Incense boat, spoon and plaque

Place of origin: Italy (central, made)
Date: 1400-1450 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Copper gilt
Museum number: 606 to B-1902
Gallery location: Medieval and Renaissance, Room 50c, case 1

Public access description
Incense boats were used to store incense prior to its being put into a censer for burning. Their boat-like shape was traditional. The most common subject for the lid of an incense boat in Italy was the Annunciation - the representation of two saints, as here, is much more unusual. The separate plaque is a remarkable feature. It was attached over the image of the bishop saint, apparently by four patches of tin or lead solder. The plaque is of roughly contemporary date with the incense boat, and has been especially made to fit the engraved pattern on its lid.

What seems to have happened is that the incense boat was made for a group of Augustinian Hermits. After having received the incense boat, they decided that the image of Saint Augustine was unsatisfactory. The replacement image depicts the saint more recognisably: he wears the habit of an Augustinian Hermit, with its characteristic belt.

Descriptive line
Copper-gilt incense boat, spoon and plaque in Central Italian style, 1400-1450.

Physical description
Copper gilt, the incense container in the form of a boat, on a foot composed as a sexfoil superimposed on a six-pointed star. The lower part of the boat is fluted to suggest planking. The hinged lid is engraved on either side with foliage and an ogeed quatrefoil, within which is a three-quarter length figure. On one side, this represents a bishop saint with a crozier and book. On the other, it shows St Catherine crowned with wheel, martyr's palm and book. The handles at each end are formed as dragons.

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Object history note
Nothing is known of the early history of this piece.

The separate plaque is an unusual feature. It was attached over the image of the bishop saint, apparently by four patches of tin or lead solder. The plaque also represents a bishop saint, who must be Saint Augustine, since he wears the costume of an Augustinian Hermit, with its characteristic belt. It seems most likely that the bishop represented on the incense boat is also intended to be Saint Augustine. The plaque is of roughly contemporary date with the incense boat, and has been especially made to fit engraved pattern on its lid.

What seems to have happened is the following: the incense boat was made for a group of Augustinian Hermits, who asked that the lid contain representations of Saints Augustine and Catherine of Alexandria. After having received the incense boat, they decided that the image of Saint Augustine was unsatisfactory. The making of a replacement image, which depicts the saint more recognisably, and in a manner more relevant to the Augustinian Hermits, seems to have been a quicker and easier solution than removing the lid and re-making it.

Historical context note
Incense boats were used to store incense prior to its being put into a censer for burning. Their boat-like shape was traditional. The most common subject for the lid of an incense boat in Italy was the Annunciation - the representation of two saints, as here, is much more unusual.

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