

Christ and a Sleeping Apostle from an Agony in the Garden group
Alpine Region

c. 1450

Christ: 102 x 43 x 58 cm

Sleeping Apostle: 101 x 38 x 58 cm

Both terracotta.



Provenance

Private collection, Vienna, by 1920 (almost certainly the same provenance for both figures);

Collection of Reinhold Hofstätter, Vienna, until 2012

These two large figures, both made of fired terracotta, are among the only surviving elements of a larger ensemble representing Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, the episode from the Gospels in which, following the Last Supper, an angel appeared to Christ as he prayed in the company of Peter, John, and James the Greater. The event is known as the Agony in the Garden on account of the anguish Christ experienced as he prayed, when 'his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling upon the ground' (Luke 22:44). Immediately thereafter, upon seeing his Apostles sound asleep a mere stone's throw away from him, Christ remarked that 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' (Matthew 26:41, Mark 14:38). This narrative, emphasizing Christ's suffering and the failure of his closest followers to keep watch for even an hour, was a popular theme in late medieval sculpture, particularly in the German-speaking regions of Northern Europe. Many similar sculptural groups were created in this area throughout the fifteenth century, their figures assuming the role of stationary characters within a three-dimensional sculptural tableau. The two terracottas represent Christ in prayer and the sleeping Peter, the latter identifiable by his book and clasped right palm that would have held either the sword he later employed to strike Malchus or his traditional attribute of a key. These figures would have been accompanied by further sculptures representing John and James the Greater, and perhaps, in the distance and at a smaller scale, Judas and the Roman

centurions approaching to arrest Christ. The figures were often positioned within elaborate landscape settings in interior or exterior chapels.

Clearly the work of a talented sculptor, both figures show vivid traces of the carving process. Fettling marks are visible in the facial features and draperies especially; this lively roughness of finish indicates that the works would have been covered in a layer of polychromy after firing, which would have yielded a smoother, less overtly hewn appearance. Both works are remarkably three-dimensional, with the clay medium permitting a wholesale release from the confines of the stone block or section of wood. The rounded bases indicate that the pieces were intended to be placed in a landscape setting of some sort, though contemporary examples (see below) show that these could range in complexity from a simple painted niche to a full-fledged *mise-en-scene* including subsidiary figures, landscape elements, and props like dried plants, clothing, and weapons.

The Christ figure kneels in a serene, upright manner, his fingers joined together in prayer and his facial expression placid, indicating the serene acceptance of his fate following his initial reluctance ('Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by... If this cup cannot pass by, but I must drink it, your will be done' (Matthew 26:42). His hair and beard fall in regular curls, their shapes incised into the clay as opposed to being built up additively. His eyes are wide open and blank, the tears mentioned in the gospel narrative likely present only in the now-vanished paint layers. Christ's tunic, of a simple T-shaped design, drapes elegantly downward and pools on the ground. Its oversized sleeves form bunches at Christ's wrists, and the collar is of a simple, round cut.

Contrasting with Christ's vigilance, the stout Saint Peter sits and drowsily cants his head towards his left. The rough, unfinished reverse indicates that the figure would have been placed against a vertical surface, either the wall of the sculptural niche or a low fence or stone outcropping in the garden, a common feature of contemporary Agony in the Garden ensembles. This formal contrast with the upstanding Christ furthers the message of the narrative about the physical weaknesses of the Apostles. Peter's bulging eyes are unpainted but his somnolent posture and the slackness of his neck indeed indicate that he is sleeping, in keeping with the iconography of the scene. His shorter beard, heavy brow, bald head, and slightly more elaborate dress, which includes a mantle over a buttoned and sleeved tunic, are all typical of Petrine iconography. The other Apostles present at Gethsemane, John and his brother James the Greater, are routinely shown to be closer in age to Christ.

Known generically in German as *Ölberggruppen* (oil-mountain ensembles), multi-figure sculptural ensembles representing the Agony in the Garden were popular in German-speaking lands throughout the fifteenth century. They range from relatively simple and small in size, like the stone figures in the church of Saint Moritz in Olomouc, Moravia (fig. 1), to the vast, topographical ensemble carved by Weit Wagner in 1498 and now in the north transept of Strasbourg Cathedral, which includes an extensive landscape

background and numerous additional figures (fig. 2).¹ While they are frequently located in church interiors, however, such groupings can also be found in covered alcoves on church exteriors, for example at the Lorenzkirche in Nuremberg (figs. 3-4), the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Delitzsch, North Saxony (fig. 5), or the Church of Saint Michael at Swäbisch Hall (fig. 6). This exposure to the elements is likely what prompted some such ensembles, including our own, to be fashioned from robust terracotta.

Terracotta sculpture saw a period of widespread popularity from the early fifteenth century, primarily in the region of Franconia, but also further south and in to the Alpine region.² Figures of approximately the same scale as the present pieces are exemplified by the exceptional series of seated apostles now in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg (fig. 7),³ which have also lost all traces of polychromy, but more modest examples from the Rhineland, hollowed out to ease the firing process like the two figures here, also survive (fig. 8).⁴ Smaller composite clay pieces representing the three sleeping Apostles together are known, and a figure of Christ in Agony dated to around 1450 now in Darmstadt presents an analogous iconography, albeit in a more simplified style (figs. 9-10).⁵ A younger-looking, huddled Apostle from an *Ölberggruppe* in Nuremberg has the same bulbous eyes and rounded nostrils as the present pieces, and its drapery falls to the ground in similar, angular folds (fig. 11). A further sleeping Apostle of about 1450-60 formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin (fig. 12) and another considered to be about two decades later (fig. 13) share a close resemblance to the present pieces, both in terms of style and technique, but their place of origin remains uncertain.⁶ It has been suggested that those artisans responsible for the magisterial Apostles in Nuremberg had emigrated from the productive artistic centres of the Middle Rhine region to Franconia, and the widespread availability of clay would have made it easy for workshops to transplant their activities.⁷ Such mobility renders the precise localisation of the present figures somewhat difficult, but the survival of another from the same group (preserved in the Belvedere Museum in Vienna) and the scholarly consensus of an Alpine origin would help support the same attribution for ours (fig. 14).⁸

¹ See M. Fuchs, *Les monts des oliviers sculptés sur le Rhin supérieur aux XV^e et XVI^e siècle*, Université de Strasbourg, 1978, 2 vols.

² For a survey see the foundational study by H. Wilm, *Gotische Tonplastik in Deutschland*, Augsburg, 1929.

³ See F. M. Kammel, *Die Apostel aus St. Jakob: Nürnberger Tonplastik des Weichen Stils*, Nuremberg, 2002; and entry by R. Kahsnitz in *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg, 1300-1550*, New York, 1986, cat. no. 24, pp. 143-47.

⁴ See entry by H. Bredekamp in *Kunst um 1400 am Mittelrhein: Ein Teil der Wirklichkeit*, ed. H. Beck, Frankfurt, 1975, cat. no. 79, p. 129.

⁵ See M. Woelk, *Bildwerke vom 9. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert aus Stein, Holz und Ton im Hessischen Landesmuseum Darmstadt*, Berlin, 1999, cat. 44, pp. 244-46.

⁶ Wilm, *Gotische Tonplastik*, cat. nos. 135 and 138.

⁷ See R. Kahsnitz, 'Sculpture in Stone, Terracotta, and Wood' in *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg*, p. 67.

⁸ Elfriede Baum, *Katalog des Museums Mittelalterlicher Österreichischer Kunst: Unteres Belvedere Wien*, Vienna and Munich, 1971, p. 187, no. 187.



Fig. 1. Ölberggruppe, Church of Saint Moritz in Olomouc, Moravia.



Fig. 2. Veit Wagner, Ölberggruppe from the cemetery of the Church of Saint Thomas, 1498, Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Strasbourg.



Fig. 3. Ölberggruppe, Lorenzkirche, Nuremberg.

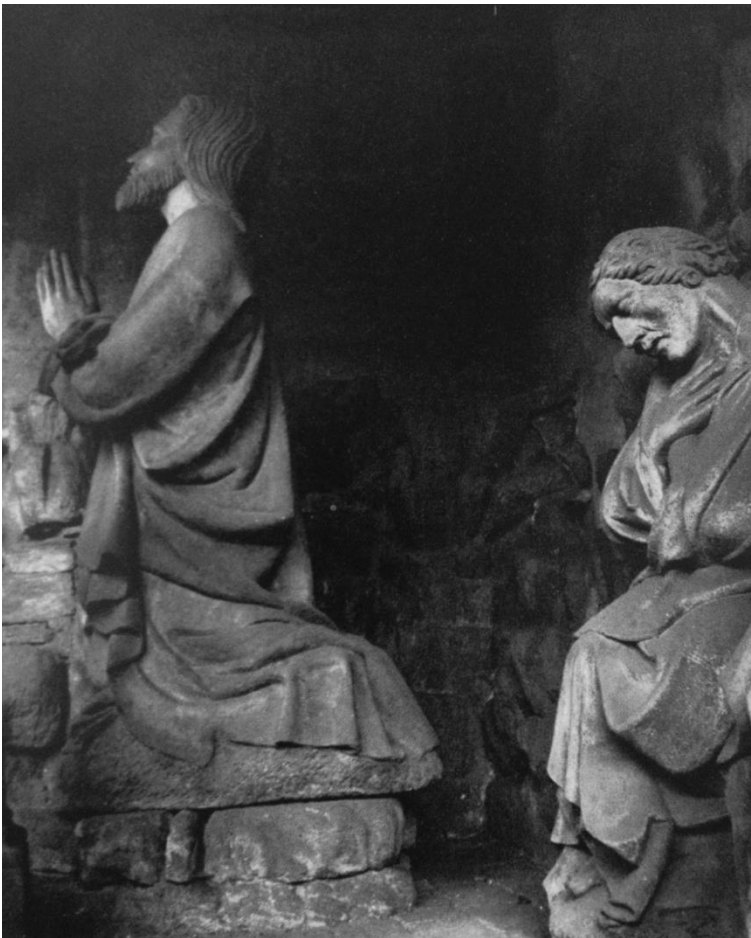


Fig. 4. Detail of Ölberggruppe, Lorenzkirche, Nuremberg.



Fig. 5. Ölberggruppe, Church of Saints Peter and Paul, Delitzsch.



Fig. 6. Ölberggruppe, Church of Saint Michael, Swäbisch Hall.



Fig. 7. *Saint Bartholomew*, terracotta, Nuremberg, around 1400, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg.

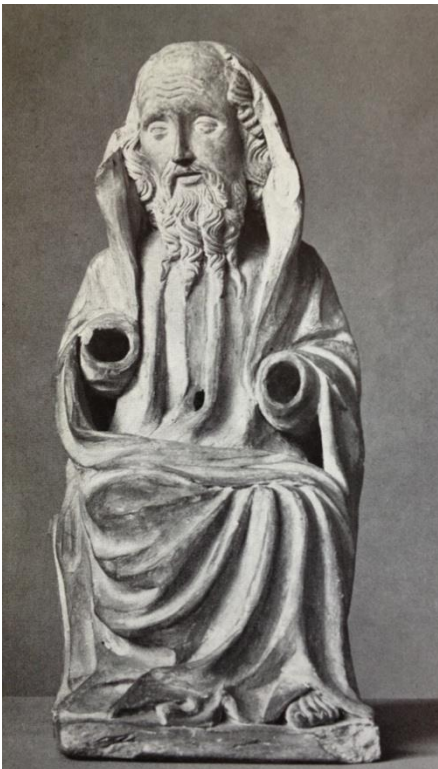


Fig. 8. *Enthroned Prophet*, terracotta, Middle Rhine, c. 1430, Liebieghaus, Frankfurt.



Fig. 9. *Christ in Agony*, terracotta, Middle Rhine or Franconia, c. 1450, Hessischen Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, Inv. Pl 24:02.



Fig. 10. *Christ in Agony*, terracotta, Middle Rhine or Franconia, c. 1450, Hessischen Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, Inv. Pl 24:02.



Fig. 11. *Sleeping Apostle*, terracotta, Landshut (?), around 1440, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, Inv. Pl.O.2240.



Fig. 12. *Sleeping Apostle*, terracotta, Middle Rhine or Franconia, c. 1450-60, Formerly Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin.

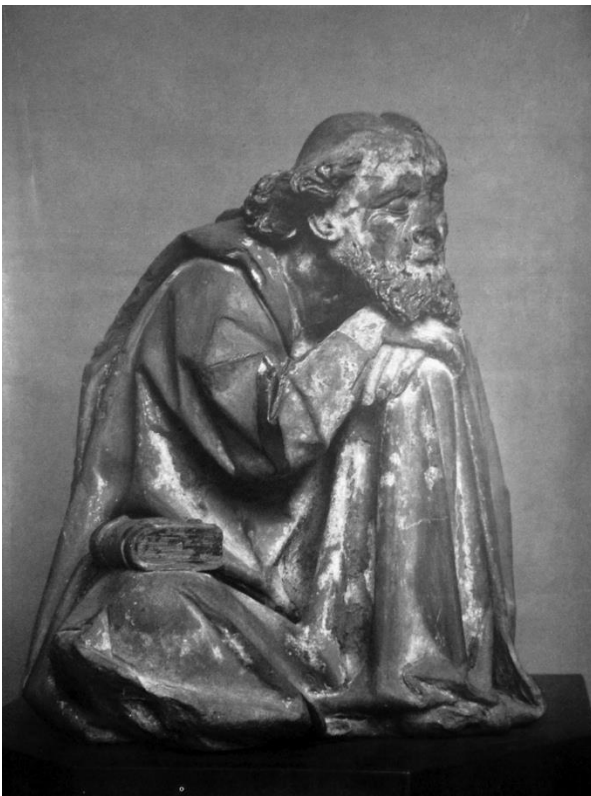


Fig. 13. *Sleeping Apostle (Peter?)*, terracotta, Middle Rhine or Franconia, c. 1480, Formerly Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin.



Fig. 14
Sleeping Apostle
Alpine region(?)
89 cm (height)
Vienna, Lower Belvedere, inv. 5013