

A lampas panel depicting Saint Barbara
Germany, Cologne
c. 1450-1475



34.2 × 14 cm, 17 warps per cm; woven lampas embroidered with gold- and silver- metal-wrapped threads and coloured silks; a general and even level of surface abrasion, with some broken or missing threads but only minimal fading to the coloured dyes.

Provenance

With Brimo de Laroussilhe, Paris, 2002;
 Private collection, London, until 2018

Exhibited

Blumka Gallery, New York, 22 January–8 February 2002

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Saint Barbara is thought to have been born in the third century in Turkey or Lebanon as the daughter of a wealthy pagan named Dioscorus, who had a tower constructed to guard her while he was away on business. During one of these periods of her father's absence, Barbara asked the builders to change their plans and incorporate three windows in the tower's high walls in order to symbolise the Holy Trinity, because she had secretly converted to Christianity. After discovering that Barbara had become a Christian, Dioscorus became enraged and had her arrested. She was tortured and sentenced to death by beheading, which was carried out by her father. By the fourteenth century, Barbara's cult grew immensely, and she was included in a group of fourteen saints known as the Holy Helpers – paragons of Christian life and good works who were believed to protect against disease and sudden death.

This woven panel was originally made to form part of a longer orphrey band on a lavish and costly liturgical vestment (one of the garments used by bishops, abbots, priests and deacons during the celebration of Mass). The standing figure of Saint Barbara on our panel holds a martyr's palm in one hand and her attribute of the tower in which she was imprisoned by her pagan father in the other – notable for its inclusion of the three windows described in the saint's *Vita*. She is depicted against a background of luscious intertwined vines, which sprout large flowers with red and white petals. While the panel's dominant patterns and features are woven integrally, they are also embellished with a plethora of embroidered elements; the figure's face, hair and halo, the blue tiled roof of the tower in her hand, and the astonishingly delicate flowers sprouting at her feet, are all embroidered in shimmering silk threads. In many places these touches of needlework are of truly remarkable subtlety and skill.

This vivid orphrey panel attests to the incredible ingenuity and inventiveness of the textile weavers of Cologne in the second half of the fifteenth century. Although we have little knowledge concerning exactly where and by whom such textiles were made, the production of these woven textiles for use in liturgical vestments seems to have been perfected in the city and its environs as early as the twelfth century, and flourished right up until the Reformation.¹ In recent years scholarship on the subject has developed rapidly, and several important new studies have helped to broaden our understanding of the status and importance that these extraordinarily costly luxury objects enjoyed at the time of their manufacture.² The medium's easily divisible format and inherent suitability for use on a variety of liturgical textiles and furnishings has meant that, like most extant pieces of this date, our panels survive as short sections of textiles that must originally have been woven in much greater lengths.

This panel has two sister pieces, whose widths and warp count correspond precisely, suggesting that while they were executed individually, and perhaps even in different workshops, production for this class of textile was standardized to a large degree. The elegant vines that criss-cross and march across the backgrounds of the group seem to have come into fashion around the middle of the fifteenth century, and most surviving examples are characterized by figures similarly superimposed on to a decorative framework of large green or red vines that resemble a garden in full bloom. Closely comparable lampas bands (particularly those ornamented with green foliage) are preserved in the Schnütgen Museum, Cologne, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Fine Art Museum, San Francisco.³ Examples depicting figures set against a dense red ground in the manner of panel (a) are comparatively rarer. A chasuble ornamented with several panels of the same design survives in the Schnütgen Museum, woven with the name and arms of Johann Pennynck, a burgomaster of Cologne who died in or before 1479.⁴ It allows us to date our example accordingly to the twenty or so years immediately after the middle of the century.⁵ It is likely that the embroiderers responsible for this figure collaborated closely on their design with contemporary painters, since many of their stylistic features echo those found in panel paintings executed in Cologne during the 1450s and 1460s, a connection that further helps in the dating of this panel and the wider group to which they belong (figs. 1 and 2).

NOTES

- 1 Leonie Von Wilckens, 'kolner Textilien', in Anton Legner. Ed., *Ornamenta Ecclesiae: Kunst und Künstler in der Romantik in Köln*, exh. cat., Schnütgen museum, Cologne 1985, pp. 440–45; Marita Bombek, 'Kölner Borten, Kölner Garn, Kölner Gold in der mittelalterlichen Textilwirtschaft der Stadt Köln', in Marita Bombek and Gudren Sporbeck, *Kolner Bortenweberei im Mittelalter*, Regensburg 2012, pp. 17–39.
- 2 Evelin Wetter, *Liturgische Gewänder in der Schwarzen Kirche zu Kronstadt in Siebenburgen*, Riggisberg 2012, pp. 209–43; Marita Bombek and Gudren Sporbeck, *Kolner Bortenweberei im Mittelalter*, Regensburg 2012.
- 3 Sporbeck dates the examples in Cologne to c. 1450, see Gudren Sporbeck, *die Liturgischen Gewänder 11. Bis 19. Jahrhundert*, cologne 2001, pp. 112–14, cat. 20; San Francisco panels inv. 1952.30; Metropolitan Museum panels inv. 53.35.3.
- 4 Bombek and Sporbeck 2012, pp. 209–11, no. 101 see 1.
- 5 Other fragments similarly given to this date range survive in the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin, the treasury of Aachen Cathedral, and the Museum für angewandte Kunst in Cologne. For the Aachen and Berlin fragments see Bombek and Sporbeck 2012, p. 211, and for the fragments in the Museum für angewandte Kunst see Bombek and

Sporbeck 2012, pp. 212–14, no. 103.1; for those in the Schnütgen see Bombek and Sporbeck 2012, pp. 214–16, no. 103.2.



Figs. 1-2
Coffer panel with the Entry of Saint Ursula into Basel (details)
Cologne, c. 1455–60
Oil on spruce, 54 × 248 cm
Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, inv. WRM 0716