The story of Salome and Saint John the Baptist, so simply told in the New Testament (Saint Mark vi. 17-29, Saint Matthew xiv. 1-12), yet abounding in dramatic feeling and vivid details, has been illustrated by artists of many periods and many lands. Writers and composers have also been drawn to the violent theme, developing its dramatic possibilities, supplying details only suggested in the biblical narrative, and in recent times exploring its psychological overtones. Earlier treatments followed more closely the story as set forth by Saint Mark.

‘Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias’ sake, his brother Philip’s wife: for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, ‘It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother’s wife.’ Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not: for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. And when a convenient day was come, and Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee; and when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, ‘Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee.’ And he sware unto her, ‘Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom.’ And she went forth, and said unto her mother, ‘What shall I ask?’ And she said, ‘The head of John the Baptist.’ And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, ‘I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist.’ And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath’s sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother.”

These events took place in the early years of the Roman empire, the outlying areas of which were ruled by means of local governors acceptable to the population and loyal to Rome. The Herods were a family of local governors in Palestine; the one with which this story is concerned was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, and tetrarch of Galilee and...
Peraea from 4 B.C. to 39 A.D., mainly in the reign of the emperor Tiberius. Antipas met and fell in love with Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip, on a journey to Rome. Herodias divorced Philip, by whom she had a daughter, Salome, and married Antipas, who gained many enemies by this unlawful marriage. His downfall was eventually caused by Herodias's ambition, which drove him to seek a royal title from the emperor Caligula, who promptly confiscated his domains and sent him into exile in 39 A.D. According to the ancient historian Josephus, Antipas imprisoned and executed Saint John the
Scenes from the life of John the Baptist. Choir reliefs in Amiens cathedral. French, xv century

Baptist at the border fortress of Machaerus. Subsequently, these facts were woven into a cohesive story, and legend has made of this petty tyrant a powerful monarch.

The earliest known representation of Herod’s feast and the beheading of Saint John the Baptist appears in a fragmentary gospel of Saint Matthew found at Sinope, an ancient Greek settlement on the Black Sea. The manuscript is written in gold letters on purple vellum and dates from the sixth century. Painted in bright colors, the episodes show, at the left, Herod reclining with his guests in Roman fashion before a table on which is a basket of fruit. The king points to Salome, who receives the head of John the Baptist in a plate. At the right is the prison, where John’s headless body is viewed in horror by two disciples. The roof has been conveniently removed to reveal the scene within. The movement and narrative quality of the painting are reminiscent of late antique art, but the flat conception of figures and space, the large heads and staring eyes, the diadems and rich coverings, and the brilliant colors are signposts of Byzantine splendor. This painting illustrates clearly how the late classical tradition, revitalized but de-materialized by early Christian fervor, emerged in the Near East as Byzantine art.

The events surrounding the death of John the Baptist were interpreted in more fiery fashion in the religious sculpture of the Romanesque period. The theme was well suited to the emotional fervor which produced the art of Moissac and Vezelay. In the eleventh century an interesting school of Romanesque sculpture developed in South Germany which held undisputed leadership in the art of bronze-casting. Its chief center was the city of Hildesheim in Saxony, where Bishop Bernward assembled a workshop that flourished for more than two centuries. The bronze column and doors which Bernward commissioned for the church of Saint Michael were long ago transferred to the Hildesheim cathedral. The spiral design of the column, with a long band of relief sculpture winding eight times around

Herod’s feast, from a pulpit by Mino da Fiesole (1431-1484). Cathedral of Prato
the core, was inspired by Trajan's column, which the bishop had undoubtedly seen during his stay in Rome in 1001. Among the biblical episodes cast on it are several from the life of Saint John the Baptist. The section illustrated here shows Salome dancing before Herod with a musician at the left and a servant arriving from the right with the head of the saint. The emotional and nervous qualities of Romanesque art are fully expressed in this early sculpture. Fired by his theme, the artist has distorted natural forms in order to heighten the emotional content and feeling of the scene. This is particularly apparent in the dancing Salome. Although striving toward three-dimensional expression, the sculptor's linear heritage from Carolingian manuscript illustration is apparent in the treatment of drapery folds and the spiraling ground line. The large heads with their bulging eyes and piercing glance are vestiges of Byzantine influence.

Much cruder, but equally interesting, is a representation of the same scene on the bronze doors of the eleventh-century church of San Zeno in Verona. Unlike the solidly cast doors of Hildesheim, those of San Zeno consist of a series of bronze plates nailed to a wooden core. Though adorning a church in Italy, they are thought to be of German workmanship. There is a marked difference in style among the panels, and those concerned with the story of Salome are among the crudest examples. The central of the three, showing Salome's dance, is illustrated here. Herod is seated at his banquet table between two men. The king and his left-hand neighbor make gestures of horror at the sight of John the Baptist's head, which is brought by a figure coming from the first panel, where the actual beheading is shown. In the foreground the serpentine Salome executes a back bend worthy of the most limber contortionist. At the right the man carrying the severed head is
departing toward the next panel to present it to Herodias.

The cathedral of San Marco in Venice contains a magnificent series of Byzantine mosaics. Latest in date is the mosaic decoration of the baptistery, executed in the middle of the fourteenth century, which has a design of incomparable richness. Herod’s banquet, which fills one of the large lunettes, is set before a palatial structure. At the left, the sinuous Salome, clad in a clinging, fur-trimmed dress of great elegance, dances with the head of Saint John already held aloft. This portion of the mosaic can be seen in an exact reproduction in the Early Christian gallery of the Museum. The narrative element and movement in the scene give evidence of its late date, but still present are the gold background and rich colors, the formal poses and large scale of the figures which are characteristic of Byzantine church decoration.

In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the story of Salome is most frequently found among representations of the life of Saint John the Baptist, which, along with the lives of Christ and the Virgin, was one of the most popular religious subjects. It occurs repeatedly in the great fresco cycles decorating Italian churches from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Giotto included the story in his frescoes in Santa Croce in Florence and Pietro Lorenzetti painted a very similar scene on the walls of another church in Siena. In both, the different episodes of the story are woven into one composition, and the characters are shown with contemporary costumes and settings.

Also in the fashionable dress of a courtly lady is a fifteenth-century French interpretation of Salome from the cathedral of Amiens. The great Gothic cathedrals of northern Europe, with their soaring vaults and arches and their stained-glass windows, had no need for the painted decoration which covered the large flat expanses of wall in Italian churches. Instead, they were adorned with a wealth of sculptural ornament, inside as well as on their façades. On the north side of the choir in the cathedral of Amiens are four scenes from the life of Saint John, part of whose head is said to have been brought to Amiens as a relic in 1206. Executed in the late Gothic manner, the scenes are crowded with elegant figures carved in high relief and set against appropriate backgrounds. The poses and gestures are mannered, and details of costume and setting are carved with the marked emphasis on realism which gradually infiltrated French art in the fifteenth century. The episodes are framed by elaborately foliated ogival arches, the trademark of the flamboyant Gothic style. The scenes first show, at the right, the imprisonment of Saint John, who wears the animal skin which earned him the reputation of having the countenance of a wild man. Next comes Salome’s dance, the beheading, and the presentation of the head to Herodias, with Salome fainting theatrically into the arms of a retainer.
In Italy during this period, the familiar religious stories were interpreted in a quiet, objective spirit entirely different from the lively realism of late Gothic art beyond the Alps. Donatello, who by synthesizing Florentine realism with an ideal borrowed from Roman antiquity created the formula of renaissance sculpture, designed a very fine feast of Herod among the bronze reliefs decorating the baptismal font of a church in Siena, and his much younger contemporary Mino da Fiesole carved a spirited although rather archaic version of the subject on a marble pulpit in the cathedral at Prato. Framed in a profusion of classical architectural decoration, Mino’s feast is set in a classical renaissance interior crowded with smiling figures and chubby musicians, while Saint John stares through a window in the background. As an example of how popular the subject was, there is a large fresco in a chapel of the same cathedral representing Herod’s feast, painted by Fra Filippo Lippi around 1464.

In the Museum’s collection is a bone altar-piece on which the story of Salome was carved by Baldassare degli Embriachi, a gentleman ivory-carver who worked mainly in Venice in the early fifteenth century. Adapted to the triangular space of its pinnacle, one wing of this large triptych contains the familiar three scenes. In the square central panel Salome is demanding the head of Saint John as Herod and his guests raise their hands in horror. At the right the saint, kneeling in the door of his prison, prays as the fatal blow is about to descend. At the left Salome kneels to give his head to Herodias, and, to fill the remaining corner, the artist has carved a falconer and a dog. The bands between the panels are decorated with inlaid designs. The story is also told in a series of three paintings of this period in the Museum which belong to the “international style,” a late medieval, tapestry-like mode of painting current throughout Europe.

The fifteenth century never tired of repeating the story of Salome and Saint John. It is abundantly illustrated in the art of the Low Countries and Germany as well as in the Latin lands. The theme was admirably suited to the northerners’ love of minute details. Hans Memling, born in Germany but trained in the Flemish tradition of Rogier van der Weyden, included the Salome story in the left wing of
a great altarpiece which now hangs in the medieval hospital of Saint John in Bruges, the city in which he chiefly worked. Founded in 1118 and partly rebuilt in the fifteenth century, this hospital, which is still in use today, houses some of Memling’s greatest paintings. Salome, conceived as the ideal feminine type evolved by Memling for his Madonnas, assists the gruesome beheading with a sweet and modest mien completely unsuitable to the theme. The feasting scene is shown through an open archway of the palace in the telescopic fashion used by Flemish artists since the time of the van Eycks.

The illustrative possibilities of the Salome story were recognized by many German as well as Flemish artists. An engraving by Israhel van Meckenem in the Museum is still very Gothic in feeling. Van Meckenem combines the feast and the beheading into a crowded composition filled with gracefully mannered figures. The scenes, framed and separated by elegant arches and stepped platforms, are drawn with a light and sensitive line. A markedly different representation of the story was drawn by Albrecht Dürer, who, immediately after returning from his second trip to Italy in 1511, engraved Salome taking the head of John the Baptist. His stay in Venice had developed his interest in pictorial effects, which can be seen in the engravings by the way in which light and dark areas are contrasted. The result is a richness of tone very different from the crisp, linear quality of van Meckenem, or of his own earlier woodcuts and engravings. Dürer chose to represent only one highly dramatic moment of the story: Salome, plump and with a pained expression, half rises from the meager repast to receive her reward, which Herod contemplates with utter dejection.

During the High Renaissance and afterwards, the formula of Salome with the head of John the Baptist offered many artists the opportunity of contrasting a lovely young girl with a lifeless head. Andrea Solario, a Milanese painter whose work follows closely that of Leonardo, executed the subject several times. In a painting in the Museum’s collection the young princess, richly clothed in a jewel-studded gown, looks down demurely while she holds the plate into which the executioner’s clenched fist will drop the saint’s head. In a painting by Titian, the subject is stripped of its macabre aspect and merely supplies an

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Salome dancing before Herod, by Ferdinand Bol (1616-1680). Rijks Museum, Amsterdam

Death of Saint John the Baptist, by Delacroix (1796-1863). Palais Bourbon, Paris
Salome dancing before Herod, by Georges Rochegrosse (b. 1859). In a private collection

Religious subjects were not popular in Protestant Holland of the seventeenth century, but curiously enough, this little nation of prosperous burghers produced the most profound and imaginative religious painter of the century. Rembrandt made an etching of the beheading of John the Baptist, and the feast scene was painted by one of his followers, Ferdinand Bol, chiefly known as a prolific portraitist. Bol's Salome is highly amusing; interpreted as a buxom Dutch lass, she hops about gaily before the appreciative Herod. The old king is reminiscent of Rembrandt's orientalized sitters, for he is clad in a fur-trimmed coat and peacock-plumed turban similar to the studio "props" so often used by the master to enhance the textural interest of his portraits.

LEFT: The Apparition, water color by Gustave Moreau (1826-1898). In the Louvre
It is interesting to note that, in the Mohammedan Near East, a representation of the daughter of Herodias dancing before Herod has been found among the wall paintings of a seventeenth-century house in Aleppo, which are now in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum. Biblical subjects are of course found in Moslem art, and it is well known that the Koran is in part derived from the Old and New Testaments. Illustration of religious subjects is forbidden in the Mohammedan religion, and these paintings decorated the walls of a Christian's house.

The paucity of illustrations of the Salome story in eighteenth-century art is not surprising; nothing could be further removed from the capricious, pleasure-seeking spirit of the aristocratic art patrons of that period. It is not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the story is once more abundantly illustrated. What woman of history or legend better qualifies for the role of femme fatale? This new feminine ideal, created by the imagination of the Romantics, found its expression in figures such as Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Salammbô, and Carmen; but it found its most vicious incarnation in Salome. The Romantics discovered horror as a source of beauty. The intimate association of pleasure and pain which pervades nineteenth-century artistic expression had already been formulated at the end of the eighteenth century, particularly in the writings of the notorious Marquis de Sade, whose influence on the Romantic and Symbolist writers cannot be disregarded. No painter exemplifies better than Eugène Delacroix the predilection of this period for “the lecherous, blood-stained Orient” as the artistic setting of an exotic association of beauty and death. Most of Delacroix’s subjects, whether historical, literary, or animal, embody the cruel drama of death and destruction. He included the death of John the Baptist among the tragic episodes which form the subject of a ceiling decoration in the Palais Bourbon in Paris.

A popular Salon painter, Georges Rochegrosse, exemplifies in his Salome dancing before Herod the superficial exoticism which invaded public taste toward the end of the nineteenth century. The scene is laid in a columned hall resembling a Roman bath—and incidentally the Main Hall of the Metropolitan Museum. Similar archaeological interests are displayed in the Egyptian and Assyrian motifs on hangings and carpets. The musical instruments, harp, lute, and sistrum, are derived from ancient Egyptian sources. The portly Romans and the Judaean chieftains are clothed in what the painter conceived to be the dress of the first century in Roman Galilee. The central attraction is the dancer herself. Wearing split trousers, a transparent overskirt, and a Cleopatra-like headdress and laden with bangles, she languidly sniffs a lotus bud as her expectant audience waits for her to continue what must surely be a danse du ventre.

Gustave Moreau offers, in better taste, a more original and imaginative concept in his large water color The Apparition. The idea of feminine fatality weighed heavily on the soul of this evocative painter. The setting of extreme richness is drawn not from archaeological
Salome, by Alexander Archipenko (1887– )

studies but from the artist’s imagination. Moreau superimposes Salome’s state of mind on the outward reality of the scene, for she alone can see the awful apparition. The old king whose desire she evoked, the mother whose vengeance she served, the inevitable executioner leaning on his sword do not partake in the dramatic moment as the beautiful dancer rejects the vision of the prophet’s severed head, which has already caused a crimson puddle to form at her feet.

In the Bible Salome is merely the tool of her mother’s vengeance, and it is in this vein that she is conceived by Gustave Flaubert in his short story Hérodias, written in 1876 or 77. The author of Salammbô was familiar with the ancient Orient through archaeological study and a visit to Egypt in 1850, but he was directly inspired to use the Salome story by a sculptured tympanum of Rouen cathedral. Flaubert’s story, in turn, was used by Jules Massenet for the plot of his opera Hérodiade.

It was the German poet Heinrich Heine who, in his poem Atta Troll, written in 1841, first conceived the idea of Salome’s fatal passion for John the Baptist. Oscar Wilde in his play Salomé crystallized this psychological interpretation. Salome becomes the dominant figure. Her desire increased by the prophet’s harsh rebuff of her advances, she demands his head in an impulsive act of revenge. The play was written in French in 1891 for Sarah Bernhardt, who was prevented by the censor from performing it. The English translation was published in 1894 with illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley. Neither the author nor the illustrator tried to recreate an accurate picture of antiquity. The fantastic decorations express the moods of the play in an atmosphere of unhealthy beauty. It is surprising that Beardsley was only twenty-one when he began these sophisticated drawings. At that time the Japanese vogue was at the height of its popularity in England. The Japanese prints which Beardsley collected and the Japanesque designs of Whistler’s famous Peacock Room at Prince’s Gate—now at the Freer Gallery in Washington—with which the young artist was well acquainted, influenced his style at this period of his brief career. The Dancer’s Reward is artificial, unpleasant, lacking in emotional impact. Beardsley’s line never attained the vitality and rhythm of his Japanese models; it is cold and lifeless. Wilde’s play received a more stirring interpretation by the German composer Richard Strauss, who used it as the libretto of his opera Salome. Composed in 1905, it is the very embodiment of fin de siècle decadence. The suggestive music, with its use of dissonance, intensifies the swift emotional development of the plot and the overwhelming mood of horror.

The ancient narrative consisted of a series of events leading to the death of John the Baptist. In the latest versions interest is focused on Salome, and the elements of the story are used to build her vivid characterization. The nineteenth century radically modified the story by clarifying Herod’s attraction to his step-daughter, and, most important, by adding Salome’s infatuation for the prophet. It is in the spirit of this new motivation that a modern sculptor, Alexander Archipenko, conceived his Salome clasping to her cheek, in a strange ecstasy, the lifeless head of John the Baptist.