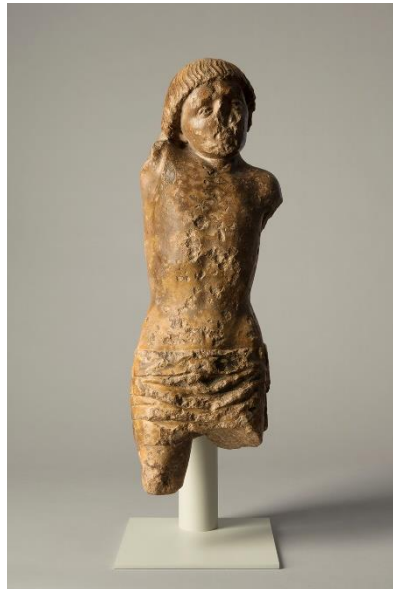


Saint Sebastian
France, Lorraine
1450 – 75



60.1 x 19.7 x 18.2 cm; limestone, the figure has lost its arms and legs, its face and torso suffered from damage, which reveals that this figure was violently separated from its original context, probably as a result of iconoclasm.

A figure of Saint Sebastian depicted with pudding-bowl haircut, a melancholic face and youthful features. He stands nude, covered only by a loincloth, and his body scarred with empty holes left by arrows the resultant wounds bleeding from the effects of the thick wooden darts. Original polychromy is still found throughout the sculpture, most notably below the wound on the left side of his torso, which spews red blood. The figure is bound by rope to a trunk of a tree, which survives in good condition behind the figure.

The style of the figure is related to sculptures from Lorraine from the second half of the fifteenth century, where there was a fusion of late French Gothic art with that of German art. It relates in style to an Entombment group in the Chapel of Saint-Nicholas, Neufchâteau or to the head of Mary Magdalene, now in the Louvre (fig. 1). The small eyes, with a lowered gaze, and the smooth straight hair find close analogies with our sculpture. Sebastian can also be compared to sculpture from Pont-Saint-Vincent in Lorraine such as the angel from the church of Saint Julien (fig. 2). Here the figure is rendered with the same degree of realism and with a similar sense of solemnity befitting of the subjects they depict.

The iconography of this sculpture presents the usual depiction of Saint Sebastian, who was an Early Christian martyr (died c. 288 AD) persecuted during the reign of Diocletian. His *vita* was first established by Ambrose of Milan in his sermon on Psalm 118 but, like many saints popular in the late Middle Ages, his legend was codified and embellished in Jacobus da Voragine's *Golden Legend* (compiled c. 1260). De Voragine relates that, under the emperor's orders, 'the archers shot at him till he was as full of arrows as an urchin'. However, while he is most commonly depicted tied to a tree and shot through with arrows in the manner of the present figure, the story of his martyrdom states that this did not kill him (fig. 3). Having miraculously appeared to the citizens of the kingdom, freed of his bonds, he was only truly put to death when the emperor ordered him to be beaten with cudgels.

Our figure of Sebastian, however, suffered not only the shots of the arrows that now leave empty wounds in his torso but also the blows of the iconoclasts that damaged it centuries later. His body is

covered in marks that suggest that it was struck repeatedly with a blunt instrument, while his face looks to have suffered a violent blow. Beaten and defaced, this figure of St Sebastian has almost lost its identity. The French origin of the sculpture suggests that the iconoclasm may have occurred during the reformation in the 16th century or during the French Revolution in the 18th century (fig. 4). These times of unrest caused many statues to be decapitated, bashed up or removed from churches. Defacing and decapitating these figures crucially anonymised them because with the absence of the face, the figures lost their identity. This act also removed their authority and took away the power to remember them – it was destructive but it was also highly symbolic.

So it is through this context that we should view this sculpture, which testifies to the way that revolutions redefine our understanding of images and symbols.



Fig. 1
Head of Mary Magdalene
30 x 26 x 22cm; Limestone with polychromy
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Inv. No. RF 1456



Fig. 2
Angel from the Church of Saint Julien
France, Lorraine, Pont-Saint-Vincent
15th century



Fig. 3
Martin Schongauer
Saint Sebastian
Germany, Colmar
c. 1435 – 1491
MET 41.1.193



Fig. 4
Detail from the Sac de Lyon by the Calvinists in 1562
France, Lyon, Musée des Beaux-arts de Lyon
c. 1565