MITTELALTER MUSEUM RELIGION

Now you see it, now you don’t

Miri Rubin 15.06.2021

During the immobility imposed on us in 2020/21 by COVID the pleasant task of roaming through museums to seek out an object as an offering to Susanna Burghartz has turned into something more sedentary, but not less pleasant. For the digital offerings of our museums afford current-day scholars riches unimaginable even just a few years ago. Hence I am delighted to reflect on an object that prompts fruitful consideration of the meanings it held for Europeans in the fifteenth century. It is a monstrance made around 1450 in Cologne (Fig. 1)[1].

Fig. 1: New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, Silver gilt Monstrance, Cologne, c. 1450 (63 x 21.2 x 16.4 cm).

The monstrance displays while it protects, reveals while it withdraws. It was created to support the claims at the heart of Christianity since its reformulation in the twelfth century: that Christ was remade at every altar at the mass, made present and available in his full historical reality. Available – to all believers in good standing; received – from the hands of the priest, just after he 'made' Christ at the altar with the words of the consecration, Christ's own gospel words. The eucharist was given to lay people only once a year, and only following confession and penance. Made, but also kept apart under lock and key in a special cupboard – *armarium* – to be brought out on special occasions: when it was taken to the sick and dying on deathbed, and for controlled display at processions.

The monstrance expressed the ambivalence which was also the strength of the idea of Corpus Christi as formulated by the end of the twelfth century, and taught to the laity as a required tenet of faith by the early thirteenth. It reflected the seeming contradiction between the consecrated host as available to all Christians, and yet the majesty of its substance, as Christ's own body. The feast of Corpus Christi was inspired by the devotions of holy women of the Low Countries, promulgated by the pope in 1264, and reissued in 1311, this time effectively and across Europe.[2] Those who promoted the feast believed that the great promise of the eucharist could not be adequately relished in the mundanity of the daily mass, which was often celebrated by the priest on his own, nor even on Maundy Thursday, which commemorates the Last Supper, when Christ pronounced the words that became the formula of consecration: «This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me» (Luke 22:19). The new feast was dedicated to the wonder of the eucharist, its unique promise of salvation, and the marvel of Communion, when believers received the body of Christ into their own.

Fig. 2: London British Library. The Lovell Lectionary, 1408, Harley 7026/1, fol. 13r, © British Library Board.

The celebration of Corpus Christi was thus a joyous one, of the gift of Corpus Christi; it was a summer feast, with outdoor processions to which drama and pageantry were often added. The monstrance developed out of the traditions of display of holy relics, yet with the novel design of a transparent – beryl, glass – compartment within which the consecrated host was fixed into a holder, and safely displayed. One of my favourite depictions of a monstrance in procession was made for the Lovell Lectionary probably made by friar John Siferwas at Glastonbury, c. 1408 (Fig. 2)[3].
Although the setting could not be more shimmering, or the vestments more glamorous, there is a hint of the outdoor setting, in the flowery ground under the episcopal feet. Here the monstrance is shaped as a traditional Gothic structure. The artist tried to draw the white sphere representing the host. It is possible that processional reliquaries were repurposed for the display of the eucharist on Corpus Christi.

Fig. 3: Scene of the Virgin and Child.

Our monstrance from Cologne is the real thing, not a depiction, and it is expressive of sentiments regarding eucharistic display. It is delicately cast, and the artist chose to situate above the glass compartment a scene of the Virgin and Child.

Thinking about the Body of Christ in its eucharistic form, further led to reflection on its birth of the Virgin, in purity, without sin. Fifteenth century artists explored the link between the Passion and the mother-son relationship of Mary and the boy Jesus. A good example is by a follower of Robert Campin, *The Madonna of the Fire-screen*, of c. 1440.[4]

Here the Body of Christ in its eucharistic form is suggested by the fire screen, woven of stalks of wheat, and the fire suggesting sacrifice, and the chalice on a surface to the Virgin's left, as if on an altar (Fig. 4).[5] The milk of Mary's breast drips onto Jesus' genitals, themselves through

the meaning of the Crucifixion, foretellings of the Passion. Through such associations, the two great devotions, to the Virgin mother and to Christ on the Cross were combined. And so in our monstrance these strands combine. The detail of Mary and Child was not visible from a distance, to audiences observing a procession, but it was available to the priest carrying the monstrance.

Fig. 4: London National Gallery, Follower of Robert Campin, Madonna of the Firescreen, c. 1440, Salting Bequest, 1910 (NG2609), © Copyright The National Gallery, London 2021, licence: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

A great deal of thought and craft was invested in the making of the monstrance, and yet the monstrance had its own affordances. It invited focused attention to Corpus Christi in its whiteness, and its Gothic gabled setting invoked the aesthetic par excellence of church buildings and furniture.[6] This is not the most precious of objects – neither heavily gilt nor jewelled, but it captured the essence of Christian materiality: showing but protecting, promising what is both past and made present.

Empfohlene Zitierweise/Suggested citation

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Abstract

The choice of a monstrance for my discussion is a tribute to Susanna Burghartz's commitment to the study of material culture and the challenges it poses. In Basel and its museums she found much material for reflection, and these she contextualised within the urban cultures she knows so well. The monstrance, made in Cologne c. 1450, offers an occasion to reflect on design and the affordances it created. The monstrance both protected and displayed that most precious matter the body of Christ, *Corpus Christi*. The monstrance – a version of a reliquary – sought to show the host clearly, with a neat slot for its secure placement. The makers added an image that amplified the meaning of the host on display: the Virgin Mary, in whom God was made Flesh. The figure was too small to be seen by a processing crowd, but was available for the carrying priest to savour.

1 New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, Silver gilt Monstrance, Cologne, c. 1450 (63 x 21.2 x 16.4 cm); The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931 (32.100.226), available online: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/467485 [14.05.2021]., licence: CC0 1.0.

2 On the foundation of Corpus Christi, see Miri Rubin: Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture. Cambridge 1991, Chapter 3.

3 London British Library. The Lovell Lectionary, 1408, Harley 7026/1, fol. 13r, © British Library Board, available online: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ms_7026!1_f013r [14.05.2021].

4 Beth Williamson: Altarpieces, Liturgy, and Devotion, Speculum 79/2 (2004), pp. 341–406.

5 London National Gallery, Follower of Robert Campin, Madonna of the Firescreen, c. 1440, Salting Bequest, 1910 (NG2609), © The National Gallery, London 2021, licence: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, available online: https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/follower-of-robert-campin-the-virgin-and-child-before-a-fire-screen [14.05.2021].

6 On the distinctive Gothic micro-architecture of the *Sakramentshaus*, and its affinity to the monstrance in shape and function, see Achim Timmermann: Real Presence: Sacrament Houses and the Body of Christ, c. 1270–1600. Turnhout 2009.