

**A carved jet figure of Saint James
Spain, Santiago de Compostela
First quarter 15th century**



16.7 x 5.4 x 2.5 cm; jet, pierced below the shoulder for suspension, historic breaks through the body and staff re-adhered and infilled, the feet missing. Some historic wear channels from where it has been suspended.

Provenance

By repute, Collection of Andre (1875-1949) and Maria (1887-1947) Larminet-Davioud, Lille;
By descent to Georges Davioud (1927-2014), Lille, sold by his heirs in 2021

Saint James, the patron saint of pilgrims and pilgrimage, stands enshrouded in a mantle drawn across his front and pinned by his arms. On his head he wears his conventional attribute of a pilgrim's hat with a shell at the centre of its upturned brim. He carries an opened book, probably a prayerbook, in his left hand and holds his other traditional attributes of a pilgrim's staff and bag in his right.

For many centuries, Saint James has been associated closely with pilgrims and pilgrimage, and throughout this association the cockle shell has formed one of the most recognisable pilgrims' signs, and are still used to mark the way to the great pilgrimage site at Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain (where the saint's shrine is located). According to tradition, his martyred body was miraculously translated to Santiago de Compostela, which became one of the most important centres for pilgrimage in the medieval period. At such sites there was great demand among pilgrims who visited the shrine for souvenirs including not only vessels for holy water but figurines like the present one. It was produced by the jet carvers of Santiago (who as early as 1443 had formed a guild to protect their profession) in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. Jet is a lustrous, glossy and easily worked material made from fossilized oil, most notably that produced by the slow-growing monkey puzzle tree. Jet carving sprung up in Santiago not only because of the local accessibility of the material but also because its believed protective and apotropaic properties (as well as medicinal powers), aligned it closely with the purported powers and properties of Saint James himself and made it well suited to the arduous and potentially dangerous process of pilgrimage. The significance of jet for pilgrimage is also seen in the name of one of the portals on the Cathedral of Santiago. Jet souvenir vendors would sell their wares next to the north door of the church, called the *Puerta de la Azabachería*, or the doorway of the jet sellers.

Our figure is one of a small number of medieval jet carvings to have survived but its quality and size are unusually ambitious. Another closely related figure is now preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and was undoubtedly carved with recourse to the same compositional model (fig. 1). Both must have been produced for wealthy pilgrims; not all travellers to Santiago could afford a souvenir of this sort but their high level of craftsmanship would have made them particularly expensive and therefore accessible only to the elite.

Jet figurines like ours were significant not only in the immediate period of their production and veneration, but also in the afterlife of their collection, since they would have played a prominent role once brought back into a pilgrim's home. They would likely have been proudly displayed as symbols of the pilgrims' social class and the fact of their successful completion of the pilgrimage.

Related literature

María Angela Franco Mata, 'Los azabacheros asturianos del siglo XVI: Arte e industria del azabache. Pervivencias' in *Boletín del Museo Arqueológico Nacional*, 19 (2001)

María Angela Franco Mata, 'Iconografía jacobea en azabache', in Maria Carmen Lacarra Ducay ed., *Los Caminos de Santiago: Arte, Historia, Literatura*, Zaragoza: Institucion "Fernando el Católico", 2005

Angel Cardin Toraño, *El azabache y su cultura en la península ibérica: Formación, minería, estudios científicos, propiedades mágicas, artesanía y el Camino de Santiago*, Vigo, 2013



Fig. 1
Saint James the Great
Spain, Santiago de Compostela
c. 1410
20.8 cm; jet
New York, metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters Collection, inv. 65.67