

Art review: Splendor abounds in museum's display of grisly holy relics in Baltimore

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By Jason Edward Kaufman
Sunday, March 6, 2011; E01

Would you believe that John the Baptist's tooth, the arm of Saint George and the head of Saint Sebastian are currently in Baltimore?

Right. We don't quite believe it, either.

But such grisly relics are being touted as part of a stunningly rich exhibition at the Walters Art Museum that brings together tantalizing mementos of Christian saints and holy persons - either their supposed body parts or items associated with their lives. No matter what the wall labels say, though, it's not the actual or alleged relics that matter so much as their containers and the art that embellishes them: the 130 golden sculptures, jewel-encrusted and enameled boxes and crosses, paintings and illuminated manuscripts that make up "Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe," on view until May 15.

For believers, these "reliquaries," created in Europe and the Middle East, provided access to sacred objects in a way that intensified spiritual meditation. In medieval Christendom, where churches often were built above or near the tombs of martyrs, thousands of pilgrims crisscrossed Europe from one church to the next to pray before reliquaries, make donations and purchase souvenirs, paying for room and board along the way. It was big business.

One type of reliquary would be immediately familiar to anyone who has ever brought back stones or shells from a vacation: a 6th-century wooden box whose lid slides back to reveal rocks set in plaster and labeled with the names of Holy Land sites. The lid shows painted scenes of Christ's birth, baptism, crucifixion and other events. It's one of nine pieces the Vatican lent from its Sanctum Sanctorum, the "Holy of Holies" where relics and treasures were kept for use by the popes.

Clerics, emperors and noblemen collected relics for prestige, protection and profit. There were great repositories in Aachen, Cologne, Paris and elsewhere; by 1520, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, had amassed some 19,000 items.

With all due respect to the holy persons represented, the authenticity of most relics challenges credulity. The Walters's curator, Martina Bagnoli, says relic-mongering was a constant source of fraud; she cites Boccaccio's tale of Fra' Cipolla in "The Decameron," about a monk who cons his audience with spurious relics. Obviously, there was ample room for outright chicanery: One item on display, the curved horn of an ibex, was treasured as a magical "griffin claw" of Saint Cuthbert, something straight out of Harry Potter.

The greatest relics, of course, were associated with Christ and the Virgin, both of whom, per doctrine, rose bodily into heaven leaving nothing behind. That problem was solved with reliquaries said to contain Christ's baby teeth and swaddling clothes, spines from his crown of thorns, nails and the vinegar sponge from his crucifixion, and numerous splinters from the cross. Also in circulation were swatches from Mary's shirt and veil, her hair and, believe it or not, samples of her milk. (The Baltimore exhibit includes a reliquary that ostensibly has bits of her shirt and belt, and there's a rock crystal flask with an inscription that suggests it once may have held some of her hair.)

But the exhibit is less about the authenticity of the remains - many of which are anyway missing - than the elaborate containers commissioned to house them. These anonymously made artworks are among the greatest

surviving examples of medieval craftsmanship, often combining superb sculptural elements and precious materials.

Hints of divine perfection

The show opens with one of the most dazzling pieces: a gilded-copper, nearly life-size half-figure of Saint Baudime. Never before outside France, this 12th-century masterpiece comes from a church built where the 1st-century evangelical saint's companions were buried in Gaul, and originally included a vial said to contain his blood. Though enlivened by naturalistic details such as inset eyes and gesticulating arms, this radiant, idealized image is meant to convey heavenly perfection.

So is the realistic head of Saint Eustace, lent by the British Museum. Made in the Upper Rhine region around 1210, it consists of a wooden bust that housed numerous relics and a hammered silver-gilt head that covered it like a divine skin, replete with a jeweled brow band. This arresting image is far more powerful than the nearby reliquary for the head of Saint Sebastian, a covered bowl that looks like a soup tureen.

Equally astonishing are the standing forearm-shaped reliquaries that became popular in the 12th century in part because they could be "animated" by the clergy, who could wield them to perform benedictions or healing touches - as if the saint himself were performing the acts. A 14th-century Neapolitan example that allegedly contains a bit of the arm of Saint Luke has a shining hand grasping a golden quill - which alludes to his writing a Gospel and drawing the Virgin.

The arm of Saint George was kept in Byzantium in a simple silver sheath, and when the Venetians acquired it in the 13th century they placed it in an elaborate vase-like container covered with Gothic ornament. (Another reliquary arm of Saint George is in Prague. One wonders: Which of these preserves a part of the arm that held the lance that killed the dragon?)

The French city of Limoges became a veritable factory for reliquaries, most of them house-shaped boxes covered with enameled copper plaques illustrating scenes from the lives of saints. Particularly popular was Archbishop Thomas Becket of England, who, after a falling out with the king, was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 and beatified within three years. His blood and skull became prized relics of the cathedral, and pilgrims took away flasks of water mixed with his blood.

The exhibition - co-organized by the Walters, the Cleveland Art Museum and the British Museum in London - is sumptuously installed in rooms painted regal red or blue, with the gilded, jeweled and enameled reliquaries spotlighted in vitrines so as to glitter as they would under candlelight within the similarly dark setting of a church. But it includes more prosaic forms of reliquaries, as well.

There are models that could be taken on trips, carried into battle, or worn as symbols of social status or for personal protection. Terra-cotta pilgrim flasks contained oil or water sanctified at holy sites, and souvenir tokens were made with the reputedly miraculous earth from the base of columns atop which the 6th century's Saint Symeon the Stylite and a follower stood in prayer in the Syrian desert.

The Walters show concludes with a big surprise: reliquaries of Maryland's Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821) and Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos (1819-67). In 1975 Seton became the first native-born American to be canonized. She had established a sisterhood in Emmitsburg dedicated to the care and education of girls, and three instances of miraculous cures were attributed to her. The shrine that houses her remains lent the Walters a display piece made in 1965 that contains what looks like a dried finger under glass at the center of a geometrically patterned silver disk.

Kaufman is an art critic and reporter whose In View blog is hosted by Artinfo.com.

"Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe" Through May 15, at the Walters Art Museum, 600 N. Charles St., Baltimore. More information at thewalters.org.

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