

Christ reunited..but where is John the Evangelist ?

Display case 4, Gallery 42

Thanks to the generosity of Edmund de Unger, a lawyer and art collector who has been a friend of the Museum since the 1970s, the British Museum has been able to reunite an engraved altar-cross with its central element, a beautiful enamelled plaque depicting Christ. The cross has been in the Museum's collections since 1895 but, prior to its acquisition, it was broken up and the central plaque - and a plaque depicting John the Baptist which would have sat on the right arm of the cross - was removed. Fine liturgical objects from the Middle Ages were often broken up in this way in order to satisfy the demand of 19th century collectors for small enamels and ivories which could be displayed as objet d'art in cabinets. Sales of these objects ensured they were scattered the length and breadth of Europe and the US. The task of reassembly therefore requires painstaking research and it is very rare that such pieces are reunited.

The reunification of the cross came about as a result of research undertaken in France with the intention of publishing a corpus of 'Limoges' enamels. In the course of preparing this mammoth volume, many old sales catalogues were filleted, many old inventories scoured. Edmund de Unger's plaque was included in these publications and one researcher, noting the similarity in shape and design, suggested it might fit the British Museum's engraved altar cross. The missing plaque would have had to depict Christ crucified, to complete the front of the cross, between three enamel plaques of an angel, the Virgin Mary (on the left arm) and the missing St John on the right. Adam rising from Golgotha is depicted beneath the cross. De Unger's enigmatic plaque is of a quatrefoil shape and shows Christ floating, arms outstretched as if on the cross, against a blue sky studded with 33 stars (symbolising the thirty-three years of Christ's earthly life), the sun and moon. The cross and plaque were brought together and the match was happily confirmed.

The plaque has had a fascinating history since it was removed from the cross. Its beauty had attracted the attention of the predatory commission formed by Adolf Hitler in the final months of the Second World War to create, to the glory of the Führer, a great museum at Linz (Austria), where he had been born. The project aborted of course and many (still not all) of the sequestered works of art found their way back through a checkpoint at Munich in 1945-46. Among these works was the enamelled plaque which was returned to its owner Baron Cassel. He subsequently sold it to Ernst and Martha Kofler-Truniger. The Kofler's collection was acquired in 1971 by Edmund de Unger.

The cross will go on permanent display in the Museum's medieval galleries from February 13. But the one remaining question now is where is the missing St John the Evangelist? If anyone has information pertaining to his whereabouts, please contact the department of Prehistory and Europe at the British Museum.

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