



**JAIME EGUIGUREN**

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Portugal, 17<sup>th</sup> century

**PAIR OF RELIQUARY BUSTS OF  
THE ELEVEN THOUSAND  
VIRGINS**

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Portugal, first third of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

## *Pair of Reliquary Busts of the Eleven Thousand Virgins*

Carved, sgraffito, estofado, gilt and polychrome wood.

34 x 22 x 18 cm each

Provenance: Enrique Larreta Collection, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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These are two pieces of great artistic interest, depicting Saint Ursula's holy martyred companions. It is important to highlight the fact that, in contrast to other Reliquary Busts, such as those preserved at the Los Angeles County Museum, at the Cloisters in New York (**Fig. 3**) or the one housed at the National Museum of Catalonia in Barcelona, these include arms and hands, resting delicately on open books.



**Figs. 1 and 2** *S. Beatris V.M. and Das Onze Mil Virgenes*, Portugal, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Collection.



**Fig. 3** Reliquary bust of one of Saint Ursula's companions, Brussels, ca. 1520-1530, The Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum

Our sculptures (**Figs. 1 and 2**) are *ronde-bosse* carvings featuring the narrow profiles characteristic of this sort of reliquary. In terms of their decoration, it is worth noting the naturalism of their faces, the combination of Renaissance and Baroque elements present in the copious and typically Portuguese decoration with *estofado* and *sgraffito* gilding, as well as the painstaking finish of the details in the headdresses, the ribbons and the imitation of fabric, necklaces and brooches. They are carved in wood and made up of a number of sections. The relics, wrapped in

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pieces of sumptuous fabric, are arranged in a theca in the middle of the chest.

Each bust rests on a pedestal with a rectangular cartouche bordered by birds which, on a beautiful blue background, features the name, in Portuguese, which identifies the figures as part of Saint Ursula's entourage who, according to legend, were martyred by the Huns in Cologne, Germany, and though the reliquary busts are similar, they do present certain differences in terms of dress and ornamentation.

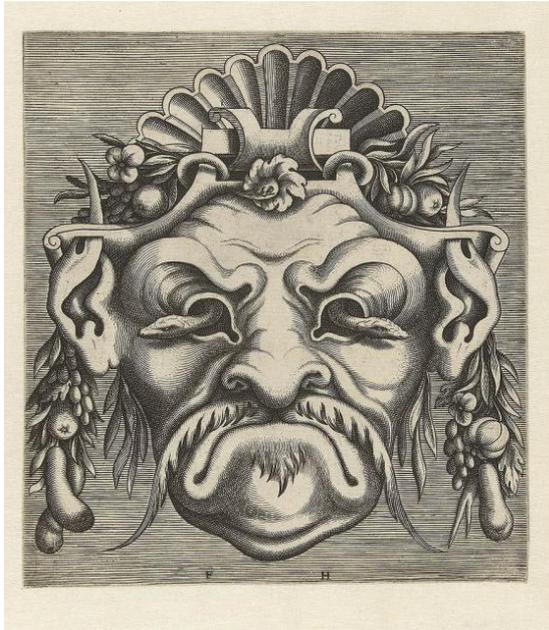


**Figs. 4 and 5** Reliquary bust, Portugal, first third of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.  
Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Collection.

The reliquary bust sculpture identified with the name *S. Beatris V.M.* (**Figs. 4 and 5**) is, as mentioned earlier, a *ronde-bosse* carving with a narrow profile. It is lavishly dressed, in the German Flemish fashion of the 1500s. Beatris is depicted wearing a short tunic with a square neck and short sleeves imitating sumptuous brocade of a floral nature, showing late Gothic influence. Under the tunic an extremely tight plain ruff closes off the neck at chest height. Sticking out from under the tunic is a plain shirt with long sleeves. A theca has been arranged in the middle of the chest, which holds the relic, delicately wrapped in sumptuous cloth. The figure presents a round, clear face, with delicate carnation and big eyes looking straight ahead

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**Fig. 6** *Frans Huys* (1525- 1562) Flemish etching, aqua fortis on paper. National Museum, Amsterdam, Holland

and a well-outlined crimson mouth. The undulating and flowing head of reddish hair falls gently down her back leaving the forehead free thanks to a tiara. In turn, this tiara or brooch secures a veil that covers the head of hair as it falls down the back, and is lavishly decorated with sgraffito geometric patterns. The tiara or headdress, in the form of a grotesque, is reminiscent of Frans Huys' (1525-62) model of Flemish etchings (**Fig. 6**). Our bust reaches down to the waist, marked by a beautiful twisted belt and undulating decorations imitating sumptuous brocade with gemstones. It is worth highlighting the emphasis and care taken in decorating the clothing. In the case of Beatris, the

tunic is white with estofado and sgraffito adornments depicting floral-shaped elements and scrollwork. The shirt under the tunic is green, and the veil covering her hair is white. Around her neck and on her sleeves we observe decorations imitating gemstones and jewelry work. Furthermore, the reliquary medallion containing the relics resembles a precious gemstone with Renaissance elements made up of spiral scrolls and a delicate angel towards the bottom.

It is worth remarking on how the sgraffito work seeks to imitate luxurious and diverse fabrics. The cartouche on the pedestal is flanked by two beautiful birds whose plumage is also of note, in terms of the sgraffito work. As we mentioned earlier, these two busts include both arms and hands. The right hand rests gently on a book whose pages lie open. St. Ursula was the patron saint of universities, and this book is probably an allusion to that.

The reliquary bust (Figs. 7 and 8) with a cartouche bearing the inscription "Das Onze Mil Virgens" refers to the legend of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins. If it presents a similar *fattura* to that of Beatris, its decoration is rather simpler when it comes to the estofado and sgraffito work, and the colors of the clothes are different. In this case, the short tunic is green with sgraffito decorations and less polychromy than in Beatris' tunic. The former's shirt

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is pink, which creates a beautiful contrast between one bust and another. The ruff is also both delicate and more richly adorned than in the Beatris bust. The theca in the middle of the chest does not include the angel seen in the other bust. In all other regards, hair, brooch, birds and book, the ornamentation is similar, with minimal differences.

Although in both busts the clothing follows the Flemish fashion, these reliquaries were executed for an altarpiece or chapel in Portugal linked to the reliquary chapel of the Monastery of Alcobaca. Their cartouches in Portuguese, along with the gilt and estofado work so characteristic of Portuguese sculpture, bear this out, as does the style of their clear faces with rounded eyes looking straight forward, features common to Portuguese carving.



**Figs. 7 and 8** Reliquary bust, Portugal, first third of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques Collection.

## Technical Aspects

The reliquary busts were carved in wood and made up of several parts. They were joined using pegs and strengthened in areas such as the neck, shoulders and torso. The joining, gilding and polychromy were carried out once the relics were already inside. The decorations resembling gemstones, brocade and so on were applied onto a thin preparatory layer of calcium carbonate and animal glue, probably rabbit. The gilding of the clothes and hair was executed using mordant, with gold leaf on an earth pigment base, red iron oxide, minium and an oil binding. The rest of the face carnation and fabric decorations were executed in oil, other than the blue azurite applied to the glue. The figures were then mounted on a pedestal, secured by a rectangular wooden block going through the base of the bust. Their state of conservation is excellent, with their original polychromy.

As mentioned earlier, comparison with other European pieces from the period allows us to rule out any link to the Flemish and German works (**Figs. 9 and 10**) arriving on the peninsula in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as was the case of the busts of one of the Eleven Thousand Virgins housed at the National Museum in Valladolid, and those in other collections.



**Fig. 9** Reliquary bust of one of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, *Anonymous*, c. 1520, National Museum of Sculpture, Valladolid.



**Fig. 10** Reliquary busts of Five Virgin companions of St. Ursula, Anonymous, Brussels workshop, around 1520, Late Gothic sculpture, Flemish School. Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art, Vitoria-Gasteiz.

## The Legend of the “Eleven Thousand Virgins”

A number of figures related to the Cistercian Order popularized this legend, but it was Jacobus da Varagine who really gave it a wider appeal. The legend became more generalized in order to adapt it to other audiences reading or hearing it outside Germany and not related to the Cistercian Order. According to the legend that was widespread in the middle ages, and whose most well-known source, as we have just mentioned, was the tale of the “Eleven Thousand Virgins” found in Jacobus da Varagine’s *Golden Legend*, a young maiden called Ursula (little bear in Latin) converted to Christianity, promising to remain a virgin. As her hand in marriage had been asked for by a Breton prince called Ereo (Conan Meriadoc), she decided to make the pilgrimage to Rome and thereby consecrate her vows.

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**Fig. 11** Master of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, *St. Ursula with the Eleven Thousand Virgins*, around 1490, Tempera on panel, 112cm x 79cm, Prado Museum

In Rome, she was received by Pope Siricius (Fig. 11), who blessed her and consecrated her vow of perpetual chastity in order to devote herself to preaching Christ's gospels. On returning to Germany, she was caught in a surprise attack by Huns in Cologne. Attila, the leader of the Huns, fell in love with her, but she resisted and, along with her maiden companions, refused to give in to the sexual appetites of the Barbarians, and were therefore martyred.

Clematius, a citizen of Cologne holding the rank of senator, ordered a basilica to be raised up at the location of the martyrdom, dedicated to the "eleven thousand virgins", including Ursula. The dedicatory inscription of the building names other maidens

(Aurelia, Britula, Cordola, Cunegonde, Cunera, Pinnosa, Saturnina, Palladia and Odilia of Brittany), the last of which receives the Latin name *Undecimillia* or *Undecimita*. In Spain, another ancient inscription exists with the names of eleven martyred virgins in the Monastery of Cañas, an abbey of nuns in the Rioja region, listing Ursula, Martha, Saula, Britula, Gregoria, Saturnina, Sencia, Pinnosa, Rabacia, Saturia and Palladia.

The mistaken notion that Ursula had eleven thousand companions comes from a document dated to 922 and preserved in a monastery near Cologne, which refers to the story of St. Ursula and her fellow virgins. In said document, we find the following text: «Dei et Sanctas Mariae ac ipsarum XI m virginum», where «XI m virginum» should have been understood to mean «undecim martyres virginum» (eleven virgin martyrs), but was taken to mean «undecim

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millia virginum» (eleven thousand virgins). For centuries, this misunderstanding became increasingly widespread without anyone questioning it, thereby giving rise to the legend of the “eleven thousand virgins”. Although this led to “St. Ursula” becoming a major cult figure, she was never officially canonized by the Church, despite being worshipped from the early middle ages. Hildegard of Bingen composed a large number of chants in her honor. Finally, the image of Ursula was assimilated with that of the German goddess Freyja (also called Horsel or Ursel), who protected virgin maidens and received them in the underworld if they died unwed.



**Fig. 12** Master of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, *St. Ursula with the Eleven Thousand Virgins*, around 1490, Tempera on panel, 112cm x 79cm, Prado Museum.

Between 1490 and 1496, the painter Vittore Carpaccio (1460-1526) executed a complete cycle of frescoes depicting the legend of this virgin martyr, currently preserved in Venice. The feast of St. Ursula is held on 21 October and, during the middle ages at least, she was the patron saint of universities (**Fig. 13**).



Fig. 13 The Golden Chamber of the Basilica of St. Ursula, Cologne, Germany

## *The Reliquaries of the entourage of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins*

The considerable devotion in which the legend of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins who were martyred in Cologne was held in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries gave rise to the importing of a number of series of **reliquary busts**, dated to around 1520-30 and intended for a number of different Spanish churches. One such ensemble of bust-reliquary sculptures was donated by the Emperor Charles V to varying figures close to him and, in particular, those who accompanied him on the trip he made to mark his coronation as emperor in 1520. These reliquaries, which number almost 30, tend to be dated to between 1520 and 1530, and were sculptures made in the Flemish style, possibly executed in Brussels, and contain relics from

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Cologne, where the legend told of St. Ursula being martyred at the hands of Attila and the Huns in the fourth or fifth century (**Figs. 9 and 10**).

The largest and most important series of surviving works is made up of the five busts preserved at the Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art in Alava, originating from the funeral chapel of Ortuño Ibáñez de Aguirre, administrator to Isabella I of Castile and advisor to Queen Joanna and the Emperor Charles. Another major series, which was in the Holy Chapel of the Savior, belonged to Francisco de los Cobos, secretary and advisor to the Emperor. Furthermore, we ought to mention the two busts which, according to their inscription, Luis Dávila y de Lobera, doctor to the Emperor, “brought from Germany”. The same may be said for the two busts from the Collegiate of Villafranca del Bierzo, currently preserved in Astorga, which belonged to the Marquis Consort of Villafranca, Pedro de Toledo (1484-1553), Viceroy of Naples under Charles V, between 1532 and 1553.

Four busts are also preserved in the Shrine of the Virgen de la Caridad in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, which were a gift from Charles to the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Medina Sidonia, whose wife, Ana de Aragón y Gurrea, was his cousin. Originally housed in the Palatine Chapel of the Dukes and Duchesses of Medina Sidonia, it would appear that there were once six busts, although only four have survived. These depict two virgin saints and two bishop saints, whose miters are adorned with carved cameos representing effigies of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Maximilian I and Charles V, which would explain the imperial origin of the pieces. The same occurs with the miter on the bust of the bishop preserved at Berlin’s Bode-Museum. Other busts from this series are housed at The Cloisters in New York (**Fig. 3**).

This extensive repertory is the best testimony to the value these objects had as luxury items, which became veritable symbols of the prestige of their donors.



**Fig. 14** Busts of the Eleven Thousand Virgins preserved at the Royal Monastery of San Benito in Sahagún.

### *The Relics: The Political Importance of Owning them*

The cult of St. Ursula and her companions had considerable repercussions across the Iberian Peninsula. Until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, most of the relics of the Eleven Thousand Virgins originated from the series taken from Cologne to the Monastery of San Pedro in Gumiel de Izán (Burgos) by the Abbot Don Pedro in about 1223. Around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, worship of the relics of St. Ursula increased thanks to a visit from the king and queen and, in particular, due to the support of the Jesuits, as part of the Catholic Church's reaction to the Reformist movement.

Apart from a dose of sincere piety, the highly-coveted possession of relics constituted an extremely lucrative business, not just for churches and monasteries but also for individuals given over to achieving astonishing cures with their aid. Furthermore, another of the relics' many functions was that of building ties of friendship and alliance between nobles and

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monarchs, as may be observed in the widespread exchange among the entourage accompanying Charles V to his coronation in Aachen in 1520, and the introduction of a large number of relics into the Iberian Peninsula. In addition, their worship helped to protect against the enemy of the Faith. The relics were intended to strengthen the combative spirits of the troops in the approaching conflict with Islam. The relics of the Eleven Thousand Virgins were, alongside those of the Theban Legion, the most popular relics on the peninsula. It is as such that, whereas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins was primarily driven by the Cistercian Order, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century its most prominent defenders were the Jesuits, starting with Saint Ignatius himself.

For Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors, the discovery of the Americas and the expansion towards the East Indies meant not only colonization but also the issue of evangelization and Christianization. With the joining of Spain and Germany through Charles V, the enormous repository of relics of the Eleven Thousand Virgins in Cologne could now meet the demands of the innumerable churches that needed to be founded and built in the New World. The beautiful and moving legend of St. Ursula and her companions could bolster the task of conquering and evangelizing, spreading a cult steeped in tenderness and feminineness and with great persuasive powers.

As mentioned earlier, both Charles V and Philip II were great collectors of relics. Philip II's collection exceeded 7,000 items, and the El Escorial Monastery included more than 70 heads depicting the Eleven Thousand Virgins originating from the Monastery of St. Ursula and executed in workshops from the Rhine region. For their part, many nobles and courtesans copied the tastes of their monarchs, and collected works of art, books, exotic items, and numerous relics. Some of these collections of relics ended up being housed in oratories, church niches, closets, and reliquary chapels or funeral chapels, in imitation of those in the Escorial or the reliquary chapel of Santa María in Alcobaça, carried out by local sculptors.

## *Collection of Reliquary Busts in the Monastery of Santa María de Alcobaça*

The monastery is located in the convergence of the Alcoa and Baça rivers in Portugal. Work building this great convent complex was started in 1172, with construction taking place on land given by Afonso Henriques, first king of Portugal, to the Cistercian Order as part of a strategy to consolidate his power in the lands won back from Al- Andalus. This was a political move by which the new monarch managed to convert Abbot Bernard de Clairvaux, a key figure in the development of the Cistercian Order throughout the continent, into his ally, subsequent to having proclaimed himself as first king of Portugal. The convent would end up becoming one of the most important buildings for the Order.

As referred to in the study by Sira Gadea:

“The Reliquary Chapel, also known as “O Espelho do Céu”, is located at the head of the Sacristy. It was built between 1669 and 1672, with construction work commenced by Friar Constantino de Sampaio.

It is a space with an octagonal floorplan, dome and small tower, and it is decorated in its entirety by a polygonal altarpiece of gilt carving with six levels of compartments housing a collection of reliquary statues, constituting an exceptional work of Portuguese art. It was carved by Antonio Rodríguez Carvalho and Manuel García, and its six rows of compartments housing reliquaries were executed in a short space of time by a range of devotees, skilled painters and gilders, with some of the reliquary busts being in polychromed clay.” (Figs. 15, 16 and 17)



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**Figs. 15, 16 and 17** Reliquary chapel in the Monastery of Santa Maria de Alcobaça

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## Vivian Velar de Irigoyen

Art Historian

# JAIME EGUIGUREN

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