



JAIME EGUIGUREN

ARTS & ANTIQUES

Nottingham, England

14th-15th century

**THE KISS
OF JUDAS**

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The Kiss of Judas

Carved alabaster, traces of polychromy and gilding

44 x 29 cm

Provenance: Spain, private collection

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Fig. 1 Nottingham, England, *The Kiss of Judas*, 14th-15th century, Carved alabaster, traces of polychromy and gilding, Private Collection, Spain.

The kiss or embrace of Judas is one of the Gospel stories from Christ's Passion leading up to his Arrest. According to the Gospels, in the year 33 of the Christian era, Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus of Nazareth for 30 pieces of silver with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. This moment has been depicted in numerous works of art, with the kiss traditionally symbolising betrayal. Both the Gospel of Saint Matthew (26: 47-50) and the Gospel of Saint Mark (14:43-45) used the Greek verb *kataphileó*, which means to “kiss tenderly, intensely, fervently”. The apocryphal gospels also deal with this subject, although the apocryphal Gospel of Judas (56-57) provides a gnostic version of the story, whereby it was Jesus who asked Judas to betray him. “You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me (...). The star that leads the way is your star.”

The scene depicts the moment prior to the kiss, and juxtaposes various parts of the story in one single scene (Fig. 1). Just prior to it, Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane with the apostles Peter, James and John. The garden is illuminated by moonlight and Jesus is at prayer. In the distance Judas and his companions enter through the gateway, leading those who were going to arrest the Lord.

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Fig. 2 Nottingham, England, *The Kiss of Judas* (detail), 14th-15th century, Carved alabaster, traces of polychromy and gilding, Private Collection, Spain.

In the middle of our alabaster relief, we observe the Figures of Jesus and Judas just before the kiss and Jesus' arrest (Fig. 2). The work focuses the main dramatism of the scene on the encounter between Judas and Christ, with the apostles Saint James and Saint John being absent, with only Peter present. From a physiognomic point of view, the Figures are extremely similar, worked repetitively, without individually differentiated facial feature, with greater importance given over to the iconographic attributes, such as spears, torches and lanterns, underlining the opposition between the disciples and those attempting to arrest Christ. The Roman soldiers are differentiated from the rest of the characters as they are wearing chainmail and helmets, and are armed with swords. They surround both Christ and his disciple Peter. Another episode from the arrest has Peter realise what is going on and draw his sword, attacking one of the High Priest's servants, Malchus, and cutting off his right ear. In the relief this has already occurred, and we can see Malchus who has fallen on his back as a result of Peter's assault of him, and is writhing on the floor, holding on to a lantern, which would end up becoming his iconographic attribute. Details like the lantern positioned over the Figures tell us that the events took place at night, when in fact this episode took place during the crescent phase of an almost full moon.



Fig. 3a English artist. Manufacturing of Nottingham. *Triptych of Passion*, ca.1350-1400. Alabaster, wood and glass. National Museum of Capodimonte. Naples. Italy.

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Fig. 3a English artist.
Manufacturing of
Nottingham. *Triptych of
Passion*, ca.1350-1400. Detail
of *Kiss of Judas and Jesus before
Pilate*. Alabaster, wood and
glass. National Museum of
Capodimonte. Naples. Italy.

The floor is covered with flowers, which implies that the episode is taking place in the Garden of Olives. It is worth highlighting the high quality of the carving and the traces of polychromy and gilding that combine to heighten the scene's dramatic potency and realism. For example, the red polychromy around Peter's sword leads us to realise that the tragic events involving Malchus have already taken place.

It is extremely interesting to compare this relief with the Metropolitan Museum's alabaster relief and with the diptych housed at the Capodimonte National Museum in Naples. (Figs. 3a, b) Although the subject of Christ's Arrest is approached in much the same way, there are subtle details that point to differences and, despite the large number produced, no two reliefs are exactly the same.

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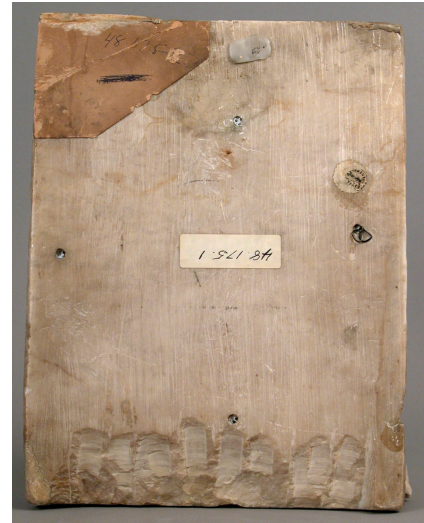


Fig. 4 School of Nottingham, *The Betrayal of Christ*, Alabaster with paint and gilding, 15th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 5 School of Nottingham, *The Betrayal of Christ*, Alabaster with paint and gilding, 15th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The Nottingham Alabaster Reliefs (Figs. 4, 5 & 6)

The English alabaster relief panels were executed during a fairly well-defined period, between the middle of the 14th century and the beginning of the 16th century. The first recorded use of alabaster carving in England dates from around 1160, at Tutbury Church. However, it would not be until the 1300s that we find the first sculpture carved in said material, in the construction of the tomb of Sir John de Handbury. The most important alabaster quarries were in Staffordshire and Derbyshire, and the most prominent centres for alabaster carving were Nottingham, Burton-Trent, York and London. Alabaster is a mineral made up of gypsum and other impurities. It is extremely soft for carving, making it quicker to work with and allowing for greater levels of production.

These reliefs were initially created as unique pieces. They were devotional images, religious items for the home, which became particularly widespread throughout bourgeois society. Many of these individual panels were framed inside little oak boxes with hinged doors, richly painted with geometric Figures or ingenuous patterns. This format facilitated their transportation and encouraged their sale and exportation. They were generally gilt polychrome in either their entirety or at least partially. Blue and purple were generally reserved for clothing, gold for crowns and sceptres, and green for backgrounds and landscapes.

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Fig. 6 School of Nottingham, *The Betrayal of Christ*, Alabaster with paint and gilding, 15th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The works carried out in the early years were of great quality and were considered luxury items, commanding high prices. In subsequent decades the extraordinary demand for these pieces across the whole of Europe gave way to mass production, with the result that subject matters were repeated and overall quality levels fell. However, in spite of the unavoidable standardisation, due to their status as artisan works, it has been shown that no two panels are exactly the same. As well as individual panels, master alabaster carvers executed altarpieces, triptychs and polyptychs, made up of panels joined together and generally undertaken for churches. The majority of these panels are of a standard size (40cm x 27cm, or 53cm x 27cm), depending on where they were positioned within the overall ensemble. The scenes chosen for panels came from the four canonical gospels, the Book of Revelation, the apocryphal gospels and the Lives of the Saints. The most frequently occurring subjects on early panels were the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi, with Christ's Passion and the Joys of the Virgin becoming widespread later on. The most popular depictions of the Saints were Saint Thomas Becket, Saint Catherine and Saint John the Baptist. The designs used by alabaster carvers were not of their own creation, but influenced to a great extent by the Mystery Plays, scriptural works enacted on city streets during Corpus Christi, of which the Chester Plays were the most important and expensive. The high demand for these alabaster works gave rise to mass production, and they were exported in great numbers from the main production centres in England across the whole of Europe, particularly to coastal regions of the Baltic, North Sea and Netherlands. In Spain they are most abundant in the North and in the Balearics. There is documentary evidence that in 1390 a ship set sail from Dartmouth en route to Seville, transporting woollen cloth, alabaster images and other trade goods. Trade between the Kingdom of Castile and England was intense during the 14th and 15th centuries. Regions of Andalusia exported wool, wine and oil, while fabrics, wood for barrels and fish were imported from the British Isles. Following the Reformation, large part of these works were destroyed by iconoclasts during the reign of Henry VIII. That would explain the fact that these works have survived in greater numbers in continental Europe than in Great Britain.

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