Virgin and Child: The Status of Reliquaries without Relics

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The depiction of the Virgin Mary as subject matter in the twelfth century is ubiquitous yet strategic. Two objectives were met with the production of a Virgin Mary reliquary, firstly as the mediator between the suffering mankind and the heavenly Christ acting as a human incarnation of religious power, and secondly, as a reminder of Jesus Christ’s mortality by encouraging patrons to achieve similar holy power. The second objective was especially important: during the Byzantine period (c. 330 – 1453 CE) the Virgin Mary was known as Theotokos or ‘god bearer’, which supported the idea Mary’s importance to the Church.¹

The Virgin and Child as a reliquary is emphasised by its position on the altar. The question arises whether a statuette can be deemed a reliquary without the mandatory prerequisites – that is whether the statuette possesses or hosts any relics at all. This paper will argue that because of a lack of available and/or direct relics, the significance placed on objects in particular bereft of any relics, and the focus swaying towards aesthetics rather than representation allowing for a reimagined veneration of the figure, calls for the redefinition of the term “reliquary” as per Hans Belting’s definition within his essay Likeness and Presence. Furthermore, this definition raises relationship questions between relics and reliquaries; while the figure of the Virgin Mary surpasses the value of her relics, it leaves the correlation rather minimal and increasingly irrelevant to patrons.

To begin, Hans Belting’s introduction of the concept of reliquaries is two-fold. First he notes the physical definition of the reliquary as a miniature sculpture noting its distinct difference from that of the monumental sculpture, of which production was stopped due to its twelfth century taboo regarding the association it had with sculptures of antiquity. Yet, while Belting’s physical description of a reliquary as an object often made using wood and then layered with coats of paint, matches that of the Virgin and Child, the functional description as a “figural shrine,” does not. Literally meaning a miniature in “human shape…often used to restore the appearance of a body to a relic that had lost its shape through decomposition.” This is in part addressed through Ilene Forsyth’s essay where anecdotes discuss the diminishing correlation between relics and reliquaries.

Forsyth’s essay recalls a story regarding a statuette from Vézelay, where the restorer reveals a previously hidden opening behind the figure’s shoulders. This unveiled the hidden relics of Mary Magdalene as the primary reason for the figurine’s invincibility through the fire of early twelfth century. What followed was the revelation around the period of 1161 – 1165, addressing the notion that reliquaries were increasingly understood to be independent from each other. Indeed both Belting and Forsyth note the scarcity in relics across the world related directly to the Virgin Mary and her Son. Forsyth also noted that Bishop Stephen depended on the zeal of relic seekers to discover secondary or indirect relics of the Virgin such as personal adornments or locks of hair. Belting continues by claiming that reliquaries depicting Christ or the Virgin did not subscribe to the former definition as they left behind no bodily relics and instead their miniature

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
depictions were viewed as substitutes, facilitating pilgrimage and cult following. In fact if this is the case, Belting presents the idea that the relationship between reliquary and relics, or what he characterizes as the analogy of relic and image, is not direct. Thus, the definition of the term ‘reliquary’ must be revisited as some relics were hosted within reliquaries (increasingly during the 12th century), but not all reliquaries need to host relics.

The idolatry of these figurines, especially the Virgin and Child, diminishes the need for actual relics to be attached to the reliquary for the latter to be idolized mainly due to the fact that it has been repainted numerous amounts of time. This specific reliquary in question, though in poor condition, offers many clues regarding its position in the Church. The one I use as an example is part of the AGO’s collection and is made of fruit wood and then layered with multiple coats of paint. A Virgin and Child reliquary is an archetype reflection of the Byzantine tradition. The paint allows the work to look regal and ornamented, a vital characteristic of the Byzantines. This facilitates the reliquaries’ position at the altar, yet by using an economically conscious material such as wood, it allows for the production of multiple to be included. Indeed, Belting too contextualises such a work stating that sculptures at the time were largely made using a wooden core with some sort of layer atop it, rather than marble or bronze which were limited to Carolingians or Charlemagne; both of different traditions.

The texture of the wood, along with the remnants of the colourful layers of paint, is further strengthened by the hieratic pose emphasising the importance of the reliquary statuette in the context of the church. The figurine’s pose facilitates her veneration as a God-bearer, a stylistic concept of sedes sapientiae which translates into throne of wisdom. Indeed remnants of

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6 Ibid 31.
8 Ibid 297.
the figurine, namely the crack and additional layer of paint on the head of Jesus indicates that there was previously a crown adorning the holy figure. Moreover, the Virgin Mary’s extended arms allude to a throne for Her Son. Jesus, who sits on her lap, holds His extended hands, gesturing in a manner implying that he may have originally been holding something of importance, possibly a sceptre. Furthermore, the number of times the statuette has been painted and repainted in different styles and colours alludes to the number of locations it has traversed, ultimately justifying the symbolic significance of the object as one of devotion and importance. In fact, statuettes such as these ones are of more than just of symbolic importance and often facilitate preaching to church-goers who didn’t read. Hence, due to low literacy rates, priests and artisans would paint statuettes and depict the Virgin Mary in particular ways to convey teachings and morals in styles pertaining to the region of production.

Furthermore, Belting notes that while the alliance of the image and the relic were vital and intertwined, the lack of relics left behind by Christ and the Virgin inspired the Western worshippers to re-imagine the deity through image or the reliquary. Indeed, this re-imagination saw the emphasis of images surpass the previous regard of relics; the image was now adorned and expressed through a layer of jewels and gold. In fact, the veneration towards the figurine was now purely aesthetic. This materialistic quality of the reliquary created new questions pertaining to idolatry. Forsyth agrees, concluding through Hugh of Poitiers’ account, where she claims that the possession of relics were not the “raison d’être” of reliquaries: importance of the relic was granted well before the discovery of the secret relics within the figurines.

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10 Belting, 302.
11 Forsyth, 35 – 36.
Thus, deeming these figurines as *Maiestas* or Mother of God, or the seat of the Logos incarnate, further signifies the importance of the Virgin Mary image with or without the relics. Forsyth concludes that it is the importance of the figure depicted rather than the relic possessed: “Were it not possible for people to believe in the statue as a representative of the Virgin, the stories would not have enjoyed such wide and lively circulation.” Indeed, the iconography of the Virgin Mary’s surpasses that of the relics, deeming Belting’s definition of a reliquary as a container or as coupled with the remaining relics of Mary to give the reliquary importance appears incorrect and irrelevant.

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Bibliography

