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MEDIAEVAL ENGLISH ALABASTER-WORK IN PORTUGAL

PELO

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ONE of the most lovely and characteristic minor arts of mediaeval England was that alabaster-carvers, known in their own day the *alablastermen*. They were particularly numerous at Nottingham, as the neighbouring quarries of Chellaston and Tutbury provided rich sources of their raw material. Minor guilds of these workers also existed in other towns such as Burton-on-Trent, Leicester, Lincoln, Norwich and York.

English alabaster or gypsum is, at its best, an excellent medium for the sculptor. It is soft and yet well suited for fine detail. It takes colour and gilding perfectly. The more accesible deposits now long since exhausted, yielded pure white, semitranslucent blocks; and it was not till these gave out that the underlying brown-veined strata came into use in the early years of the sixteenth century.

After the Black Death the work of the alablastermen quickly set the fashion for all other activities in religious and monumental sculpture in England; and it was exported in great quantities to the furthest pars of Europe. In 1382 the Pope commissioned Cosmati Gentilis to take back with him to Rome three large images in alabaster of the Blessed Virgin, St. Peter and St. Paul and a smaller one of the Trinity. In 1408 Queen Joan, the wife of Henry IV, exported alabaster carvings, which were cut by Thomas Colyn, Thomas Holewell and Thomas Popehow, for the tomb of her first husband, Jean, Duc de Bretagne, at Nantes. These survived until their destruction during the French Revolution. Sir Eric Maclagan in a characteristically learned article, in the *Burlington Magazine* for February 1920, gives a list of English alabaster carvings that are still to be seen in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Norway. He adds that he has seen at least one detached panel in Russia, that there are a fair number in Spain and that their presence has been noted in Portugal.»

Alabaster was used by the English in three main ways It was frequently employed for funeral effigies and the decoration of important tombs. It is

also often found in the form of free-standing statuettes, ranging to about three feet in height. But it was generally wrought into small panels in high relief, averaging about a square foot in size, always elaborately painted and occasionally enhanced with gilding. These were sometimes designed as separate objects of devotion, but more usually destined to be built up as a sequent series into an altar-screen, reredos or retable.

None of these series now remains in England in its original position, though several survive in French churches. The best preserved of them all is probably the one now to be seen in the Musée Vivenel at Compiègne. Here ten panels are arraged in two rows, in an elaborately carved, painted and inscribed wooden frame. They represent scenes from the Passion: the Washing of the Feet, the Last Supper, the Betrayal, the Trial before Pilate, the Mocking, the Scourging, the Carryng of the Cross, the Deposition and the Resurrection, and are flanked by four large images of St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Remigius and St. Giles and a partitioned by sixteen smaller images of other saints. This retable came originally from the Church of St. Germain l'Auxerrois and is in an extraordinarily fine condition.

It was not till 1919 that anything similar could be seen in England: and the altar-piece now on view in the Victoria and Albert Museum is far inferior to most of those accessible to art-lovers abroad. As Professor Edward S. Prior reminded us, the work of the alablastermen is now represented in their native country «for the most part by broken pieces, some dug up from the floors of churches, as at Whittlesford in Cambridgeshire and Pieston in East Yorkshire; others recovered from some ancient rubbish-hole in a churchyard, or from a pond nearby, as was the case with the Selby find; others again dredged out of rivers, as at York, or brought to light in the excavation of steets, like the large hoard of broken pieces found in London.» A letter written on September 10th, 1550, to the Privy Council by Sir John Mason, the English ambassador to France, throws light on the circumstances of their ruin and disappearance from the land of their origin. He writes: «Three or four ships have lately arrived from England laden with images which have been sold at Paris, Rouen and other places and, being eagerly purchased, give to the ignorant people occasion to talk according to their notion, which needed not had their Lordships' command for defacing them been observed».

It is fortunate for the reputation of English mediaeval art that Catholic nations on the continent have preserved so many specimens of the beautiful work which was destroyed in vast quantities by the so-called Reformers. Descendants of those iconoclasts are now, in a more enlightened age, busily engaged in searching out and recording what remains of it at home and abroad. So far, research workers seem to have passed over Portugal. Yet when

we recall that John of Gaunt's tomb in old St. Paul's Cathedral at London was of alabaster, and that his grandchildren were king Duarte the Eloquent and Prince Henry the Navigator, we must deduce the likelihood of the presence in Portugal of English alabasters, shipped there during the Portuguese Golden Age and still preserved for the admiration of modern Portuguese lovers of art. There are, in fact, many such survivals. Notable among them are two delightful panels, or «tables» as they are more commonly called, in the municipal museum of Soares dos Reis at Oporto, and no less than seven tables and two statuettes in the national museum das Janelas Verdes at Lisbon. These, so far as I know, have never yet been authoritatively described.

The panels in the museum of Soares dos Reis are of small dimensions and were almost certainly intended to stand alone. They represent the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, in which her full-length figure is framed in a vesica-shaped glory, and the Holy Trinity, in which God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are shown as three majestic crowned figures seated side by side. The Holy Trinity was a favourite subject of the alablastermen and was invariably treated in one or other of two very different types of composition. The more usual shows God the Father seated, crowned in glory and holding between His kness Our Lord crucified above Whom hovers the Holy Spirit. The other, which is now prohibited by the Congregation of Rites, was popular all over Europe in the middle ages. It is the one preferred by Jehan Foucquet for perhaps the most sumptuous of his illuminations in the Hours of Etienne Chevalier.

The seven tables in the museum das Janelas Verdes are more important than those in Oporto, and some of them are still adorned with canopies of Gothic tracery carved from a separate piece of material. Their subjects and their varying dimensions show that they cannot all have been originally related in a series. They represent the Adoration of the Magi, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, her Coronation, the Entombment of Our Lord, the Resurrection, the Holy Trinity, similar in ype to the table in the museum of Soares dos Reis, and the head of St. John the Baptist. Most of them are in an unusually fine state of preservation and several still bear a great deal of their original colour, thanks to the pious care with which they have been preserved in the soft, dry atmosphere of Portugal. It is very rare to find more than faint traces of colour remaining on similar pieces in England. The scarlet robes and bright countenances of the Holy Trinity, are painted in tempera with sound skill and give as good an impression as can be got anywhere of the brilliance which must have characterized such images when they were first produced.

The head of St. John the Baptist calls for some special comment; for tables of the kind were probably the most popular of all in the fifteenth

century. They are mentioned in many wills and inventories of the period. So far back as 1432 Isabello Hamerton of York bequeathed to her chaplain «unum lapidam alabastri secundum formam capitis Sancti Johanes Baptistae»; and in 1491 one Nicholas Hill, alablasterer, brought an action against William Bott his salesman for five marks, the value of fifty-eight heads of John the Baptist in «tabernacles and housings» wich had been delivered to him for sale. These St. John's heads are often mistaken to-day for effigies of Our Lord's head surrounded by a nimbus when, in fact, they represent the saint's severed head lying against the background of Salome's dish. At the base of such tables we often find images of the Resurrection of the Lamb of God between small standing figures of St. Peter and St. Wilfrid of York. St. Thomas á Becket sometimes occupies the place of St. Wilfrid. He is still remembered, as Mr. John Gibbons tells us, in the Alto Douro under the name of São Tomaz de Cantuaria. So it may be he who figures on this particular table.

The two statuettes in the museum das Janelas Verdes represent St. Catherine with her wheel and St. Anne teaching the Blessed Virgin her lessons. The latter is a fairly recent acquisition and its origin has been questioned by some Portuguese critics. But Dr. João Couto is unquestionably right in assigning it to England for the costume of St. Anne makes any other attribution impossible. She wears an engular hood of a style familiar from the portraits of Margaret Countess of Richmond, the mother of king Henry VII, and of Henry's own queen, Elizabeth of York; a characteristic garment worn by the aged ladies of the day, particularly widows, in imitation of the conventual form of head-dress. She also wears the peculiar pleated veil below her chin, which was known as a «barbe» and of which we have many extant examples in English funerary art, such as the brass of Elizabeth Porte dated 1516 in the church at Etwall in Derbyshire, and the alabaster effigies of Lady Clinton, who died in 1422, on her tomb at Haversham in Buckinghamshire; of Anne Bardolf, the second wife of Lord Cobham, who died in 1453, on her tomb at Lingfield in Surrey; and of Lady Nevill of Womersley, on her tomb at Harewood in Yorkshire which dates from about 1482. Moreover, the lower half of a very similar alabaster group of St. Anne and the Blessed Virgin is still preserved in the church of Whittlesford in Cambridgeshire.

English art.-historans are far to apt to speak slightingly of purely English works of art and in particular of the mediaeval alabasters. It is customary to refer to them as the somewaht crude wares of a provincial trade. When the art-historian is unable to attribute a picture or a carving to a known individual he is prone to depreciate its aesthetic worth. We cannot authoritat ively attribute a single mediaeval alabaster to any definite personality; for they were never signed, though many of them bear on the back roughly incised

marks showing that they came from the hand of some particular carver or workshop. Undoubtedly much crudity crept into the products of the alablasters after the close of the fifteenth century; but at heir best they produced things of rare power and charm; a few of which, such as the Flawford Madonna, the mutilated kettlebaston slab and the Coronation of he Virgin in the Barber Institute at Birmingham, may not unfairly be described as masterpieces. The English alabasters in Portugal will surely help to rehabilitate the reputation of the anonymous craftsmen who carved such beautiful objects of art and piety.