

ALABASTERS



Prior to 1910 when the Society of Antiquaries of London held an exhibition of English medieval alabasters between May and June of that year, very little attention had been given to medieval alabaster sculpture and carving. Although the English medieval alabaster industry had been incredibly strong, creating objects that were exported throughout Europe, as works of art they are orphaned from their creators – the product of anonymous makers and workshop manufacture, leaving them attracting relatively little scholarly attention in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, these are undoubtedly moving and sometimes innovative creations by craftsmen marrying together an artistic and creative impetus with a form of industrial production.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, craftsmen in England carved and decorated images from alabaster, a form of gypsum that is relatively soft and easy to carve but which allows for fine and sharp detailing. Alabasters were also often painted and gilded, creating a vibrancy that also provided an additional means of highlighting detail through use of colour as well as depth of carving. These sculpted images and tablets were displayed in churches as altarpieces, and in chapels, palaces, ordinary homes and even workshops. Quality varied, from the rough and stylistic to the very fine and exquisite depending on the skill of the craftsman, with many examples surviving showcasing the particular strengths of English workshops.

Primarily, alabasters of this kind acted as devotional aids, depicting scenes from the life of Christ, Saints and martyrs. The Society has four complete sculpted alabaster tablets in its collection, as well as smaller fragments including one unfinished example found under the floor of St Peter's Church, Isle of Thanet (Kent). The Society also collected casts of alabaster tablets as a record of their discovery.

Martyrdom of St Erasmus (LDSAL 462)

This tablet depicts the martyrdom of St. Erasmus, a bishop from Formiae in Campania, Italy, who according to Christian tradition died in the year c. AD303 during the Tetrarchy of the Roman Emperors of the west, Maximian and Diocletian. Erasmus was alleged to have been repeatedly and brutally tortured for continuing to preach Christian doctrine, but was miraculously healed by an angel until he was finally executed by having his stomach slit open and his intestines wound around a windlass.

This alabaster was once part of an altar or shrine, and dates from the 15th century. It depicts in brutal detail the martyrdom of the Saint. It was donated to the Society on the 8th May 1851 by George Richard Corner FSA.

St. Katharine in Prison (LDSAL 150.2)



St. Katharine of Alexandria was said to have been martyred in the 4th century AD during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Maxentius. The Society has two alabaster tablets in its collections relating to the life of St. Katherine – this one which shows her imprisoned, and a second which shows her martyrdom.

Said to have been the daughter of King Costus, a governor of Alexandria, she was both a philosopher and academic, who converted to Christianity as a teenager after seeing a vision of the Virgin Mary. Her education and eloquence was demonstrated at a debate in front of the Roman Emperor, where she successfully countered pro-Pagan arguments and even managed to convert a number of her detractors.

After both torturing and proposing marriage to Katharine – a strange combined assault to dissuade her from her religious beliefs! – she was condemned to death by Maxentius. The ‘breaking wheel’ that was to be used to shatter her bones by bludgeoning disintegrated against her touch, and so she was instead beheaded.

St. Katharine was one of the most popular saints of the medieval period and certainly one of the most prominent of the virgin martyrs and intercessors, partly due to her strong association with philosophical and academic argument. She would have been a popular choice for devotional objects of this kind as she has made a direct plea to Christ to answer the prayers of those who remember her prior to her execution.

The alabaster depicts her as a beautiful and serene woman surrounded by Christ, the Virgin Mary and a number of angels. It would also have been made as part of an altar or shrine, and is dated to the mid-15th century.