

HOLY MATTER

A winged figure guards one end of a cremation sarcophagus, carved in limestone by an Etruscan stonecutter three hundred years before the birth of Christ. It is an angel by any other name. Sealed inside, the ashes of a body remain as invisible *mementi mori*. For thousands of years people have created artworks to forge a connection with the dead, expanding the narrative of a life to beyond the physical world, a story of the imagined spiritual journey of each separate soul in the company of souls. Their artifacts connect the living to the dead by a *transformation mystical and hidden*¹ in an act of contemplation involving the senses, memory and imagination.

Carved on an Italian marble tomb made three hundred years after the death of Christ, birds are depicted on the first known representation of the Resurrection: represented as mediators of the divine, they soar heavenwards on a journey to an afterlife, linking the natural to the supernatural. With the assimilation of Christianity into western consciousness the metaphor of Heaven evolves into a 'holy city' with a *radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal*,² a city inseparable in the imagination from the beauty of Earth's rarest elements, precious materials endowed with the means of communicating the power and mystique of the dead. In the *Revelations* of St John, the foundations of the City of God are adorned with jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth and amethyst. *The street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass*³ – gold as precious metal purified by smelting, symbolising spiritual purification by fire, made indestructible and incorruptible as with the flesh of the saints whose bodies miraculously resist decomposition over time.

Glittering objects of adoration and worship, made to house the relics of saints and holy men, bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, the lost and the longed-

¹ St Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*

² Revelations 21, 11

³ Revelations 21, 18

for. By awakening memory and imagination, the dazzling craftsmanship of medieval reliquaries creates intimate contact with the divine, expressing in physical form something of the spiritual beauty of Heaven. The art of the medieval goldsmith becomes a material expression of the sacred as the physical merges with the metaphysical. Body parts or objects remaining from a life (a lock of hair, a splinter from the Cross, the remnant of a bone) bring us as close as we can ever get to the substance of a memory. *The resurrection of the body has a meaning we cannot understand.*⁴

A large gold cross, the Cross of St Nikomedes of Borghorst dating from the eleventh century, is crafted in pure gold on a wood base with repoussé images of the Crucifixion and four saints. Below, the figure of a man lifts praying hands towards a pair of angels against a background of filigree scrolls. The body of the cross is inset with rock crystal flasks containing relics of wood and bone, wrapped in red silk to signify the spilt blood of Christ and His martyrs. The intense studding of precious stones, rock crystal and pearls into the gold indicates a triumphant victory over death.

In the medieval imagination gemstones, like stars in the firmament, were connected to the cosmic events that led to their creation. They were thought to originate from the Four Rivers of Paradise, evoking Dante's river of light in the *Paradiso*, which in its turn evokes the sparkling of a bejewelled masterpiece of medieval art: *light in the form of a river poured in burnished splendour between two banks painted with beautiful spring flowers. And from the torrent came living sparks which settled into the flowers on either side, like rubies set in gold.*⁵ Gemstones were believed to have metaphysical qualities, silver and gold the only metals deemed worthy to receive the Eucharistic wine. Vessels of private and public devotion designed to venerate mortal remains were crafted in materials imbued simultaneously with immanence and transcendence. Jasper represents the strength of the incorruptible truth, red porphyry and rubies blood, garnet

⁴ TSEliot, *Essay on Dante*

⁵ Dante, *Paradiso XXX*

compassion. Sapphire symbolises heaven and the impulse to celestial values, used to chasten the spirit, cool the blood and clear the sight. Imperishable ivory is a symbol of purity. Rock crystal was regarded as the most precious of stones by some, highly valued because of the skill needed to carve it, and symbol of purity for its clear transparency. The fact that it can magnify made it highly prized for displaying relics. It was understood as petrified water because of its transparency, and came to represent purity from sin – the purity of Christ and the waters of baptism. *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal....*⁶

Blood-soaked earth from the site of St Stephen's martyrdom is sealed, invisible, inside a pure gold purse studded with precious and semi-precious stones. The paradox of blood and dust contained in gold and jewels points to the value of the contents being infinitely more precious than the priceless vessel. Clustered gems emit rays of healing light (to the medieval mind if not to ours) in a fusion of relic and reliquary: the reliquary partakes of the aura of the relic, becoming one and the same as it absorbs the holy mysteries. Furthermore, the invisibility of the stained soil requires believing without seeing: the definition of faith, or what Abbé Suger of St Denis calls 'interior seeing'.

The most valuable elements of the material world represent what there are no words for. They express a beauty not easily described but unmistakably experienced: offerings of the priceless to the nameless in objects of adoration and worship are a recognition of the intrinsic beauty of holiness where *the soul expands and is uplifted by the beauty it perceives: it loses itself in the object.*⁷ Spirit becomes matter, matter holy – even in an object as small as an exquisite gold and pearl pendant made in Scotland around 1200. A circular gold box, set with relics of the True Cross, is filled with pearls set in gold wire around a miniature wooden cross also set in gold. Gleaming under a dome

⁶ Revelations 21 10?

⁷ Richard of St Victor

of rock crystal, it was once suspended on a gold chain. Simplicity and beauty dazzle the soul.

*Where the unseen eyebeam crossed*⁸ bears witness to the spiritual force of looking at an object that is endowed with significance. The successors of St Peter have gazed daily in adoration at a cross-shaped box of gilded copper engraved and embossed, a reliquary of the Holy Cross inlaid with cloisonné enamel in greens and blues, ochres and ivory-whites, and garnet-red. To look at this object is to share in the veneration of holy men throughout a millennium. It is the work of master-craftsmen of the early 9th century and is housed in the Pope's private chapel the *Sancta Sanctorum*, the Holy of Holies in the Palatine chapel at the Lateran over whose entrance is inscribed, THERE IS NO HOLIER PLACE IN THE WHOLE WORLD. Likewise, countless eyes have looked on a reliquary crafted in the Auvergne between 1146-78. The waist-length bust of Baudime, a missionary from Rome to France around 200 AD, is clad in copper-gilt over walnut with ivory and horn, glittering gold, a living presence to the faithful. He is depicted as an immortal dweller in Paradise, expressive hands raised, one in blessing, the other holding a phial once containing his blood. Formerly studded with gems both precious and semi-precious, this artifact connecting the living to the dead for a thousand years is still radiant in its beauty, serene in its presence as it communicates the power and mystique of the ineffable.

Thousands of these works of exquisite craftsmanship were destroyed in acts of vandalism at the Reformation by those who attacked them as idolatrous, superstitious and fraudulent, or dismissed them as mere curiosities. Recusant Catholic families rescued what treasures they could and kept them hidden, risking death were they to be discovered. Some of these priceless reliquaries have been restored to the religious foundations of their origin, others have found their way into museums and private collections. Gazing at the Cross of St Nikomedes, a woman was heard ridiculing the

⁸ TSEliot, *Burnt Norton*

notion of a relic of the True Cross to her companion, who scoffed in agreement, then whispered to her as they turned away, 'Do you think it's wrong to be cynical?'

Plato believed that beauty is a path to God, that it answers our spiritual and moral needs. The precious was linked to the sacred, the beautiful to the holy. Two thousand years later the Reformation decided that they weren't. In the twenty-first century we *dare no longer believe in beauty*.⁹ It has become fashionable to mock beauty, to deny that it is synonymous with truth, or that it calls us to the divine, or that it offers a glimpse of the transcendent, or that it is an encounter between the visible and the invisible, or that the beauty that reaches beyond the world of greed and sorrow connects us to the ultimate mystery of things. It is easier to remain in the encircled world of having and getting, of rational explanation and analysis.

Beauty remains the sacred task of the artist. *Before the beautiful, within the beautiful, – the whole person quivers. He not only 'finds' the beautiful moving, rather he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it.*¹⁰ The dazzling art of the medieval reliquary remains witness to 'the forgotten theme of metaphysics, beauty.'¹¹

Treasures of Heaven

British Museum

July 2011

⁹ Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*