

A roof boss with the eagle of Saint John
England
Early 16th century



37 x 39 x 19 cm; oak with traces of polychromy.

Provenance

Sold Christie's London 'Important Wood-carvings, Sculpture and Bronzes', December 11th 1979, lot 73 (ill. plate 10);
Michael & Jane Dunn, Claverack, New York, 1990;
Private collection, Boston

This large wooden boss of hemispherical form, boldly carved with the eagle of Saint John unfurling its wings behind its body, was most likely made to decorate the ceiling of a sixteenth-century chapel or church space, although the richest strata of private houses are also known to have incorporated such carvings. It would have hung above the heads of the inhabitants or congregation below, attached invisibly by a single hidden oak dowel (which still survives in the back of the block) to a wooden supporting vault. Its beak and talons retain traces of a vibrant original paint layer, which would have been selectively applied to help visually pick its details out from amongst the surrounding timber structure.

Oak ceilings were typical features of the architectural landscape of late-medieval England; in East Anglia alone the survival of many dozens of so-called 'angel roofs' attest to the incredible

dexterity of our early woodcarving.¹ Stylistically, it can be compared closely to other depictions of birds in British late-medieval oak carvings, especially to those in East Anglian churches, such as an early 16th century boss in Saint Mary's Church, Cambridge and a late 15th century boss from the Norwich Cathedral Cloister (see figs. 1-2). In both of these examples, the bosses display birds whose individual feathers are sculpted three dimensionally – a defining characteristic of our example.



Fig. 1
Roof boss of a nesting bird
Great Saint Mary's Church, Cambridge
c. 1508

¹ Michael Rimmer, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia: Unseen Masterpieces of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 2015



Fig. 2
Stone boss of a Pelican in Piety
Norwich Cathedral Cloister– west walk
Late 15th century