‘TABERNACLES, HOWSYNGES AND OTHER THINGS’. THREE ALABASTERS FROM THE BURRELL COLLECTION IN CONTEXT*

CLAIRE BLAKEY, RACHEL KING AND MICHAELA ZÖSCHG

If fame were measured in photographs, the Burrell Collection’s Head of St John the Baptist in a Tabernacle would be a celebrity (Inv. 1.34; Pl. X). Few objects have been reproduced as frequently or as generously in treatments of English alabasters or of St John’s severed head. It has increasingly stolen the limelight from all other known examples and all but entirely eclipsed its two Glasgow fellows (Inv. 1.33 and 1.35; Pl. XI and Pl. XII). Yet this Head of St John in a “howsynge” has been a reluctant star. Its pre-museum life remains buried in the past. Many of the same ideas have been rehearsed again and again. This chapter sets out the state

1 Cheetham, F., Unearthed: Nottingham’s Medieval Alabasters (Nottingham, 2004), 8.

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of research to date and looks at Burrell’s trio of tabernacles afresh with a focus both on the central panels and on their wooden cases.

SIR WILLIAM - ST JOHN

Though it has usually been stated that Sir William Burrell (1861–1958) acquired his first English alabaster in 1900/1 in Paris, he probably began acquiring them in the 1890s. In 1944, he gave twenty-nine examples to Glasgow, complemented by a further nine, in 1948, 1949, 1951, and 1955. Burrell was competing with other voracious collectors, such as Walter Leo Hildburgh (1876–1955) and Philip Nelson (1872–1953). The tendency has been to see the Burrell Collection as exactly mirroring the collection that the Burrells assembled and enjoyed in their homes. Yet a closer reading of Sir William’s meticulous purchase books begun in 1911 reveals that alabasters were occasionally returned or given to others. The tabernacles discussed here were acquired at fairly regularly spaced intervals.

The first of the group to be acquired was Inv. 1.34 (Pl. X). Published in 1920 as in Burrell’s collection, this never-before-seen example does not appear in Burrell’s notebooks, suggesting purchase before 1911. Philip Nelson clearly states that it goes back to George Grosvenor Thomas (1856–1923), an Australian artist-cum-dealer. Grosvenor Thomas was


6 See note 3.

based in Glasgow between 1885/6 and 1899. Burrell is likely to have known him through his sales of paintings of the Barbizon and Hague Schools, or through his relationship with the Glasgow Boys. Burrell bought and furnished his first home in Devonshire Gardens around 1891/2. The following decade saw Burrell blossom as a collector. As the century drew to its close, he embarked on three study tours of Northern Europe. A month after his return from the second, the Glasgow Herald announced the sale of Grosvenor Thomas’ effects.8

If the object was in Burrell’s hands by 1901, it was not among the pieces he displayed at the Glasgow International Exhibition. Nor was it loaned to the 1910 Society of Antiquaries’ Alabaster exhibition or mentioned in the later catalogue.9 Burrell was notably reticent about publicising his interest, believing that the best bargains were to be had when operating from a position of stealth.10 Were Burrell to have had the tabernacle by this date, his failure to lend the work is not especially remarkable.

Perhaps more notable is that this well-preserved example is not recorded in W.H. St John Hope’s comprehensive list of 1890.11 The object appears to have been completely unknown and must surely go down as one of Burrell’s first collecting coups.12 For despite being well publicised through reproductions,13 prominent loans – the first in 1920 to the V&A,14 and
almost permanent display since the Burrell Collection opened in 1983 – no-one has yet linked this work with antiquarian accounts of the nineteenth century or earlier.

The second of Burrell’s Heads, Inv. 1.33 (Pl. XI), was also acquired without fanfare, in Winter 1921/22 from the London dealer F. Harding. Harding’s source is unknown, and the piece had not been previously publicised. A newspaper cutting affixed to the exterior of the tabernacle’s left door hints at a history. It reads:

From the Ipswich Journal of the 26th of September 1789. Last week, some workmen employed in taking down an old house adjoining the New Bank Buildings in this town, found, secreted under one of the floors, a precious relic of the Romish Church. Four figures curiously cut in Alabaster – in the centre is represented the head of the Deity; immediately under, a half length of the Saviour; on the right side, a full length of the Pope; and on the left, that of St Peter. The whole is fastened in a plain wainscot box, of about a foot square, and is in fine preservation.

Burrell does not appear to have questioned whether the account and the artefact truly belonged together. While the clipping may identify the object as the piece in the report, it may also have been affixed to contextualise it, or to increase its price.


15 F. Harding, 18 St James Square, was the source of several of Burrell’s alabasters. Hildburgh enumerates the Heads known to him in “Miscellaneous Notes”. He knew of examples in Oxford, Leicester and in the Croft-Lyon’s Collection, an example reproduced in St John Hope, “On the Sculptured Alabaster Tablets,” Pl. XXIV (actually Leicester’s example), one owned by William Burrell (now known to be 1.34) and one formerly in the possession of Messrs. Harding. The latter suggests that Hildburgh did not know that Burrell had also acquired this nearly a decade before. Given to Glasgow Museums in 1944, 1.33 has been published in: Cheetham, Alabaster Images, 158, no. 14 (Fig. 16), indicating that this item has not been published previously; and Anderson, “Re-discovery, Collecting and Display”, 49. This item was on view at St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow, from 1993 to c. 2009.
yet to be found. Notably, it does not cite the full original entry, which explained that the artefact was now in the 'Bank of Messrs. Crickett and Co. 'The Ipswich Town and County Bank of Messrs. Crickett, Truelove and Kerridge' had opened three years before at the beginning of 1786, and was in Tavern Street. This central location in a hotbed of radical Protestant sympathies fell within the parish of the Church of St Laurence, formerly part of the Augustinian priory of Holy Trinity, in the sixteenth century.

Nearly forty years later, in August 1826, what appears to be the same object is mentioned in notices of an upcoming auction of the Crickett ancestral home: Smyth's Hall, Blackmore, Ingatestone, Essex. A ‘curious and very ancient alabaster altar’ is summarily described in announcements carried in Ipswich, Norwich, Bury St Edmunds and London-based newspapers. What happened after this is unknown. There is likely to have been some interest. The Gentleman’s Magazine had recently carried a number of letters discussing St John’s Heads. Like 1.34, 1.33 is neither listed in 1890, nor loaned in 1910. It represents another triumph for Burrell, who now had two rare tabernacles.

Most discussions of English alabasters note the end of the production of panels by the time of the Reformation. They were removed, defaced, buried, dumped, sold abroad, and destroyed thanks to the iconoclasm of 1548 and the 1550 ‘Act for abolishing and putting away divers Books and Images.’

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16 The Ipswich Journal (Saturday 26 September 1789), no. 3088.
20 The Suffolk Chronicle; or Ipswich General Advertiser & County Express (Saturday 26 August 1826); Bury and Norwich Post (Wednesday 23 August 1826); and London Morning Chronicle (Monday 21 August 1826).
21 Stukeley, W., Paleographia Britannica: or, Discourses on Antiquities in Britain, 3 vols (London, 1743–1752), vol. 2 (1745), 53, Fig. 5 is the first to discuss the pieces as showing St John on the basis of the piece having come from a chapel dedicated to the saint. For the first letter, see the writer signing as J.B.N. in The Gentleman’s Magazine (May 1824), 397–8. See also Duke, E., “Alabaster Sculpture Representing the Personification of the Holy Trinity,” The Gentleman’s Magazine (September 1824), 209–13: 209. This episode is discussed by Anderson, “Re-discovery, Collecting and Display,” 49–50. Unidentified by St John Hope, an appeal for the whereabouts of this panel was made in Nelson, P., “Medieval Alabaster Panel,” Notes and Queries 12 S.I. (27 May 1916), 428.
grounds of churches and monastic houses were known in the sixteenth century, with a spate of findings in the later eighteenth century. Since then secreted pieces have been found in Kent, Norfolk, Derbyshire, Nottingham and York. The V&A houses a fifteenth-century panel mounted in a later case inscribed ‘[...] found in ye Ruines of An house att [space] near Yorke, Procured & Beautified by William Richardson of Northbierley 1689’. This treatment, like the language describing the preservation and presentation of the Ipswich ‘relick’ and ‘curiosity’ says something of the understanding of these objects in history. Such examples highlight concealment as one of the main reasons for the preservation of alabasters, which may explain their sudden market appearance and lack of provenance.

Another twenty years would pass before Burrell would buy the third of his tabernacles (Inv. 1.35; Pl. XII), from his trusted dealer John Hunt, in August 1938. Its presence in the photograph of Hunt’s stand at the inaugural Antique Dealer’s Fair gives 1934 as the latest possible date of its acquisition by Hunt. A label reading ‘Lent by Mrs Lumley-Holland’ is affixed to the case – this refers to its loan, in 1923, to the V&A. The widow of Major General Lumley-Holland, Caroline [Carrie] Roper of Lynsted Park, Kent, died in 1929. This suggests that Hunt could have acquired it as early as 1930.

In 1989, John Cherry identified the Lumley-Holland example as the tabernacle Lieutenant Colonel George Babington Croft Lyons (1855–1926) exhibited to the Society of Antiquaries in December 1912. A committee member for the Society’s 1910 Alabaster exhibition, Croft Lyons only contributed one item, a Resurrection. The tabernacle had clearly only recently come into his possession. Drawings dated June 1828 in the archive of the same Society show that the panel was then in the soon to be restructured Church of St John the Baptist in Bristol. This piece was presumably removed, and is registered lost in 1890. The 1828 account

and Display,” and Cheetham, Unearthed, 16. See also Aston, M., Broken Idols of the English Reformation (Cambridge, 2016), passim, but 173, 240 (on the alabasters in the pond at Scotter) and Marks, R., Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England (Stroud, 2004), especially Chapter 10 “Deface and Destroy.”


24 V&A A.112-1946.

25 Since being given to Glasgow Museums in 1944, 1.35 has been published in Cheetham, Alabaster Images, 158, no. 15 (Fig. 17).


27 Victoria and Albert Museum, Review of the Principal Acquisitions during the Year 1923 (London, 1926), 98.

28 John Cherry, Correspondence in Object File 1.35, and Croft-Lyons at the Meeting of Tuesday 12 December 1912, Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries 2nd series XXV (1912), 17–18.


30 St John Hope, “On the Sculptured Alabaster Tablets,” 690, no. 12. See also the public
makes no mention of a wooden framework, but does suggest that the panel is mounted on, rather than set into the Church’s west wall.\textsuperscript{31} The incidental details it records clarify that the drawing is of the Croft Lyons/Lumley-Holland/Burrell table.\textsuperscript{32} There is no evidence that Burrell was aware of this history, but it is also impossible to say that he and Hunt knew absolutely nothing of it.

THE TABERNACLES IN CONTEXT

These three St John’s Heads in Tabernacles were patiently-made purchases. Only seven such tabernacles are known worldwide – the others are kept in Worcester (containing a Virgin and Child), Reykjavik, Leicester and Carmarthen (St John’s Heads).\textsuperscript{33} The acquisition of the Burrell examples reflects an approach which has yet to be fully understood. Why did Burrell so often buy more than one version of the same type of object, sometimes, as is true of this small group, adding lesser rather than better quality pieces? He did not record St John Hope’s taxonomy alongside the appeal for information in Idem, “Alabaster Panels with St. John’s Head,” The Athanaecum 3234 (19 October 1889), 528.

\textsuperscript{31} Anderson, “Re-discovery, Collecting and Display,” 49, recounting the discovery of a panel which had been reversed and set into the wall as a stone facing.

\textsuperscript{32} It is worth noting that the drawing shows the canopy upright beneath the panel, rather than above it.

\textsuperscript{33} On all occasions dated to the second half of the fifteenth century and described as being in contemporary wooden housing. Bibliography for the Reykjavik tabernacle: Nelson: “Unpublished;” 197, Fig. IV. no. 1; Rafnsson, S., Frásögur um fornaldarleifar 1817–1823 (Reykjavik, 1983), 407–9; Cheetham, English Medieval Alabasters, 20, 29, Fig. 16; Nordal, B., “Alabastur fyrir altari,” Storð (1985), 39–44: 42–4; Idem, “Skrá um enskar alabastursmyndir frá miðöldum sem varóveist hafa a Islandi,” Árbók hins íslenzka fornleifafélags 82 (1985), 85–128; Cheetham, Alabaster Images, 151.

descriptions in his purchase books. He did not encourage the external study or publication of the objects.

Their differing degrees of preservation has meant that the group has never been shown together, though they have shared a spread in Cheetham’s concordances. Skip forward to the pages illustrating his lists, and you will see that each alabaster panel appears neatly cropped and separated from its wooden container. Not only has St John been beheaded, but the object itself has been effectively disembodied. With the exception of the much-reproduced 1.34, scholars’ concentration on the alabaster panels has increasingly meant the denial of the objects as a whole. In the second half of this chapter, we will draw back. What were the physical and emotional structures which materially enclosed and devotionally embraced them?

THE CENTRAL PANELS

All three Burrell tabernacles contain alabaster panels which have the plated head of St John the Baptist as their central motif. In all three, the severed head is flanked by the standing figures of St Peter to the left and of a Bishop Saint to the right. Underneath there is an image of the Man of Sorrows. A large number of surviving panels share this same combination, sometimes substituting the Man of Sorrows with the Agnus Dei.

Divorced from its biblical narrative context (Matthew 14:1–12; Mark 6:14–29), the Head of St John was a widely venerated image in fifteenth-century Europe and was reproduced in many materials and forms.
Its popularity reflects the increasing cult surrounding the saint's relics. More than a dozen different places claimed to possess his skull, most famously Amiens Cathedral. The relic housed there was believed to possess healing powers and to cure epilepsy, melancholy and headaches among other ailments. Streams of pilgrims came from all over Europe and purchased badges showing St John's Head, further contributing to the dissemination of his cult and image.

The skull at Amiens has a gash above the left eye socket which is not accounted for in the Bible but, according to legend, represents a post-mortem wound. Many of the English alabaster panels depicting St John's Head, including two of the Burrell examples, reference the relic by reproducing this wound, imbuing the object with some of the power inherent in the original. While the elaborate tabernacle 1.34 (Pl. X) shows it as a deep cleft, on 1.35 (Pl. XII) only a slightly raised pale outline still echoes the wound's former presence.

The miraculous nature of the copied image was further enhanced by other details of the rendering. Originally shown swimming in a pool of blood, the Burrell heads stare the viewer in the eye and address her or him through slightly opened lips. Beheaded and bleeding, yet living, seeing and speaking, the motif of St John's Head recalls the Vera Icon.
print of Christ's face on the veil directly connects with the viewer through his gaze.\(^4\) In the fifteenth century, John's role as precursor of Christ was theologically grounded. Each episode in John's vita was interpreted in light of the biography of Christ. John's decapitation was seen as presaging Christ's Crucifixion, and his beheading at Herod's banquet as a precursor of the Last Supper and of the Eucharistic bread and wine.\(^4\) On Burrell's alabaster panels, the Eucharistic link is underlined by the presence of the Man of Sorrows.\(^5\) This iconography showing Christ standing, naked above the waist, wearing the Crown of Thorns and displaying the wounds of his Passion, visualises his sacrifice, repeated in the Eucharistic rite, and humankind's salvation.\(^5\) On 1.33, Christ points with his right hand to his side wound, his left revealing the nail wound and gesturing upwards towards St John's decapitated head.

A late-fifteenth-century breviary following the use of York puts this into words: 'Saint John's head on the dish signifies the body of Christ which feeds us on the holy altar.'\(^5\) As this passage seems to be unique to York, alabaster panels with St John's Head and the Man of Sorrows have traditionally been linked to this city. Some scholars have also interpreted


\(^4\) However, Baert, "Vox clamantis in deserto," 78–9 distinguishes between the all-seeing Veronica and St John's Head whom she describes as possessing an 'absorbing gaze,' which functions as a medium between the viewer and the divine. For the Vera Icon, see Kuryłuk, E., Veronica and her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a "True" Image (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford, 1991); Kessler, H.L. and Wolf, G. (eds), The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation: Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996 (Bologna, 1998).


\(^5\) This link between the Man of Sorrows and the Eucharist is most evident in the Mass of St Gregory. Meier, E., Die Gregorssmesse: Funktionen eines spätmittelalterlichen Bildtypus (Cologne, 2006). For this iconography specifically in the context of English alabasters, see Ward, "Who Sees Christ?"


**THE CASES**

Agas may have been looking at a tabernacle like the example in the Burrell Collection (1.34, Pl. XI), the wings of which bear inscriptions directly naming several of the saints shown on the central panel.\footnote{Cheetham, \textit{Unearthed}, 60–1. It is rarely stated that the Worcester and Reykjavik tabernacles have been cut down.} Here, four further figures are inserted behind St Peter and the Bishop Saint. St James and St Catherine of Alexandria are signposted on the left wing, St Anthony and St Margaret on the right. No other surviving tabernacle has this interactive...
labelling. It may be that a “minimum” standard iconography of St John’s Head, Christ as Man of Sorrows, Peter and the Bishop Saint could be made to meet individual needs and preferences.\(^{59}\) The high artistic quality of the carving and painting of 1.34 in comparison to 1.33 (Pl. X) and 1.35 (Pl. XII), as well as to other surviving examples, suggests that the piece was particularly special.

The legal action brought by ‘imagemaker’ Nicholas Hill suggests that consumers probably acquired tabernacle and panel as a unit. Money was owed to Hill for 58 Heads which had been transported with, if not within, tabernacles and niches.\(^{60}\) The use of ‘carver’ and ‘painter’ to describe the same individual suggests that the sculptor of the panels may also have painted them. But did this extend to the wooden housings?\(^{61}\) And who produced these? Richard Marks has asserted that these painted boxes sat at the ‘bottom end of the (altarpiece) market,’ noting the generally low value of St John’s Head panels, and decrying their craftsmanship as ‘crude.’\(^{62}\) Sophie Philipps’ contribution in this volume discusses their construction in detail, showing, among other things, at what stage in their production the boxes were painted, how guidelines were used, and that unseen portions were given coats of colour. Sources like Hill suggest that panels and containers were produced in large numbers. Across the seven surviving tabernacles and the Warkleigh pyx box, an object believed to recycle a dismantled tabernacle, the use of standard iconography and stock motifs is evident.\(^{63}\)

Each case comprises an angled niche enclosed by two doors which open as if wings. The interior of each wing is decorated with a design of three fields, with the uppermost and lowermost reserves mirroring one another’s form in a cross. These fields are contained within a painted frame. They contain a shape drawn in tracery. The tracery in 1.34 (Pl. XI) assumes a sextafoil form with three white dots at each of the cusps. In 1.33 (Pl. X) it is a quatrefoil with yellow dots. Arrow-like, the cusps draw attention to motifs at their centres, sunbursts atop rosettes balanced by white roses atop a black-and-white hatching, all ringed by hoops punctuated by raised bosses. On 1.34 these are spiked with alternating feathered dashes of red and white. On 1.35 (Pl. XII), the upper and lower reserves also appear to

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59 Compare 1.34 for example to the Heads of St John the Baptist illustrated in Cheetham, *Alabaster Images*, n.p.


have once framed small wheels with feathery spikes containing sunbursts with jagged and writhing rays. The Leicester tabernacle displays similar motifs enclosed within more elaborately shaped red tracery contour, and the Carmarthen tabernacle evidences a similar selection and arrangement of motifs.

On all three tabernacles, the upper and lower fields harbour stencilled primroses, which reach into the well of niche on 1.34. Traces of primroses can be seen on the Reykjavik housing, but these are heavily overshadowed by the bright central motifs which have been overpainted in uncharacteristic blue. Where, in these tabernacles, leafy flourishes buffer upper and lower fields, these mirror the outline of the quatrefoil tracery, suggesting the use of templates not only for the painted primroses, but also to lay out the reserves.

These roses and sunbursts have been interpreted as Yorkist emblems since at least St John Hope and his discussion of the Leicester tabernacle in 1890. Henry II (reg. 1154–1189) was the first to use the rose as badge. He favoured the stylised form of a single flower with five petals, seeded at the centre and with the tips of the sepals appearing between them. Edward IV (reg. 1471–1483) was the first to use the white rose, frequently rayed by the sun, or en soleil. St John Hope linked the white rose and the blazing sun to York’s Corpus Christi guild. The fact that Nottingham was believed to be the centre of alabaster production and that the town belonged to the diocese of York seemed to support this.

This association has become a standard feature of treatments of the tabernacles. When 1.34 was exhibited in the National Portrait Gallery’s Richard III exhibition, it was to ‘demonstrate the political allegiances of

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64 See the thirteenth- or fourteenth-century lead stencil for rosette patterning reproduced in Rosewell, R., *Medieval Wall Paintings in English and Welsh Churches* (Woodbridge, 2008), 130, Fig. 143.
67 St John Hope, “On the Sculptured Alabaster Tablets,” 706. Founded in 1408, the Guild of Corpus Christi in York was, until its abolition in 1547, one of the most important, powerful and influential late medieval institutions of its kind, and particularly known for its elaborate pageants, processions and plays on occasion of the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi; see, for example, Rogerson, M. (ed.), *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City* (Woodbridge, 2011).
69 Stone, L., *Sculpture in Britain: The Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth, 1972), 216–17 raises the possibility that the heads of St John the Baptist were adopted as emblems by some religious guilds, including the Corpus Christi Guild, and points to their inclusion in the York service book; see note 67. Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 315 claims that the Corpus Christi confraternity in York assumed the Head of St John the Baptist as their badge.
The catalogue presents the Bishop Saint as William of York and takes the link to the Corpus Christi guild a step further, suggesting that such artefacts might have been found in the homes of its members. Tudor-Craig’s proposal that Richard is directly linked to the tabernacle by his 1477 induction into the guild is echoed by Pollard’s recent claim that 1.34 was ‘possibly commissioned by a member of the royal household.’

Yet as Nigel Ramsay has stated, these theories surrounding York and the Corpus Christi guild lack concrete evidence. The repertoire of motifs available to a craftsman in late-fifteenth-century England was a wide one. Signs and symbols, such as heraldry, monograms, badges, mottos and emblems were a key part of artistic language in the Middle Ages. Sunbursts, primroses, and roses, examples of which can be found in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century wall paintings, represent an existing established visual currency.

It is inevitable that the ascent of the House of York and its mobilisation of these motifs influenced their reception. How these signs and symbols were understood depended on where they were encountered. In the Royal Window at Canterbury, as at the Church of St Mary and All Saints at Fotheringhay, site of the dynastic mausoleum, the motif is clearly linked to the family. But standardised sunbursts composed of superimposed wavy and straight stars and stacked stars were also a common feature of contemporary window quarries. Indeed parallels can be drawn even within the corpus of surviving alabasters. The sunburst shown on the

70 Tudor-Craig, Richard III. The exhibition Chaucer’s London, London Museum 1972, showed alabaster sculpture in order to demonstrate London’s importance as a centre of trade and industry, linking the distribution of alabasters with the export of textiles to continental Europe in late medieval England. See Anderson, “Re-discovery, Collecting and Display,” 55.
71 Tudor-Craig, Richard III, no. 21. Associations have also been made between the Corpus Christi pageant cycle and the production and consumption of alabasters in the city, using bequests of alabasters to York churches to state that the merchant classes of the city were amongst those who owned them and were likely to have been involved in the annual cycle. Stevenson, J., Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture. Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York (New York, 2010), 80.
72 Tudor-Craig, Richard III, no. 21.
73 Pollard, A.J., Edward IV: The Summer King (London, 2016), caption to Fig. 8.
76 Ibidem, 54.
77 Cheetham, English Medieval Alabasters, at p. 29 stated ‘it is also of note that the East Anglian, and especially Norwich glass painters commonly decorated their quarries with the Yorkist “rose en soleil”.’ Glass showing this motif can be found across a number of locations, see Marks, R., The Medieval Stained Glass of Northamptonshire, Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi, Great Britain: Summary Catalogue, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1998), 72–3, 79–109. See the crowned rose of York – BC inv. 45.221. Burrell’s own sunburst quarries (including 45.102.a) are said to have come from Fotheringhay.
78 See BC inv. 45.46, 45.94 and 45.78.
wings of the Burrell and Leicester tabernacles is as stylistically close to
the stars of Bethlehem crowning the stable in alabaster Adorations.79

Many motifs crossed the boundaries of political and personal, public
and private. In their homes, people were surrounded by furniture decorated
with stars, flowers, rosettes, and circles. On muniment room chests, the
same symbols functioned as pictograms distinguishing specific records.80
Like the stars, the ears of corn beneath the canopy on 1.34 recall East
Anglian stained glass and the stylised leaves echo conventional architectural
ornament.81 These objects are testimony to an all-encompassing network
of images which cannot be reduced to single pronouncements.

This associative web lies behind one image linking Marian devotion and
roses in a fifteenth-century English manuscript.82 In it, Mary, nursing the
Christ Child, occupies and forms the centre of a blooming red rose. Red
roses were symbolic of her love and charity and the five petals associated
with her five sorrows.83 The surrounding hoop of white and gold dots has
been interpreted as a stylised rendering of the rosary, with its Hail Marys
represented by white dots and its Our Fathers in gold.84 The example is
proof that unconsidered approaches to the interpretation of these objects
may be possible and that there is work to be done inspired by Barbara
Baert’s proposal that the language of these objects is both figurative and
abstract at once.85 One way of opening a new angle on these tabernacles
would be on a threshold, as mediators between the earthly and the
heavenly realm. The final section of this chapter asks: What do we know
about how these tabernacles were used, who owned them, and how their
specific shape informed this?

79 See BC inv. 1.7, 1.8 and 1.9.
80 Danbury, E., “Security and Safeguard: Signs and Symbols on Boxes and Chests,”
in J. Cherry and A. Payne (eds), Signs and Symbols: Proceedings of the 2006 Harlaxton
Symposium (Donington, 2009), 29–41: 36.
82 The Virgin and Child in a Red Rose with a Rosary, East Anglia, England, c. 1490,
illustrated Vita Christi with devotional supplements, 17.6 × 12.8 cm. Los Angeles,
collection/objects/244407/unknown-maker-the-virgin-and-child-in-a-red-rose-english-
about-1480–1490/ (last accessed 8 April 2018); see also Keene, B.C. and Kaczenski, A.,
Sacred Landscapes: Nature in Renaissance Manuscripts, Exh. Cat., Los Angeles, The J. Paul
Getty Museum (Los Angeles, 2017), 59–61, Fig. 41.
suggests that the five petals may refer to Christ’s wounds.
84 Keene and Kaczenski, Sacred Landscapes, 59–61. For the history of the rosary as prayer
sequence, see Winston-Allen, A., Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the
Middle Ages (University Park, PA, 1997).
85 Baert, Caput Johannis in Disco, 94–5 suggests that the four disks on BC inv. 1.34 are
abstract repetition of the disk at the centre of the shrine, but without noting that shrines
bearing this motif do not always contain St John’s Heads. Her larger argument highlights
the importance of circles and rotation in the celebration of St John, for example in the use
of burning “St John’s wheels” and the association of the motif with the cosmos.
FUNCTION AND USE

‘It is enclosed in a box or tabernacle, with double doors, after the old manner of pictures, the better to preserve it from injury and dust, to be opened and shut occasionally … The middle figure is the head of St John the Baptist on a discus.’

This description from 1789 is of an alabaster which has since been lost. It highlights the box’s protective function. It also touches briefly on use. In line with other contemporary literature discussing caskets and chests, the tabernacle is described as being at hand. It is ‘ready for use, but not yet given (its) function.’ But how were the alabaster panels in their ‘howsyinges’ seen in their own time?

One fifteenth-century account relates an episode on Palm Sunday 1471. As King Edward IV knelt in prayer:

a lytle ymage of Seint Anne, made of allebaster, standynge fixed to the pillar, closed and clasped togethars with 4 bordes, small, payntyd, and gowynge round about the ymage, in manar of a compas … And this ymage was thus shett, closed, and clasped accordyng to the rulles that in all the churchis of England be observyed, all ymages to be hid from Ash-wensday to Easter in the morninge. And so the sayd ymage had been from Ash-wensday to that tyme. And sodanly, at that season of the service, the bords compassynge the ymage about gave a grat crak, and a little openyd, whiche the kynge well perceyveyd and all the people about hym. And anon, after, the bords drewe and closed togethars agayne, withowt any mans hand or touchinge, and, as thowghe it had bene a thinge done with a violence, with a gretar might, it openyd all abrod, and so the ymage stode, open & discovert, in syght of all the people there beynty.

The power of images was increased by their covering and uncovering in accordance with the liturgical year. They gained agency by oscillating between visible and invisible. In this instance, the image itself (or the heavenly power it channelled), forced its painted wooden container to

89 This subject has been extensively discussed in the context of Northern winged altarpieces. See, with further bibliography, Schlie, H., “Wandlung und Offenbarung: Zur
open and show its contents. It has been suggested that alabaster panels within such ‘painted wooden cabinets’ were specifically designed ‘to function as devotional aids for more solitary worshipers within the private spaces of their own homes.’

In other parts of medieval Europe, small altars with doors and wings, or with potential to be manipulated, were indeed often used in more “private” devotional contexts. In fourteenth-century Florence standardised painted triptychs are an early example. In the fifteenth-century Netherlands there were small folding diptychs. North of the Alps, openable and closeable altarpieces were never confined to the “private realm” as shown by the extant large-scale winged altarpieces of cathedrals, parish and monastery churches. And importantly, sources tell us that St John’s Heads in tabernacles were also in churches. Yet whereas the exteriors of Florentine triptychs and Netherlandish diptychs were sophisticatedly decorated, the outsides of the Burrell tabernacles bear no traces of paint. When not in use, these would have been unpretentious and unassuming.

The little church of St Kerrian in Exeter was home to three alabasters in tabernacles, probably tucked away in chapels where it was possible to come within centimetres of them. In lay homes, they may have been in the sleeping area. In fifteenth-century England, spaces for prayer were rarely


94 The 1417 inventory for the Church of St Kerrian, Exeter, suggests that this space accommodated many alabasters, three of which, an image of St Anne and two images of St John, were within tabernacles. Marks, Image and Devotion, 89.

95 For the visual interactions between inside and outside when manipulating such objects, see the various essays in Ganz, D. and Rimmle, M. (eds), Klappeffekte: Faltbare Bildträger in der Vormoderne (Berlin, 2016).
separated from spaces for other activities. One 1492 inventory describes ‘a saint Johns hed of Alabaster in a case […] in the chamber at the Beddis hede.’ The domestic space was undeniably gendered, and the bed associated with conception and childbirth. St John the Baptist, conceived by a barren mother, was associated with charms connected to safe birth. Could these tabernacles have held a special meaning for women? Another source describes them as being stored out of sight. Nicholas Wildgoose owned six heads of St John all of which were in a closed coffer. The value given is that of the lot including home storage. The panel and painted wing interiors may have been seen simultaneously when open, but such objects may equally have remained closed for long periods of time. More than this, they may largely have been totally out of sight, in which case concealment takes on a subtly different significance.

Though narratives of these tabernacles are marked by movement, foremost that of their own wings as they opened and closed, their storage out of sight reminds us that these objects were often, although not always, mobile. Especially in a domestic context, they could be characterised by movement as they were stored, removed, and returned to their place. Their extraction from storage, not the opening of its wings, was the primary action, and, like the Bible to the altar, a stored tabernacle had to be transported to the place of prayer. The object was actively devotional for a delimited length of time in a place made sacred by its presence. The full details of their use remain to be revealed. Where and at what height were they placed? Was it raised on high, like the wafer in the Mass? Whatever is the case, such objects were a store of latent possibilities, not ones whose definition and use is monolithic.

Contemporary documents often associate the tabernacles with veils. These may have been used to drape them when not in use, or in accordance with the liturgical year. Equally, they may have been used to cover the surface on which they were to stand – if, that is, they stood, and were not hung. When Agas Herte bequeathed her Head to her son in 1522 it was accompanied by a cloth of red sarsenet fringed in green. Another was inscribed ‘Caput Sci Johis Baptiste’ and accompanied by a cloth of gold.

100 Cheetham, Unearthed, 61.
101 Cheetham, Alabaster Images, 4.
worked with Roman letters in black velvet. Some sources specifically refer to these as St John’s Cloths. Many do actually accompany alabasters, like one of unknown colour and fabric belonging to widow Agnes Browne of Greenwich, or another in green satin belonging to Robert Collyns, haberdasher in London. But mercer Robert Stodley’s ‘cloth of sarcenet stained with the image of St John’ had no companion. It has yet to be asked what it meant to combine the mass-produced alabaster Heads with costly embroidered cloth of gold. Low original price and mediocre artistic quality clearly did not impact the impulse to care for the objects in ways commensurate with their spiritual significance.

If it is correct that the exteriors of the ‘howsynges’ were not painted, their transformation from a closed wooden box into a colourful and glittering open shrine would have made for a particularly impressive devotional experience. Traces of handles are discernible on 1.35. The user did not have to slide their fingers into the crack and risk touching the paintwork or sculpture to open them. Aside from preparing the object physically, the user went on a mental voyage. Moving from the smooth oak of the exterior, to the painted sunbursts, roses and foliage, to the carved, painted and gilded alabaster at its heart, the experience would have been similar to that of the late medieval churchgoer crossing the threshold of the sacred space and preparing their person for the prayer therein. Such ideas about thresholds and portals go hand in hand with interpretations of the St John’s Head on a Charger and the Man of Sorrows as motifs straddling heaven and earth or life and death. Once open and with the wings in position, angled to match the polygonal bases, the imagery would have wrapped itself around its user creating a devotional space akin to a minute chapel. More than containers for alabaster artworks, these cases are an integral part of experiencing the power of the object. They open to encompass a sacred, eternal space and offer their user a performative tool.


105 For the importance of images at thresholds, see Gertsman, E. and Stevenson, J. (eds), Thresholds of Medieval Visual Culture: Liminal Spaces (Woodbridge, 2012); Bawden, T., Die Schwelle im Mittelalter: Bildmotiv und Bildort (Vienna and Cologne, 2014) and now Jacobs, L.F., Thresholds and Boundaries: Liminality in Netherlandish Art (1385–1530) (New York, 2018).

106 Wilkins, “Opening the Doors to Devotion,” 377 in the context of Florentine Trecento triptychs.
CONCLUSION

In assembling three encased St Johns Heads, Sir William Burrell created the only permanent concentration of alabaster panels in tabernacles anywhere in the world. In so doing, he silently mounted a private challenge to the power of the major museums, the most rapacious of collectors, and the venerable Society of Antiquaries.

While Burrell's own reasons for collecting them may perhaps forever stay in the past, here our goal has been to explore the wider contexts of these encased St John's Heads. We have addressed them holistically as active entities. We have considered the contexts of their ownership in the late medieval period, as well as in the early twentieth century. We have revisited the iconography, suggesting that new arguments can be made about imagery which was long held to be understood. We have addressed their making, their consumption, and their use. Divorced from their original contexts and presented, a case within a case, in a museum gallery; disembodied by discussion, our purpose has not been to give definitive answers but to return them to being dynamic cultural artefacts.

APPENDIX

Since 1944, 1.34 has been published as follows:

Museum of Art (New Haven and London, 2006), 194–95, Fig. 114; Carr, A.W., “The Face Relics of John the Baptist in Byzantium and the West,” *Gesta* 46:2 (2007), 159–77: 171–2, Fig. 2; Williamson, P. (ed.), *Object of Devotion. Medieval English Alabaster Sculpture from the Victoria and Albert Museum*, Exh. Cat., Palm Beach, FL, Society of the Four Arts, and five other institutions, with contributions by F. Cannan, E. Duffy and S. Perkinson (Alexandria, 2010), 110, no. 18, Fig. 1; Stevenson, J., *Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture. Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York* (New York, 2010), 80; Baert, B., *Caput Johannis in Disco: Essay on a Man’s Head* (Leiden and Boston, 2012), 91–98, Fig. 61; Pérez Suescun, F., “Los alabastros medievales ingleses y la iconografía jacobea: algunas piezas singulares,” *Anales de historia del arte* 24 (2014), Núm. Esp. Noviembre, 421–38: 436, Fig. 5; Baert, B., “The Blaffer Foundation St John’s Head: The Johannesschüssel Phenomenon,” in J. Clifton and M. Kervandjian (eds), *A Golden Age of European Art: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation* (Houston, 2016), 115–29: 117–18, Fig. 5; Pollard, A.J., *Edward IV: The Summer King* (London, 2016), caption to Fig. 8; Hendrikman, L., *The Neutelings Collection. Four Centuries of Medieval Sculpture* (Maastricht, 2016), 102–107, Fig. 28.4; Baert, B., “Vox clamantis in deserto: John’s Head on the Silent Platter,” in B. Baert and S. Rochmes (eds), *Decapitation and Sacrifice: Saint John’s Head in Interdisciplinary Perspectives: Text, Object, Medium, Art & Religion*, 6 (Leuven, 2017), 63–92: 73, Fig. 76; Henderiks, V., et al. (eds), *Blut und Tränen: Albrecht Bouts und das Antlitz der Passion*, Exh. Cat., Luxembourg City, Musée National d’Histoire d’Art Luxembourg and Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig Museum (Regensburg, 2017), 166–7, Fig. 1.