

**A large cross covered with engraved foliage**  
**Upper Rhine or Switzerland, Basel?**  
**c. 1440-1460**



*61.5 x 40.5 x 6 cm; gilded copper, silver, glass and velvet over a wooden core. The corpus and tubular supporting cross associated. The glass fronted roundels and their mounts, halo and attached cross of circular section are later additions.*

*Provenance*

Private collection, Switzerland, before 2012

A large cross with the corpus of the dead Christ suspended from the patibulum and framed by four circular reliquary mounts attached to trilobed termini. Above his head a fine scrolling titulus reads, in a calligraphic Flemish script, 'I / N / R / I', an acronym for the title given mockingly to Jesus during the crucifixion; '*Iesvs Nazarenvs Rex Iudaeorum*' ('*Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews*'). An ornate engraved design of scrolling foliated branches against a cross-hatched ground decorates both the obverse and reverse sections of the cross, starting with a square central field behind Christ's head and ending in flowering vines within the lobes of the termini. Each of these ten gilded plaques, which are attached onto a wooden carcass with the aid of gilt-headed pins, is framed by a simple border. Along the edges runs a sheet of punched silver decorated with a pattern of linked diamonds and five-pointed flowers, variations of the latter also appearing before and after the letters on the titulus. Originally, the four shaped termini would have held round coins in gold, silver or enamel with zoomorphic representations of the four evangelists, a particularly common decoration for this form of object during the fifteenth century.

The cult of the cross has always been a central aspect of Christian devotion. The rise in processional liturgy during the later Middle Ages, and the concurrent development of the gold- and silver-smith's art, meant that by the fifteenth century crosses and other liturgical objects had become a tour de force of finely decorated and manipulated materials. Indeed, to the Medieval viewer of such objects, 'precious materials achieved pious distillation only when skilfully worked', with the play of light upon their glittering surfaces invested with vivid spiritual and aesthetic significance.<sup>1</sup> The engraved embellishment, lobed shape, square central field, and decorative fill around the edges of the present example all conform generally to a group of crosses made during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries across Switzerland and the Upper Rhine lands (Figs. 1-3). Its foliated decoration is, however, particularly comparable to a cross identified with an example recorded in the 1827 inventory of the treasury at Basel cathedral (Fig. 4a-b). The corpus exhibits a similar treatment to the figure on the Basel cross, with the head dropped to the left and the body curving to one side, as well as a homogenous perizonium wrapped close around the loins. See also another, albeit frontally positioned, corpus with a comparable face and torso in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, (Inv. No. M.43-1955), also made in Switzerland during the same period. Corpuses of this nature are relatively scarce. Its pronounced, angular ribcage, the delicacy of the twisted crown of thorns and individual locks of hair, and the ornate hem of the perizonium are unlike many of the surviving examples. Its emphasis on expressive realism replaces the earlier fashion for more composed representations of Christ as redeemer, common from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, often depicted wearing a crown and standing with horizontal or angularly bent arms and outstretched hands. Instead, its focus is on Christ's downward movement, with his weight fully hanging from his partially closed, lifeless hands.<sup>2</sup>

Since Heinrich II inherited Basel in 1006, the city had emerged as one of most politically powerful centres in Western Europe. It controlled the access routes from the Rhine to the Kingdom of Burgundy, which at the time was situated within present-day Switzerland. By the fifteenth century Basel's cathedral had built up a vast and rich treasury, incorporating fragments of the True Cross and other valuable and important Saint relics, and displayed them in a number of fine metalwork crosses. These would be processed on occasions throughout the Christian calendar, with celebrations such as those of the Good Friday liturgy utilising them in particularly elaborate rituals enacted before the entire congregation. Records of the Heinrich Cross, the most important of Basel cathedral's treasury, state that it was

*"Wrapped in a golden cloth, [and] placed on a silk cushion on the steps of the choir and held upright. The celebrant – barefoot, as a sign of humility – raised the cross three times, unveiling it in the process. ... Beginning with the bishop, members of the clergy knelt and approached the cross in order to kiss it. Once the clergy had returned to their seats, members of the municipal council entered the choir with candles, and worshipped the cross in similar fashion. At the end of the liturgy, the cross, together with the Eucharist, was placed in the holy sepulchre that had been installed in the choir."*<sup>3</sup>

The Basel treasury inventory of 1525 also records a red staff with a copper knob ('ein rotter stecken zů dem sonteglichen crutz mit eynem kupfferin knopff'), used to carry a processional

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<sup>1</sup> S. Fliegel, *Resplendent Faith; Liturgical Treasuries of the Middle Ages*, Ohio, 2009, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> For examples see *Suevia Sacra; Frühe Kunst in Schwaben*, ICOM, Augsburg, 1973, especially Figs. 67-81.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

cross during Sunday Masses, the choice of colour not only due to the richness of the pigment but also reflecting of its symbolic connection to the blood of Christ, which flowed from his wounds during the crucifixion.<sup>4</sup> The chamfered and elongated foot of our cross suggests its suitability for use atop a staff of exactly this form. Moreover, its bold, legible decoration and large size also support the notion that it would have been employed in the types of highly choreographed and theatrical displays and processions described above, incorporating a nuanced and intimate engagement with its symbolism and materials before a congregation of some size or status. While its square fielded central section and the pointed divisions between the termini lobes echo much earlier designs, including examples from Constance and the Upper Rhine (see for example Fig. 1), the close stylistic similarities between our cross and the Basel altar cross indicate that it was produced in the city during the same period of time. Indeed, it may well have been made for another of the city's religious foundations seeking to engage with and replicate the significance and veneration of the objects in the cathedral treasury. Nonetheless, the more complex and assured engraving visible across the surface of our cross (incorporating cut branches, fruiting vines, and shaded, swirling leaves), as well as its more generous proportions, denotes that it was made at the hand of an extremely proficient and skilled goldsmith, and not merely a copyist.

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<sup>4</sup> Inventory, 1525, No.44, as quoted in T. Husband, *The Treasury of Basel Cathedral*, Yale, 2001, p. 81.



Fig. 1

Altar or Processional Cross

Germany, Constance, Upper Rhine

c. 1300-1310

*Stamped, engraved and gilded copper, champlevé enamel and gemstones on a wooden core*

Cleveland, Museum of Art

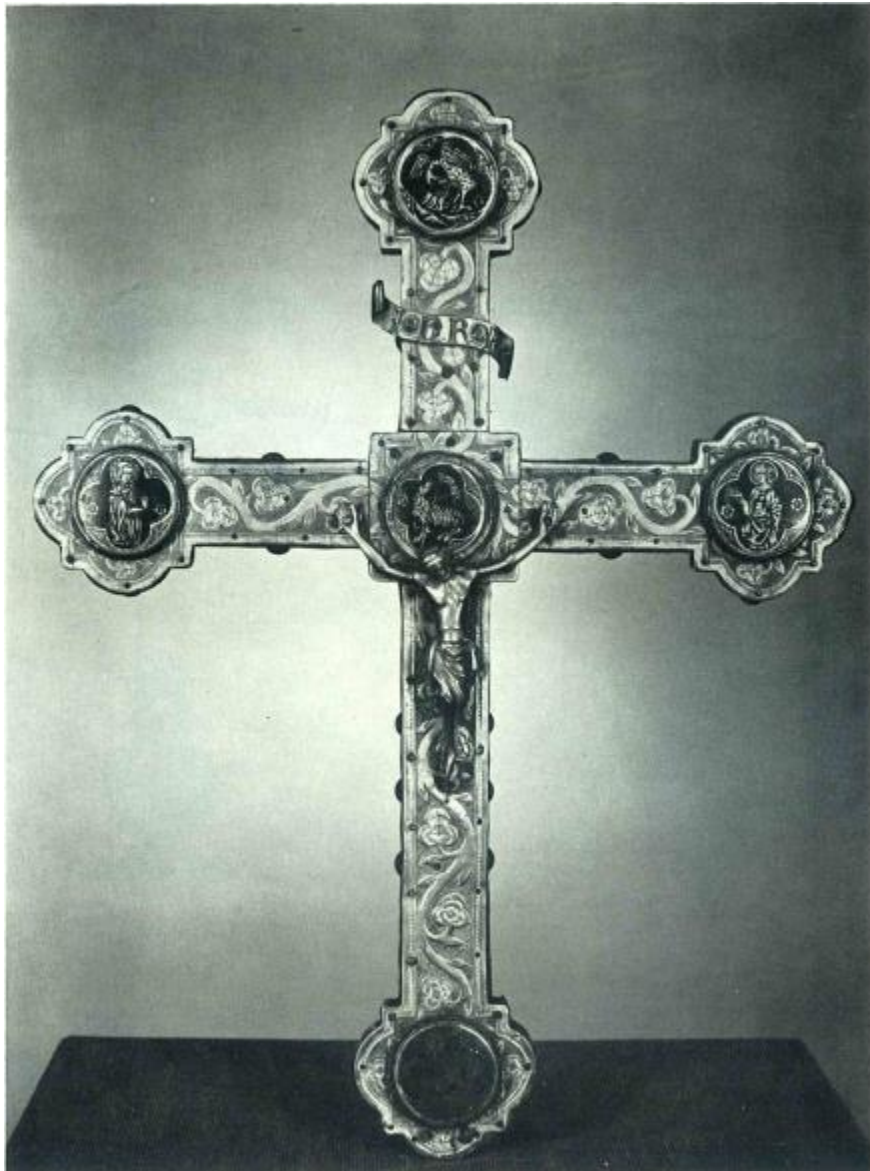


Fig. 2  
Processional Cross  
Germany, Upper Rhine  
First half of the fifteenth century  
*H: 47 cm; stamped, engraved, gilded and silvered copper with champlevé enamel on a wooden core*  
Brussels, Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Inv. No. 3171



Fig. 3

Processional Cross

Basel

c. 1425-50

*H: 47.5 cm; stamped, engraved, and parcel-gilt silver on wooden core*

Basel, Historisches Museum, Inv. No. 2000.190.1



Fig. 4 a (obverse); and b (reverse)

Processional Cross

Basel

c. 1440-1460

*H: 52 cm; engraved, stamped, gilded and silvered copper on a wooden core, with glass and champlevé enamel*

Basel, Historisches Museum, Inv. No. 1893.379