, although these are 1940s reconstructions. A painted cartouche on the back of each waggon records its history. The older ones were lowered earlier this century to enable them to pass below the new electricity cables. It appears that the plinths carrying the major statues were reduced in height by as much as a metre at this time.

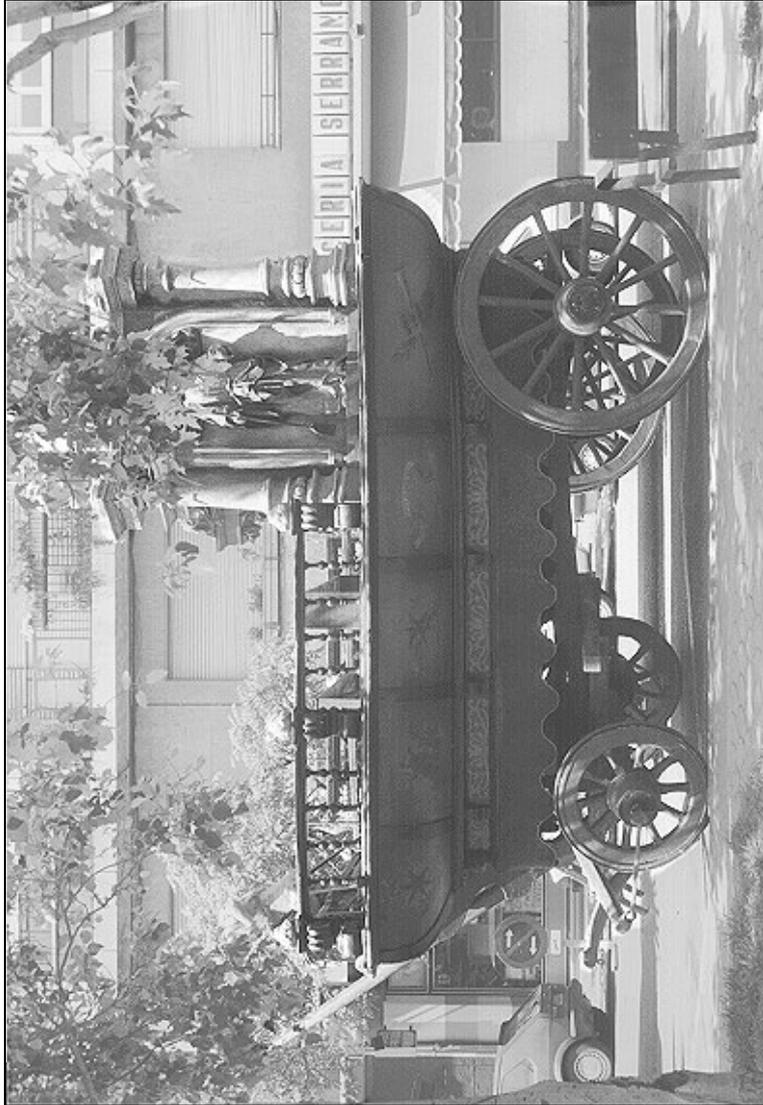
The iconography of the tableaux on the waggons – Fame, Blind Faith, St Michael, etc. – owes more to the Renaissance emblem book than to the biblical iconography probably expressed in the original scenes. Original subjects are again recorded on the cartouches, although whether the originals were tableaux of statues or real people is not at this point clear. For example, the waggon which currently carries St Michael was constructed in 1528 for the Last Judgement. Texts of plays from Valencian Corpus Christi cycle survive, but only one play is now performed each year. In 1994 it was *The Massacre of the Innocents*, played on a large outdoor fixed stage and accompanied by heavily amplified background music by Wagner and Beethoven. It was very popular.

The waggons are now marginalised from the main event, forming a procession of their own, when they are loaded up with members of the Confraternity and a band, and pulled by pairs of surprisingly small ponies. The popularity of the waggon procession these days is rather dismaying: it is the focus of some very heavy betting over which ponies will make it up a certain uphill section of the route, which collapse trying. The animals are driven hard with their huge loads, metal-shod hooves slipping frantically on the greasy metalled road in midsummer heat.

But there is also a main procession in which biblical figures alternate with dancing troupes of dwarves, hobby-horses, and a mumming of Virtue and the Seven Deadly Sins. The procession is led by giants, representing the races of the world, and finishes with the cathedral clergy carrying the Host in its monstrance which is showered with rose petals from surrounding balconies. The army brings up the rear. In the main procession, however, interest lies not in the authenticity of individual elements, but the eclectic nature of the whole process. A maypole dance



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in which the maypole is topped by a pomegranate containing a representation of the Host, a figure of the Virgin Birth, supplies one example of an ancient mixture of folk and official Christian art, whereas the contiguity of the army in combat gear with the cathedral clergy says more about the period of the middle of this century in Spain when religious observances such as this were revived.

Spain is stuffed with lesser lay religious festivals proudly proclaimed *muy viejo* by their local populace. Commonly one is taken to one side by the historically knowledgeable and warned that there is little or nothing of what is currently to be seen which is truly medieval, that what survives is somehow dangerously ersatz. And disillusion encourages peripheral focus on the obvious later accretions and improvements, annoyance that when inevitably a moving part, or a costume, or a statue has been replaced, the replacement has not been a faithful copy of the original. But the chronological Middle Ages were over a long time ago. The survival of practices from that time and the survival of ephemera are not always compatible, unless the ephemera are as robust and functional as the sub-structures of the Valencia wagons, which may be why they are known locally as *rocas* ('rocks').

I am grateful, as ever, to Asuncion Salvador-Rabaza Ramos for first drawing my attention to these constructions in 1990. In 1994 I returned with Meg Twycross and the Lancaster University Television crew: video film of the event, and further reflections on the waggons in relation to records of other religious processional cars from all over Europe are forthcoming.

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NOTES

The computer graphics illustrating this article were prepared by Meg Twycross from photographs taken by Pamela King.

1. The construction appears to be roughly the same as that described by James Arnold in his *Farm Waggon and Carts* (David and Charles, Newton Abbot and London, 1977) 18 and 25. John Marshall discusses the date of the re-introduction of the pivoted front axle into Europe in the Middle Ages in "The manner of these plays": the Chester Pageant Carriage and the Places where They Played' in *Staging the Chester Cycle* edited David Mills (Leeds Texts and Monographs NS 9: University of Leeds School of English, 1985) 25. The four earliest Valencia pageant waggon are said to date from 1512, 1528, and 1542.