Altar cross

Place of origin: Hildesheim (Probably, made)
Mosan (made)
Cologne (Possibly, made)

Date: ca. 1160-1200 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Copper-gilt with champlevé enamel plaques with cloisonné details, on oak core

Museum number: 7234-1860

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 8, The William and Eileen Ruddock Gallery, case 21

Public access description

The cross is really a composite object, incorporating some elements which are Mosan, and others which are north German (probably from Hildesheim) and possibly from Cologne. It may have been assembled from these late 12th century components in the late 15th century when the copper-gilt scrollwork additions were made.

Four Mosan enamel plaques on the front of the cross represent Old Testament types of the Redemption (traditional foreshadowings to the New Testament antitypes of the Resurrection), including, from the left arm clockwise, Aaron marking a house with a Tau cross using the blood of the slain lamb lying below, to allow the Passover, Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph, Manasses and Ephraim with his arms crossed to echo the shape of the cross, Elijah with the widow of Sarepta, who holds her two sticks crossed and Moses and the brazen Serpent. This way of showing several individual types around a central theme (in this case the Cross) was typical of Mosan production.

The central enamel plaques (the Lamb of God on the front and Christ in Majesty on the reverse) are thought to be from north Germany. They do not fit with the careful typological scheme, and are in a quite different style.

Rubrics in early missals indicate that a cross should be placed on the altar during the Mass to remind participants of the sacrifice being celebrated. The earliest documentary evidence for placing a cross on an altar is canon III of the council of Tours held in 567: "Ut corpus Domini in Altari, non in armario, sed sub crucis titulo componatur". For much of the Middle Ages, it was not the custom to leave a cross on its altar when Mass was not in progress.

Descriptive line
Altar cross, Copper-gilt, Hildesheim, ca. 1160-1200

Physical description

The cross consists of an oak core, covered with sheets of copper-gilt. The sides are edged with brass mouldings (check).

It stands on a tripod stand, each foot has a lion mask with an open mouth, out of which come a paw-like foot. The three side panels of the stand are decorated with enamel, in floral patterns with birds.

The ends of the two side arms, and the edges of the central panel have been embellished with copper-gilt leaves and fruits.

FRONT:

Square champlevé panel in the centre, with a rectangular champlevé enamel plaque at the end of each arm.
Centre = plaque showing the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God), set in a roundel.
Left-hand arm = Aaron marking a house with the blood of the slain lamb lying below, to allow the Passover (Mosan) - Exodus 12:6-7
Top = Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph, Manasses and Ephraim (Mosan) - Genesis 48
Right-hand arm = Elijah with the widow of Sarepta (Mosan) - 1 Kings 17:8-24; Luke 4:26
Bottom = Moses and the brazen Serpent (Mosan) - Numbers 21:9, John 3.14
The four plaques each have an enamelled border with white/yellow quatrefoils on a blue ground, done in cloisonné enamel.

The remainder of the bottom and side arms of the cross are covered in champlevé enamel plaques with floral decoration, with wide borders of a pattern of lozenges and leaves. The upper arm has the same border plaques, but the central section consists of an indentation beneath glass (presumably replacing crystal). This contains a small double-cross, with a tiny figure of Christ on the upper part, and the INRI label, and another wooden cross, possibly a relic of the True Cross. A hook on the left hand enamel border holds the glass cover in place.

The main figure of Christ (north German) is cast separately and hangs in front of the Agnus Dei panel. His feet are nailed individually with two nails, and he faces forward, with drooping head.

REVERSE:

Covered largely with plain copper(?) sheets. A square enamelled plaque in the centre shows Christ in Majesty (north German) seated on a
rainbow in a mandorla, surrounded by the four symbols of the Evangelists. At the end of each arm is a copper-gilt(?) plaque with scrolling vine decoration, and a central circular indentation, perhaps originally intended to hold a relic.

**Dimensions**

Height: 64.7 cm, Width: 41.5 cm, Depth: 16 cm approximately, Weight: 4.16 kg

**Museum number**

7234-1860

**Object history note**

Bought for £350.

Said to have come from a church in Cologne - Bloch in Ornamenta Ecclesiae, 1985, says it is unlikely that it came, in its current shape, from an old church, and suggests that it was made up to be sold to a collector.

In the Peter Leven collection, Cologne, up to 1853.

Sold in 1853, by the auctioneers, J M Heberle of Cologne.

**Historical context note**

The cross is really a composite object, incorporating some elements which are Mosan, and others which are north German (probably from Hildesheim) and possibly from Cologne (see Attribution tab for a more detailed analysis). It may have been assembled in the late 15th century when the copper-gilt additions were made.

Four enamel plaques on the front of the cross represent Old Testament types of the Redemption (traditional foreshadowings to the New Testament antitypes of the Resurrection).

They include:

1. Aaron marking a house with a Tau cross using the blood of the slain lamb lying below, to allow the Passover (ie a Lamb has been sacrificed to save others - Exodus 12:6-7)
2. Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph, Manasses and Ephraim with his arms crossed to echo the shape of the cross (Genesis 48)

NB There has been a muddle here - not only does Jacob bless Manasses (the elder son) with his right-hand, going against the whole point of the story, but the younger son, Ephraim has also been captioned as Benjamin, who doesn't even appear in this episode. Mistakes like this did sometimes creep in in Mosan inscriptions - often these were added at the last minute, and it has been suggested that they may have been completed by assistants (Stratford 1993, p.76). There is also some debate about the significance of the bowls held by both sons - possibly this results from a conflation of this story with the scene of Isaac blessing Jacob (Chapman 1980, p.45).

3. Elijah with the widow of Sarepta, who holds her two sticks crossed (1 Kings 17:8-24; Luke 4:26)
4. Moses and the brazen Serpent (used by Christ specifically as a metaphor for his own sacrifice: ‘And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him, may not perish; but may have life everlasting’ - Numbers 21:9, John 3.14)

This way of showing several individual types around a central theme (in this case the Cross) was typical of Mosan production. A cross in the British Museum (MMA, 56.7-18,1, cat. 4, Stratford 1993) also has enamel plaques showing all four of these scenes, with an extra scene: The return of the spies from Canaan. It is possible that a plaque showing this scene may have decorated the centre of the cross before the north German Agnus Dei plaque was added (Campbell 1983, p.19). Bloch 1993 points out that the current crucifix figure does not fit the proportions of the cross, and that the use of the roundel containing the Agnes Dei figure to form a quasi-halo for the figure is a strange iconographic feature. Another type sometimes associated with these scenes is Isaac bearing the Wood (which is part of a set including the Brazen Serpent, the Widow of Sarepta and Aaron and the Tau cross at the Oesterreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna, Chapman 1980).

The reverse shows only a single enamel plaque with Christ in Majesty. It is usual for crosses to have one richly decorated side, and one plainer, presumably because they were intended to be seen primarily from one side (Stratford 1993, p.71).

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**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O120840/altar-cross-unknown/