

Akim Monet Fine Arts, LLC



Artist UNKNOWN

Enkolpion

A Spanish Renaissance Gold & Silver reliquary

The front plate of the cross has a quartet of three-lobed arms, a central crucifix pierced through the center, and a small hinge along the lower end. The main body of the cross exhibits a similar form as the top, has two leaf-adorned branches projecting from the lateral arms, and features two pierced lock holes on the upper and lower arms.

41% gold (equivalent to 9K+) and 57% silver; total weight: 52.8 grams.

3 ³/₄ x 2 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 1/2 in (9.5 x 7.5 x 1.27 cm)

Circa 1500 CE

PROVENANCE

Christie's, London (sale July 4, 1989)
Collection Martí Mas Tubau of Medieval Art, Barcelona
Private Collection, France
Artemis Gallery, Erie

EXHIBITED

Disruptive selection, Fall 2019, Popcorn Gallery Akim Monet Fine Arts, Los Angeles

NOTES

Relics and Reliquaries in Medieval Christianity

Christian belief in the power of relics, the physical remains of a holy site or holy person, or objects with which they had contact, is as old as the faith itself and developed alongside it. Relics were more than mementos. The New Testament refers to the healing power of objects that were touched by Christ or his apostles. The body of the saint provided a spiritual link between life and death, between man and God: "Because of the grace remaining in the martyr, they were an inestimable treasure for the holy congregation of the faithful." Fueled by the Christian belief in the afterlife and resurrection, in the power of the soul, and in the role of saints as advocates for humankind in heaven, the veneration of relics in the Middle Ages came to rival the sacraments in the daily life of the medieval church. Indeed, from the time of Charlemagne, it was obligatory that every altar contain a relic.

The holiest of relics were those associated with Christ and his mother. Because of the belief in the resurrection of Christ and the bodily assumption of the Virgin into heaven, physical relics of Christ and the Virgin were—with a few rare exceptions, like the baby teeth of Jesus or the Virgin's milk—usually objects that they touched in their lifetime, such as the wood from the True Cross or pieces of the Virgin's veil.

The most common relics are associated with the apostles and those local saints renowned for the working of miracles across Europe. All relics bestowed honor and privileges upon the possessor; monasteries and cathedrals sought to obtain the prestigious relics, and when they succeeded, their proud accomplishment is sometimes celebrated in the decoration of their sanctuaries.

Some relics were even stolen from one church, only to find a new home in another, those of Saint Mark in Venice, Saint Nicholas in Bari on the Adriatic coast, or Saint Foy at Conques being among the most famous examples.

Reliquaries

Reliquaries are the containers that store and display relics. Since the relics themselves were considered "more valuable than precious stones and more to be esteemed than gold," it was considered only appropriate that they be enshrined in vessels, or reliquaries, crafted of or covered by gold, silver, ivory, gems, and enamel. These precious objects constituted a major form of artistic production across Europe and Byzantium throughout the Middle Ages.

Medieval reliquaries frequently assume the form of caskets (*chasses*), but complex containers in the form of parts of the body, usually mimicking the relics they enshrined, are one of the most remarkable art forms created in the Middle Ages for the precious remains of saints. Reliquaries were often covered with narrative scenes from the life of saints, whose remains may have been contained within. Sometimes the decoration of *chasses* was not specific to any given saint or community but rather reflected common Christian themes, making them appropriate to the use of any community. Reliquaries were also fashioned into full-body statues, or more abbreviated, but still imposing, bust-length images of saints, often those with local reputations of great authority, including revered women saints. Set on an altar and carried in procession, their arrival sometimes heralded by the sounding of ivory horns, these highly decorated works of art made an indelible impression on the faithful. The distinction between the meaning of an image such as the famous Reliquary Statue of Sainte-Foy, still preserved at the monastery of Conques in France, and pagan idols was clearly articulated in an important chronicle written by Bernard of Angers in the eleventh century: "It is not an impure idol that receives the worship of an oracle or of sacrifice, it is a pious memorial, before which the faithful heart feels more easily and more strongly touched by solemnity, and implores more fervently the powerful intercession of the saint for its sins." By the end of the Middle Ages, image reliquaries, which traditionally were meant to suggest a saint's heavenly form and visage, came to mirror contemporary ideas of beauty. Meanwhile, the relics themselves, once hidden within the container, could be glimpsed through apertures or vials of rock crystal.

Reliquaries were sometimes created expressly for privileged individuals or purchased by them. The faithful of humble means might still acquire a souvenir badge at the shrines of saints that called to mind the precious works of art associated with them. Whether created for a church or for a private individual, medieval reliquaries have been subject to widespread destruction during times of religious and political strife. Those that survive bear precious witness to exceptional artistic creativity inspired by contemporary faith.

Barbara Drake Boehm
Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art originally published October 2001, last revised April 2011

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http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/relic/hd_relic.htm

Further Reading

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Bagnoli, Martina, et al., eds. *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2010.

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Additional Essays by Barbara Drake Boehm

Boehm, Barbara Drake. "The Age of Saint Louis (1226-1270)." (October 2001) Boehm, Barbara Drake. "Prague, 1347-1437." (February 2014)

Boehm, Barbara Drake, and Alison Manges Nogueira. "Painting in Italian Choir Books, 1300- 1500." (March 2009)

Boehm, Barbara Drake, and Melanie Holcomb. "Animals in Medieval Art." (originally published October 2001, last revised January 2012)

Boehm, Barbara Drake, and Melanie Holcomb. "Jewish Art in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium." (June 2008)

Boehm, Barbara Drake, and Melanie Holcomb. "Jews and the Arts in Medieval Europe." (originally published June 2008, last revised August 2010)

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100 Wilshire Blvd. Suite 700
Santa Monica, CA 90401
United States of America

Telephone +1 (424) 394 8480
info@akimmonetfinearts.com
www.akimmonetfinearts.com