

Fig. 1. Head of St. John the Baptist, Northern France/Southern Netherlands, last quarter of the 15th century. Alabaster, height 26.7 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. BK-1998-1.



Thomas Belyea

Johannes ex disco Remarks on a Late Gothic Alabaster Head of St. John the Baptist

And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison. And his head was brought on a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought it to her mother. Matthew xiv: vs. 10-11.

By comparison with a Shakespearean tragedy, St. Matthew's account of the death of St. John the Baptist appears remarkably sober. It was nevertheless this short excerpt from the New Testament that served as the textual inspiration for the superbly dramatic expression of the alabaster Head of St. John the Baptist acquired by the Rijksmuseum in 1998 (figs. 1-2).¹ This work, together with other examples carved in wood, stone or precious metal, belongs to a theme of late medieval sculpture known as *St. John's Head on a Charger*, also referred to as *Johannes-schüssel*. These dramatic sculptural representations of the decapitated head of St. John are frequently accompanied by a separate platter, or charger, upon which the sculpted head rests. As told in the Gospels of St. Mark and St. Matthew, the story of St. John's death culminates in the deceitful manipulation of the king's wife, Herodias, and her beguiling daughter, Salome.² Under her mother's provocation, Salome performs a seductive dance in a fateful deal for the imprisoned Baptist's head. King Herod, though initially reluctant to grant his step-daughter's request, ultimately concedes and thereby orders the execution. This scene is portrayed in a 16th century stone relief in the Rijksmu-

seum (fig. 3). Standing beneath an arch on the right Salome receives the head of St. John, charger in hand. The charger accompanying the Rijksmuseum St. John's Head is no longer extant, but a slight projection of the neck hidden beneath the head and beard corresponds closely to numerous 14th and 15th century examples where the charger has remained intact. Viewed as a free-standing object, the deathly white pallor of the decapitated head conveys to the viewer the morbidity of St. John's execution. From the knitted brow to the pointed beard, the tilt of the head instills a life-like presence, which is further enhanced by the imperfect symmetry perceivable in the face. The morose protrusion of the lower jaw draws the mouth slightly open to reveal the upper teeth and tongue. Only in the vacant heaviness of the eyelids is there a sense of death-like serenity. The blending of many conflicting emotions and impressions in the Baptist's face conveys a realism with which even the 20th century observer may easily empathize.

Resting on a charger of metal, wood, stone or even Spanish majolica, sculpted St. John's Heads were placed on church altars for religious veneration. The *Johannes-schüssel* theme was initially sparked by the discovery of St. John's skull in Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade. It was subsequently brought to Europe and bequeathed to

Fig. 2. Head of St. John the Baptist, Northern France/Southern Netherlands, last quarter of the 15th century. Alabaster. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. BK-1998-1.



Fig. 3. *The Executioner Presents the Head of St. John the Baptist to Salome. Antwerp, c. 1530-1540. Stone, 53.5 x 51.9 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. BK-1978-162.*



Amiens Cathedral in 1206. By the 14th century the emerging cult of the Baptist could be witnessed across Germany and Northwest Europe in the ever-increasing number of altars dedicated to him. St. John's decapitated image was associated with the miraculous healing of a variety of head ailments - ranging from melancholy to epilepsy. This sparked a mania of religious fervor in the 15th century. Commentaries on St. John's perceived role as Christ's New Testament

predecessor also led to the emergence of the *Caput Johannes in disco* as an important eucharistic symbol.³ Throughout the late Middle Ages, the genre remained primarily indigenous to Northern Europe. Classical renderings of the *Johannesschüssel* theme are, however, known to have emerged in 16th century Italy, while in the Spanish colonies dramatic baroque interpretations were still being produced in the 17th century. The precise role of the carved St. John's Heads in

the liturgy of the late Middle Ages is difficult to ascertain. While the iconography of these objects remained virtually unaltered for over three centuries, the purpose they served appears to have varied over time and, perhaps most significantly, with the patron. Commissions from churches, guilds and religious brotherhoods dedicated to the Baptist were numerous. Ultimately, however, the general popularity of St. John the Baptist in the late medieval cult of the saints was greatly stimulated by the genre's proliferation in the realm of private devotion.⁴

Medieval alabaster

The dissemination of the *Johanneschüssel* theme in Northern Europe was undoubtedly spurred by the portable size of the St. John's Heads. Establishing a specific geographic provenance for a sculpture such as the Rijksmuseum piece is additionally complicated by the nature of the medium itself. As a soft, sedimentary stone - inherently vulnerable to water and abrasion - alabaster was commonly quarried in small-sized blocks in the Middle Ages.⁵ Easily transportable and readily amenable to sculpting, painting and gilding, it was a medium ideally suited for the export production of small-scale 'indoor' imagery throughout Europe. Particularly renowned was the English production of carved alabaster plaques that were exported from Nottingham to Continental Europe beginning in the 15th century. In the 16th century similar factors accounted for the popularity of export alabaster altarpieces made at Mechelen.⁶ Whether produced by the *alabastermen* at Nottingham or the *cleynstekers* at Mechelen, the quantity and serial nature of these extant works tends to dominate the current perception of medieval alabaster. As the Rijksmuseum's Head of John the Baptist clearly demonstrates, however, the use of alabaster was not restricted to this kind of 'mass' production.

In color and structure alabaster is sometimes practically indistinguishable from certain kinds of marble.⁷ Although it displays a tendency to harden (and discolour) upon exposure to air, alabaster's surface remains sub-

stantially softer than marble. Thus the sculptor is able to fashion the stone in a manner similar to wood or ivory. The gouge, chisel and knife - tools normally applied in wood-carving - permit a freer technique, so that effects rarely obtained in other kinds of stone are more easily achieved in alabaster. Closer examination of the Rijksmuseum piece reveals much about the sculptor's choice of material. In the Head of St. John the Baptist the sculptor has optimized the stone's natural 'pliancy', so that even the sharpest gradations in the structure of the face blend into a convincing unity. The technique of polishing the stone to a smooth, translucent surface has been applied to enhance the life-like rendering of the shiny nose and the soft skin of the lips and eyelids. By contrast, the stone's natural texture has occasionally been employed to imitate the tactile qualities of human flesh, as in the accentuation of the pock-marked skin of the sunken cheeks. At the back of the head rough incisions demarcate an unfinished surface (fig. 4). As in numerous medieval alabaster images in the Netherlands and Germany, carving on the reverse is frequently confined to a cursory outline.⁸ The unfinished surface, preserved in the preliminary stage of the sculptor's work, facilitates the identification of tool markings. The deep, rugged furrows on the back of the head - a sketchy extension of the hair - reveal carving done with a toothed gouge. Although more commonly associated with wood-carving, gouges were used as a kind of soft-stone chisel in the Middle Ages.⁹ Tool markings on the remainder of the image have been virtually eliminated: the St. John's Head was meant to be displayed and viewed frontally. In the final twists of the curls in the hair and beard, however, traces of the sculptor's drill are visible. The play of light and shade created by this technique lends additional volume to the locks of hair. When the head is viewed in profile, grey striations in the stone follow its angle precisely. These textural veins were clearly decisive in determining the ultimate form and dimension of the final sculpture. This emphatic regard for the natural quality of the stone suggests the piece was not intended to be polychromed.

Fig. 4. Detail of figs. 1-2.



Indeed no trace of polychromy is discernible. The painting and gilding of alabaster and ivory - in contrast to most wooden sculpture - were often restricted to surface highlights.¹⁰

The Master of Rimini

As a sculptural medium alabaster has received scant attention from historians of medieval art. Most research has been conducted in Germany with an emphasis on

indigenous alabaster production. Much current knowledge is indebted to Georg Swarzenski's ground-breaking article *Deutsche Alabasterplastik des 15. Jahrhunderts*, published in 1921.¹¹ With the identification and subsequent classification of countless alabasters into regions of provenance and chronological periods (including a *Pietà* in the Rijksmuseum's collection¹²), he established medieval alabaster sculpture as a

Fig. 5. Master of Rimini, *The Rimini Altarpiece*, Northern France/Southern Netherlands, c. 1430. Alabaster. *Städtische Galerie Liebieghaus, Frankfurt Am Main*. Photo credit: U. Edelmann.

subject worthy of art historical enquiry. This accomplishment notwithstanding, Swarzenski's distinctly 'German' perspective was disputed thirty years later by a fellow countryman, Walter Paatz, who shifted the alabaster discussion to Burgundian territories in Northern France and the Southern Netherlands. In an article entitled *Stammbaum der gotischen Alabasterskulptur 1316-1442*, Paatz rejected a scenario in which Germany figured as a center for alabaster production with export to its neighbours in the West.¹³ Instead he recognized the prominent role of alabaster in the Burgundian tombs at Dijon and, in the light of the English alabaster tradition of the 14th and 15th centuries, acknowledged contacts stimulated by the English king's presence in large portions of Northern and Western France during the Hundred Years' War (1338-1453). Paatz concluded that alabaster production was far more likely to have originated in the north-western corner of Europe, and that only later would its stylistic influence have branched

out into Germany and beyond. Citing written sources retrieved from the archives of the Dukes of Burgundy, Paatz positioned the geographical center of this *niederländisch-nordfranzösische Kunstkreis* in the vicinity of the medieval cities of Tournai and Lille where, in approximately 1441-1442, a court workshop specifically designed for the production of alabaster was established under Burgundian patronage.¹⁴

Central to Paatz's theory is the best known extant example of late medieval alabaster sculpture, the so-called *Rimini Altarpiece* of c. 1430 (fig. 5).¹⁵ Originally housed in a baroque retable in the church of S. Maria delle Grazie at Rimini-Covignano in Northeast Italy (now preserved in the Liebieghaus in Frankfurt), its otherwise anonymous creator was appropriately dubbed the Master of Rimini. This extensive alabaster *Crucifixion* group comprises Christ on the Cross with St. Mary Magdalene at its foot, a free-standing St. John the Evangelist, the crucified figures



Fig. 6. Detail of fig. 5.

of the penitent and impenitent thieves, a group depicting the Virgin and Longinus and a group with Stephaton, the sponge-bearer. An accompanying group of twelve free-standing apostles completes the composition. The pipe-like folds of the drapery and the intense facial expressions of these figures are characteristic of the Master of Rimini's style. To Swarzenski and others the Rimini Altarpiece was the culmination of an innately German tradition in medieval alabaster sculpture.¹⁶ With his 'Netherlandish' orientation, however, Paatz interpreted the Rimini Altarpiece as the penultimate example of early 15th century alabaster production in the region of Northern France and the Southern Netherlands. In 1969 Paatz's theories received full affirmation from a third German art historian, Anton Legner. In an article entitled *Der Alabasteraltar aus Rimini* Legner identified production at Lille as the work of a specialized court workshop, or *Spezialwerkstatt*, in which alabaster masterpieces were produced for the Burgundian court and its network of associations. He made a distinction between the neutral quality of alabaster devotional pieces produced for export and works revealing the existence of a superior sculptural tradition.¹⁷ These findings were based upon written sources at Lille and further supported by known workshop practices in contemporary England.¹⁸ Legner sustained Paatz's original hypothesis, but also took the first step towards interpreting 15th century alabaster production within the broader context of contemporary artistic developments in Northern France/Southern Netherlands. In particular he made a link between the Rimini Altarpiece and early 15th century trends in the circles of Van Eyck, the Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden - artists working *im Stil von der neuen Kunst des niederländischen Realismus*.¹⁹ In Legner's view, this so-called 'Netherlandish Realism' was particularly characteristic of stylistic conditions predominating in Northern European workshops for wood and stone sculpture at the onset of the 15th century. Involving iconographic precedent (a comparison with Netherlandish wooden retables), artistic form and style, his compre-



hensive analysis provided a convincing theory to support the existence of a thriving alabaster industry in the region of the Burgundian Netherlands.²⁰

Netherlandish Realism

In relation to the Rimini Master the term 'Netherlandish Realism' is perhaps best understood by observing the highly expressive physiognomical traits that works attributed to him inevitably bear. Theodor Müller described this realism *à la Rimini* as follows: (...) *not a demonstrative naturalism (...) but a new kind of reality, which lends, to the faces especially, an as yet unknown intensity, without in any way destroying the sublime delicacy and the beauty of the whole*.²¹ In the head of Christ in the Rimini Altarpiece the technique by which this 'as yet unknown intensity' has been achieved is discernible in several essential features: the strongly profiled brow; the heavy eyelids, underlined by starkly protruding cheekbones; the half-open mouth and the slackness of the jaw in direct contrast to the tightness of the forehead (fig. 6). Particularly striking, however, is the emphasis placed on the raised, notched area bridging nose and

Fig. 7. Detail of fig. 5.



brow. Clearly, it is this point in the face of the Christ figure - much as in the face of the Rijksmuseum's Head of St. John - which provides the strongest visual tension. The combined effect of the 'notched' brow, heavy eyes and sagging jaw found in the Rijksmuseum *Johanneschüssel* falls well within the stylistic parameters of the Rimini Christ figure. The lightly traced furrows in the forehead, the doubled lines around the eyes, the small areas of fleshiness flanking the nose and bordering the sunken cheeks, the emerging upper teeth, the protruding lower lip and the small recess beneath - are traits common to both heads. Both works have the double-pointed beard and likewise display a similar articulation of the hair, with thin parallel lines that come together to form long, wavy strands outlining the face. The flowing locks of the St. John's Head display an alternating wave-like pattern that is virtually identical to the manner in which hair is depicted in the Rimini apostles (fig. 7). While differences may also be detected, a comparison with the Rimini Altarpiece provides sufficient grounds for linking the Rijksmuseum *Johanneschüssel* to the wider perspective of 15th century developments in Netherlandish Realism.

The genre of the sculpted St. John's Head was by no means foreign to Northern France and the Southern Netherlands. In the early 15th century the renowned art patron Jean, Duke of Berry, whose interest in the theme may have been prompted by his bearing the saint's name, is reported to have possessed several examples of the *Johanneschüssel* for private devotion, the most costly recorded in an inventory of 1402.²² In Flemish painting numerous 15th-century works focus on the theme of the beheaded Baptist. Most significant is Rogier van der Weyden's *St. John Altarpiece* (now preserved in Berlin), a triptych entirely devoted to the life of the Baptist (fig. 8).²³ In the right-hand panel, Van der Weyden (1399/1400-1464) has directly transposed a *Johanneschüssel* into the scene of the beheading of St. John. A similar phenomenon is to be observed in a number of late 15th century Netherlandish painted

Fig. 8. Rogier van der Weyden, *St. John Altarpiece*
(right-hand panel of triptych), c. 1453. Oil on panel, 77
x 48 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preussischer Kul-
turbesitz, Gemäldegalerie. Photo credit: Jörg P. Anders.



Fig. 9. Albrecht Bouts, *Head of St. John the Baptist on a Charger*, late 15th century. Oil on panel, diameter 28.3 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Rupert L. Joseph, 1959.

tondi with highly illusionistic depictions of the head of the Baptist, the round panels serving as chargers. As Panofsky observed, such works would undoubtedly have functioned as an adapted two-dimensional *Andachtsbilder* for private devotion.²⁴ They include a late 15th century tondo by Albrecht Bouts (c. 1450-1549), now housed in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which is said to be based on a lost original of c. 1450 by Dirk Bouts (c. 1410-1475) (fig. 9). This panel, along with other extant works attributed to Dirk Bouts with depictions of St. John the Baptist, can be closely equated with the Amsterdam St. John's Head.²⁵ In the panel currently found in Munich, *Ecce Agnus Dei: Jesus with St. John the Baptist and a Donor*, painted c. 1464, the facial structure, beard and overall demeanor of the St. John figure correspond closely with



features found in the Rijksmuseum piece (fig. 10).

Few extant examples of sculpture in 15th century Flanders provide such strong grounds for comparison. One piece of special significance, however, is an alabaster *Man of Sorrows* of c. 1450-1460 in the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp (fig. 11). This moving rendition is not only remarkable for its iconography and scale, but is also of particular interest with regard to the high level of exceptionally fine sculptural detail. The piece has recently been linked to stylistic antecedents in the later works of the Master of Rimini and the regions of Northern France at Tournai.²⁶ On close examination of the head of Christ one recognizes the 'notched' meeting of nose and brow, the heavy eyes and hanging jaw with open mouth as seen in the Christ figure at Rimini. In contrast to the latter, however, the eyebrows of the Antwerp *Man of Sorrows* are raised in the center, a distinction that may establish an affinity with the alabaster *Johannesschüssel*, both pieces clearly revealing a stylistic development that goes back to the Master of Rimini. This not only suggests a close geographical provenance, but also provides sufficient grounds for interpreting the Rijksmuseum St. John's Head as a work of the late 15th century. The highly developed sculptural expression found in both these works supports the existence of a *Spezialwerkstatt* as envisioned by Legner, who himself was obliged to admit: *Im stilistischen Heimatgebiet des Riminialtars als welches Walter Paatz die Gegend Tournai-Lille nominiert hat, fanden sich bisher nur wenig Zeugnisse spätgotischer Alabasterplastik.*²⁷ Two sculptures produced in the Middle Burgun-

Fig. 10. Dirk Bouts, *Ecce Agnus Dei: Jesus with St. John the Baptist and a Donor* (detail), c. 1464. Oil on panel, 53.5 x 41.2 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



dian region of Northern France must also be mentioned in connection with the Rijksmuseum *Johannesschüssel* in respect of their style. A limestone figure of *Christ in Distress* in the Musée Historique de Troyes in North-eastern France, with an expression comparable to the Antwerp *Man of Sorrows* and the Head of St. John the Baptist, is described as a work of the early 16th century (fig. 12).²⁸ Despite obvious differences due in part to the use of limestone as the sculptural medium, the face of the Christ figure reveals a marked physiognomical kinship to the Antwerp piece. A work of equal significance is a *Crucified Christ* on a triumph cross at the Couvent des Filles de Soeur Marie-Vianney at Mons, in which the facial features offer a clear stylistic parallel with the Head

of St. John the Baptist (fig. 13).²⁹ Such findings would seem to confirm a link drawn by Legner between Netherlandish alabaster production and wooden triumph crosses found in Belgian church choirs.³⁰ The Christ figure of c. 1450-1470 at Mons again strengthens arguments for placing the St. John's Head in the last quarter of the 15th century.

A precise determination of the provenance of the Amsterdam *Johannesschüssel* could be facilitated by an inquiry into the specific quarry or region from which this particular block of alabaster was procured. Observation with the naked eye reveals a close affinity between the alabaster of this work and that of other medieval sculpture produced in Northern France, *inclining to a warmer*

Fig. 11. *The Man of Sorrows (detail)*, Southern Netherlandish, c. 1450-1460. Alabaster, height 39.9 cm. Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp. Copyright IRPA-KIK Brussels.

colour in some areas and including a few golden brown veins.³¹ The milky white alabaster of the St. John's Head is substantially different from the highly translucent, reddish-brown alabaster from the English Midlands. Such observations, however, are obviously subjective. The testing of a sample of the stone and an examination of its physi-

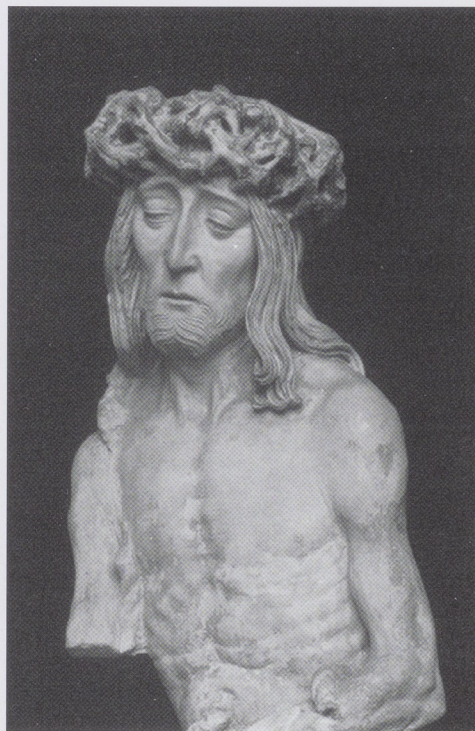
cal make-up might ultimately lead to a determination of its provenance. Alabaster, like other kinds of sedimentary stone, can be measured for its sulphur content. Such findings might be compared and matched with samples taken from various regions throughout Europe. At present, however, no such geological databank exists.³²



Exotic materials at the Burgundian court

Claus Sluter's tomb for Philip the Bold (1363-1404) at Dijon, completed in 1411, firmly established alabaster as the material of choice for Burgundian sepulchral sculpture. The creation in 1441/1442 of a specialized alabaster workshop at Lille not only reflects a shift of Burgundian power from Dijon to Netherlandish territories in the North under Philip the Good (1396-1467), but would also suggest the growing status conferred upon alabaster by the Burgundian nobility. With the power and financial wherewithal of a noble patron transferred to the North, skilled artisans were bound to follow. Juan de la Huerta (d. 1462), a Spanish sculptor working at the Burgundian court in Dijon, is reported to have left Dijon for Brussels in 1456, in hope of new commissions and *of obtaining from the duke a monopoly on the exploitation in Burgundy of the mines were gold, silver, lead and azurite were extracted.*³³ Sculptors trained and skilled in alabaster would not have been exceptional. In Paatz's estimation, *Im dienst des französischen Königshauses und seiner Nebenlinien verarbeiteten also Franzosen, Wallonen und Holländer Alabaster.*³⁴ The privileged status of alabaster in the *französisch-burgundische Hofkunst* of the 15th century is tenable when acknowledging a general Burgundian predilection for exotic materials. Van der Velden's recent study of Burgundian patronage under Charles the Bold (1433-1477) reveals the duke's personal fondness for works of gold enamel.³⁵ A high Burgundian esteem for precious ivory is also apparent. Ivory production, normally associated with French royalty and the Parisian ateliers of the 13th and 14th centuries, is known to have been maintained in the Burgundian Netherlands throughout the 15th century.³⁶ Although restricted to a small format by the nature of the material itself, ivory carvings occasionally reveal parallels to monumental stone sculpture.³⁷ By the late Middle Ages the soft, creamy quality of 'white' alabaster may have evoked direct associations with ivory, a conclusion supported by compositional, stylistic and iconographic links between works in the two materials.³⁸ The Rimini Altarpiece

Fig 12. *Christ in Distress (detail)*, Troyes region, c. 1500. Limestone, height 72 cm. Musée de Historique du Troyes (Musée Vaulisant), Troyes. Photo courtesy of Musées de Troyes. Photo credit: Jean-Marie Protte.



certainly displays in its figures a sculptural expression reminiscent of 14th-century Parisian ivory craftsmanship, although it achieves a refinement rarely encountered in the latter. The same ivory-like quality is also to be found in the Rijksmuseum St. John's Head, particularly when viewed on the ambiguous scale of a photograph.

In the early 16th century the tradition of alabaster in Burgundian sepulchral monuments was still very much alive. On the direct orders of the Burgundian regent of the Netherlands, Margaret of Austria (1480-1530), the alabaster effigies for a tomb at Brou were to be neither painted nor gilded - this against the suggestion of her artistic advisor.³⁹ Margaret's request not only expresses an aesthetic appreciation of the material in its purest form, but also underlines the high regard in which alabaster was held at the time. Conrad Meit (1480's?-1550/51), who was commissioned to execute these works in 1526, had been Margaret's official court sculptor at Mechelen since

Fig. 13. *Christ on the Cross (detail)*, Brussels (?), c. 1450-1470. Wood, height c. 140 cm. Couvent des Filles de Soeur Marie-Vianney, Mons. Copyright IRPA-KIK Brussels.



1514. Trained in his native Germany and skilled at working alabaster, he escorted Burgundian sculpture into the Renaissance era virtually overnight. Although the late Gothic tradition of Netherlandish Realism would survive outside the Burgundian court well into the 16th century, the importation of Renaissance values definitively altered the future course of Southern Netherlandish sculpture. Sixteenth century alabaster altarpieces produced at Mechelen attest to the decisiveness with which this classical influence was ultimately embraced.⁴⁰

Devoid of any distinct classicism, the Rijksmuseum Head of St. John the Baptist bears no direct relationship to later developments in 16th century Southern Netherlandish sculpture. Instead it shares a development in style initiated by the Master of Rimini and adopted by sculptors a generation later in the last quarter of the 15th

century. A geographical association with alabaster production in Northern France and the Southern Netherlands is justified on the basis of a select group of sculptural and pictorial works originating in that region. In view of this provenance and the prevailing regard for alabaster in the Burgundian cultural tradition, a direct or indirect affiliation with members of the ducal court is conceivable. As such, the Rijksmuseum St. John's Head may represent and affirm the existence of a *Spezialwerkstatt*, in an artistic climate in which, as Legner remarked, *Der spezifische niederländische Realismus erscheint zurückgebunden in die Sphäre einer verfeinerten höfischen Gotik*.⁴¹

Notes

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¹ The Head of St. John the Baptist came up with other works from the prestigious Blumka collection at a Sotheby's auction in New York in January 1996 (see the Sotheby's New York catalogue, 9 January 1996, no. 90). With the aid of the Rijksmuseum Stichting the Rijksmuseum purchased the work in March 1998 from the London art dealer, Daniel Katz. Built up on the acumen of Ruth and Leopold Blumka, the Blumka Gallery in New York has acquired wide renown for its vast collection of sculpture and applied arts, with masterpieces dating from the Medieval and Renaissance eras to the 19th century. The alabaster St. John's Head belonged to the Blumka's private collection of Medieval art. Unfortunately, there is no extant information regarding its provenance prior to its acquisition by Leopold Blumka. My thanks to the current director of the Blumka Gallery, Mr. Tony Blumka, for his assistance in this matter.

² See St. Matthew 14: 1-12, St. Mark 6: 14-29.

³ I. Combs Stuebe, 'The Johannesschüssel: From Narrative to reliquary to Andachtsbild', in: *Marsyas* XIV (1968-1969), New York University Press, pp. 1-16, esp. p. 7. In the late 15th century York Breviary appears the text: *Caput johannis in disco: signat corpus Christi: quo pascimur in sancto altari*, which Combs Stuebe translates as follows: *St. John's Head on the dish signifies the body of Christ which feeds us on the holy altar*.

⁴ For a complete overview of the *Johannesschüssel* phenomenon see H. Arndt and R. Kroos, 'Zur Ikonographie der Johannesschüssel', in: *Aachener Kunstblätter* 38, 1969, pp. 243-328.

⁵ A. Legner, 'Der Alabasteraltar aus Rimini', in: *Städels-Jahrbuch*, Nf. 2, 1969, pp. 101-188: pp. 126-127: (...) *durch die auf günstige Transportgrößen genormten Rohmaterialien sind andererseits auch wieder die Masse von Figuren und Figurengruppen vorgegeben*.

⁶ See: M.K. Wustrack, *Die Mechelner Alabaster-Manufaktur des 16. und frühen 17. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt 1982. His introduction (pp. 8-9) provides an extensive historical overview of alabaster in sculpture from Antiquity to the 17th century.

⁷ For a general description of different kinds of alabaster (and a comparison with marble) see N. Penny, *Materials of Sculpture*, London 1993, pp. 60-65.

⁸ See: G. Swarzenski, 'Deutsche Alabasterplastik des 15. Jahrhunderts', in: *Städels-Jahrbuch* 1, 1921, pp. 167-213; p. 170: (...) *einige fast geradlinige Längsfalten geben der etwas abgeflachten Rückseite eine summarische Belegung*.

⁹ See: P. Rockwell, *The Art of Stoneworking: a reference guide*, Cambridge 1993, p. 44.

¹⁰ See: B. Rommé, 'Holzsichtigkeit und Fassung: zwei nebeneinander bestehende Phänomene in der Skulptur des ausgehenden Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit', in: exhibition catalogue *Gegen den Strom*, Aachen (Suermond-Ludwig Museum) 1996, pp. 97-112.

¹¹ Swarzenski, *op.cit.* (note 8).

¹² See: J. Leeuwenberg and W. Halsema-Kubes, *Beeldhouwkunst in het Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam 1973, cat. no. 787.

¹³ W. Paatz, 'Stammbaum der gotischen Alabasterskulptur 1316-1442', in: *Kunstgeschichtliche Studien für H. Kauffmann*, Berlin 1956, pp. 127-135.

¹⁴ Paatz, *op.cit.* (note 13), pp. 127-128.

¹⁵ The date 1430 is based on stylistic parallels between the Rimini Altarpiece and an alabaster *Gruppe der Frauen* at Breslau, Poland. Paatz believed this work was cited in a document of 1430 and came to the following conclusion: *Diese Urkunde bietet die einzige bisher überhaupt bekanntgewordene Nennung eines Herstellungsortes und das einzige sichere Datum für ein Alabasterwerk in der Art des Rimini-Meisters: Sitz der Werkstatt - Paris; Datum - vor 1431*. Although Paatz named Paris as a highly probable *Hauptquelle* for works of the Master of Rimini, he nevertheless believed *der sogenannte Rimini-Meister kam aus dem nordfranzösisch-niederländischen Kunstkreis; er kann Franzose gewesen sein, aber ebensowohl einer jener vielen Niederländer, die in Nordfrankreich tätig, oft sogar ansässig waren* (...). See: Paatz, *op.cit.* (note 13), p. 132.

¹⁶ See: Swarzenski, *op.cit.* (note 8): pp. 174-176. The Rimini Altarpiece served as the basis for Swarzenski's attributions of many alabaster sculptures.

¹⁷ See: Legner, *op.cit.* (note 5), pp. 132: *Verschiedene Warengüte hergestellt wurde - vom anspruchsvollsten Kunstwerk bis zur anspruchslosen Devotionalie*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 126 and 151-152: *Dass diese Ate-liers 'Spezialwerkstätten' waren, beweist nicht bloss die Nachricht, die Herzöge von Burgund hätten in Lille eine Alabasterwerkstatt ein-gerichtet. Die Annahme einer Spezialwerkstatt ergibt sich vielmehr auch aus dem Wesen der Alabasterplastik - man denke z. B. an die Produktion der englischen Werkstätten.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 132.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 135: *Der vielfache und man-nigfaltige Zusammenhang der Alabasterwerke aus Rimini mit der Gruppe holzgeschnittener niederländischer Altarretabel (...).* In the most recent survey of late medieval alabaster produc-tion in Germany Legner's conclusions are upheld. See N. Jopek, *Studien zur Deutschen Alabasterplastik des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Worms 1988, pp. 4-5: *Endgültig wurden die mit dem Rimini-Meister verbundenen Fragen 1969 von A. Legner gelöst. Auf Grund des Vergleichs mit zeitgenössischen Werken der Malerei und Skulp-tur aus dem Umkreis des Meisters von Flémalle, Jan van Eycks und Roger von der Weydens kann die Einordnung dieser Werkgruppe in den nieder-ländisch-nordfranzösischen Bereich vorerst als sicher gelten.*

²¹ T. Müller, *Sculpture in the Netherlands, Ger-many, France and Spain: 1400 to 1500*, London 1966 (Pelican History of Art), p. 64.

²² For a discussion of Jean, Duke of Berry, in the light of the *Johannesschüssel* genre see: H. Arndt and R. Kroos 1969, *op.cit.* (note 4), pp. 252-255.

²³ For a more detailed description see: O. Delenda, *Rogier van der Weyden: Das Gesamtwerk*, Stuttgart 1997, pp. 126-138, where the painting is dated c. 1453.

²⁴ See: E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renais-sance*, New York 1939, pp. 12-14. See also: I. Combs Stuebe (1968-1969), *op.cit.* (note 3), p. 9. Combs Stuebe describes these tondi as a translation of *the plastic idea of St. John's sacrificial head into a painted Andachtsbild*. Her view is based upon Panofsky's remarks regarding the *Johannesschüssel* as a separate *Andachtsbild* removed from the narrative from which it origi-nally derived.

²⁵ For a recent overview of Bouts' oeuvre see the exhibition catalogue *Dirk Bouts (ca. 1410-1475), een Vlaams primitief te Leuven*, Louvain 1998. The general physiognomy of several of Bouts' male figures is stylistically very close to the general expression found in the Amsterdam

Johannesschüssel. See, for example, the figure on the far left in the panel painting *The Jewish Passover (The Last Supper Triptych*, left wing, c. 1464-1468, Louvain, Collegiate Church of St. Peter). Like that in the *Johannesschüssel* panel, the beheaded figures in the diptych *Exempla iustitiae*, c. 1473-1475, Brussels, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten, have a similar 'sculptural' air, even though they are beardless. It may be noted in passing that the Christ figure in Bouts' *Entombment of Christ* in the National Gallery in London bears a distinct resemblance to Rogier van der Weyden's proto-type, with which the Christ figure of the Rimini altarpiece is commonly associated.

²⁶ See: J. Steyaert, *Laat-Gotische Beeld-houwkunst in de Bourgondische Nederlanden*, Gent 1994, cat. no. 105, p. 342. Steyaert associ-ates this work stylistically with that of the South Netherlandish sculptor Jean Delemer and the so-called *Alabaster Meister von 1467: Maar ongeacht de plaats van oorsprong kan de stijl van de Antwerpse groep de Nederlandse-Bovenrijnse bronnen van de 'Alabaster Meister von 1467', die in Midden-Duitsland werkzaam was, helpen verduidelijken*. My thanks to Professor Steyaert for his valuable suggestions and assistance in the early stages of this research.

²⁷ Legner, *op.cit.* (note 5), p. 148.

²⁸ See the exhibition catalogue *Le Christ de Pitié Brabant-Bourgogne autour de 1500*, Dijon 1971, cat. no. 29, pp. 27-28. In this catalogue the sculpture is described as *Christ de pitié, 1er quart du XVI siècle*. Subsequent attributions have nevertheless dated this work c. 1500.

²⁹ Steyaert, *op.cit.* (note 26), under cat. no. 87, p. 302.

³⁰ See: Legner, *op.cit.* (note 5), pp. 132-133.

³¹ This description of white alabaster refers to Claus Sluter's *pleurants* for the tomb of Philip the Bold. Quoted from N. Penny 1993, *op.cit.* (note 7), pp. 63 - 64. The alabaster in the *pleu-rants*, the tomb effigies of Margaret of Austria at Brou, and the Antwerp *Man of Sorrows* has qualities also found in the stone of the Rijksmuseum's St. John's Head.

³² My thanks to Dr. A. Wallert, curator in the Rijksmuseum's Department of Paintings, for his valuable observation.

³³ Exhibition catalogue P. Quarré, 'De Bour-gondische kunst onder de hertogen van Valois', in: *500 jaar grote raad 1473-1973, van Karel de Stoute tot Keizer Karel*, Mechelen (Cultureel Centrum A. Spinoy) 1973, pp. 49-50.

³⁴ Paatz, *op.cit.* (note 13), p. 128. For patrons of alabaster sculptures produced in 15th century Germany see: N. Jopek 1988, *op.cit.* (note 20), p. 163. Jopek concludes, *Stiftungen und Aufträge sind nur zum Teil präzise zu belegen, andere lassen sich aus den Umständen und der Bildthematik vermuten. Es sind hier unterschiedliche Schichten vertreten: der König von Dänemark, der deutsche Hochadel und Klerus, aus den Städten das Patriziat und Mitglieder einer Zunft.*

³⁵ H. van der Velden, *Gerard Loyet & Karel de Stoute: Het votiefportret in de Bourgondische Nederlanden*, dissertation at the University of Utrecht, 1997, p. 4: *Onder het mecenaat van de hertog van Bourgondië konden niet de schilders, maar de goudsmeden op de hoogste waardering rekenen.*

³⁶ See: Steyaert, *op.cit.* (note 26), p. 28.

³⁷ H. van Os, 'Een schat aan verhalen', in: exhibition catalogue *Gebed in Schoonheid, Schatten van privé-devotie in Europa, 1300-1500*, Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1994, pp. 25-26. In reference to a 13th century ivory diptych, Van Os describes the transposing of monumental scenes from cathedral portals to miniature ivories produced for private devotion. For a commentary on Van Os' remarks see: M. Camille, 'Images in Ivory: Gothic Toys and Devotional Dolls', in: *The Sculpture Journal*, Vol. II, London 1998, pp. 123-127.

³⁸ In the exhibition catalogue *Images in Ivory: Precious Objects of the Gothic Age*, Detroit (Detroit Institute of Arts) 1997, a similarity between ivory and alabaster in 15th century Burgundy is clearly demonstrated. Under cat. no. 65, an ivory image of *God the Father* (late 14th, early 15th century) is directly linked to the Dukes of Burgundy on the basis of a likeness to alabaster *pleurants* carved by Jean de la Huerta for the tomb of John the Fearless. Issues of provenance are addressed under cat. no. 66, p. 253, in which two ivory images of a *Lamentation of Mary* and a *St. John the Evangelist* (c. 1400-1420) are classified as being either works of French (Burgundian) or Southern Netherlandish origin: *The sculpture workshop assembled in Dijon was Netherlandish in origin, and it is, therefore, difficult to determine whether the ivories should be assigned to a location in the Southern Netherlands or Burgundy.*

³⁹ See: E. Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: four lectures on its changing aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini*, New York 1964, pp. 75-79.

⁴⁰ See: Wustrack, *op.cit.* (note 6) and Leeuwenberg and Halsema-Kubes, *op.cit.* (note 12), cat. nos. 176-177.

⁴¹ Legner, *op.cit.* (note 5), p. 151.