

Classical and Christian Symbolism: An Early Renaissance Female Saint from Augsburg

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IN MEMORY OF HANNS SWARZENSKI (1903–1985)¹

AMONG THE LARGE NUMBER of works of art bequeathed to The Metropolitan Museum of Art by George Blumenthal is a beautiful lindenwood sculpture representing a standing young woman, elegantly attired and bejeweled (Figures 1–4). Unfortunately her hands—one or both of which would have held an attribute—are missing and with them were lost the standard clues to her identity. A rather unusual clue remains, however, as I will elaborate.

The front and sides of the figure are carved but most of the back, below the neck, is cut flat and hollowed out lengthwise from the upper back to the feet (Figure 5).² While the woman's right leg and foot stand firmly on the ground, her left leg flexes forward at the knee making the body bend in that direction. The figure is kept in perfect balance thanks to the position of her left foot, which points out with heel raised, and to the slight movement of the head to her right, which helps to maintain the statue's verticality.

Apart from the important loss of both hands, the condition of the sculpture is excellent. The delicate carving of the details indicates that the figure was never intended to be polychromed. Some touches of color were added to give life to the features, as can be seen from the remains of red pigment on the lips. Most likely the pupils were also painted as they appear in comparable examples. A few wormholes are scattered on the back of the head, on the lower part of the dress and mantle, and on the rocklike ground under the feet, the left corner of which is a restora-

tion. A small loss in a fold on the figure's right side and a crack under her left arm complete the damages. Part of a nail on the upper back, and two holes, one on each side of the back at the bottom, are the only traces of the original attachments that must have fastened the sculpture to a flat background in a shrine or altarpiece.

Bearing in mind the German tradition of using free-standing sculptures for altarpieces instead of the relief compositions favored in other countries such as Italy and Spain, we can safely assume that this is an appliqué figure which probably stood with others flanking some central religious representation.³ Arrangements of standing saints—all female, all male, or mixed—usually under arches, appear in Germany and elsewhere in paintings such as the Hohenburger

1. This article, in a slightly different form, was delivered with many others by colleagues, friends, and admirers to Hanns Swarzenski in celebration of his eightieth birthday. The occasion was organized by Willibald Sauerländer and Dietrich Kötzsche at the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich, on Aug. 29, 1983. Dr. Swarzenski died on June 22, 1985, when this article was in press.

2. A modern strip of iron is fastened along the hollow part and to the modern wooden block on which the sculpture now stands.

3. H. Wölfflin discussed the different approach of Italian and German artists to relief sculpture in his *Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl*, translated by Alice Muehsam and Norma A. Shatan as *The Sense of Form in Art* (New York, 1958).



1, 2. *Female Saint*, here identified as *St. Barbara*, German, Augsburg, ca. 1510. Lindenwood, H. 24½ in. (62.2 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George Blumenthal, 41.190.95

3–5. *St. Barbara*, profiles and back



Altar executed in tempera on panel by Hans Holbein the Elder, now in the National Gallery of Prague.⁴ These paintings look like models for sculptures or as if they were inspired by sculptures. One has to remember that Holbein the Elder was related by marriage to the Erharts—the most outstanding family of sculptors in Augsburg in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century.⁵ Among the female saints most often represented are Margaret of Antioch, Cather-

ine of Alexandria, Dorothy, and Barbara. In addition, or instead of one or two of these, we sometimes find St. Lucy, St. Apollonia, or the saint connected

4. For the Holbein example see *Hans Holbein der Ältere und die Kunst der Spätgotik*, exh. cat. (Augsburg, 1965) nos. 45, 46, figs. 45–48.

5. For a clear family tree showing the Erhart–Holbein relationship see Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven/London, 1980) p. 129.



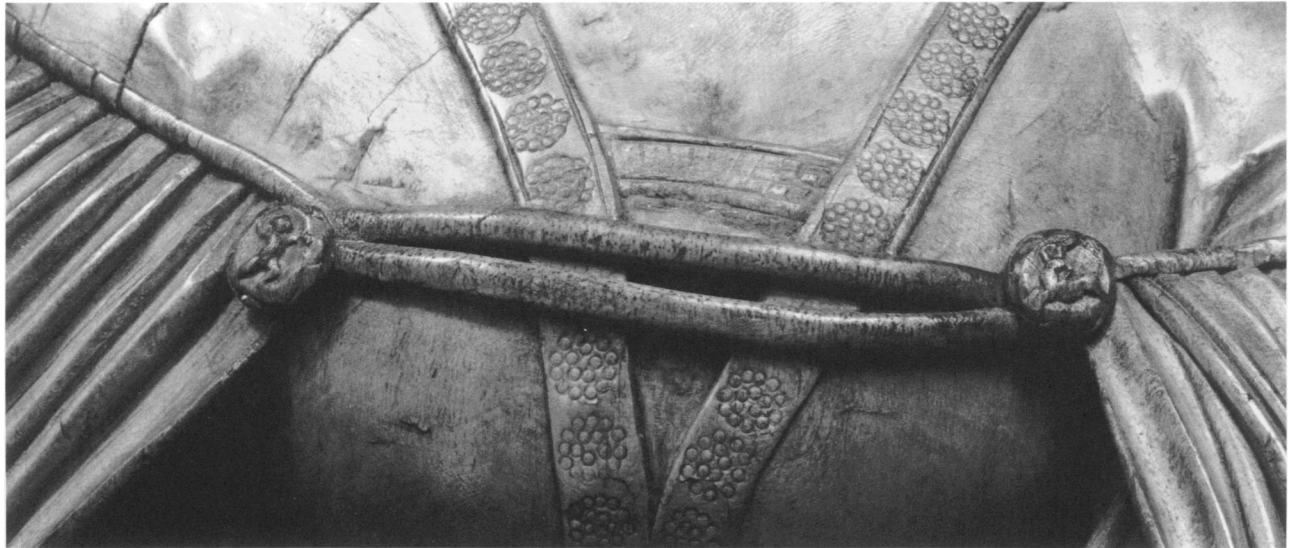
6. *St. Dorothy*, German, Augsburg, early 16th century. Lindenwood, H. 32½ in. (82.5 cm.). Frankfurt am Main, Städtische Galerie-Liebieghaus (photo: Liebieghaus)

with a particular town, church, or donor. Of the male saints, the most favored as escorts for the young female martyrs are Sebastian and Roch.

When, for one reason or another, altarpieces were dismantled, sculptured figures were often scattered. A statue that shares many of the characteristics of the Metropolitan Museum's figure is a lindenwood *St. Dorothy* in the Städtische Galerie-Liebieghaus in Frankfurt am Main (Figure 6).⁶ This figure, with her left leg bent at the knee and head inclined slightly to her right, shows a very similar pose, as well as a resemblance in the features and in the handling of the draperies. *St. Dorothy's* attributes have fortunately been preserved—a basket, which according to legend contained apples and roses (here it has only the latter), and a garland of roses on her head. The Frankfurt sculpture is 8 inches taller than the one in the Metropolitan Museum. Were it not for this disparity, the two are close enough in style, iconography, and medium to have formed part of the same ensemble. From the pose, both once stood on the right of a central composition.

The common denominator between these two statues is their natural, relaxed pose and an awareness of the body under the drapery that has a classical origin, typical of the Italian Renaissance but unusual in the North. They are also linked by their delicately carved ornamentation, which is reminiscent of goldsmith workmanship. The belted dresses with their generous décolletage are very similar, and the mantles, each fastened by a double cord and worn low on the shoulders, are virtually identical. Both figures wear ornaments around their necks and show a similar treatment of the locks of hair on either side of the face. In the Metropolitan Museum statue the rest of the hair is covered by an elaborately embroidered cap

6. I am very grateful to Michael Maek-Gerard, who visited the Metropolitan Museum in 1981, when we exchanged ideas about the two sculptures. Later we provided each other with photographs both for a catalogue of the Liebieghaus he was preparing and for this article, which I have had in mind for several years.



7. *St. Barbara*, detail

surmounted by a small crown;⁷ St. Dorothy's hair, under an exquisitely carved wreath of roses, falls luxuriantly about her shoulders and back. The faces have a youthful roundness—more pronounced in the Metropolitan Museum example—unlike other sculptures of the Swabian area or elsewhere in Germany, which usually exhibit flatter cheeks and longer faces. The small features of the Frankfurt and New York sculptures and the almond-shaped eyes, drooping slightly at the outside corners, are dominated by the same high, rounded foreheads. Neither figure has carved eyebrows; these are only suggested by the bone structure.

The Metropolitan Museum sculpture was not on display when I joined the Department of Medieval Art in 1956 and, to my knowledge, never had been. Shortly after my arrival, needing something to brighten up my surroundings, I took the little lady and placed her facing my desk. One day, when I was pondering over some other project, my eyes rested on the sculpture and focused more closely on the two buttons connected by the double cord which holds the mantle. Even from a considerable distance I noticed that they were carved with different decorative motifs. To my surprise I saw that the button on the left represented a naked male figure, running to the right, his raised right arm holding something like a stick or a club. The button on the right represents a centaur facing to the left. Both tiny images (the diameter of

each button is only 1 centimeter) are set within pentalobular frames as if they were cameos (Figure 7). I considered the two motifs as a unit because, although the centaur could have had a decorative meaning on its own, the running man had none. The scene that came to mind was the fight of Hercules and the centaur Nessus, a subject often found in classical sources and, by extension, in art of the Italian Renaissance. In classical mythology Hercules is a symbol of strength, as is Samson in biblical iconography. But why would Hercules be represented in the jewelry of a Christian saint?

A careful study of the statue is needed to explain this connection. The young woman, to judge by the position of the arms, was holding something in front of her. A small fragment of the missing object can be seen attached to the fold of the mantle below the waist and near the break of her right arm. The object must have been no taller than the distance between this remaining fragment and the Hercules button or it would have obscured the latter. The base of the attribute would have rested on the saint's right hand, which would have been extended forward palm up, while

7. The closest parallel for her elaborate hair covering is in a sculptural group by the Ottobeuren Master representing a kneeling St. Margaret accompanied by St. George, in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg (see Baxandall, *Lime-wood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, pl. 87).



8. *St. Dorothy*, detail (photo: U. Edelmann)

its top would have been steadied by her left hand bent upward (the positions of the missing hands can be detected quite clearly from the angles of the forearms). Thinking, from the statue's general appearance, that the saint represented was likely to be St. Barbara, I first took the attribute to have been a tower—one of St. Barbara's symbols. Closer examination of German art, however, and more precisely of Swabian sculpture and painting, has persuaded me that the tower is used infrequently in German representations of St. Barbara, while a chalice—another of her attributes—appears almost constantly. A chalice, moreover, would have fitted the space available and

would also have caught up the folds on the left side of the saint's mantle. The figure of St. Dorothy uses her right hand to hold the left side of her mantle across her body in a similar manner (Figure 6).

According to legend, St. Barbara, one of the most venerated of the early martyrs, suffered humiliation and torture at the hands of her pagan father. Imprisoned in a tower, she continued her study of the Christian faith and, refusing to renounce this, was put to death by her father. Her life and martyrdom made St. Barbara a symbol of Christian fortitude. The tower became one of her attributes and the chalice another, the tower a sign of her strength and the chalice of her faith. It is as the *Fortezza* of the Christian church that St. Barbara is linked with Hercules, a connection that explains why this representation of a Christian saint is shown wearing a pagan motif. Only in Augsburg, where the classicism of the Italian Renaissance was more influential than anywhere else in Germany, could such a parallel occur. Not even Dürer with all his enthusiasm for Italy, much overemphasized by art historians, would have conceived such subtle reciprocal symbolism.⁸

Although it is not comparable in imaginativeness with the Hercules and Nessus buttons, the figure of St. Dorothy also has something that is non-German in origin. Instead of a jeweled necklace she wears a torque from which is suspended a medallion with a relief representing the profile of a man, perhaps a Roman emperor (Figure 8).⁹ The medallion resembles a coin with milled edges. Parallels or prototypes for portraits of Roman emperors in medallion shape exist in the woodcuts representing heads of Roman emperors by the most Italianized of all the Augsburg artists, Hans Burgkmair the Elder, who died in 1531.¹⁰

8. I would like to express my gratitude to Erich Steingraber for his valuable suggestions in connection with the area of origin of this group of sculptures, which we discussed many years ago before my discovery of the carvings on the buttons.

9. It is hardly conceivable that St. Dorothy would have worn a portrait of Diocletian, a persecutor of the Christians, under whose mandate she was martyred. The medallion may have been inspired by a Roman coin, and the portrait may not be that of an emperor but of the Roman lawyer Theophilus, who mocked St. Dorothy when she was going to her death. The saint sent Theophilus her miraculous basket of apples and roses, causing his conversion, which was closely followed by his own martyrdom.

10. See Ernst Buchner and Karl Feuchtmayr, eds., *Beiträge*

An earlier example connecting the iconography of St. Barbara with classical mythology appears in the Frick Collection, New York, in a painting attributed to Jan van Eyck, representing the Virgin and Child with two saints and a donor. St. Barbara on the left stands in front of a window, through which the tower that is her symbol can be seen behind her. The Gothic structure depicted here is quite unlike the crenelated tower usually associated with the saint. This Eyckian tower contains a small bronze sculpture of a man seen through the middle of the three windows¹¹ with the inscription *MARS* beneath it (Figure 9). St. Barbara had been invoked since the ninth century for protection against lightning,¹² and by extension she became patroness of anything or anyone connected with explosives, firearms, miners, artillery, and soldiers. As Mars is the god of war we again find a combination of classical and Christian symbolism, similar to the St. Barbara with Hercules, but showing another aspect of the saint's powers, conceived over half a century earlier.

The two sculptures under discussion have already been considered by some scholars on the basis of their general style as coming from Swabia and, more precisely, Augsburg, around the first decade of the sixteenth century. This conclusion, however, has not yet been published. The evidence presented here, focusing on the artist's awareness not only of the Italian Renaissance but also of classical mythology and symbolism and their parallels with Christian iconography, seems further confirmation of an Augsburg origin. There remains the important problem of finding other, comparable works within the Augsburg group. At present, some general characteristics of style, coupled with an unusual use of classical sources, are all we have to go on, and no artist has been found to whom the sculptures can safely be assigned.



9. Attributed to Jan van Eyck (active 1422–41), *Virgin and Child with Saints and Donor*, detail: St. Barbara. Oil on panel. The Frick Collection, New York (photo: courtesy of the Frick Collection)

zur Geschichte der deutschen Kunst: II. Augsburger Kunst der Spätgotik und Renaissance (Augsburg, 1928) pp. 224–228, figs. 164–169.

11. According to legend, St. Barbara had a third window added to her tower to symbolize the Holy Trinity.

12. St. Barbara's father was said to have been struck by lightning and killed, as divine punishment for putting his daughter to death.