

Saints Peter, James Major, and Judas Thaddeus
France or the Southern Low Countries
c. 1525



Each roundel 20.8 cm diameter; clear glass with silver stain and dark brown vitreous paint framed in a modern perimeter lead. The roundel with Saint James is completely intact. Those with Saint Peter and Saint Judas Thaddeus have a number of repaired breaks and some minor infills. Slight abrasion to the paint surface in places.

Provenance

Private collection, Essex, acquired prior to 1943

Saints Peter, James Major, and Judas Thaddeus stand atop small hillocks in the most essentialised and abstracted of landscapes, the details of which are limited merely to the occasional shrub or tuft of grass. Two of them carry the attributes with which they are most commonly associated - a pilgrim's staff and hat for Saint James and a large key for Saint Peter. More curiously however, Judas Thaddeus is shown holding a long-toothed saw. This must be an error on the part of the painter, since Judas is thought to have been martyred not with a saw but with an axe (though he is occasionally also shown holding a halberd or club; see fig. 1).

It was his co-sufferer Simon the Zealot who was famously martyred by being sawn in two (fig. 2). This erroneous choice of attribute, which conflicts with the prominently placed lettering of Judas's name next to his figure, may reveal the limitations of the painter's knowledge of theology, but, rather intriguingly, we know of other artists working in the same period who seem to have made the same mistake (fig. 3).

The inscriptions accompanying the figures of Peter and Judas Thaddeus are written in the French vernacular - 'S(ain)c(t)e petrus' and 'S(ain)c(t)e judas thade(us)' respectively. As such, they must have been created wither in northern France or in the southern-most glass-producing centres of the Low Countries. They were certainly made to be seen together, and may even have been augmented in their original context of display by the other Disciples of Christ, each occupying a separate roundel. No complete sets of such figures have survived to this day however, making the re-emergence of three from a series a moment of great importance for the study of late-medieval stained glass. Interestingly, the figures of Peter and James were designed with recourse to a single compositional model, with only James' staff and hat were swapped for Saint Peter's conventional bared head and key, showing how quickly and effectively a stock of patterns could be adapted to render an array of differentiated figures.

All three roundels came to us wrapped in newspaper dated to the early 1940s, and none of them seem to have been looked at it many years. They were found with a cache of glass believed to have glazed the windows of the Merchant Taylors' Hall on Threadneedle Street in the City of London. It is likely that the building's modern glass was removed during the Blitz in 1940-41 for safekeeping and never replaced after the Second World War ended, though how our three medieval roundels made their way into the cache remains a tantalising mystery.



Fig. 1
Martin Schongauer (c. 1450/53-1491)
Judas Thaddeus
c. 1480
Engraving



Fig. 2
Martin Schongauer (c. 1450/53-1491)
Simon the Zealot
c. 1480
Engraving



Fig. 3
Master E. S. (c. 1420-1468)
Saint Jude Thaddeus
c. 1450-67
Engraving