

Student Lightning Talk: *Arm Reliquary*



Arm Reliquary, unknown maker, German, about 1200-25, wood overlaid with silver, decorated with gilt copper filigree and semi-precious stones.
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello, I'm Nadia Sommella, a third year History of Art student at the University of Birmingham and in this talk I'll be considering an often-overlooked object in the Barber's collection. This object in question is situated in an original 1930s display cabinet on the first floor of the Barber, just outside the main galleries.

It is an Arm Reliquary from the 13th century, traced to the Rhine region in Germany and decorated in the Romanesque style. It is a curious object, not least because it contains a small piece of actual human remains.

The term reliquary refers to the vessel created to hold a relic, a religious object thought to have spiritual powers. A relic can be part of the bones, hair or blood of a saint, or wood from the Holy Cross, or other objects associated with saints and religious figures.

The practice of collecting relics and storing them for use in worship occurs in many faiths. But, as Germany and the Rhineland was almost exclusively Christian in the 13th century, I will be focusing on relics in a Christian context.

In the Middle Ages relics would attract visitors, or pilgrims, from far and wide. These pilgrims believed in the miracle-inducing properties of relics and that close proximity to them during prayer promoted direct access to that particular saint.

This is still a practice today. Many of you may have heard of the relics of Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral, which still attracts large numbers of visitors.

Many relics have later been proven to be fake. Many saint's bones said to be from this or that saint have been tested and are actually bones from animals. Wooden splinters purporting to be from the Cross or vials of blood supposedly from a saint are almost impossible to verify.

But pilgrimage was a huge source of tourism in the Middle Ages, and most importantly, a source of income for Christian churches in Europe. Much like when we visit cathedrals today, we might go to the café for a coffee, or buy a souvenir, or even pay entry fees. Churches would sell pilgrim badges, small metal souvenirs stamped with the symbol of a saint.

They would also sell indulgences. Indulgences came in many forms and promised the buyer a certain amount of time off purgatory. These ranged from a simple piece of paper inscribed with a message promising a single day off purgatory to large donations to fund a cathedral in return for complete salvation.

Purgatory was an invention of the Middle Ages, having not been mentioned in the Bible itself it became part of Roman Catholic teaching in the 11th century. Purgatory was thought to be a physical place between earth and heaven where, it was said, we go after we die and are punished for our sins before being let into heaven.

Fear of this punishment encouraged the Christian public to pay the church in return for a reduced sentence. So, it was in the churches' interest to perpetuate these stories and peddle false claims. Even if it meant digging up the bones of an old pet...

However, the relic we have here has been tested and proven to be human bone. More specifically, part of a human fibula from the right leg. Kind of gruesome right? Presumably the relic originally was, or was thought to have been, the bone from an arm or hand, hence the shape of the reliquary. This practice is called a 'speaking reliquary' where the vessel mimics the body part it contains, animating the saint and bridging the gap between their realm (heaven) and our own.

In order for the church to emphasise the importance of the relics, which were often small and unassuming objects, it was the job of the reliquary to create a sense of opulence. This practice can be seen clearly in this reliquary in the Barber's collection.

Although basically a wooden object, the core has been overlaid with sheet silver, while on the wrist we can see a gilt-copper bracelet and arm band with a foliage pattern, inlaid with semi-precious stones. This was a display of the wealth and power of the Church. It was also intended to create a sense of awe in ordinary folk, whose homes would have been incredibly bare and simple by today's standards and therefore an object such as this would have seemed all the more impressive.

Relics such as this one, were not only important parts of religious ceremonies and the community, but also often used as political props to gain or display power. Relics were collected, donated and given as diplomatic gifts by rulers. They were simultaneously a tangible example of piety and a visible display of worldly treasure.

There was a belief that kings and queens had the divine right to rule, that God himself had decided they were to be in power. Acquiring relics was an extension of this. It was believed that relics could not be stolen because the saint decided where they wanted their bodies to be venerated. Hence, the more relics a ruler had the more holy they were deemed. Rulers would compete to commission more impressive and elaborate reliquaries to hold the relics in order to demonstrate their wealth.

King Louis IX of France is perhaps the most well-known example of this. He owned what was believed to be the Holy Crown of Thorns, which he purchased in 1239. King Louis built the entire church of Sainte-Chapelle to act as a reliquary and house the precious object, an undertaking which cost him 40,000 livres. Individual thorns from the crown were given as prized gifts to later French kings.

This reliquary is rather humble in comparison to the famous Holy Thorn Reliquary currently in the British Museum, which holds one such thorn. So, we can imagine it might have belonged to a small chapel rather than a French king.

But how did this object end up in the Barber gallery's collection, and more importantly should it be here? The reliquary was acquired by the Barber from a leading London dealer in 1961. For those who view this

object as a holy bridge between heaven and earth, the idea of it as an antique or aesthetic object could be problematic. Not to mention the ethical debate surrounding the displaying of human remains in galleries and museums...

We do not know whose bone is held within it, or the saint it is supposed to be. No one therefore can make a claim for the return of this persons remains. But does the anonymity of the deceased person affect how it is viewed and the respect it deserves?

Is this object different from say an Egyptian Mummy? While a mummy was meant to be buried in a tomb and left there in order to facilitate the persons afterlife, this relic would have most likely been on public display originally, all be it in a religious rather than secular environment.

This is the only example of such a work in the Barber's collection and the curatorial team have taken steps to pay homage to its original use. The object is displayed next to Christian objects, providing visual religious context, however museums and galleries cannot recreate a sense of the object's original purpose. People would have travelled to see this object, seen under flickering candlelight, the jewels and silver glistening. The viewer would have believed this was a real piece of a holy saint. They would have prayed to the relic and left with the hope that those prayers would be answered. So, for many people this was an object of beauty and of hope – and in many ways it still is.

Whilst its function may have evolved over time; the reliquary remains a cherished object and a draw for visitors, for reasons of devotion, learning, appreciation and more. It acts as a bridge between worlds. Between heaven and earth. Between our time and the past.