

Professor Emeritus John Roe, Secretary of the Friends of York Art Gallery, discusses a fifteenth-century oil-on-wood panel from the Gallery's collection, which is on display in the 'Treasures from the Stores' exhibition.

Artwork of the Month July 2023

Hans Siebenbürger, *The Flagellation of Saint Barbara*



Hans Siebenbürger (d.1483), *The Flagellation of Saint Barbara*
oil on wood, 73.6cm x 54.6cm, YORAG:752
Photo: York Museums Trust ©

This oil-on-wood painting probably dates from the 1470s and is paired with another by the same artist, the [Martyrdom of Saint Barbara](#). They are certainly altar pieces, and look like a pair of panels. Their provenance is the Schottenstift Abbey in Vienna, a Benedictine Abbey which takes its name from the Scottish monks harboured there, when visiting on Catholic missions, in the Church's Counter-Reformation struggle. I will say more about the background to the painting below, but first I wish to give an

impression of it, what struck me about it, and why I chose it as the subject of an Artwork-of-the-month talk.

It is a vibrant, beautifully coloured painting, with the qualities of composition, colour, drapery, a certain sombreness of background that one associates with Netherlandish or late Gothic painting of the fifteenth century. Its subject, on the other hand, is brutal, a father's seizure of his daughter by her hair, prior to his whipping her. As gruesome a tale you could hardly imagine. Cruelty and beauty strangely blend together, giving the painting an arresting, dramatic quality. The more one gazes upon it, the more it reveals its details. Some of these are iconographic, in keeping with contemporary religious painting, others are realistic. The spiritual and the earthly come together in a disquieting, yet satisfactory compositional alliance. It struck me that this was a painting that naturally kindled enthusiasm about its achievement, and that this enthusiasm warranted sharing with others.

The two paintings on the martyrdom of Saint Barbara, only one of which is ours unfortunately, came on the market in the 1920s, following the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian empire after the First World War. Until then they had sat quietly, relatively unknown, in the Abbey, removed from the altar during a fire in the seventeenth century. (The Schottenstift remains to this day, and even has its own museum.) The *Martyrdom* (i.e., decapitation) was bought by Lord Bearsted at Christie's in 1926, and forms part of his collection at Upton House, Warwickshire. He left the house and contents to the National Trust, which now owns it. York's great benefactor, F. D. Lycett Green, bought the *Flagellation* in 1931 (at Sotheby's), and it became part of a large collection of paintings he gave to the gallery in 1955. It benefitted from conservation in 2007, at which point it attracted some outside interest. A Polish scholar Magdalena Łanuszka published an article in 2014, after studying the painting here, and concluded that the painter was Siebenbürger, and not as had been formerly suggested, the Master of the Schottenstift. Such a title anyway is given when nobody is at all sure of the identity of the painter. The arguments for Siebenbürger are given in Łanuszka's article (reference following this account), and they turn on likenesses to details in other paintings known to be by him. Not only the face of the saint but also her fingers, which are very distinctive, resemble those elsewhere, for example. There had been a total of 21 altar paintings, 19 on the Passion and the Life of the Virgin. An older master was thought to be responsible for all but the two Saint Barbara panels, but it may be that Siebenbürger and his workshop did them all. In other words, he may possibly be the Master.

As well as the *Flagellation* and *Martyrdom*, there is clear evidence of a third, smaller painting, the subject of which is Christ visiting the saint while she is in prison, and healing her wounds each night. This depends on a black and white photograph. No painting has been discovered, which suggests either that it is lost or destroyed or that it remains undeclared in private hands. In that case, from the perspective of symmetry one may speculate on the existence, former or undiscovered, of a fourth painting, all four originally occupying the retable behind the altar. This last putative study might be that of Barbara holding the tower (see below).

Who then is Saint Barbara? She is amazingly topical, as we shall see. According to such lives of the saints as the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, Saint Barbara is a martyr whose death occurred in 303, on the very eve of the triumph of Christianity, the Roman emperor Constantine declaring it the official religion in 312. She offended her father by refusing wealthy suitors, being determined to be a bride of Christ, so he kept her in a tower. While he was absent, she had workmen put in a third window in the tower to represent the Holy Trinity; in the meantime, she defaced her father's pagan icons. When he returned, he pursued her in his fury, but she managed to escape to a cave in the nearby mountains. A nasty, tell-tale shepherd gave her away, and her father punished her with a whip before handing her over to the authorities, who subjected her to torture. Barbara remained resolute in her faith, and finally her father put her to death by decapitation, wielding the sword himself. His reward was to be smitten instantly by a thunderbolt, which reduced him to ashes.

Alban Butler in his *Lives of the Saints* declares that she is likely to be spurious, as no mention of Barbara was made before the seventh century. Notwithstanding, she is highly regarded in both the Catholic and Orthodox churches. She has been removed from the Roman calendar (probably to reduce the number of holidays occasioned by Saints' days) but she remains on the Catholic register. Because of the lightning punishment that did for her wicked father, she is the patron saint of artillery, and it so happens that her reliquary is preserved in the cathedral in Kyiv in Ukraine. One can imagine the long line of worshippers. The tower in which she was kept is now regarded as an attribute of the saint, just like Saint Catherine's wheel. Accordingly, she is also the patron saint of architecture, so that when this war finally comes to an end she will doubtless receive prayers a second time for the rebuilding of cities.

We must say something about the uncomfortable subject of flagellation. This is a female saint, after all, and we are in a period of supreme religious devotion. Should the painter depict the whip cutting into

the saint's naked flesh? Shades of the Marquis de Sade immediately impose themselves. Siebenbürger / the Master of the Schottenstift clearly resists doing that. For one thing he is far too interested in drapery. In fact, few artists go so far. Lorenzo Lotto is an exception, painting a fresco of a nude Barbara in more than one pose (public humiliation, torture) for the [Oratory of the Suardi family](#) near Bergamo. Online representation suggests that the figures involved are comparatively small.

Italian depictions of Christ's scourging display his body along classical lines, as in Sebastiano del Piombo's work, inspired by Michelangelo. Again, that would be a difficult thing for a Northern, or any, painter to emulate for a female saint, and at that time. The greatest number of portrayals of Saint Barbara opt for the safest pose, that of Barbara with her tower, sometimes posing as the tower in a stately, commanding way. A wonderful example is an early [fresco of Ghirlandaio's](#), which shows Barbara standing on the body of her vanquished father, who is dressed as a Saracen warrior, i.e., what paganism meant to the Christian fifteenth century. Ghirlandaio painted this in 1471, which corresponds almost exactly with the date of the Schottenstift panels. The fresco is in an alcove chapel in the Pieve di Sant' Andrea in Cercina, near Florence.

We turn again to the painting of the *Flagellation*. The immediacy of the action is one thing: the father dragging his daughter from the cave by the hair, the whip descending. He clearly takes this detail from the *Golden Legend*, where Jacobus includes a sentence to this effect. We are not witnessing the whipping but the moment immediately prior to the whipping, the first stroke, as it were. Similarly, decapitation studies of Saint Barbara concentrate on the moment just as the sword descends, no blood as yet being shed (the Upton House panel is true to this tradition). The whip curls in the air, its end remarkably serpent-like, as befits the evil of the father's intention, the sinfulness of his anger. Another thing is the narrative aspect. In paintings of this period, the action while present and immediate often accommodates a series of events, which include past, present, and future. The horses have arrived in the field below, the father has dismounted from his and has approached the mouth of the cave, leaving an attendant, wearing a Turkish or Islamic turban, guarding the two mounts. Meanwhile the snitchy little shepherd points to where the saint is hiding. The father drags her forth by her lustrous, golden hair, and raises the whip. A final narrative detail is his scimitar, still in its scabbard, but ready to be employed for Barbara's final punishment. There are two time sequences, then: the instant and the sequential. The treacherous shepherd pays the price of being 'consumed' (the word of the *Golden*

Legend) by stone, and the painter seems to portray his fate, as the large, dark rock of the cave encroaches upon him.

If we look more closely at the shepherd, we see how thin and withered his witch-like, pointing fingers are. Compare these to the beautiful, slender fingers of the saint, held in prayer, or to the ham-like fist of the father as he grips the stock of his whip. Each hand tells a different story. The composition contains many small, but significant details that can be gleaned on close inspection.

The painting's colours are striking. I think invariably of the paintings of the Italian Renaissance when the subject of colour is raised. But the northern paintings of the Netherlandish School give so many rich examples, as is apparent in their influence here. The manner and spirit of Jan van Eyck or Rogier van der Weyden can be discerned in the colour of the costume and the folds of the drapery. After my talk people commented on the garish yellow boots of the father, as he performs a frenzied dance. He occupies the centre of the frame, yet the saint in her attitude of quiet devotion and displaying muted gold or cross-hatched yellow in her garments (also the soft gold of her hair and halo) holds him at bay. Her inner strength shows in the light emanating from her face, which is of a stylised spirituality. The father's face by contrast is thoroughly naturalistic and deeply unpleasant, a face which unfortunately one is often likely to meet. The darkened, sombre landscape, with trees and towering rock covering most of the sky, is typical of late Gothic. The main source of light accordingly is the face of Saint Barbara herself, who is already otherworldly in her inner conviction and her submission to, yet conquest of, earthly torment.

What if we could bring this and the Upton House painting together for display by means of reciprocal loan? I suggest we make the approach and ask them to lend us their picture first!

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Reference. Magdalen Łanuszka, 'An Attribution for two late-Gothic central-European panels in English public collections, depicting episodes from the life of Saint Barbara' (*Quart* Nr 2 [48], 2018, pp. 3-20). It can be downloaded from: academia.edu. I owe this reference to my colleague and fellow Friend Jeanne Nuechterlein.