

A rock crystal processional cross
Italy, Venice
c. 1300 - 1350 (silver base dated 1541)



45.1 x 38.9 x 3.6 cm (cross), 25.5 x 23 x 19.7 cm (base); rock crystal with gilt-silver mounts, with a silver base dated 1541

Provenance

Private Collection, Germany

A large and impressive processional cross composed of rock crystal mounted on a gilded metal core, forming a central Latin cross with cusped terminals resembling fleur-de-lys on each arm. The construction of our cross is typical of the rock crystal crosses made in Venice in the middle ages, in that it comprises multiple lengths of crystal (ten in this case) interspaced by gilded metal sleeves and joined together using rods which pass through their hollowed centres. The later silver base is decorated with figural grotesques and ornate cartouche ornament, with four standing Apostles arranged around a central architectural knob and a broad stellated foot depicting the four Evangelists. This heavily ornate silver base is inscribed with the date 1541 and the small gilded figures of the Virgin and the crucified Christ are possibly contemporaneous additions incorporated onto the cross in order to update its austere Medieval appearance during the flourishing of the Baroque taste in the late 16th

century. The inscription around the base documents the 16th century patrons who commissioned these additions.

Surviving examples and inventories attest to the popularity of rock crystal crosses throughout Europe from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. The present cross is one of a group described by Hans Hahnloser in his authoritative survey of medieval rock crystal crosses as 'lily crosses', on account of the elegant form of the four fleur-de-lys-type terminals (fig. 1).¹ More than a third of the approximately 120 hard stone crosses catalogued by Hahnloser are given to Venetian workshops, a localisation that thus seems pertinent for the present example. By the 14th century, the workshops in Venice were renowned not only for their glass production but also for their skill in carving hard stones, such as rock crystal, which they mined in Alpine caves.

The acanthus filigree mount on the lowest gilded sleeve of the lower arm is likely to be original, although the metal finials on the end of each of the upper three arms may not be. Nevertheless, similar mounts are found on what is believed to be an untouched example of the medium, preserved in the Musée d'histoire, Berne (illustrated in *Iconoclasme; Vie et mort de l'image médiévale*, Exh. Cat., Berne and Strasbourg, 2001, p. 175).

The visibility of the workmanship here highlights both the craftsmen but also the preciousness of the materials used. Symbolically, rock crystal was an enigmatic material. It was associated with purity, perfection and light, characteristics also linked with Christ, which made it especially desirable for altar furnishings. We can thus imagine the cross being carried during medieval processions and ceremonies, with candle light passing through the crystal and reflecting off the gilding. In such a setting, this processional cross would have had a powerful presence, calling its viewers 'away from external cares'² and inspiring quiet contemplation.

Further reading

Hans. R. Hahnloser, Susanne Brugger-Koch, *Corpus der Hartsteinschliffe des 12-15. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, 1985

¹ Hans. R. Hahnloser, Susanne Brugger-Koch, *Corpus der Hartsteinschliffe des 12-15. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, 1985, p. 46

² Erwin Panofsky (transl.), *Abbot Suger On the Abbey Church of St. Denis and its Art Treasures* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1948).



Fig. 1
Cross
c. 1280-1300
Italy, Venice
Cleveland Museum of Art