

The Master of the Rimini Altarpiece (active c. 1410-1440) and workshop
Saint John the Evangelist
Southern Netherlands
c. 1430



42 x 16.5 x 9 cm; alabaster with pale veining and inclusions. Generalised surface abrasion, pitting, and some chip losses in places, the former through historic exposure to water. The head of the figure broken at the neck and reattached, with a fine line of infilling and overpainting across the back of the shoulders. Rubbing to the front of the hair and the face, especially the upper lip.

Provenance

Collection of Edouard Aynard (1837-1913), Lyon;
 His estate sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 4 December 1913, p. 177, lot 264;
 Collection of Georg Swarzenski (1876-1957);
 Blumka Gallery, acquired 1980;
 Private collection, USA

Description

A youthful, male figure with short curling locks of hair that spring loosely over his head and run down the nape of his neck, stands in a subtle contrapposto with his head turned slightly to our right. He has both hands raised, his right drawn partway across his chest with the forefinger extended to point towards an object or attribute (now missing) that was once held in his left, which is implied rather than seen, being shrouded in the heavily pleated fabric of the figure's mantle. He has drawn this garment over his left arm and across his body, and thrown its loose end over the crook of his right arm, so that from his sternum to his knees its material hangs in a wriggling mass of u-shaped swags. Beneath his mantle he wears a full-length garment with tight sleeves. Bordering his neckline and lower hem are two inscriptions picked out from the surrounding stone in raised lettering visible only in raking light, which identify the figure by his name 'JOHANES'. It is possible that the lettering was not originally carved in its present form but instead picked out selectively with polychromy, and that the abrasion to the stone which has occurred over time and is consistent with the effect of water damage, left the lettering and other decorative motifs around the figure's hemlines to stand proud as it first ate into the surrounding stone.

Function and Context

The inclusion of the figure's name 'JOHANES' on the neck and lower hemline of his full-length garment means that we must be looking at a representation Saint John, Christ's favourite disciple and the man who typically accompanies the grieving figure of the Virgin Mary at the base of the Cross in Medieval imagery relating to the Crucifixion. His clean-shaven jaw and short hairstyle accord well with this identification, as do comparisons with another surviving figure of Saint John on the contemporaneously carved *Rimini Altar* in Frankfurt (to be discussed further below).

That our figure may have functioned in a similar context is suggested by the presence of a single, slightly tapering dowel hole drilled into the underside of the stone. This makes clear that he was once located by way of a fixing pin to a larger structure or framework, perhaps a carved wooden retable carcass of the type widespread across Europe during the fifteenth century. Comparable holes are visible on a number of the other surviving figures from the so-called 'Rimini' group (discussed further below), and suggest that the workshop had a standard way of preparing its products for mounting, regardless of whether the support to which they were to be attached was created at the same time, or alternatively upon the figures' arrival at their final destination. A point in favour of the latter, which would have demanded a certain flexibility in regards to the figure's positioning and display, is suggested by the fact that our Saint John is fully worked in the round, a characteristic closely aligned with almost all of the other surviving figures from the same workshop.

If the interpretation that our Saint John was carved for a larger altarpiece is indeed correct, the scale of the figure, measuring over forty centimetres in height, would suggest that it was created as part of a substantial commission for an important patron or foundation.

Attribution

The stylistic treatment of our figure, with his spiralling locks of hair and his concentrated mass of fine drapery folds, as well as his creation using a pale but highly figured and veined type of

alabaster, are clear evidence that he was produced in the workshop of an artist known since the late 1920s as the ‘Master of Rimini’. This provisional name was originally coined by the great German art historian Georg Swarzenski (1876-1957), who purchased our figure from the sale of the estate of the noted Lyonnais industrialist Edouard Aynard (1837-1913) in 1913. In the same year, Swarzenski had purchased the so-called *Rimini Altar* for the Liebieghaus (fig. 1), a dedicated sculpture museum which he had helped to establish in Frankfurt four years previous. The altarpiece in question, which takes the form of a ‘crowded Crucifixion’ showing Christ crucified between the two thieves and accompanied at the feet of the three crosses by the Roman soldiers, Longinus, the grieving Virgin and her counterpart Saint John (fig. 2), as well as the twelve apostles or Disciples of Christ, once decorated the Franciscan church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Covignano, near Rimini. In his first article on the altarpiece, Swarzenski attempted to demonstrate that its carver, the so-called ‘Master of Rimini’, could be identified with the documented sculptor Master Gusmin, an artist he thought trained in Cologne but worked in Italy, and is documented in texts of the mid-fifteenth century including Lorenzo Ghiberti’s *Commentarii* as having died between around 1415 and 1420.¹ In response, and owing to a misreading of the surviving documents, Walter Paatz suggested that the artist instead worked in northern France², while more recently Anton Legner, Paul Williamson, Monique Blanc and Kim Woods have all argued convincingly for a Netherlandish localisation.³

It is clear from what survives of the sculptor’s oeuvre that he operated a workshop whose heyday lasted from the early 1420s into the mid-1440s, and whose products were exported right across Europe - to Silesia, France, Italy, Savoy - finding currency among the highest echelons of society.⁴ The fact that his key surviving works were found in Italy - a place famously rich with marble deposits and sculpture - speaks to the demand for his talents and for the material with which he worked. Indeed, the Frankfurt Crucifixion Altar was in all likelihood commissioned by Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, Lord of Rimini, while another prominent Italian noble family, the Borromini, ordered an altarpiece from the same workshop for their church on Isola Bella in Lago Maggiore. Recently, Kim Woods has connected the artist tentatively with Gillis de Backere, a *tailleur d’ymaiges d’albastre* (alabaster carver) recorded as working for Philip the Good in 1436 on a tomb monument to the duke’s first wife Michèle de Valois (d. 1422) in Ghent.⁵ Such an important commission implies that de Backere had already had a fruitful and feted career, so we may reconstruct his activities at least back into the 1420s. He seems to have died by 1443, when the sculptor Tydeman Maes took over the carving of Michèle’s tomb. Though the identification is tentative - de Backere remains the only documented alabaster specialist in the southern Netherlands in the fifteenth century and so risks being burdened with the full weight of the surviving material evidence - Woods has convincingly showed that he was well placed, both

¹ Georg Swarzenski: ‘Der Kölner Meister bei Ghiberti’, in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg, 1926–27*, Leipzig, 1930, pp. 22–42.

² Walter Paatz, ‘Stammbaum der gotischen Alabasterskulptur 1516-1442’, in *Festschrift für Hans Kauffmann*, Berlin, 1956, pp. 127-35.

³ Anton Legner, ‘Der Alabasteraltar aus Rimini’, in *Staedel Jahrbuch* 2, 1968, pp. 101-169; Paul Williamson, *Netherlandish Sculpture 1450-1550*, London, 2002, p. 64; Monique Blanc, *Retables: la collection du Musée des Arts Décoratifs*, Paris, 1998, pp. 117-9; Kim Woods, ‘The Master of Rimini and the tradition of alabaster carving in the early fifteenth-century Netherlands’ in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 2012, Vol. 62, 2012, pp. 56-83.

⁴ For export see Woods, 2012, p. 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-5.

chronologically and geographically, to undertake works of this nature using alabaster imported into the Low Countries via its western sea ports. Regardless of his precise identity, his style is so closely connected with the artistic language developed in part by contemporary painters working in the southern Netherlands, especially Rogier van der Weyden, the Master of Flémalle, and Jan van Eyck, that it seems clear it was in that region that he worked. Indeed, we now believe that the sculptor must have been acquainted with the latter since a number of corresponding motifs appear in their respective works.⁶

It must be conceded that the artistic identity described as the Master of Rimini is problematic and enigmatic, for several reasons. First, the corpus of surviving sculptures grouped around the artist are of considerable diversity, both in terms of quality and stylistic treatment, indicating that we are dealing not with a single artist but with a group of connected sculptors working closely with one another over a long period of time, with (we assume) the most accomplished among them leading a dedicated workshop. To put this into relief, the gnomon by which all other attributions are judged, the *Rimini Altar* itself, is now understood to be the work of several sculptors, with whole figures attributable to differing hands. Our understanding of the Master's identity is also complicated by the fact that no works in other media have ever been convincingly attributed to them, meaning that while alabaster may indeed have been their primary conduit of artistic production, we are forced by lack of evidence to reconstruct an oeuvre in which it formed the *only* material they were able or trained to work with, which we know from other artistic identities of the middle Ages (Tilman Riemenschneider for example) was often far from the truth. Nevertheless, it is absolutely clear that the Rimini workshop fruitfully and repeatedly keyed into the historic prestige that alabaster held since at least the 14th century, capitalizing on what Woods has described as the material's elevated 'social allure'.⁷ We must think of the workshop therefore as a perfect marriage of skill and ingenuity.

Our figure of Saint John can be firmly attributed to the Rimini workshop and, moreover, can be placed among the very best of the workshop's extensive output. The figure's large scale and the almost endless wriggling complexity and carefully conceived rhythms of his falling draperies count among the most ambitious of the known carvings associated with the artist. Many of his motifs can also be linked to the best examples of the Rimini group, particularly perhaps the angularity of the facial structure (wider above the temples than at the jaw, and with a chiselled, chamfered appearance to the cheeks), which relate well to several of the Frankfurt Altar's figures (fig. 3). The placement of the shrouded hand and its relation to its pointing counterpart, which are features identical to one of the figures among the Disciple group on the Frankfurt Altar but in reverse (fig. 4), also indicate that our version was conceived from the same workshop model. Further evidence of this can be gleaned from the survival of a smaller figure holding a model of a church, carved for the Isola Bella altarpiece imported into Milan and installed in the church of Santa Maria Podone by Vitaliano Borromei (d. 1449; see fig. 5).⁸ The Isola Bella figure is an almost verbatim version of our example in reverse, though with more simplified draperies.

⁶ Kim Woods, *Cut in Alabaster: A Material of Sculpture and its European Traditions 1330-1530*, Turnhout, 2018, p. 120.

⁷ Woods, 2012, p. 60.

⁸ Woods, 2018, p. 104.

The *Rimini Altar* is a massive construction for alabaster carvings of the period, with a central cross that in any reconstruction could not originally have been under about two metres in height, and with the accompanying apostles all measuring around forty-five centimetres in height. Our figure is only slightly shorter at forty-two centimetres, and since it is closer in proportion to a stylistically related figure of the grieving Virgin in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 6), as well as to a pair of figures representing Saint James and an unidentified apostle now in the Musée du Louvre in Paris (fig. 7), it is possible that together they represent what survives of another monumental and important Crucifixion group. The Louvre's figure of Saint James in particular corresponds extremely closely to our Saint John, being identical to it in both height and width, and incorporating the same simplified drapery folds across the figure's back (fig. 8). It would seem an extreme likelihood that they were carved for the same altarpiece, perhaps by different hands but certainly in a single workshop.

Since Georg Swarzenski's influential article a century ago, the Master of Rimini and his workshop have rightly become the most celebrated alabaster carvers of the late Middle Ages, and the re-emergence of the present figure, which has gone largely unpublished in the surrounding scholarship to date, enriches our understanding of the Rimini group immensely.

Related Literature

Georg Swarzenski, 'Deutsche Alabasterplastik des 15 Jahrhunderts', in *Staedel Jahrbuch* 1, Frankfurt, 1921, fig. 112, no. XXXIII, b, 24

Anton Legner, 'Der Alabasteraltar aus Rimini', in *Staedel Jahrbuch* 2, 1968, pp. 101-169

Kunst um 1400 am Mittelrhein, Exh. Cat., Liebieghaus Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 1975

Paul Williamson, *Northern Gothic sculpture 1200-1450*, London, 1988, pp. 187-191, no. 54

William Wixom, ed. *Mirror of the Medieval World*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1999

Kim Woods, 'The Master of Rimini and the tradition of alabaster carving in the early fifteenth-century Netherlands', in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 62, 2012, pp. 56-83

Timothy Potts, 'Recent acquisitions (2013–16) at The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles', in *The Burlington Magazine*, March 2017, No. 1368, Vol. CLIX

Kim Woods, *Cut in Alabaster: A Material of Sculpture and its European Traditions 1330-1530*, Belgium, 2018, pp. 93-122



Fig. 1
The Master of Rimini and workshop
The *Rimini Altar*
Southern Netherlands
c. 1430
total height 225 cm; alabaster with traces of polychromy
Frankfurt-am-Main, Liebieghaus



Fig. 2
The Master of Rimini and workshop
Detail of the *Rimini Altar* with Saint John (far left)



Fig. 3
The Master of Rimini and workshop
Detail of the bad thief from the *Rimini Altar*



Fig. 4
The Master of Rimini and workshop
Standing saint, from the *Rimini Altar*, Frankfurt



Fig. 5
The Master of Rimini and workshop
Standing saint, from the Isola Bella altarpiece
c. 1430
c. 25cm (height); alabaster
Palazzo Borromeo, Isola Bella, Lago Maggiore



Fig. 6
The Master of Rimini and workshop
The Grieving Virgin
Southern Netherlands
c. 1430
36.9 x 15.9 x 10.2 cm; alabaster
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 1991.84



Fig. 7
The Master of Rimini and workshop
Saint James and a standing saint
Southern Netherlands
c. 1430
Paris, musée du Louvre, inv. RF4401
Photo: RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Martine Beck-Coppola



Fig. 8
Reverse of the Paris Saint James
Photo: RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Martine Beck-Coppola