

= Holy Thorn Reliquary =

The Holy Thorn Reliquary was probably created in the 1390s in Paris for John , Duke of Berry , to house a relic of the Crown of Thorns . The reliquary was bequeathed to the British Museum in 1898 by Ferdinand de Rothschild as part of the Waddesdon Bequest . It is one of a small number of major goldsmiths ' works or joyaux that survive from the extravagant world of the courts of the Valois royal family around 1400 . It is made of gold , lavishly decorated with jewels and pearls , and uses the technique of enamelling en ronde bosse , or " in the round " , which had been recently developed when the reliquary was made , to create a total of 28 three @-@ dimensional figures , mostly in white enamel .

Except at its base the reliquary is slim , with two faces ; the front view shows the end of the world and the Last Judgement , with the Trinity and saints above and the resurrection of the dead below , and the relic of a single long thorn believed to come from the crown of thorns worn by Jesus when he was crucified . The rear view has less extravagant decoration , mostly in plain gold in low relief , and has doors that opened to display a flat object , now missing , which was presumably another relic .

The reliquary was in the Habsburg collections from at least the 16th century until the 1860s , when it was replaced by a forgery during a restoration by an art dealer , Salomon Weininger . The fraud remained undetected until well after the original reliquary came to the British Museum . The reliquary was featured in the BBC 's A History of the World in 100 Objects , in which Neil MacGregor described it as " without question one of the supreme achievements of medieval European metalwork " , and was a highlight of the exhibition Treasures of Heaven : Saints , Relics , and Devotion in Medieval Europe at the British Museum from June 23 to October 2011 .

= = History = =

King Louis IX of France bought what he believed to be the authentic Crown of Thorns in Constantinople in 1239 , and individual thorns were distributed as gifts by subsequent French kings . John , Duke of Berry (1340 ? 1416) , brother of King Charles V of France , had this reliquary made to house a single thorn ; it was probably made a few years before he commissioned his famous Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry , and some years after he commissioned the Royal Gold Cup , also in the British Museum . Previously dated between 1401 and 1410 , from evidence in John Cherry 's book of 2010 the reliquary is now thought to have been made before 1397 ; based on the heraldic forms used , the museum now dates it to 1390 ? 97 . The Holy Thorn Reliquary was later thought to have been in the possession of Louis I , Duke of Orléans , but all recent writers prefer his brother , the Duke of Berry .

Its location is unknown until an inventory of 1544 , when it belonged to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V , perhaps as an inheritance from his ancestors the Valois Dukes of Burgundy . It presumably passed to the Austrian branch of the Habsburgs on Charles V 's death , as it is listed in several inventories of the Imperial Schatzkammer (" treasure chamber ") in Vienna from 1677 onwards . It remained in Vienna until after 1860 , when it appeared in an exhibition . Some time after this it was sent to be restored by Salomon Weininger , an art dealer with access to skilled craftsmen , who secretly made a number of copies . He was later convicted of other forgeries , and died in prison in 1879 , but it was still not realised that he had returned one of his copies of the reliquary to the Imperial collections instead of the original . The Viennese Rothschild family bought the original reliquary by 1872 , in ignorance of its provenance ; it was inherited by Ferdinand de Rothschild , who moved to England , and built Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire . One of the copies remained in the Ecclesiastical Treasury of the Imperial Habsburg Court in Vienna , where the deception remained undetected for several decades .

The original reliquary reached the British Museum as part of the Waddesdon Bequest in 1899 , by which time its origins had been " completely lost " and it was described as " Spanish , 16th Century " . Thus its history had to be reconstructed through scholarship ; the meaning of the heraldic plaques on the castle base had by now been lost in both London and Vienna . The first publication to assert

that the London reliquary was the one recorded in earlier Viennese inventories was an article by Joseph Destrée in 1927 ; the matter was not finally settled until 1959 when the Viennese version was brought to London to enable close comparison . The assembled experts from the British Museum , Victoria and Albert Museum and Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna agreed that the London reliquary was the original . Under the terms of the Waddesdon Bequest the reliquary cannot leave the museum ; in 2011 it was omitted from the Cleveland and Baltimore legs of the exhibition Treasures of Heaven : Saints , Relics , and Devotion in Medieval Europe . Normally it is on display in Room 45 , the dedicated Waddesdon Bequest Room , as specified in the terms of the bequest .

= = Description = =

The Holy Thorn Reliquary is made of gold , enamel , rock crystal , pearls , rubies and sapphires . It is just over 30 centimetres (12 in) high and weighs 1 @.@ 4 kilograms (3 @.@ 1 lb) . There are some areas of damage (including what appears to be deliberate removal of enamel in the 19th century) , and small losses and repairs ; but generally the reliquary is in good condition . The central front compartment holding the relic is protected by a thin pane of rock crystal , which has kept it in perfect condition . The enamel is mostly in *ronde bosse* technique , applied to three @-@ dimensional figures , with white as the dominant colour . White enamel using lead was only recently developed , and very fashionable , dominating many contemporary *ronde bosse* works . There is also red , green , blue , pink and black enamel . Pure gold is used throughout , which is rare even in royal commissions of such pieces at this period ; most use cheaper silver @-@ gilt for the structural framework .

The jewels , which would have been keenly appreciated by contemporary viewers , include two large sapphires , one above God the Father at the very top of the reliquary , where it may have represented heaven , and the other below Christ , on which the thorn is mounted . The gold elements framing God the Father and the central compartment with Christ and the thorn are decorated with alternating rubies and pearls , totalling fourteen of each . All the gemstones have the smooth and polished *cabochon* cut normal in medieval jewellery , and though they are set in the reliquary with gold " claws " , all are drilled through as though for threading on a necklace , suggesting that they are re @-@ used from another piece . There may have been other jewels now lost , for example mounted in two holes on either side of the door of the castle @-@ like base .

= = = Front face = = =

The design of the front face is based on the general resurrection of the dead following the Last Judgment . At the top sits God the Father , above two angels . A small hole at the level of their knees shows where a dove representing the Holy Spirit was originally attached ; with Christ below , all three persons of the Trinity were therefore represented . A round @-@ topped compartment protected by a rock @-@ crystal " window " holds the relic itself and the group around Christ . Christ in Judgment is shown seated displaying the wounds of his crucifixion , with his feet resting on the globe of the world , and making a blessing gesture . As with all the enamelled figures that are still extant , the hair is in gold , the main robe is in white , and the flesh is in white with coloured eyes and lips , a touch of pink on the cheeks . Behind Christ the celestial spheres are represented like a rainbow , and above him fly two angels holding Instruments of the Passion , including the crown of thorns over his head ; behind him a cross in shallow relief emerges from the curved gold background . The thorn relic rises below and in front of him , mounted on a " monstrously large sapphire " .

To the left and right of Christ are shown John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary in supplicant poses , a traditional grouping ; John was also one of the Duke 's patron saints . Around the central scene small figures of the twelve Apostles carrying their identifying attributes emerge from the foliage border of oak leaves and tendrils ; the uppermost heads on each side are replacements , probably by Weininger in the 1860s .

Below this upper section there is a gold scroll label with the Latin inscription *Ista est una spinea*

corone / Domini nostri ihesu xpisti (" This is a thorn from the crown / Of Our Lord Jesus Christ ") in black enamel filling the engraved letters . Below the inscription is a scene showing the mass resurrection of naked people rising from their graves on the Day of Judgement . On a green enamel mound like a hillside are four naked figures , two men and two women , emerging from tiny gold coffins whose lids have been upturned on the ground ; the women wear white caps . Four angels blowing horns sound the " Last Trump " of the Book of Revelation , standing on the turrets of a tiny castle which serves as the base of the reliquary .

The Last Judgement was an especially appropriate subject for setting a relic from the Crown of Thorns . Some thought that the crown was held by the French kings on loan , and would be reclaimed by Christ on the Day of Judgement ? a belief expressed in the antiphon sung at Sens Cathedral in 1239 to celebrate the arrival of the main relic .

Two panels on the walls of the castle are patterned with the coat of arms of the Duke of Berry , and their form has been crucial for establishing the provenance and date of the work . Two of the angels with horns have blue fleurs @-@ de @-@ lis on their robes ; the other two , patterns of dots in blue . All the arches of the castle are semicircular , and in fact the whole reliquary lacks any Gothic pointed arches , even among the tracery ? a sign of advanced artistic taste at the time . In this respect the Holy Thorn Reliquary contrasts strongly with the Tableau of the Trinity in the Louvre (possibly made in London) , whose framework is a forest of crocketed Gothic pinnacles , although estimates of its date cover the same period as the reliquary .

= = = Rear face = = =

The rear face is plainer , with no jewels , but still highly decorated ; Cherry speculates that it may originally have been much more simple and not designed for viewing , with most of the other elements added after it was originally made . At the top is a medallion with the face of Christ set in a sunburst . The central round @-@ topped area contains two doors , secured with a small gold pin , containing full @-@ length gold figures in relief , chased in gold , a feature unique to this reliquary . On the left door is the archangel Saint Michael , spearing a dragon representing the devil . He was both the patron saint of the French monarchy , and also traditionally the person responsible for supervising the chaotic crowds at the Last Judgement , when he is often shown in art weighing souls in a pair of scales . On the right is Saint Christopher , carrying the Christ child on his shoulders , who raises his hand in blessing . There was a popular belief that sight of an image of Saint Christopher meant that a person would not die on that day without receiving the last rites , which may well explain his presence here .

In the fake in Vienna , the figures of both saints are enamelled ; flesh is white , Michael and the Christ child have red robes , and Christopher blue , and the saints stand on a brownish dragon and blue water respectively , with green grass below both of these . Some scholars have thought it unlikely that the forger invented this scheme , and therefore presumed that he copied enamel on the original that has been removed in the 19th century , probably because it was damaged ? sections of enamel cannot be patched up , but must be removed completely and redone . However John Cherry believes this and other changes in the enamel of the Vienna version are elaborations by Weininger and his craftsmen ; for example in Vienna the wings of the trumpeting angels are coloured . The two figures are in a sophisticated " soft and flowing " International Gothic style executed with great virtuosity ; Michael 's staff is detached from the background over most of its length and is one of a number of elements that extend outside the frame of the door . If there was once enamel on the two figures it would have been at least mainly in more fragile translucent enamels , as the very fine working of many details of them was clearly intended to be seen . The rougher working of the surfaces at the bottom of the doors : the dragon below St Michael , the water below St Christopher , and the ground below both of these , suggests that the missing original enamels were opaque in these areas . But all the extra enamel in Vienna is opaque , including the saints ' figures , and the effect of the more intense colours is " lurid " and " offends our eyes because of its crudity " .

When the pin is removed and the small doors opened , there is now nothing to see but " a flat layer of plaster , with a sheet of nineteenth @-@ century paper or vellum in front of it " . Whatever was

designed to be displayed has now gone ; it must have been flat , and was perhaps another relic , probably a textile , or a picture on vellum . The Veil of Veronica , in either form , is a possibility ; the face of Christ at the top in a circular setting often represents this . Outside the doors the foliate border of the front is continued , uninterrupted by figures . Below two of the angels with trumpets can be seen , with an unpopulated stretch of the green hillside , and below it the back of the castle base , which has apparently had another arched " leg " in the centre crudely removed , leaving a jagged edge , and also making the reliquary rather less stable .

= = Goldsmith = =

The maker of the work is unknown ; it is not signed or marked , and goldsmiths of the period rarely did this . There are a number of goldsmiths ' names known from accounts and other records , but none of the few surviving works can be attached to a particular maker . Paris was the centre of production for the great numbers of joyaux , secular and religious , produced for the extended Valois royal family and other buyers . Berry and his brothers and nephews had goldsmiths on salaries or retainers for what must have been a continuous flow of commissions , whose results are tersely catalogued in various inventories of the period , but of which there are now only a handful of survivals . Only one item mentioned in the records of the Berry collection might match the reliquary , but this was made after 1401 , which conflicts with the date suggested by the heraldry . Another possibility is that the reliquary was made and given as a gift , as many such pieces were , in between inventories .

= = = Techniques = = =

The reliquary exuberantly exploits the *ronde bosse* or " encrusted " enamelling technique , which involves creating small three @-@ dimensional figures coated in enamel on a metal core , often just gold wire . The technique was a recent innovation which the goldsmiths working for the Valois were pushing to its limits at the end of the 14th century . The main colour of enamel used is a lead @-@ based white , which had also only been developed a decade or two at most before the date of the reliquary , and was evidently very fashionable at the end of the century . White dominates the few surviving large enamels in *ronde bosse* dated to the period beginning about 1380 and ending about 1410 , used as here for both the clothes and flesh of the figures . Gold is used for their hair , and other enamel colours are mostly used at the neck and cuffs to demarcate between white robes and white flesh ; " throughout , colour is used in a very considered way " ; " a controlled use of red includes the alternation of rubies and pearls " , except where " a single sapphire interrupts this rhythm " above God the Father . Blue , an important enamel colour in other works , is almost entirely absent here , perhaps so as not to overshadow the large sapphires .

Other techniques are also used with a great degree of skill ; the large figures on the rear are chased , with St Michael 's wings being represented on the flat surface of the door in delicate stippled or *pointillé* work using punches , which is too detailed to see in most photographs , and indeed hard to see on the original . Michael 's body is also feathered , stopping at the neck , ankles and wrists , a " most exceptional feature " often referred to as " feather tights " , that perhaps borrows from the costumes of liturgical dramas . Other elements were cast in small moulds , and most of the visible gold has been burnished to give a smooth and shining appearance .

= = Patron = =

Jean , duc de Berry (1340 ? 1416) , or the " excellent puissant Prince Jehan filz de roy de France Duc de Berry " (" excellent and powerful prince Jean , son of the king of France , Duke of Berry ") , as his secretary inscribed one of his manuscripts , was the third of the four sons of King John II of France ? Charles V , Louis I , Duke of Anjou (1339 ? 1384) , Berry and Philip the Bold , Duke of Burgundy (1342 ? 1404) . All commissioned great numbers of works of art in various media , and in particular spent huge sums on works in gold and silver . Although it is Berry who is especially

remembered as a patron , partly because he specialized in illuminated manuscripts which have little value in their materials and so have not been recycled , his brother Louis of Anjou had over 3 000 pieces of plate at one point . These included wholly secular pieces with sculptures in enamel that can only be imagined by comparison as regards technique to the handful of reliquaries , like the Holy Thorn Reliquary , that have survived from the period , and as regards subject matter to tapestries and some secular illuminated manuscripts . There are extremely detailed inventories of Berry 's possessions including ones from 1401 ? 1403 and 1413 ? 1416 , however none contain an entry whose description matches the reliquary .

Soon after Berry 's death in 1416 , the bulk of his treasures were seized and melted down by the English , who were occupying much of northern France after their victory at the Battle of Agincourt the previous year . That the reliquary escaped this fate suggests it may have been given away by Berry , perhaps to his Burgundian cousins , in whose family it is next recorded (the Burgundian heiress Mary of Burgundy married the Habsburg Maximilian I , Holy Roman Emperor in 1477) . A reliquary that was donated to the church had a better chance of surviving than the similar secular works that are now only known from their descriptions in inventories , where scenes of courtly pleasure were depicted with portrait figures of the princes and their friends . A work belonging to Berry 's elder brother Anjou showed the romance of Tristan and Isolde , with King Mark spying on the lovers from a tree above them , giving himself away when they see " the enamelled reflection of his face in the enamelled brook " .

One work that survived long enough to be recorded in an 18th -century painting had a very similar gold castle as its base , with a paradisaal garden within the walls , in this case with trees bearing pearls and red gems . However the rest of the piece was very different in scale , with a single large white enamel figure of the Archangel Michael impaling Satan with a lance -like jewelled cross , completely out of scale with the garden in which he stands . This is the St Michael and the Devil Group , which can be reliably dated to before 1397 , when it was given to King Charles VI of France , Berry 's nephew , as a New Year 's gift by another uncle , Philip the Bold , Duke of Burgundy . It later passed to a church at Ingolstadt in Bavaria , where it remained until it was destroyed in 1801 .

Berry was religious as well as worldly , and collected relics as keenly as other types of objects . By 1397 both of his sons had died , he was in his late fifties , and he had begun to think of his tomb , finally deciding to build a new " Sainte Chapelle " in his capital of Bourges to house it . His collection of relics included objects claimed to be the wedding ring of the Virgin Mary , a cup used at the Wedding at Cana , a piece of the Burning Bush and many others . However the provenance of the Holy Thorn , as well as its centrality to the Passion of Christ must have given it a special status . The crown from which the thorn came had been bought in 1239 by Louis IX , both a saint and King of France , from the Latin Emperor in Constantinople , Baldwin II , along with a portion of the True Cross . Both had been in Constantinople since the Muslim Conquest of the Holy Land in the 7th century , and may very well be the same relics that Bishop Paulinus of Nola saw in Jerusalem in 409 . There are a number of other thorn relics said to have come from the relic in the Paris Sainte Chapelle , including the far smaller Salting Reliquary in the British Museum , a French pendant of about 1340 .

Berry may have kept the reliquary with him on his round of visits to his many castles and palaces , or it may have been kept in a chapel , perhaps the Bourges Sainte Chapelle , built in emulation of the king 's Paris Sainte Chapelle , where the Crown of Thorns itself was kept . The reliquary is relatively small and would almost certainly have had a custom -made carrying case like that for the Royal Gold Cup , in which the cup came to the British Museum .

= = Gallery = =