Rosary bead - Saint John the Evangelist and Christ in distress

Object: Rosary bead
Place of origin: Netherlands (north; or Lower Rhine, made)
Lower Rhine (made)
Date: ca. 1500 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Craved boxwood
Museum number: 265-1874
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 10, case 5

Public access description
Sets of rosary beads were carried about the person, and often had decorated pendants. This pendant is carved in minute detail. It opens up to show St John the Evangelist and Christ as the ‘Man of Sorrows’, displaying the five wounds of his Crucifixion and surrounded by the instruments of his death.

Descriptive line
Rosary bead, boxwood, with St John the Evangelist and Christ in distress, North Netherlandish or Lower Rhine, ca. 1500

Physical description
Boxwood rosary bead. The exterior of the upper half is carved with elaborate Late gothic openwork tracery, the exterior of the lower half is decorated with a fleshy foliate design. The interior of the upper half is carved with the seated figure of St John the Evangelist and an eagle against a stippled background, the interior of the lower half is carved with the naked Christ in distress.

Dimensions
Diameter: 4 cm, Weight: 0.02 kg

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Object history note

Historical significance: This is a very good example of a micro-carved pendant of a Rosary which was probably carved in the North Netherlands or Lower Rhine and is a perfect example personal devotion in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Historical context note
The use of the rosary grew enormously during the second half of the 15th century, stimulated by the preaching of the Dominicans and made attractive by the ease with which the layperson could apply him or herself to prayers through it mediation. Most of the rosary beads were normally plain and the number of beads was dictated by the three cycles of prayer on the fifteen Mysteries of the Life of Christ. By the 1480’s the opportunity was taken in the Netherlands to make larger boxwood beads more elaborate by adding scenes or single images, setting a challenge to the sculptor to produce carvings in some cases of almost microscopic detail inside the globes.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O113457/saint-john-the-evangelist-and-rosary-bead-unknown/