Reliquary - Reliquary of St Sebastian

Object: Reliquary

Place of origin: Augsburg (probably, made)

Date: 1497 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: silver, parcel-gilt, hammered, cast and engraved; set with rock crystal, pearls, sapphires and rubies

Credit Line: Purchased with the assistance of the National Heritage Memorial Fund and Art Fund

Museum number: M.27-2001

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 10, case 17

Public access description

This powerfully expressive figural reliquary of St Sebastian is one of the most important works of art bought by the Museum in recent years. Of superb artistic quality, it is a rare and powerful example of European goldsmith's work from the great age of Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein. Reliquaries usually contain fragments of saints' bones or objects associated with saints. The base of this reliquary, elaborately decorated with pinnacles and figures in the Gothic style, contains relics associated with St Sebastian visible through a window on one side. Recent examination has revealed fragments of wood, possibly believed to be shards of the arrows that fatally pierced the saint, all wrapped in silk.

St Sebastian was believed to protect people from the plague, and according to the inscription on the base, the reliquary was a votive offering commissioned from the monastery during an epidemic. The cult of relics was central to medieval Christian worship. The formal display of relics on major feast days was an important ritual of the Catholic church. Contemplation of them was thought to reduce time spent in purgatory after death and many saints were thought to be responsive to prayer against specific illnesses.

Sebastian was one of the most popular saints in the late Middle Ages. He lived reputedly in 3rd-century Rome, an officer in the Roman Praetorian guard at the time of the Emperor Diocletian. He was condemned to death for his Christian beliefs and shot with arrows. He is depicted here pierced with arrows (some lost) and lashed to the boughs of a tree. None of the arrows entered his vital organs and he survived the ordeal. He confronted the emperor with a renewed avowal of his faith and was this time clubbed to death. His body was thrown into a sewer in Rome.

This reliquary was one of a number of costly items commissioned by Georg Kastner, abbot of Kaisheim Monastery near Augsburg in south Germany between 1490 and 1509. Kaisheim was a Cistercian monastery founded in 1134 and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Kastner 'enriched his abbey both inside and out'. Among his other commissions were a companion reliquary of St Christopher, a large monstrance and a precious white chasuble (robe). The reliquary of St Sebastian is inscribed with the date 1497 and with the names of Kastner, Duke Frederick III of Saxony, who partly paid for the commissions, and the Emperor Maximilian.

The British Museum owns a design for this reliquary, believed to be by Hans Holbein the Elder (around 1460/5-1534). Holbein bought a house in Augsburg in 1493 and painted an altarpiece for Kaisheim Monastery in 1502, again commissioned by Kastner. Like many painters of the day, such as Dürer, Schongauer and Cellini, he initially trained as a goldsmith. Holbein's design differs from the silver reliquary in having an oval base.

The name of the goldsmith who made the reliquary is not known. However, the wonderful modelling of the saint's hair and arms confirm that he was clearly a master craftsman. He was probably trained in Augsburg, which was one of the major centres of goldsmithing expertise in 15th-century Europe.

The reliquary is presumed to have first come onto the art market when Kaisheim Monastery was secularised in 1802-3. Its first known owner was the Russian Prince Petr Soltykoff, renowned for his wealth and discerning taste for medieval art. The private collector Sir Julius Wernher acquired the reliquary, probably between 1880 and 1890, to add to his own outstanding art. The reliquary joined the Museum's collections in 2001.

Descriptive line

Partially gilded silver, set with glass, pearls, sapphires and rubies, Germany, Augsburg, 1497, designed by Hans Holbein the Elder

Physical description

The figure of the martyred St Sebastian is tied to a tree by cords and pierced by six holes and two arrows, wearing a loincloth and billowing cloak, the whole mounted on an hexagonal base with four figure feet. The base is adorned with buttresses and figures and bears a Latin inscription and the date 1497 around the upper shoulder. Two relics bound in silk fabric are visible behind a rock crystal window on one side of the base, framed with pearls, sapphires and rubies. On the opposite side of the base to the window is a figure of the Virgin Mary with abbots at her feet. The four figures at each corner are thought to be St Catherine, St Geroge, St Wolfgang and possibly St Boniface.

Dimensions
Height: 50 cm, Width: 20 cm, Depth: 14.5 cm, Weight: 2.574 kg

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Object history note
The reliquary is a remarkably well-documented piece, one of a number of costly items commissioned by Abbot Georg Kastner, abbot of Kaisheim Monastery near Augsburg in South Germany between 1490 and 1509. Kaisheim was a Cistercian monastery founded in 1134 and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Among Kastner's other commissions were a companion reliquary of St Christopher (now in a private collection), a large monstrance and a precious white chasuble. The reliquary of St Sebastian bears an inscription which states it was commissioned by 'the second Abbot Georg [Kastner] of the Monastery of Ceasarea [i.e. Kaiserheim]' in 1497. The design of the reliquary relates very closely to a metalpoint drawing by Hans Holbein the Elder of St Sebastian, now in the British Museum, (1885-5-9-1612 verso).

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The reliquary was purchased by the Museum in 2001 after an export licence was stopped following its sale at Christie's, London, at the Wernher Collection sale on 5 July 2000 (lot 52).

At some point in its history the arrangement of the statue to the tree and base appears to have been altered. Sebastian's arms hang awkwardly and unnaturally from the boughs (surely they once bent over the boughs, rather than suspended from them?) and one of his feet obliterates part of the inscription, again presumably not the intention of the maker. It is no longer possible to raise the figure up onto the boughs as the feet are fixed to the base.

This is one of the most important works of art bought by the Museum in recent years. It is of superb artistic quality, a rare and powerful example of European goldsmith's work from the great age of Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein. Very few medieval figural reliquaries survive at all and there are no other examples in public institutions in Britain.

Until the sale of the Wernher collection in 2000, this reliquary remained with its companion piece, a reliquary of St Christopher, which had also been commissioned for Kaisheim Abbey by Abbot Kastner in 1493.

By rare good fortune, the British Museum owns a design for this reliquary, believed to be by Hans Holbein the Elder (around 1460/5-1534). Holbein bought a house in Augsburg in 1493 and painted an altarpiece for Kaisheim abbey in 1502, again commissioned by Kastner. Like many painters of the day, such as Dürer, Schongauer and Cellini, he initially trained as a goldsmith.

The name of the goldsmith who made the reliquary is sadly not known, but he was clearly a master craftsman - note the wonderful modelling of the saint's hair and arms. He was probably trained in Augsburg which was one of the major centres of goldsmithing expertise in 15th century Europe. Müller suggests the work may show the influence of the German sculptors Michel Erhart (1440/45 - after 1522) in Ulm and his son Gregor (about 1470-1540) in Augsburg (see References).

Historical context note
Reliquaries usually contain fragments of saints' bones or objects associated with saints. The base of this reliquary, elaborately decorated with pinnacles and figures in the Gothic style, contains relics associated with St Sebastian visible through a window on one side. Recent examination revealed fragments of wood, possibly believed to be shards of arrows, wrapped in silk.

The cult of relics was central to medieval Christian worship. The formal display of relics on major feast days was an important ritual of the Catholic church. Contemplation of them was thought to reduce time spent in purgatory after death and many saints were thought to be responsive to prayer against specific illnesses. Images of St Sebastian were believed to protect the beholder from plague and an inscription on the base of this reliquary confirms that it was given as a votive offering at a time of plague.

Sebastian was one of the most popular saints in the late middle ages. He lived reputedly in 3rd-century Rome, an officer in the Roman Praetorian guard at the time of the Emperor Diocletian. He was condemned to death for his Christian beliefs and shot with arrows. His agonised body is depicted here, pierced with arrows (some lost) and lashed to the boughs of a tree. None of the arrows entered his vital organs and he survived the ordeal. He confronted the Emperor with a renewed avowal of his faith and was this time clubbed to death. His body was thrown into a sewer in Rome.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O62629/reliquary-of-st-sebastian-reliquary-unknown/