



Group from a crucifixion scene (one of two)

Not on display

Title/Description: Group from a crucifixion scene (one of two)

Born: 1400 - 1425

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Alabaster

Measurements: h. 355 x w. 210 x d. 140 mm

Accession Number: 397b

Historic Period: Early 15th century

Production Place: Germany or Flanders, Belgium

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Each of the two figurative groups cluster around the lower part of two crosses, those of the two thieves who flanked Christ at his Crucifixion. The sculptures clearly formed part of an elaborate Crucifixion scene containing multiple figures. Copper fixings on the reverse, apparently original, would have secured them to a framework, and dowel joints (particularly at the top, where the main part of each cross would have fitted), allowed the attachment of other elements. Smaller dowel holes on some figures may have allowed the attachment of swords or spears.

Kim Woods has recently identified the figures. [1] The central figure in the group around the lefthand cross (UEA 397 A), originally that of the Good Thief, is Longinus, named in the apocryphal gospels as the Roman soldier who pierced Christ's side with his spear, [2] and later described in The Golden Legend as being cured of an eye condition by Christ's blood. [3] The other figure carrying a long weapon is identified as the centurion who, with his companions, recognised Christ as the Son of God. [4] The figure behind, carrying a flagon may be Stephaton, carrying the vinegar which he offered to Christ on a sponge. [5]

In contrast, the group beneath the righthand cross (UEA 397 B), originally that of the Bad Thief, depicts Christ's enemies, including both soldiers and a merchant figure. A dramatic confrontation is set up between Longinus and the merchant, and this echoes the interaction between separate groups seen in other sculpted Crucifixion compositions.

Along with the fainting Virgin, supported by her female companions, and a group of male supporters

usually including St John and Joseph of Arimathea, these characters were familiar components of Crucifixion iconography, other than the merchant figure. Originating in fourteenth-century Italy, and produced in materials including wood, stone, ivory and bone, as well as alabaster, elaborate Crucifixions were produced throughout Europe from Germany and the Netherlands to France and Spain. [6] These scenes, usually set in a framework as altarpieces (as would have been the case with the Sainsbury groups), encouraged a meditative form of devotion in which the gaze of the worshipper could meander across the various components of the whole while recalling the different elements of the story, as well as focus on Christ hanging on the cross representing, in bodily form, the eucharist offered at the altar.

Though probably Netherlandish, the style has features – such as the bulbous eyes and elongated, less naturalistic figures – which relate to products of the successful English alabaster industry which churned out hundreds of sculptures from the late fourteenth into the sixteenth centuries. It has been suggested that the sculptor may have trained in England but worked in the Rhineland or Flanders, [7] but the echoes would seem more likely to indicate familiarity with the English products resulting from their extreme popularity on the Continent.

Eleanor Townsend, March 2022

[1] See the detailed discussion of these two fragments in K. Woods, *Cut in Alabaster: a Material of Sculpture and its European Traditions 1330-1530*, London, 2018, pp.290-2.

[2] Gospel of Nicodemus 7:8 (<https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/lbob/lbob10.htm>); John 19:34 describes the piercing of Christ's side.

[3] 'Here beginneth of S. Longinus the Life' in Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, vol. 3 (http://www.intratext.com/ixt/ENG1293/_P2Q.HTM)

[4] Matthew 27:54, Mark 15:39.

[5] Matthew 27:48, Mark 15:36; Luke 23: 36-37; John 19: 28-30.

[6] See Woods, particularly the discussion about 'crowded Crucifixion' compositions on p.99 (as well as chapter 8 on altarpieces more generally). The former focuses on the best-known alabaster example of the iconography, the Rimini Master alabaster crucifixion, c.1420-30, Liebieghaus Museum, Frankfurt (see also H. Beck, P. Bol, B. Decker, *Liebieghaus, Museum alter Plastik: guide to the collections*, vol. 1 (*Medieval Sculpture*), Frankfurt, 1980, pp.102-7).

[7] S. Hooper (ed.), *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection*, catalogue in three volumes, New Haven and London, 1997, cat. no. 367-8.

Further Reading

K. Woods, *Cut in Alabaster: a Material of Sculpture and its European Traditions 1330-1530*, London, 2018

S. Hooper (ed.), Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, catalogue in three volumes, New Haven and London, 1997, cat. no. 367-8

Provenance

Previously belonged to Sydney Burney, art dealer, London, d.1951.

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1952. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
