

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

TREASURES OF HEAVEN: SAINTS, RELICS, AND DEVOTION IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

"We do not worship, we do not adore, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the Creator; but we venerate the relics of martyrs in order the better to adore him whose martyrs they are." —St. Jerome

I'm an ardent devotee of the internet. It has streamlined my career as a journalist: no more nail-biting waits for answers to my proposals and requests for images, no more aggravating lines at the post office or pleasant but time-consuming and often costly treks to libraries. Research and fact-checking are at my fingertips. Only a few computer clicks led me to St. Toribio, the miracle-worker of migration to the "Promised Land," of whom I'd not heard before. My search for the American location of some of his relics then guided me to Monsignor Aguirre in San Antonio, Texas, and to a scoop on the groundbreaking exhibition *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*.

On at the Cleveland Museum of Art from October 17, 2010 to January 17, 2011 before traveling to the Walters Gallery in Baltimore from February 13 to May 15, 2011, and to the British Museum in London from June 23 to October 9, 2011, *Treasures of Heaven* examines the role of relics and reliquaries in the development of Christianity and the visual arts, although relics are also important in Buddhism, Hinduism, Shamanism, and many other religions. It's the first major exhibition in the United States to consider the history of relics and reliquaries and features more than 150 works of art from late antiquity, the Middle Ages, and early modern Europe.

The word "relic" derives from the Latin *reliquiae*, meaning "remains." A reliquary is a shrine that houses one or more relics. According to *Wikipedia*, "One of the earliest sources that purports to show the efficacy of relics is found in 2 Kings 13:20-21..."



The Benedictine Monastery of St. Matthias in Trier
(Lucy Gordan photo)



The Holy Robe in Trier



Portable Altar of Countess Gertrude, c.1045,
Cleveland Museum of Art

These verses are cited to claim that the Holy Spirit's indwelling also affects the physical body, that God can do miracles through the body of His servants, or both... With regard to relics that are objects, an often-cited passage is Acts 19:11-12, which says that St. Paul's handkerchiefs were imbued with God's healing power."

"Many tales of miracles and other marvels," continues *Wikipedia*, "were attributed to relics beginning in the early centuries of the Church; many of these became especially popular during the Middle Ages. These tales are collected in books of hagiography such as the *Golden Legend* or the works of Caesar of Heisterbach. These miracle tales made relics much sought after during the Middle Ages."

"According to Catholic tradition, relics are cherished remnants of a saint, a reminder of their contributions to the Christian faith and a tangible point of focus of prayer. There are three types of relics," Monsignor Aguirre, my new friend, who studied canon law at the Angelicum in Rome from 1985-7 and lived at the graduate house of the Pontifical North American College's "Casa Santa Maria," wrote me in an e-mail. "'First-class' relics are items directly associated with Christ's life, like the True Cross, the Crown of Thorns, or the Shroud in Turin, or they are physical remains of a saint. Traditionally a martyr's relics, like ours of St. Toribio, are often more prized than the relics of other saints. 'Second-class' relics," continued Aguirre, "are belongings of a saint, like clothes or books, and 'third-class' relics are personal items which have touched a 'first-class' or 'second-class' relic."

Again according to *Wikipedia*, "Since the beginning of Christianity, individuals have seen relics as a way to come closer to the saints and thus form a closer bond with God. Since Christians during the Middle Ages often took pilgrimages to shrines of holy people, relics became a large business.

The pilgrims saw the purchasing of a relic as a means to bring the shrine back with him or her upon returning home... since during the Middle Ages the concept of physical proximity to the 'holy' (tombs of the saints or their personal objects) was considered extremely important. Instead of having to travel hundreds of miles to become near to a venerated saint, one could venerate the relics of a saint within his or her own home."

Many of the relics and reliquaries on exhibition in Cleveland have never before been seen outside their home countries. Drawn not only from celebrated public and private collections in the United States and Europe, but also from important Church treasuries, *Treasures of Heaven* includes metalwork, paintings, sculptures and illuminated manuscripts.

Besides the three organizing museums mentioned above, among the other lenders are the Vatican, the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Seventeen objects come from the Cleveland Museum's renowned collection of medieval art, and six from the Vatican collections, including three reliquaries from the *Sancta Sanctorum*, or Holy of Holies, the medieval papacy's private relic chapel.

"People who think of the Middle Ages as a dark period for art and culture will find their perceptions challenged by this exhibition," promised Griffith Mann, chief curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art and co-curator of *Treasures of Heaven*. "The relics and reliquaries showcased here provide evidence of religious objects travelling across tremendous distances and of people making pilgrimages across the Mediterranean to walk in the footsteps of important figures from sacred history. The medieval devotion to relics gave birth to new forms of monumental architecture, supported extensive pilgrimage networks and prompted significant developments in the visual arts."

"To convey the sanctity of these relics to the faithful, medieval artists created precious containers, or reliquaries, for churches, shrines, and personal use," continued Mann. "Often covered in gold and silver or encrusted with precious and semi-precious stones, these objects commanded attention. Their outward appearance reminded worshippers of the extraordinary nature of the matter they contained."

Highlights of *Treasures of Heaven* include:



Reliquary Bust of St. Baudime, Auvergne, 12th century, Eglise de Saint Nectaire, Treasury



Reliquary Box from the Holy Land, 6th century, Vatican Museums



Reliquary of the Head of St. Sebastian, 9th century, Vatican Museums

the nearly life-size *Bust Reliquary of St. Baudime*, c. 1180-1200, on loan from the parish church of Saint-Nectaire in Puys-le-Dôme and traveling outside of France for the first time; an early Byzantine sixth-seventh century *Box with Stones from the Holy Land*, one of the earliest objects attesting to the practice of collecting souvenirs during pilgrimages to the Holy Land, on loan from the Vatican; the *Portable Altar of Countess Gertrude*, c. 1045, from the Cleveland Museum's collection of artifacts from the Guelph Treasure, one of the most important Church treasuries to have survived from medieval Germany; the Flemish church-shaped *Reliquary Shrine of St. Amandus*, c. 1250-75, said to have once housed the relics of this seventh-century saint who served as a missionary and bishop to the western regions of present-day Belgium, on loan from the Walters Gallery; and the British Museum's *Head Reliquary of St. Eustace*, c. 1200, which contains fragments of the skull of this Roman soldier who converted to Christianity.

The Shroud of Turin, probably the most famous and venerated Christian relic, said to be the linen burial cloth of Jesus Christ, was just exhibited to huge crowds from April 10-May 23. It was visited by the Holy Father on May 2.

Another important relic attributed to Jesus is the Holy Robe, the garment Christ is believed to have worn at the time of his trial before Pontius Pilate or during his crucifixion, which was then gambled for by the Roman soldiers. As the story goes, it was brought from the Holy Land to Trier in Germany by St. Helena, who was the mother of Roman Emperor Constantine and a tireless collector of holy relics. Like the Shroud, the Holy Robe is very fragile and thus seldom displayed. When it was last exhibited in 1996, over one million pilgrims visited its chapel in Trier's cathedral, the oldest Christian church north of the Alps. Its next public showing will be from April 13-May 13, 2012.

St. Helena also brought here relics of St. Matthias, now in the crypt of Trier's 12th-century Benedictine abbey named for the saint. This is the only Apostle's grave north of the Alps. According to Acts, Chapter 1, Matthias had been chosen by the remaining eleven apostles to replace Judas after the latter's betrayal and suicide. Other relics of St. Matthias were left by St. Helena in Rome and are housed in the Basilica of St. Mary Major. ○