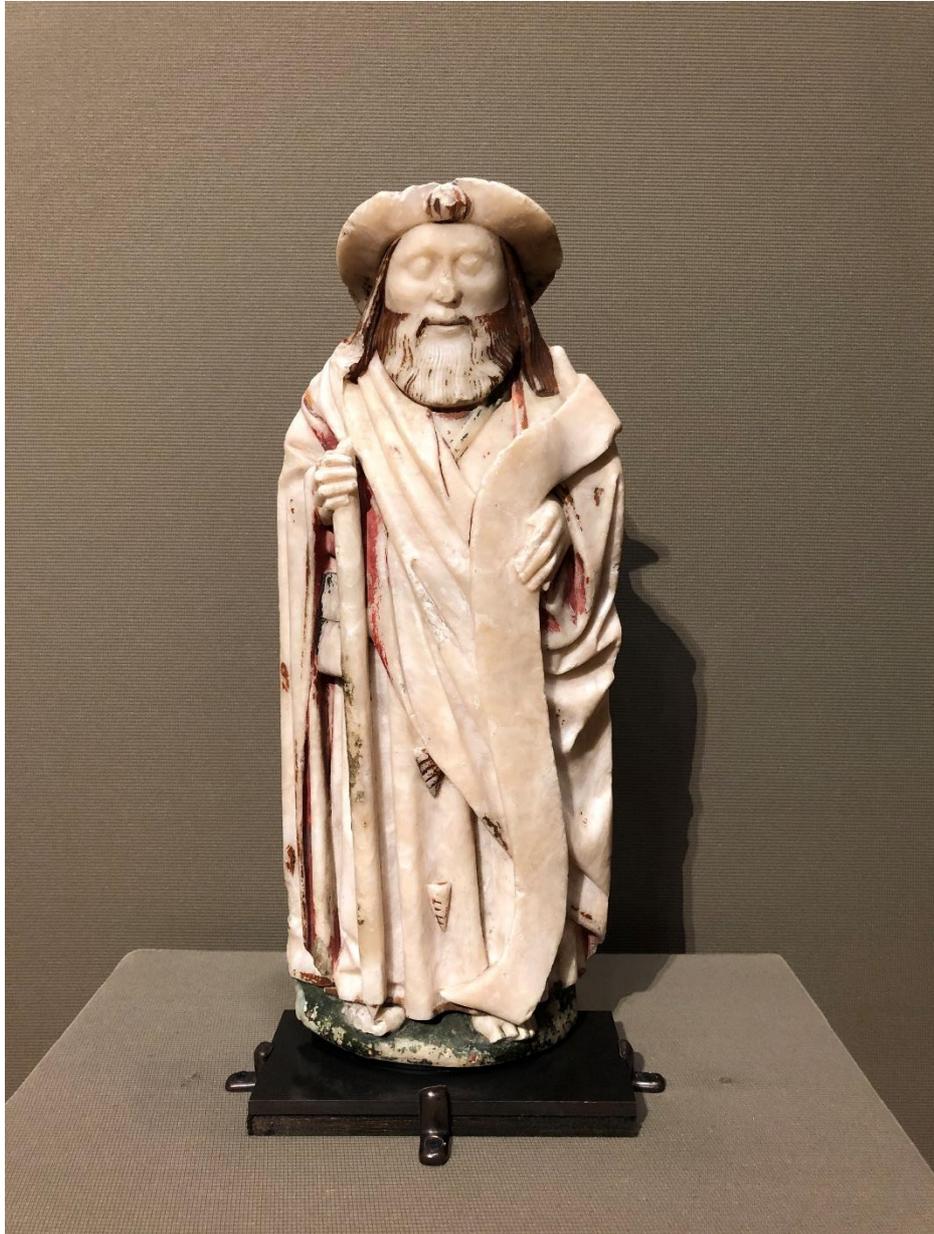


Saint James the Great and the world of pilgrimage, real and imagined



Saint James the Great, Unknown Artist, about 1500, alabaster, with traces of gilding and polychromy (coloured paint),
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to our next online Tuesday Talk presented by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, at the University of Birmingham.

I'm April Armstrong-Bascombe and I'm the current Collections Intern at the Barber (February – June 2020).

Please join with me in exploring a charming alabaster sculpture of Saint James the Great, made in England around 1500.

With generous support from the Ruddock Foundation for the Arts, Saint James was welcomed to the Barber in 2019. He stands 39cm (or 1 foot 3 inches) high and is carved out of alabaster - a relatively soft white stone found in abundance across the Midlands. James wears a wide-brimmed hat decorated with a scallop shell and holds a pilgrim's staff in his right hand. He has a deep crescent shaped beard and is draped in heavy garments that are wrapped over his body in deep folds. Look closely, you can see his little feet poking out beneath his clothing. Beneath his right arm is a pilgrim's bag full of essential items to aid him on his travels. A long, blank scroll cascades over his left shoulder. I wonder what good news James is about to share? Poised with his bag and staff, he appears ready to embark on an exciting adventure. Let's go with him!

On first encountering this sculpture of Saint James, we are met with several visual symbols of the sea and the coast. With wide edges to protect from wind and rain, his hat is like those worn today by fishermen or perhaps even that worn by Paddington Bear. Moving down his cloak, we find delicate whelk shells carved into its edges. Together, these symbols allude to James's role as a fisherman. Alongside his younger brother John (the Apostle) and Christ's other disciples, he features within a story included in the Bible (part of the Book of John) where they witness one of Christ's early miracles.

The Bible story describes a group of young men fishing off the coast who have been unsuccessful in their many attempts. Starting to get tired, they contemplate calling it a day and ferrying their nets back to land. However, Christ appears on the shore and suggests casting their nets to the other

side of the boat. Heeding his advice, James and the disciples catch an abundance of fish and have to tow their overloaded nets back home. This Gospel story, known as the 'miraculous catch of fish', married James with the attributes of a fisherman.

After the death of Christ, James was an important figure in spreading news of his miracles across the world. He journeyed across countries and preached to large crowds who were curious about Christ's life. He received wide-scale veneration within the Christian Church and was canonised as a saint. Today, we know him as Saint James the Great (to distinguish him from the Apostle Saint James the Less).

Another arresting clue to uncovering more about Saint James is the walking stick he holds in his hand. Carved from wood, such supports assisted pilgrims during their long and often arduous expeditions to visit important religious shrines, chapels, tombs, or locations associated with miraculous events or harbouring supernatural power. Pilgrimage was, and continues to be, an important part of religious culture across several different faiths. In the Christian Church, one of the most frequented and popular pilgrimage locations is Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Northern Spain, a sacred city that holds in its grand and opulent cathedral the burial place and shrine of Saint James. Respected widely across Spain, Saint James is the patron saint of Santiago de Compostela.

Many Spanish traditions hold that James journeyed to the Iberian Peninsula to spread the Bible and the Word of Christ to its population. After James's death in the fifth century, it is believed by many Catholics that James's body was miraculously transported from Judea in Palestine across the Mediterranean Sea to northern Spain. Guided only by the stars in the sky, the boat was without oars or sails. His body washed-up on the Spanish coast and discovered by a local hermit who was surprised to find his remains covered by seashells. These had acted as a form of protection from the elements.

News of Saint James's miracles fascinated European Christians in the Middle Ages. Many churches across Spain, in particular those surrounding the Galician cathedral, claimed that James had also performed miracles for their parishioners. Hundreds of churches, chapels, and shrines were

subsequently built in his name.

James's appearance as a fisherman, his close relationship to Christ, and his affiliation with cross-border journeys, cultivated an enormous network of pilgrimage routes across Western Europe that concluded at his shrine in Santiago de Compostela. These roads navigated pilgrims from their homes in England, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, to join up alongside each other and walk the Camino de Santiago (the Way of Saint James), crossing both land and sea to reach their final destination. Guided by James's scallop shell included on way markers along the way, pilgrims would collect stamps, souvenirs, and keepsakes to remember their journey. Pilgrims have walked these roads since the ninth century - about 350,000 walked the Camino in 2019. Many adopt a similar dress style to the Saint James of our sculpture. Some even complete part or all of the pilgrimage with bare feet as a form of penance or to re-enact the experiences of those who had gone before.

As the patron saint of pilgrimage, Saint James has enjoyed international veneration. Images of him were commissioned to adorn local churches, cathedrals, and shrines. In the early sixteenth century, demand for these images was met by English workshops. In that period, the ground beneath the East Midlands was rich in its abundance of alabaster. Because of its relative ease to shape and resemblance to marble when treated, alabaster became the material of choice for many talented English sculptors. Large blocks of the material were provided to local masons in Burton-on-Trent, Coventry, York, London, Lincoln, and Derbyshire, where they were carved and shaped. But by far the most successful centre for alabaster carving was Nottingham. The huge amount of production that occurred there has led to the English tradition being known collectively as 'Nottingham alabaster'.

Alabaster was easy to carve and adapted well to fine details, such as folds in draperies or facial features. Alabaster was found beneath a layer of red clay (known as red mulch), which would seep into the material and appear as delicate vein-like striations within it. These reddish tones appeared like the natural pigments of skin, which made it well suited to depicting people. Furthermore, the slightly translucent appearance of the material meant that it was a good foundation for the application of paint.

We can see traces of green paint on the ground on which James stands, red blotches on his robes, and hints of brown on his beard and head hair. Originally, he would have been fully painted and appear even more lively than he does now.

Although we do not know the original location for our Saint James sculpture, the object itself offers many clues to consider. One important fact about alabaster is that it does not like water. The material will weep and dissolve on contact. Therefore, these sculptures were made for indoor display. Miniature sculptures of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or statuettes of the saints, were made for display within parish churches, cathedrals, and private chapels. Like the sculpture of Saint James, these too were carved into single figures that could easily be slotted into larger architectural surrounds or grand altarpieces. With his compact stature and charming exterior, we can easily imagine him standing proudly to meet church goers.

Before the English Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, English churches were saturated with religious sculptures, golden altarpieces, colourful paintings, and luxurious furnishings. However, these sumptuous decorations were destroyed when Henry VIII ordered the Dissolution of the Monasteries and divorced England from the artistic traditions of the Catholic Church. Thousands of images, sculptures, metalworks, and textiles were destroyed, while many others were hidden, concealed, or stripped of their decorations to escape destruction by Henry's men.

An eye-catching sign of Saint James's heritage within this monumental environment of religious change is provided by his beard. Wide like a shovel, James sports the latest fashion in male grooming of the Henry VIII era, a sure indication that he was made during the king's reign (1509–47). Ironically, Henry demanded an absolute ban on all forms of pilgrimage. No longer could Christian pilgrims walk the sacred road to Santiago de Compostela.

In our current extraordinary time of limited mobility, Saint James serves as a fitting reminder of the joys of travel. Like those who gazed upon him in the past, sight of the sculpture today transports us all on an imagined adventure across borders.

Let's take a moment here to imagine a place of special importance to you.

Somewhere that brings us happiness and a moment of calm.

Thank you for joining me on this Tuesday Talk. Come back next week for another journey into our collection.

If you have any questions or would like to continue the conversation, please get in touch with the Barber (info@barber.org.uk) or use our social media platforms.

Speaker info

April joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in February 2020 as a Curatorial Intern. April has managed the role while completing her PhD at the University of Durham as an Arts and Humanities Research Council (Northern Bridge) funded researcher in Hispanic and Italian medieval visual culture. She specialises in the Christian materiality of the Western Mediterranean in the fourteenth century and has received generous funding to undertake original research in Oxford, New York, Spain, and Italy. At Durham, she is a member of the Zurbarán Centre for Spanish and Latin American Art. Previously, April completed her Masters at the University of Oxford (Lady Margaret Hall) in Art History and Visual Culture and was awarded the Sarah Louise Dale/Clarendon Scholarship in Renaissance Studies.

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.

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