

Saints' Lives and Symbols

During the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, saints played an important role in both private devotion and civic life. Their stories served as models for pious Christians to emulate, and the saints were vital intermediaries for the prayers of men and women. Saints offered protection against life's dangers, from childbirth to volcanic eruptions, and many were special patrons of particular professions or trades. Most cities had patron saints, and so did most people, who were often named for the saints on whose feast days they were born. Feast days, on which special offices for particular saints were included in church services, dominated the calendar and rhythm of public life. This is echoed today by our custom of calling February 14 Saint Valentine's Day.

Saints were venerated in the Christian church as early as the second century. During the late Middle Ages, their legends were greatly elaborated in such works as the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* by Jacobus da Voragine. This calendar of saints' lives, filled with miraculous tales, remained one of the most popular books in Europe until the Reformation and was a rich source of images for artists.



Agnes, 4th century

When Agnes, who had dedicated herself to Christ, was taken to a brothel and stripped naked, her hair grew miraculously to cover her, and she was unharmed by flames when she was burned at the stake. Finally

she was pierced through the throat with a sword, still refusing to surrender her virginity. She is usually seen with a lamb (the Latin word *agnus* means "lamb") symbolic of her innocence.



Anthony Abbott, 251–356

Anthony Abbott retreated from wealth to live as a hermit in the Egyptian desert, resisting various temptations of the devil until his death at age 105. His great holiness attracted others who came to live near him, and so he is considered the father of Christian monasticism. Usually

carrying the staff of an old man, he is often accompanied by a pig, a symbol of the sins of gluttony and lust that he was able to overcome.



Apollonia, died about 249

Apollonia, a deaconess who was tortured by having her teeth pulled from her jaws, jumped willingly onto a fire rather than recite blasphemous words before pagan idols.

When she held a cross before them, the images shattered. She is normally shown with the pincers used to pull her teeth and is, naturally, patron of dentists.



Barbara, 4th century?

Shut in a tower by her pagan father who feared she might be converted, Barbara nevertheless managed to study Christianity and be baptized. She added a third window to her tower prison to represent the Trinity,

so angering her father that he had her beheaded. On his return home after the execution, he was struck by lightning. Barbara is usually shown with a tower and is patron of builders and those in danger of sudden death, especially by lightning.



Benedict, about 480–550

Benedict founded the Benedictine order and was the author of the Benedictine rule, which laid the foundation for all Western monasticism. He is normally shown dressed in the black robes

of Benedictine abbots, often holding a book (the Benedictine rule) or a rod (for corporal punishment of the brothers). Sometimes he is seen with a broken cup that held a deadly potion and with the raven that miraculously removed the poison from it. Benedict is also frequently shown with two young men of his order, Placidus and Maurus. When Placidus was in danger of drowning, Maurus walked across water to rescue him.



Catherine, 4th century?

Catherine dreamed that Jesus rejected her as a servant, saying she was not beautiful enough. After she was baptized she dreamed again, but this time the holy infant gave her a ring, accepting her not as a servant but as his wife. She confounded

famous philosophers sent to convince her of the errors of her faith and protested the persecutions of other Christians. For this she was sentenced to be torn apart between spiked wheels. Miraculously the wheels burst into flames, and she was beheaded instead. Usually shown with the wheel, Catherine was considered an especially potent intercessor for human prayers and a patron of students.



Clare of Assisi, 1194–1253

Clare was a follower of Saint Francis and founder of the order of Franciscan nuns known as the Poor Clares. Their life was one of extreme poverty and austerity. Once Clare entered the convent at

Assisi she never left. She is normally shown dressed in the dark robes of her order with the Franciscans' knotted belt. In many works she holds a pyx, the container used for the communion host, which legend said she used to drive away an army of non-believer mercenaries.



Dorothy, died about 313

As she was led to execution for refusing to worship idols, Dorothy was taunted by a heckler who demanded she bring him fruits and flowers from paradise. As she prayed in her last moments, an angel

brought a basket of fruit and roses to the man, who was converted on the spot. She is usually shown with a basket of flowers.



Elizabeth of Hungary (Thuringia), 13th century

Elizabeth, the daughter of the king of Hungary, was married to a prince killed in the Crusades and led a life of self-sacrifice. She was accepted

as a Franciscan nun and is considered one of the order's greatest saints. Elizabeth is usually shown with a triple crown signifying her royal birth, her marriage, and her glorification in heaven.



Francis of Assisi, 1182?–1226

Renouncing wealth and pleasure, Francis founded the Franciscan order and based it on vows of chastity, obedience, humility, and absolute poverty. Franciscans

abandoned the cloistered life of most monastic orders to preach in towns and villages, inspiring new religious fervor by their simple dedication. Saint Francis is most often shown with the stigmata, the wounds of the crucifixion that appeared on his own body as a mark of his spiritual identification with Jesus.



George, died about 303

George, a soldier in Cappadocia (in modern Turkey), embodied the ideals of chivalry and the perfect Christian knight. His most famous legend involved a dragon that was terrorizing a town by demanding human victims. He rescued the daughter of

the king, who was to be sacrificed, by subduing the beast with his lance. Using the princess' belt as a leash, he then led the dragon to town and agreed to kill it if the townspeople would accept Christianity.



Jerome, about 341–420

Jerome retreated for many years to the desert as a hermit and is often shown in the wilderness holding a rock with which he hit himself as penance for his visions of worldly pleasures. He studied ancient languages, and, after returning to civilization,

produced the first Latin translation of the Bible (the Vulgate). Thus he is also frequently shown writing. He can be identified by his cardinal's hat and by the lion from whose paw Jerome removed a thorn.



John the Baptist, died about 30

Precursor of Jesus, prophet, and baptizer, John preached repentance and the coming of the Messiah. He renounced wealth to live in the wilderness on a diet of plants and seeds, and is usually shown with wild or matted hair and clad in animal skins. He is often accompanied by the lamb of God to underscore his mission as forerunner to Christ and his proclamation of Christ as the Messiah: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)



Lucy, died 304

Daughter of a wealthy Sicilian, Lucy refused marriage and was exposed as a Christian by a rejected suitor. Because she was supposed to be sent to a brothel and could not be moved, she was instead set on fire, but the flames did not touch her. She finally was pierced through the neck with a sword. Lucy is often shown holding her eyes on a platter. Their great beauty drove a suitor mad, so she ripped her eyes from her head and sent them to him. They were miraculously restored because of her goodness.



Margaret, 3rd century?

Although she was probably not a historical person, Margaret's legend and cult were nevertheless popular. Among the tortures she suffered for her faith was being swallowed by a dragon, the devil in disguise. Once within the creature, the small cross she wore grew ever larger and eventually burst the dragon asunder to release her. As a result she is often seen with a dragon and is patron of childbirth.



Mary Magdalene, 1st century

Medieval legends of Mary Magdalene were composed of stories about several people named Mary. She was the great repentant sinner who was forgiven by Jesus and later stood by him, weeping at the cross. After Christ appeared to her on Easter Sunday, she was the first to take word of his resurrection to the disciples. She was also thought to be the unnamed woman who had anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon and is often shown in medieval representations holding an ivory unguent container.



Nicholas, 4th century

Nicholas was one of the most widely venerated saints, a bishop and miracle worker. He gave bags of money to three young girls for dowries so they would not have to become prostitutes and resurrected three murdered boys from a brine vat. Because of his patronage of children, a custom arose of giving gifts to the young on his feast day. Today he has been transformed into Santa Claus. He is usually shown in bishop's robes and carrying a purse.

Images of saints are details from works in nearby galleries.

Saints Agnes, Apollonia, Dorothy, Elizabeth of Hungary, Francis of Assisi, Lucy, Mary Magdalene: Master of the Saint Bartholomew Altar, Cologne, active c. 1475/1510, *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1485/1500, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.78

Saint George: Rogier van der Weyden, Netherlandish, 1399/1400–1464, *Saint George and the Dragon*, c. 1432/1435, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1966.1.1

Saints Barbara, Clare, Margaret: Master of Heiligenkreuz, Austrian, active early 15th century, *The Death of Saint Clare*, c. 1400/1410, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.83

Saint Nicholas: Gerard David and Workshop, Netherlandish, c. 1460–1523, *The Saint Anne Altarpiece: Saint Nicholas*, c. 1500/1520, Widener Collection 1942.9.17.a

Saint Benedict: French 15th Century, *A Miracle of Saint Benedict*, c. 1480, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.45

Saint Jerome: Jan Gossaert, Netherlandish, c. 1478–1532, *Saint Jerome Penitent*, c. 1509/1512, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.40.b

Saints Anthony Abbot, Catherine, John the Baptist: Follower of Robert Campin, *Madonna and Child with Saints in the Enclosed Garden*, c. 1440/1460, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1959.9.3



English or Spanish

The Holy Trinity, c. 1300/1350

Alabaster, which is a form of gypsum, has a number of attractive qualities for the sculptor. It is relatively soft and so can be easily carved, but it hardens slightly after exposure to air. It readily accepts gilding and colors, and its translucence suggests the glow of human skin. Because the mineral is somewhat soluble in water, however, alabaster sculpture is normally used only indoors.

The question of whether *The Trinity* was made in Spain or England remains open. This representation of the Trinity—God the Father, his crucified son, and the dove of the Holy Spirit—rests on a base decorated with the coat of arms of a Spanish family. (The base and statue, though together for many years, were probably not made together: notice how the corners of the statue were cropped to fit the shape of the base.) Although alabaster occurs in many places in Europe, the best-known quarries were in England. English workshops produced hundreds of alabasters, and Spain was one of England's largest export markets. Most surviving English alabasters, however, are different in style from this work, without its rigid pose, blocklike bulk, and smooth, immobile face. On the other hand, since so many English alabasters were destroyed by Protestant iconoclasts (from the Greek for "image smashers") in the 1500s, it may simply be that similar pieces are now lost.

Alabaster, height 85.3 cm (33 3/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1953.2.1
(base donated by Mario Barsanti, 1950)



English
Saint George and the Dragon, 1370/1420

Saint George, who wears the red cross of a crusader, embodied the ideals of Christian chivalry. He has been venerated as the patron saint of England since the thirteenth century, after King Richard the Lionhearted (d. 1199) had placed himself and his army under the saint's protection when they battled Salah al-Din in the Third Crusade. Venice and other cities also claimed George as their protector, as did soldiers.

Though this statue is first recorded in a Spanish monastery, it was probably carved in England. Its fluid style, long, elegant proportions, smooth surfaces, and details of its crisp carving are characteristic of sculpture in Britain. Because it went to Spain, *Saint George and the Dragon* escaped the iconoclasm that destroyed many English alabasters in the early years of the Protestant Reformation, when zealots tore down monasteries and smashed religious images. Its paint and gilding are especially well preserved.

The large size of this work and the fact that it is carved fully in the round are unusual. The great majority of English alabasters were reliefs made to be placed on tables, incorporated into altarpieces, or set in wall niches. The original function of this statue is unclear. Perhaps it was part of a shrine or altar dedicated to the saint.

Alabaster, height 81.5 cm (32 1/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1953.2.2



Master of the Catholic Kings
Castilian,
active c. 1485/1500

The Marriage at Cana, c. 1495/1497

This painting, along with *Christ among the Doctors*, which hangs nearby, and six pictures now in other museums, once formed part of a single altarpiece. Four paintings include the coats-of-arms of Spain's Ferdinand and Isabella, whose zeal in protecting the Catholic faith led to their appellation as the Catholic Kings—their title gives name to an otherwise anonymous artist. He was probably Castilian, but his work shows influences from northern European painting as well. The Spanish court had strong cultural and political ties to the Netherlands, and there were many Netherlandish paintings in northern Spain for the artist to emulate. In this panel, the town glimpsed through a door looks Flemish, and domestic details, like the kitchen servants, point to a northern concern with daily life. Similar also to Netherlandish painting are the finely detailed renderings of fabric and other surfaces. On the other hand, the somber, angular faces, the red and brown tonalities, and the costumes are more typical of the Spanish region of Castile.

The scene depicts Christ's first miracle—the transformation of water into wine at a wedding in Galilee (John 2:1–12). At the table, Jesus raises his hand in benediction, while Mary prays in recognition of the miracle. The governor of the feast looks skeptically into his cup, but the bride and groom lower their eyes in reverent acceptance of the divine gift. Pairing Ferdinand and Isabella's coats-of-arms with those of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I suggests that the scene may also be an allegorical wedding portrait commemorating the 1497 marriage of the Catholic Kings' son to Maximilian's daughter.

Oil on panel, original painted surface
137.1 x 92.7 cm (54 x 36 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.42