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Metalsmith workshop in Lombardy

First half of the 15th century

**PROCESSIONAL
CROSS**

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Processional Cross

Beaten, embossed and gilded copper over a wooden core, 51.5cm tall, 24.5cm wide and 4cm thick

Provenance: Specific details unknown; it certainly originates from the Lombardy region (north of Italy)

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What we have before us is a remarkable example of a processional cross, an object characteristic of Quattrocento metalware from the north of Italy. The piece, which is part of a group of which there are few other examples, stands out due to its unusual iconography, its refined finish and its excellent state of preservation.

This is a Latin cross with a rectilinear profile, made up of a central oval medallion and four arms, decorated lengthwise with triangular elements and four-leaf clovers at the ends (**Fig. 1 and 2**). At its base, the piece has a hollow cone finished with a spherical coupling neck, or *macolla*, which serves to attach the cross to the staff, which would allow the piece to either stand alone or be carried on procession.



Figs. 1 & 2 Workshop in Lombardy, *Processional cross* (obverse & reverse), wood and copper, 15th century (first half), unknown provenance (probably Lombardy region, Italy).

The cross is made up of a wooden core which has been covered by metal plates held by tiny rivets. The cone and the *macolla* meanwhile are entirely made of metal. The obverse side of the cross has five independent plates while the reverse has six. All of these are made of copper, and the figures depicted on them have been rendered using beating and embossing techniques. The plates are arranged on a negative mould (or matrix) and, with the help of the necessary tools, the positive impression of the desired motif was attained, which in this case consists of the ten figures distributed between the obverse and reverse sides. The details of these figures were finished by the metalsmith with the help of an engraver's chisel, the same tool used for the secondary decorations (rhombus background, figures' halos, light rays). Finally, the elements underwent a gilding process.

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ARTS & ANTIQUES

The state of preservation of this cross is excellent. It has maintained each of its metal plates as well as its gilding. This fact makes it an exceptional piece, given that other crosses belonging to the same group have lost some of their plates and these have been replaced by more modern parts, or otherwise decorative elements that are alien to the original piece have been added at later stages.

The cross houses the depiction of ten figures, five on the obverse side and another five on the reverse. On the obverse (see fig. 1) a Crucified Christ appears on the central medallion, which belongs to a type of iconography known as *Christus Patiens* or “Christ Suffering”. As is common in depictions of the Crucifixion story, the figure of Jesus appears with his mother, the Virgin on one side (left), and his disciple, Saint John the Evangelist, on the right, both in an attitude of imploring and lamenting. At his feet we find Mary Magdalene, with long hair, carrying the unguent jar containing the lotions with which she would subsequently embalm the dead Christ. In the top section we find a figure dressed in episcopal attire, corresponding to Saint Nicholas of Bari, the bishop of Myra (3rd to 4th centuries A.D.). The three globes the bishop is holding in his left hand are an allusion to one of the miracles attributed to him, and represent the three golden apples or three bags of gold (depending on the version of the story) that the saint, in an act of charity, offered as a dowry to three sisters without financial means who had been forced into prostitution by their father.

On the reverse side (see fig. 2) we find a depiction of an enthroned Apocalyptic Christ (on the medallion), bearing his characteristic attributes: long mane of hair and beard, blessing with his right hand, carrying an open book in his left hand. At each of the crosses’ extremes we find the zoomorphic depiction of the four Evangelists, each with his corresponding Gospel: the eagle of Saint John (top section), the lion of Saint Mark (left section, **Fig. 3**), the ox of Saint Luke (right section, **Fig. 3**) and the winged man of Matthew (lower section). The ten figures depicted on the two sides of the cross are rendered in relief, while the other elements (nimbi, rays of light emanating from the Apocalyptic Christ, rhombus pattern filling the background) were carved onto the surface using an engraver’s chisel. All of these are depicted in elegant poses and their finish is exceptionally refined (especially that of the clothing they wear), proof of the skills of the metalsmith who rendered them.



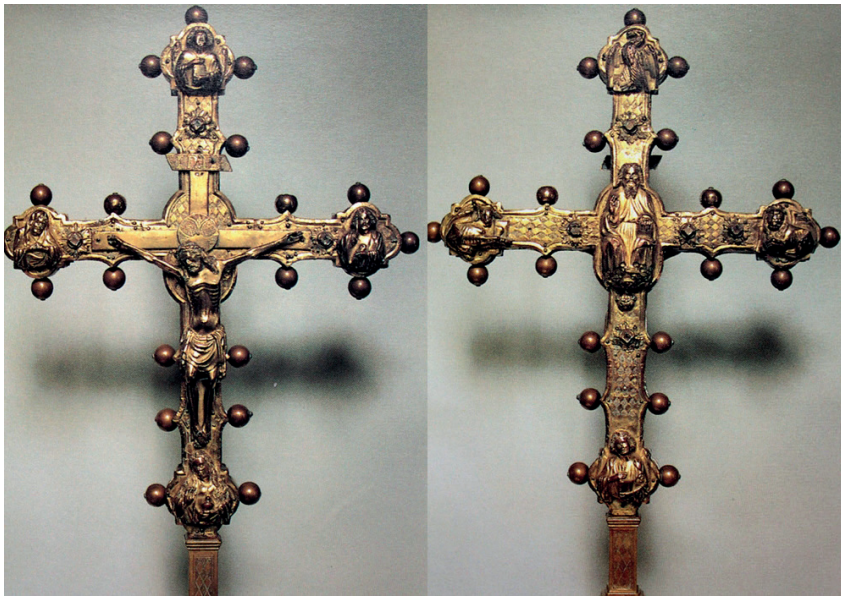
Figs. 3 a&b Workshop in Lombardy, *Processional cross* (reverse, details), wood and copper, 15th century (first half), unknown provenance (probably Lombardy region, Italy).

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ARTS & ANTIQUES

The cross is of the processional variety, also known in Italian as a *croce astile*, because it was devised to be attached to a wooden pole or staff. Since the Middle Ages, and as occurs today, this type of cross had a two-fold function. On the one hand they were taken out on procession, where they were carried by clergymen who walked at the head of said processions. On the other hand, the same cross could stand on display at the church's altar, in which case it stood on a much shorter pole which was attached to a base. Since the height of the Middle Ages, each parish in Western Christendom has had its own processional cross which, depending on the financial possibilities of said parish, would be made of more or less valuable materials.

As frequently occurs with this kind of portable object, its exact location of provenance is unknown. The cross does not bear any marks or inscriptions that would enable us to date it precisely, either. However, a limited number of crosses originating in the Lombardy (north Italy) region are known that are largely identical to the one that concerns us here (Zastrow 1999: 85). The crosses from this group are so similar that they might have been made in the same metalsmith workshop, or by nearby workshops at a similar time. The crosses belonging to the group date from the first half of the 15th century.



Figs. 4 a&b Workshop in Lombardy, *Processional cross*, wood and copper, 15th century (first half), parish church of Verderio Superiore (Lecco, Lombardy, Italia). [Photo Zastrow 1994].

We are aware of at least five other crosses from the aforementioned group. We also know the exact provenance of three of them. One of them is housed at the church of Saints Gervasius and Protasius in Bormio (province of Sondrio, Lombardy, Zastrow 1999: 91-92). The second is located in the parish church of Verderio Superiore (Fig. 4, province of Lecco, Lombardy, Zastrow 1994). The third is to be found in the chapel of Saint Giles in Fontanella al Monte (Fig. 5, province of Bergamo, Lombardy). We do not know the exact provenance of the other two crosses. They are being kept at the Scaria Museum of Sacred Art (Fig. 6, province of Como, Lombardy) and the Casa Rodolfo Siviero Museum (Fig. 7, Florence, inv. no. 13C, Corsini, Tori 2012: 36).

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ARTS & ANTIQUES



Fig. 5. Workshop in Lombardy, *Processional cross*, wood and copper, 15th century (first half), chapel of Saint Giles in Fontanella al Monte (Bergamo, Lombardy, Italia). [Photo Franco Blumer, <http://bergamo-ortodossa.blogspot.com/2013/04/dai-sermoni-di-san-leone-magno-papa-di.html>]



Fig. 6. Workshop in Lombardy, *Processional cross*, wood and copper, 15th century (first half), Scaria Museum of Sacred Art (Como, Lombardy). [Photo Scaria Museum of Sacred Art <http://sistemamusealediocesicomo.it/museodiscaria/en/galleria-dimmagini/>]



Fig. 7. Workshop in Lombardy, *Processional cross* (detail), wood and copper, 15th century (first half), unknown provenance, Casa Rodolfo Siviero Museum (Florence) Inv No. 13C. [Photo Corsini, Tori 2012: 36].

The abovementioned crosses present the same form, technique and iconography as the one we are dealing with here, although there are variations in state of preservation. They are all made of beaten, embossed and gilded copper plates covering a wooden core, and all take on the form of the Latin cross with a rectilinear profile and central medallion, with four-leaf clovers decorating the ends. From an iconographical point of view, the reverse of each is identical (Apocalyptic Christ surrounded by the symbols of the four Evangelists), as is the background, rendered using a chequered rhombus pattern. The contrasts in iconography all appear on the obverse. Although the figures of the Crucified Christ, Virgin, Saint John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalene are all repeated, the representation on the upper arm of the cross changes. The figure of Saint Nicholas of Bari, found on our cross, does not appear on the other crosses, where it is replaced by bust depictions of God the Father (the cross at the Casa Rodolfo Siviero Museum), and of a praying angel (the crosses in Bormio, Verderio Superiore, Fontanella al Monte and the Scaria Museum of Sacred Art). It is probable that the iconographic oddity here depicting Saint Nicholas is due to his being a particularly venerated saint in the cross's region of origin, or perhaps the patron saint of the church for which the cross was commissioned.

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ARTS & ANTIQUES

Despite the fact that in all of the crosses mentioned the same models were used for their figures, they all present differences on a stylistic level and in the execution of the figures depicted. This is probably due to the fact that, though undertaken in the same few workshops, they were done so by different metalsmiths. For the same reason, while in other groups of crosses made at a similar time it appears that the same moulds or matrices were used (Mezzacasa 2012), on this occasion that does not appear to be the case, as for each cross the impression of the same depicted person is always different. Other differences between the cross we are dealing with and the rest of the examples from the group are undoubtedly due to elements added at later stages (the Crucified Christ and Saint Luke on the Bormio cross, the semi-precious stones and spheres on the Verderio Superiore one, and the two pairs of angels on the one in Fontanella al Monte). As such, the one we have here is the one that has undergone the least changes from the time at which it was created.

Given the features it shares with the rest of the crosses we have referred to, like them our cross must have been made in a Lombardy workshop during the first half of the 15th century. Apart from obviously belonging to the group, there are two details, both of a geographic nature, that contribute to placing our piece within the same period. In the first place, the *Christus Patiens* typology, which furthermore follows the model created in painting by Giotto (ca. 1312, in the Santa Maria Novella church in Florence), dates the cross to from the 14th century onward. Secondly, the iconography depicting Saint Nicholas with three bags of gold or golden apples also became popular from that century, a time at which the legends and miracles surrounding the saint were codified (Réau 1996-2002: 428-442).

Beyond its specific group, this work belongs to a kind of processional cross that was extremely common in the north of Italy between the 14th and 15th centuries. All of these present the Latin cross format with central medallions and ends decorated with four-leaved clovers. Apart from minor variations, their iconography also follows the same model. There are documented examples made of different materials, such as embossed silver (sometimes gilded) or painted wood, as well as the gilt copper that characterises our group. Different groups of crosses, attributed to the same metalsmith workshops, have also been documented in the north of Italy in the Abruzzo region (Pace 1972), along with the Veneto and Trentino (Mezzacasa 2012), Friuli (Mezzacasa 2013), and outside Italy, as far as the Adriatic coast in Dalmatia (Croatia, Jakšić 2010). Such was the success of this kind of cross that they continued to be made to the same parameters up to the 18th century, with each period applying its own stylistic fashions.

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JAIME EGUIGUREN

ARTS & ANTIQUES

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