

Social aspects of funerary culture

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Today, many people around the world celebrate their deceased loved one's accomplishments and individuality in funerary practices. In the Romanesque Period, relics of saints were placed in reliquary objects, which were displayed in a religious setting. The Reliquary Bust of Saint Yrieix and The St Eustace Head Reliquary are examples of works that contained a relic of their saints at one point. These reliquary heads aimed to emanate a certain power through various aspects of each reliquary. The utilization of materials and the portrayal of saints awed many viewers.

The Romanesque period is commonly characterized by religious subject matter. Thus, it is of no surprise that reliquaries would be prominent in the time period. Reliquaries came in many different shapes. Hans Weigert, in the book *European Sculpture: Romanesque Sculpture*, states, "According to the nature of the relic, they might take the form of a small statue, a portrait bust, a head, or a limb." Gold and other precious materials covered reliquaries to impart the power and magic of the relics they contained. Reliquaries were placed near or on the altar and their fine materials were illuminated with candlelight. The use of valuable materials was not the only way that the holiness of a saint was conveyed.

Head reliquaries of saints were frequently idealized. This is due to the rise of the eleventh and twelfth century belief that one's physical appearance reflected one's virtue. Thomas Dale, in his journal article "Romanesque Sculpted Portraits: Convention, Vision, and Real Presence," describes reliquaries as having "... a narrow range of emotions, and highly stylized facial features that give particular emphasis to the eyes." Eyes were believed

to be connected to one's spirit and what one saw with their eyes can affect their morality.

Thus, makers of reliquaries sought to achieve the appearance of realistic eyes with the use of glass, ivory, and other suitable materials. The use of different materials gave the viewer the feeling of translucency, as if the saint knew the viewer's every secret. A composed expression and the use of gold to create radiant skin are other characteristics seen in Romanesque reliquaries that were commonly associated with nobles, the clergy, and saints. The physical beauty of a head reliquary represented the good virtue of a saint, which can be seen in the Reliquary Bust of Saint Yrieix. The Reliquary Bust of Saint Yrieix is composed of a wooden core and a metal shell. The wooden core contains the skull of Saint Yrieix, but was not made to be displayed.

Its luxurious exterior would have glistened in the presence of candlelight. This brightness that would radiate from the silver surface corresponds to the bright quality of the skin associated with those who were considered good, such as nobles, the clergy, and saints. The brightness of the silver also associates St. Yrieix with the divine. In the Romanesque time period, the subject was depicted according to ideal models, either spiritually or socially. In this reliquary, the head was probably modeled based on the standard on how an ideal saint or a noble should look. This reliquary would have been placed on the altar and carried in processions like most reliquaries. Silver, gems, glass, and rock crystals decorating the head convey the saint's reverence and good virtue.

Together, the utilization of precious metals, the religious setting, and relics create an image of a holy saint. The St Eustace Head Reliquary encloses a wooden core holding bone fragments. Here, the use of precious materials is seen again and the figure holds a composed expression. The eyes are noticeably stylized to reflect the belief that eyes connected to one's spirit. The use of metal gives the reliquary a dazzling image and the composed expression associates the depicted figure with a saint.

It wasn't deemed proper for nobles, the clergy, or saints to express emotions, as the expression of emotion was associated with villain and demons, who were deformations of an ideal. This reliquary would also be placed near an altar. The viewer would have held great respect for it because of the relics of Saint Eustace contained inside, the piercing gaze, and the effect of the usage of precious materials. Overall, the work projects reverence with the combination of bright skin, a composed expression, stylized eyes, and the containment of relics.

This time period placed a heavy emphasis on religion, which became a common subject matter. Romanesque reliquary heads had the focus of creating an image commonly associated with those with good virtue. To create a "good" image, use of precious materials—such as gold, silver, and gems—gave the reliquaries a bright quality. The Reliquary Bust of Saint Yrieix and The St Eustace Head Reliquary are both works from the time period that feature the use of precious materials and a composed expression, which conveyed the reverence of the relics contained inside. Reliquaries such as these have left an impression on the European people of the Romanesque period and still continue to awe viewers today.

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