

**A reliquary tableau with five illuminated miniatures, a papal wax seal, and twelve saints' relics**

**Southern Netherlandish miniatures painted c. 1500-20, assembled in Spain (perhaps Andalusia) in c. 1600 (after 1586)**



*23.8 x 18 cm overall; the wax seal 4.6 x 3.5 cm; the miniatures c. 7 x 5 cm.*

*Pigments, ink and gilding on parchment, bones, wood, coiled silver and gold wire, blue glass beads and yellow silk on linen stiffened with size. Remains of iron pins at the upper corners. Some tarnishing to the silver and discolouration to the wax seal. The silk degraded and faded in places.*

#### *Provenance*

Private collection, Spain

An old paper label attached to the reverse of the mount bearing the name 'Juan de Ávila', the Apostle of Andalusia

This intriguing reliquary tableau is not only a remarkable emblem of personalised devotion, but also a vivid document of how the fortunes of late-medieval manuscripts could change dramatically over time. Measuring just under a foot in height, it features five delicate

illuminations on parchment, a wax seal, and various relics with identifying banderols, which have been attached to a pale-yellow silk background. While its facture, combination of elements, and stylistic treatment all indicate that the tableau must have been put together in Spain around the turn of the seventeenth century, a number of its specific components date from earlier periods and regions.

With borders in the distinct ‘Ghent-Bruges style’, the five painted miniatures proudly framed by coiled gold and silver wire at its centre and four corners were all painted by a single artist working in the Southern Netherlands in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. They were probably cut from a small manuscript (almost certainly a Book of Hours), though it is also possible that they were produced as loose leaves to be inserted into a book in another centre, and that they remained extrinsic to a manuscript – a practice we know happened regularly at this date. Netherlandish medieval miniature paintings remained incredibly popular in Spain until well into the seventeenth century, even after they had fallen out of fashion in other regions.<sup>1</sup> Depicting scenes from the Life of Christ, the narrative starts in the upper left corner with a highly unusual composition, which merges the iconography of the



Annunciation with that of the Tree of Jesse in order to emphasise Christ’s illustrious progeny. While these two iconographies were often placed alongside each other on separate folios in Books of Hours of the period (cf. Fig. 1), only a handful of examples, made in the Southern Netherlands, survive in which they are shown merged into a single image (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> This is followed by miniatures in the upper righthand corner depicting the Nativity, and below that in the lower righthand corner the Adoration. In the lower left corner is a remarkable depiction of the Flight into Egypt. While Joseph is typically depicted walking beside the donkey in contemporary images of the scene, in our image he is instead shown filling his jug with water

<sup>1</sup> Javier Docampo Capilla, "Cortar y pegar. Utilización y reutilización de manuscritos iluminados flamencos en Castilla (siglos XV-XVI)", in Alicia Miguélez Caveró and Fernando Villaseñor Sebastián (ed.), *Medieval Europe in Motion: La circulación de manuscritos iluminados en la Península Ibérica* (2018), pp. 215-238.

<sup>2</sup> Other comparisons can be found in a Southern-Netherlandish book of hours of c. 1500-1525 in the Royal Library in The Hague (MMW, 10, fol. 11v), and in the Breviary of Queen Isabella of Castille (Flanders, c. 1497) in the British Library, London (Add Ms 18851, f. 354r).



from a stream. The manner in which he is reframed in this scene to play a more active role in the narrative can be linked to the growing cult of Joseph, which became especially popular towards the end of the fifteenth century after a feast day for the saint was instituted by Pope Sixtus IV.<sup>3</sup> Placed in the centre of the tableau, the final illumination depicts the Crucifixion, with Christ shown nailed to a Tau-shaped cross rising above the gathered figures of the Virgin, Saint John and the Magdalene (on the left), and Longinus accompanied by the Roman soldiers (at right). All of the miniatures are framed by integral borders encircling them on all sides, and in which pansies, daisies, strawberries, carnations, forget-me-nots and other flowers are scattered across a background of liquid or ‘shell’ gold.



The wax seal at the top of the composition, topped by a small carved wooden cross, is imprinted with the Agnus Dei, or lamb of God and, below it, a papal coat of arms. Around its edge is the inscription ‘Ecce A[gnus] D[ei], qui tollit p[eccata] m[undi]’ (Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; John 1:29). Made from the remains of the previous year’s Easter candles, Agnus Dei seals were consecrated by popes since the fourteenth century in the first year of their pontificate, and only once every seven years after that (Fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> Great protective powers were accorded to such seals, which were awarded to select individuals as signs of faith and favour.<sup>5</sup> While the age and nature of the wax make it difficult to read, close examination under raking light has revealed that the seal on our tableau seems to be impressed with the coat of arms of Pope Sixtus the Fifth (pope from 1585-1590), meaning that it must have been made in 1586.

Between the illuminations are twelve small relics. Their identifying banderols indicate that they were believed to have belonged to twelve individual saints, including Margaret, James, Simon, and Bartholomew. The relics, painted miniatures, and seal have all been meticulously and lovingly attached to the pale-yellow silk background with three types of gold and silver metal thread: pearl purl, used as the outer frame of the five illuminations; check purl, used for

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Dusserre, ‘Les origines de la dévotion à Saint Joseph’, *Cahiers de Joséphologie*, 2 (1954), 5-30 (p. 26).

<sup>4</sup> Irene Galandra Cooper, ‘Investigating the ‘Case’ of Agnus Dei in Sixteenth-Century Italian Homes’, in Maya Corri, Marco Faini, and Alessia Meneghin (eds.), *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2018, pp. 220-243

<sup>5</sup> Mortiz Woelk and Manuela Beer (ed.), *Museum Schnütgen in Cologne: A Survey of the Collection*, Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2017, no. 214, p. 320.

the inner frame of the illuminations and seal, as well as for other decorative elements; and bullion, used to outline the tableau as well as the seal.<sup>6</sup> The remains of two iron pins surviving in the corners of the tableau indicate that it likely hung on a wall as a private sacramental, though the large number of saints' relics incorporated into its composition may point to a richly endowed chapel setting as much as a domestic context.

In addition to its provenance, various aspects of this astonishing tableau point to its creation in Spain at some point after 1586. Perhaps most importantly, a sheet of parchment pasted to the back of the object carries Spanish inscriptions that identify the scenes and relics in a late sixteenth- or early-seventeenth-century hand (Fig. 4). Many of the identifying banderoles attached to or around the relics on the tableau itself are also in Spanish, including 'Esteban' (see right). Additionally, a typed paper label on the reverse of the later mount suggests a connection with the Spanish priest and theologian Juan de Ávila (1499-1569), who was known as the 'Apostle of Andalusia'. While Ávila had passed away before 1586, when the *Agnus Dei* seal was made, it is not inconceivable that the illuminations



may have been cut from a manuscript once owned by or associated with the priest and reused for our tableau by a devotee local to Andalusia. It is thus highly likely that the patron responsible for its creation commissioned an artist skilled at textile- and metal-working to combine their most precious, sacred objects into a single, treasured work of art at the turn of the seventeenth century, incorporating ancient relics and medieval manuscript illuminations. Likely used for personal devotion in a private chapel setting, this reliquary tableau is an important document of the fervent, personal piety of an individual using treasured objects and encompassing centuries of history.

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<sup>6</sup> We are grateful to Ksynia Marko for her generous help with the identification of these materials and techniques.





Fig. 1  
The Tree of Jesse and the Annunciation, from a Book of Hours printed by Simon Vostre in  
Paris  
1507  
Illuminations on parchment  
Paris, Musée du Louvre



Fig. 2  
Book of Hours with the use of Rome  
Bruges, c. 1470  
Illuminations on parchment  
Private Collection





Fig. 3  
*Agnus Dei*, front  
16th century  
Wax  
Oxford, Campion Hall Collections

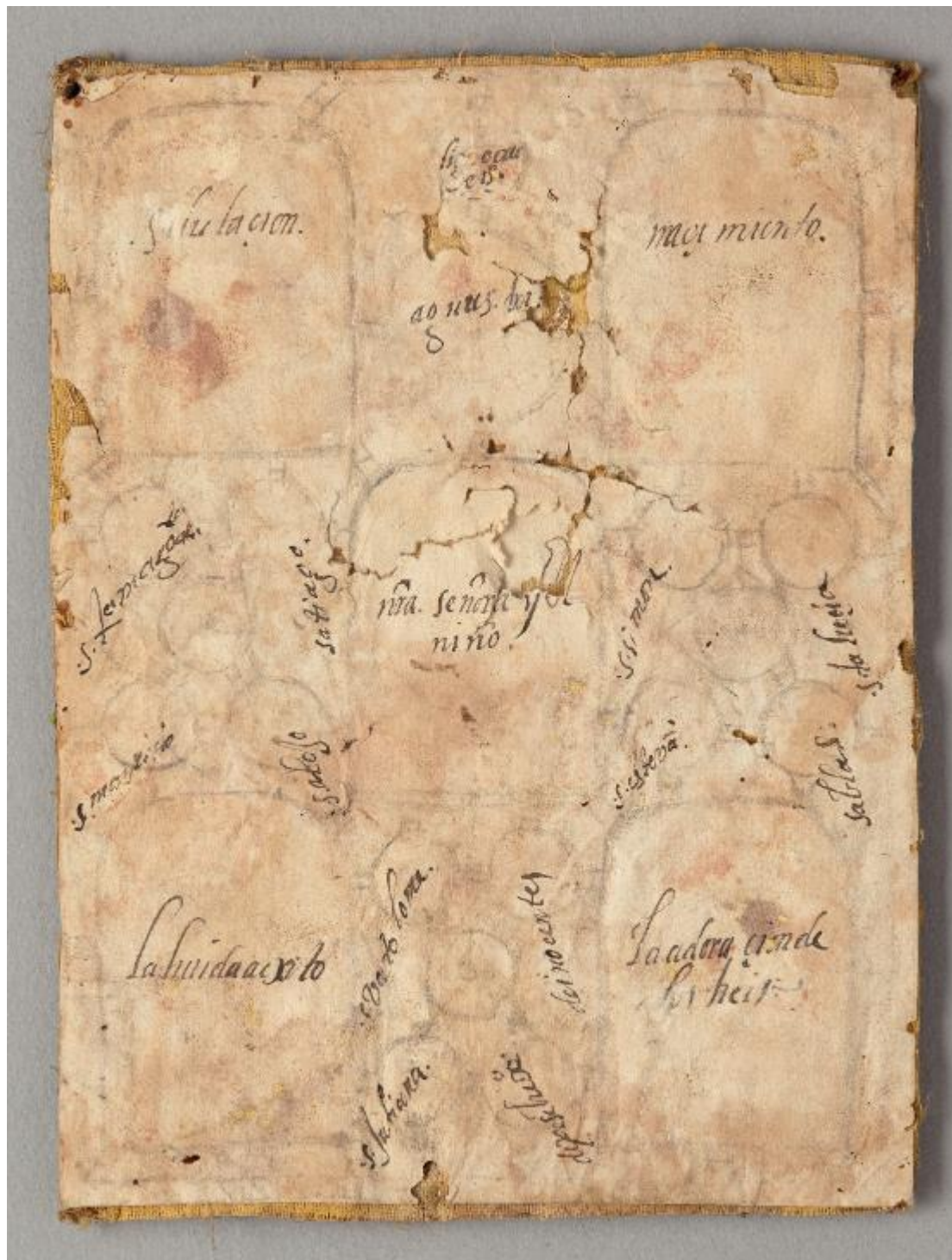


Fig 4  
Sheet of parchment on the reverse of the tableau inscribed in a late 16<sup>th</sup>- or early 17<sup>th</sup>-century hand with the identities of the saints' relics, the 'Agnus Dei' seal, and the scenes of the miniatures