

## A Reliquary Bust of a Virgin Martyr





## 15. A Reliquary Bust of a Virgin Martyr

This striking reliquary bust a rare survival from the late Middle Ages. It is fashioned from sheets of hammered brass, which have been worked separately to create the desired shapes and textures before being fitted together. Made according to the same model as another bust in the exhibition (Cat. 16), the two reliquaries are undoubtedly part of the same group, though not identical. The bust depicts a female saint with a diadem decorating her long hair, which is parted in the middle with a fringe painted on her forehead. The hair is rendered in sheets of repousse metal that fall in soft waves over her shoulders and down her back, undulating in and out to create soft patterns of regularised lozenges. The brass on the face of the bust was originally fully polychromed in naturalistic flesh tones, while the hair and dress are gilded. The striking facial features of the bust are characterised by an archaic quality, with large almond shaped eyes, a small mouth and a rigidly straight nose. Her dress suggests two layers of clothing with a sharp, 'v' shaped neckline that reveals a two-stranded beaded necklace. A glass medallion, which appears to be suspended by a thick, highly decorative chain, would have enabled a view of the relics which were once kept inside. One of the most shocking features of the bust is the polychromy which depicts blood gushing out of the Virgin's neck and an arrow that pierces her left side, or her heart. With her long, unbound hair, these features identify the bust as a Virgin martyr.

**Switzerland**  
c.1480-1500

43.5 × 43 × 25.5 cm (arrow through side) brass alloy with gilding and polychromy

*Provenance*

Collection of the Marchese Lanza di Ajeta at Lepke, Berlin (sold 20–21 March 1928)





## A Reliquary Bust of a Virgin Martyr with a Heart Shaped Face





## 16. A Reliquary Bust of a Virgin Martyr with a Heart Shaped Face

This reliquary bust depicts a Virgin martyr with long unbound hair beneath a simple diadem, a slit throat and a large arrow that pierces her chest. It has been fashioned from sheets of brass, which have been worked separately to create the desired effects, most impressively in the depiction of her hair that falls down her back undulating in and out to create soft patterns of regularised lozenges interspersed with rope-like strands. The Virgin's heart-shaped face was originally fully polychromed in naturalistic flesh tones, and the wound on her neck is dripping with blood, while the hair and dress are gilded. The striking facial features of the bust are characterised by an archaic quality, with large almond shaped eyes, a small mouth and a prominent nose. A glass medallion in the centre of her chest would have enabled a view of the relics which were once kept inside. This is conceived as a pendant with a decorative rope-like frame, hanging from a thick chain, one link of which is still extant just above the medallion. This detail distinguishes this bust from another in the exhibition, (cat. 15), which was clearly made according to the same model but is not identical.

Switzerland  
c.1480–1500

42.5 × 45 × 26 cm (arrow through chest); brass alloy with gilding and polychromy

*Provenance*

Collection of the Marchese Lanza di Ajeta at Lepke, Berlin (sold 20–21 March 1928)









## Discussion



The two reliquary busts are highly unusual because they combine an archaic aesthetic, characterised by abstraction, with late medieval detailing. The stylistic character of the busts, including the undulating hair, the late medieval dress type and the heavy chains allow us to firmly date the two busts to circa 1500. The localisation is probably best suggested by the unusual choice of material used for these busts – polychromed brass. Centres of brass production in late medieval Europe were concentrated between the Meuse and Rhine rivers, areas which were important sources of calamine, ‘the carbonate of zinc that, when smelted with copper, produced brass alloy.’<sup>1</sup> The brass industry therefore found a natural home here and two important centres of brass production developed in Aachen and Nuremberg. An example of a Nuremberg fountain mask, dated to the early 15th century, illustrates the specific character that objects made of brass possessed (fig. 1). Similarities of facial type and the way that the hair is depicted indicate that perhaps the master working on our two busts may have been someone who did not specialise in treasury objects.

The localisation to Southern Germany or Switzerland is also suggested by the unusual practise of using polychromy on metal, which has a tradition in this region. Discussed in a recent exhibition catalogue, this technique was common in 15th century Aosta and Geneva where several polychromed metal busts survive.<sup>2</sup> One example is the silver reliquary bust of San Vittore, which is gilded and polychromed (fig. 2). Much like our examples, the paint on this bust is applied directly to the metal without any preparatory layer and it begs the question: Why use an expensive material, such as brass or silver, but cover it entirely with gilding and polychromy? According to Alessandra Vallet, the answer is twofold. Unlike wood, metal was increasingly thought to be a more appropriate material to house sacred remains of saints. In addition to this, it is thought that the growing taste for naturalism in the 15th century and the ‘evocative force’ of polychromed wooden busts probably created a shift in the desired aesthetic of the metal busts of Southern Germany and Switzerland.<sup>3</sup>



**Fig.1**  
Fountain Mask  
Germany, Nuremberg  
Early 15th century  
Germanisches Nationalmuseum Pl 0.225

1, ‘Dish,’ Victoria & Albert Museum <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O88072/dish-unknown/>> (accessed Feb, 2020).

2, Alessandra Vallet, ‘Busti reliquiario medievali a cavaliere delle Alpi,’ in *Ritratti d’oro e d’argento Reliquiari medievali in Piemonte, Valle d’Aosta, Svizzera e Savoia*, Simonetta Castronovo and Viviana Maria Vallet, eds. (Torino, 2021), 59 – 61.

3, *Ibid.*

Another stylistic comparison to these busts can be found in a copper bust now in the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (fig. 3). Dated to the second half of the 15th century, the general style of the Ringling bust, including the loose hair under a diadem, the archaic aesthetic and the dress type, is comparable to our examples. Another comparison can also be drawn with a reliquary bust of a female saint in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 4). While the MET bust was made by a more accomplished artist, the similarity in dress type, including a glass medallion suspended on the necklace, a two layer 'v' shaped dress and a diadem, provides further evidence for dating and localising our busts to Germany in circa 1500.

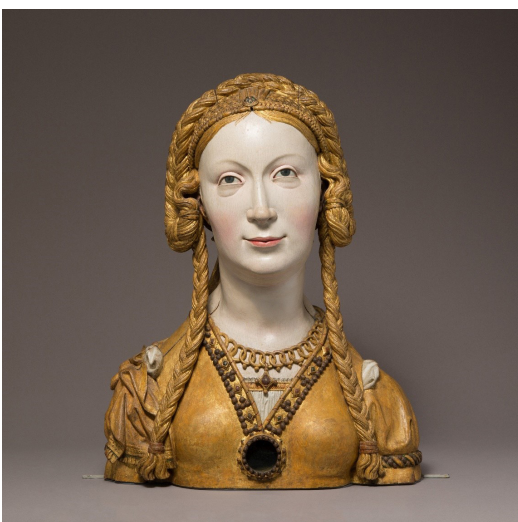
The two reliquary busts with their slit throats and arrows through their hearts probably represent two of the 11,000 Virgins who, along with Saint Ursula, the daughter of an English king, were slaughtered by the Huns during the siege of Cologne in A.D. 238. As told in the Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine, Ursula led a large 'army' of Virgin women on a march from England to Cologne, accompanied by pope Cyriacus, the bishop of Basel, and other dignitaries. They accepted the 'crown of martyrdom' when 'the barbarians saw them, rushed upon them with wild yells, and, like wolves ravaging a flock of sheep, slew them all.'<sup>4</sup> During the first half of the 14th century, there was an extraordinary explosion in devotion to these saints following the believed discovery of their bones in Roman grave fields near the city walls.<sup>5</sup>



**Fig.2**  
Bust of San Vittore  
After 1418  
Gilded and painted silver  
Switzerland, Saint-Maurice, Abbey of Saint-Maurice d'Augaune



**Fig.3**  
Virgin Saint  
Germany  
Second half of the 15th century  
Gilded copper  
The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art



**Fig.4**  
Reliquary Bust of a Female Saint  
Southern Netherlands  
c. 1520  
MET 59.70

4, W. G. Ryan trans., *Jacobus de Voragine; The Golden Legend*, Princeton and Oxford, 2012 ed., 644  
5, See A. Legner ed., *Die heilige Ursula und ihre elftausend Jungfrauen*, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, 1978, especially pp.9-14