The Head of John the Baptist, a *Johannesschüssel*
Silesia/Bohemia
c. 1480

37 cm / 14 1/2 inches (diam.) x 17.5 cm / 7 inches (depth); Grey sandstone. A section of the upper rim broken and restored from the 11 o'clock to 2 o'clock positions. Further chipping to the rim and some of the ringlets of the saint's beard.

Provenance
Count Traugott Hermann von Arnim (1839-1919), Schloss Muskau, Saxony, and by descent;
Buried in the castle grounds in Winter 1945 along with other 'art treasures' from the Schloss Muskau collection, and rediscovered during building and restoration works after the reunification of Germany;
Restituted to Count von Arnim's heirs and sold by them in 2012

Description and Iconography
The head of Saint John the Baptist, its windpipe and esophagus protruding from its severed neck, lies in the bowl of a wide-rimmed dish. The saint's long, shaggy hair sprouts in thick, coiled ringlets whose wriggling forms are further echoed by his long beard and moustache. His mouth lolls open and his eyes are closed in death. Deep wrinkles ripple across his forehead but his cheeks and nose have a plump fleshiness suggestive of youth. Both the dish and the head are carved from the same, green-tinted sandstone. Chiselled into the rim of the dish directly below the saint' neckwound is a shape that could be the artist's identifying hausmarke (a form of cypher used in

northern Europe during the later Middle Ages by craftsmen such as sculptors, masons, and architects). Not one in a thousand medieval sculptures bear any form of signature, which if it is to be identified thus, would make this example a hugely significant document of its type. Another possibility is that it is in fact a monogram for 'Johannes', with the Y-shaped element signifying the first letter of the name, and the more disguised shapes of an h and n formed by the conjunction of this symbol with the horizontal cross-stroke and its cusped vertical return on the right-hand side.[1]

Detail of the sculptor's hausmarke and/or the monogram for 'Johannes'

According to the Gospels of Matthew (14:6–12) and Mark (6:21–29), Saint John was arrested for criticizing the incestuous marriage between King Herod and Herodias, the wife of his slain half-brother Philip. Herodias's daughter, Salome, danced for Herod during his birthday banquet and as a reward she was offered whatever she wished. In an act of revenge against John, Herodias had her daughter ask for his head on a platter. Though reluctant, Herod was bound by his promise, and he ordered the execution.

Early accounts suggest that the saint's remains were being venerated as early as the fourth century, having been rediscovered some thirty miles north of Jerusalem. They remained in the Holy Land until 1206, when Saint John's skull was stolen by crusaders returning to France after the Sack of

[1] We are extremely grateful to Agata Gomolka for suggesting that the mark could be a monogram of the saint's name.

Constantinople. It was taken by one of the crusaders, Walo of Sarton, to Amiens, where it remains to this day in the cathedral built to house it. By the end of the Middle Ages, the relic's reputed healing powers had led to its widespread devotion, and images showing the saint's severed head on a platter had become key devotional aids in churches right across Europe. They are typically known by the German term *Johannisschüsseln,* or the Latin *Caput Iohannes in Disco* ('Saint John dishes'). Sculpted versions of the image typically consist of a head either fixed onto a charger of another material, or like our example, carved integrally from the same block of stone (or also wood). Such objects gained incredible currency across the Dutch- and German-speaking lands during the fifteenth century in particular.[2] They had wide-ranging and mutable symbolic potential, serving multiple functions depending on their material or during specific occasions in the liturgical calendar.[3] For instance, many are known to have been processed around the altar or displayed atop the altar table to mark the summer feast days of Saint John's birth (24th June) and beheading (August 29).[4] They also served a Eucharistic function, since Saint John is considered by Christians to be a precursor of Christ, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries his execution was seen as a portent of Christ's own death on the Cross. The platter on which the saint's head was presented to Salome also echoed the utensils used during the Last Supper, again recalling the sacrifice made by Christ with his body and blood. Our example is fairly large and heavy, and as a result is not likely to have been moved often. The remnants of carving on the underside instead suggest that it was mounted on a specially made stand or column for permanent or semi-permanent display. Traces of vivid red pigment in the crevices of the neck wound, and of precious gold leaf on parts of the hair and beard, also indicate that it was originally picked out with polychromy, either selectively in combination with the natural colouring of the stone, or completely covering it with a painted and gilded surface.

Saint John was invoked by sufferers of headaches, and was thought to guard against insanity. The latter belief may even have informed the prominent inclusion of the saint as a young boy on the Goldenes Rössl, which was given to the continually insane King Charles VI by his wife in 1405 as a reminder of his royal duties.

History and Localisation

The sculpture was buried in a wooden crate in the park at Schloss Muskau late in winter 1945, together with other valuable objects, to hide it from the advancing Red Army. At the end of WWII the Russian Occupation Forces confiscated and looted the estate. During building work, after the reunification of Germany, the buried art treasure was discovered, and restituted in 2012 to the von Arnim family. In the meantime, the ownership of the palace and its famous park (landscaped by Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau in the nineteenth century) was transferred to the Municipality of Bad Muskau and is now a museum.

The high relief and stylised locks of the hairstyle on our Johannesschüssel offer close parallels to contemporary German limewood carvings, and may suggest that our sculptor was also trained at

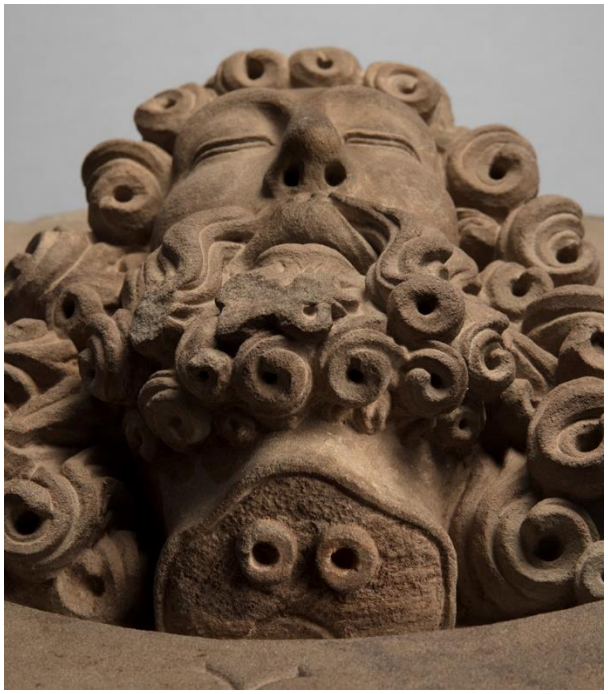
[2] Norbert Jopek, *German Sculpture 1430-1540: A Catalogue of the Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum,* London, 2002, p. 130.

[3] For a discussion on the functions of the image, see Barbara Baert, 'The Johannesschüssel as Andachtsbild: The Gaze, The Medium and The Senses' in Barbara Baert, Anita Traninger and Catrien Santing eds, *Dismembodied Heads in Medieval and Early Modern Culture, Intersections, Volume 28, 2013,* pp. 117-160.

[4] Barbara Baert, *Caput Johannis in Disco*, trans. Irene Schaudies, Leiden, 2012, pp. 61–82.

wood carving as well; this dual specialism was in fact a widespread practice amongst Northern Renaissance sculptors, evidenced by the careers of artists including Niclaus Gerhaert and Tilman Riemenschneider.[5] The combination of the figure's tightly wound corkscrew hair curls with the softly modelled physiognomy of the face, and the proportion of the head to the dish, which is marked by its broad, undecorated rim, strongly echoes sculptural developments in eastern Germany and the region between modern-day Germany and Poland encompassing Bohemia and Silesia during the second half of the fifteenth century.[6] Similarly modelled heads with such features can be seen on a small number of altarpieces and polychromed wood sculptures preserved in the museums at Wrocław (fig. 1) and Warsaw (fig. 2) in particular, as well as at the church of Saints Stanislaus and Wenceslaus in Świdnica (fig. 3), and the Benediktinerstift museum at Admont in Austria.

Just as informative is the fact that carved sandstone Johannesshüsseln were produced in large numbers in Bohemia and Silesia towards the close of the Middle Ages. Alongside having the more standard liturgical functions, examples were also mounted onto the keystones of vaults and church facades, above the doorways of private homes, and in town halls, including at Wrocław (fig. 4a-b). testament to its widespread appeal and veneration in this area, the motif of Saint John's head was even displayed in heraldic contexts, incorporated on the coats-of-arms of local landowners and municipalities.[7]



[5] Stefan Roller, *Niclaus Gerhaert: Der Bildhauer des Späten Mittelalters*, Exh. Cat., Frankfurt and Strasbourg, 2012; see also Julien Chapuis, *Tilman Riemenschneider: Master Sculptor of the Late Middle Ages*, Exh. Cat., Washington and New York, 2000, p. 24 ff.

[6] The author is extremely grateful to Matthias Weniger for discussing the localisation of this sculpture during the preparation of this study, and especially to Frits Scholten for suggesting the possibility of a Bohemian/Silesian origin.

[7] Romuald Kaczmarek, 'The cultural identity of medieval Silesia: the case of art and architecture', in Przemysław Wiszewski ed., *Cuius Regio? Ideological and Territorial Cohesion of the Historical Region of Silesia* (c. 1000-2000) vol. 1: *The Long Formation of the Region of Silesia (c. 1000-1526),* Wrocław, 2013, pp. 193- 214, p. 198.

Fig. 1
Saint Hedwig Triptych, (detail)
c. 1470
Wroclaw, National Museum

Fig. 2
Master of the Annunciation with the Unicorn Polyptych (active in Wroclaw c. 1475-85)
Annunciation with the Unicorn Polyptych (detail)
c. 1480
From the Church of Saint Elizabeth, Wroclaw (Breslau)
Warsaw, National Museum

Fig. 3
Dormition of the Virgin (detail), from the Retable of the Virgin
1492
Świdnica, Church of Saints Stanislaus and Wenceslaus

Fig. 4
Johannesschüsseln mounted onto the facades of buildings in Wrocław
First half 15th century
Image: Romuald Kaczmarek