Few people who observe the charming face of a fourteenth century reliquary bust recently acquired for The Cloisters (Figure 1) would suspect that it is, in a sense, a fraud. And no one would guess that the delicately painted cheeks, bright eyes, and smiling mouth were fashioned deliberately to conceal something more austere that rests beneath. But no wonder, for the external indications are slight and the story of the masquerade is complex.

The story begins at the very dawn of Christianity, when, at the end of the third century, the last pagan emperors, sensing their impending oblivion, strove vainly to annihilate all Christians. During one of these last persecutions, a fourteen-year-old girl of Nicomedia named Juliana was cruelly tortured and then beheaded because she had refused to marry a pagan lord, even upon the demands of her own father. Juliana’s courageous refusal to deny her marriage with Christ was well known in the Middle Ages, for the story of her martyrdom was told and embellished by numerous medieval authors. Her act of faith was praised in hymn and prayer by sisters in countless convents, for few other saints were a more effective symbol of the “wedding to Christ” that the sisters had vowed to uphold.

If the Most Reverend Gabriella Bontempi, abbess of the convent of Santa Juliana in the ancient town of Perugia, could be accused of one sin, that sin would be covetousness. To Abbess Gabriella it seemed illogical that the monks of the nearby monastery of San Domenico had in their possession a fragment of the head of St. Juliana, which, it was said, had come to the monastery sometime after 1207, when the body of the saint had been discovered in Cuma and transported to a shrine in Naples.

The Abbot of San Domenico was no match for Gabriella, who was not only fiercely determined to gain the relic for her convent, but who also happened to be of noble birth and the cousin of Cardinal Bontempi. The outcome was inevitable. On the twenty-fifth of August in the year 1376 the Dominican brothers solemnly transported the venerated relic of St. Juliana to the gates of the convent. To record the important event the Abbess ordered a fresco representing Juliana enveloping with her mantle the Abbess herself, eleven sisters of the chapter, and, in diminutive scale, the Abbot of San Domenico (Figure 2).

The fresco was not the only artistic commemoration of the moving of the precious relic. In order to honor and protect it Gabriella commissioned a goldsmith to make an elaborate tabernacle. This richly decorated Gothic cage of gilded copper was fitted with enamels and inscribed with the full story of its creation and its function: Hic collocatur capud Giuliane virginis glorioso quod predicatoribus fratres de Pferusio Reverende Matri Gabrielle Abatis Monasterii eiusdem virginis et suo capitu gratis honoriffice donaverunt claris annis Domini CCLXXVI de mense Augsti ("Herein is contained the head of St. Juliana, glorious virgin, that the Dominican brothers of Perugia gave, of their own free will and with honor, to the Reverend Mother Gabriella, abbess of the convent, and to her chapter in the year 1376 during the month of August") (Figure 3).
The head of St. Juliana mentioned in the inscription was contained in a reliquary, and this reliquary can be identified as the one now on exhibition at The Cloisters. It is a bust of the saint, beaten from copper, with gilded hair and with a smiling, somewhat wistful face of modeled gesso painted in tempera so cleverly that the brilliant surface seems to be made of finest enamel. Two copper-gilt ribbons riveted to the lower edge of the reliquary bear the incomplete inscriptions: [C]APUD. SANTE. IULIANE. (“Head of St. Juliana”) and ROMA. A. DOMINO. GUILLEM. (“Rome, By the master William”).

In 1645 a historian of Perugia described the two components together, and for almost two hundred years more the bust remained undisrupted within its tabernacle in the principal chapel of the church of Santa Juliana. By 1822 the bust was recorded as being separated from its tabernacle; the sisters, alarmed by the pillaging of the Napoleonic troops, had removed the bust and its relic to a safe, hidden sanctuary within the convent. Around 1862, when the convent was suppressed and transformed into a military hospital, the relic, reliquary, and tabernacle were removed to the Perugian church of Santa Maria di Monteluce. At that time the objects first came to the serious attention of art historians and were described by the Superintendent of Monuments and Galleries of the Province of Umbria. The card referring to the bust reliquary reads in translation: “A head of a young woman with gilded hair and a face and neck painted in tempera... the color of copper. Around the extremity of the bust is a ribbon, now lost on two sides, on which are legible the words: [C]APUD. SANTE. IULIANE. ROMA. A. GUILLE. . . . Height 27 centimeters.”

Except for the errors in transcribing the inscriptions, this description conforms almost exactly to the reliquary bust now at The Cloisters. In fact the only discrepancy between them is the color of the face, which is not a dull coppery shade but a pleasing light pink and cream, through which, here and there, slight traces of green underpaint are apparent. The eyes are brown, enlivened by minute flecks of blue; the mouth is a soft red, and between the slightly parted lips small white teeth are visible. Since an examination of the composition and application of the gesso and the tempera fully confirms that both gesso and paint are original, it is probable that the copper color mentioned in the description is either an error, mere dirt, or possibly a later paint surface now vanished. The facial type, moreover, compares closely to a number of paintings and several other metal busts, all produced in Italy during the last quarter of the fourteenth century, notably the fresco of 1376 that Abbess Gabriella ordered and the great reliquary, also of 1376, representing St. Agatha in the church of that name in Catania, Sicily. Measurements of the bust and the tabernacle prove that the former fits into the latter like a hand into a glove.

Sometime between 1862 and 1907 the reliquary bust was removed from the tabernacle forever. The tabernacle (despite its probable Sienese origin) was an important object in a comprehensive exhibition of Umbrian art held in 1907 at the National Gallery in Perugia. It is significant that whereas all catalogues and commentaries on the exhibition describe the tabern-
nacle, none refer to the existence of the reliquary. In 1910 the tabernacle came into the collection of the National Gallery of Perugia. Twenty-three years later, the reliquary bust turned up in private hands in Paris, and in 1960 it was advertised for sale in the art periodical Pantheon. When Italy did not acquire the piece, it came to the United States and was purchased for The Cloisters.

The reliquary bust of St. Juliana is an acquisition of major importance. The history of the object is impressive. The condition of the piece is superb; it is one of the very few reliquary busts of the Middle Ages that still retains all its original paint. The bust has a definite appeal as a work of art; the young girl tends to grow in quality the more she is observed. But there is more to the reliquary than meets the eye: it once represented a man, not a woman.

When the hinged cranium of the bust is removed, one can see a strange sight inside the hollow head. The photograph of the interior (Figure 6), despite its odd concave-convex distortion, shows a curiously archaic, almost forbidding image, with teardrop-shaped eyes set closely together, a strong straight nose made from a separate piece of copper, a wide mouth, and ears of non-naturalistic design. At first we thought this face was nothing more than a sort of armature, beaten rather summarily into the copper in order to retain the gesso—something like a metal skull to which the gesso flesh had been attached. But then a number of points were observed that led to the present idea that the “inner visage” and, indeed, the entire copper bust is an image of a man that may date as early as the first half of the fourteenth century.

The layer of gesso that covers the copper face is uncommonly thick, up to one-half inch at the forehead (Figure 4). In other reliquary heads of about the same time that retain traces of old paint, such as the female saint in the church of Sainte Foy at Conques (Figure 5), the paint (in this case on canvas) is relatively thin. More important is the fact that the features raised in
metal on the head in Conques do not differ from those in paint, and the same is also true of the contemporary reliquary bust of St. Agatha in Catania. With Juliana the painted features are so different from those in repoussé that the gesso has the character of a deliberately applied mask. This mask juts out too far in proportion to the rest of the head (Figure 7, right) and covers part of the hair just below each ear. Finally, if the copper base were of the same date as the gesso visage, it would be somewhat difficult to explain why a young girl of the late fourteenth century should have been represented with tight, horizontal curls. These are never seen in other female reliquary busts of the period but are typical of a number of male busts of the first half of the fourteenth century, such as that of St. Nicander in the Chiesa del Viatico in Venafro of about 1340.

The mystery of whether or not there was an earlier head could only be solved by investigating what lay beneath the gesso, but any attempt to crack the gesso was unthinkable. Thus the investigation had to be indirect. A series of X-ray photographs were made, and the X-ray of the profile of the reliquary (Figure 7) shows something as startling as the interior photograph: the features of the outer face do not correspond to those fashioned in the copper repoussé. The X-ray photograph also shows that the inner silhouette has a surprising elegance; the smooth outline from the high forehead to the straight, almost classical nose, and the strong arcs that form the lips and chin cannot be considered haphazard or simply the reflection of an armature roughly beaten from the copper. The frontal X-ray shows that only one eye of the concealed copper face is incised with a pupil. This, and other indications, lead to the conclusion that the inner head may not have been totally finished.

The final and most difficult procedure in the indirect examination involved making two full casts of the interior of the copper head. The profile of the first cast did not conform exactly to the profile apparent in the X-ray, owing to the thickness of the copper: the outline of the separate patch for the nose showed distinctly and the lips were somewhat flatter. A second cast was made and its profile adjusted to agree exactly with the X-ray. This reconstructed cast (Figures 7, 10) all but settles the question of the nature of
the face below the gesso. The inner face is somewhat smaller in dimensions; its style is primitive yet strong. The peculiar combination of the small eyes of an abstract design, the long nose with flaring nostrils, the thin lips set in a grim, rather sour expression, and the high cheekbones is shared by a number of reliquaries, generally of the late thirteenth or the first half of the fourteenth century, that were made in various centers along the Dalmatian coast. The reliquary in the Franciscan monastery in Dubrovnik, for instance, has similar eyes (Figure 9); another, in Split (Spalato), has the same hair; and one, in the cathedral treasury of Zara, even has ears of a similar abstract form.

When the master William fashioned the image of St. Juliana, he made use of a copper bust of a man, possibly unfinished, made from five pieces of copper riveted together. He seems to have added a new piece for the cranium, which he attached to the bust by two hinges of rather rudimentary design; the reason for this addition might have been that the relic of Juliana, said to be the cranium, did not fit into the original head. The joint was disguised by a small and undistinguished crown that may once have been fitted with jewels in the series of holes on its circumference. Before William gilded the cranium and hair, he apparently made a series of arc-shaped incisions with a compass and graving tool in order to indicate strands of hair. His job of gilding was careless, for there are traces of gold under the gesso on the ears. (Whether or not gilding exists on any other part of the inner copper face is, of course, impossible to determine; at any rate we bored two minute holes in the mouth and one nostril that show only a copper surface below the gesso.) After the gilding, William applied his gesso on the face, modeled it, and painted it. He did not place gesso on the neck or breast and was content to have painted this area with tempera. (Because of the corrosion of the copper, the paint surface on the lower part has deteriorated and in more modern times has been retouched with oil paint.) Finally William riveted to the base of the bust the copper-gilt ribbons with the identifying inscriptions.

Just when the shoulders were lopped off is not known. The question would be answered if we assumed that this had occurred when the bust, made in Rome, was brought to Perugia and was discovered to be too big for the tabernacle. But

7. The inner and outer faces of the reliquary of St. Juliana: left, the second cast of the interior, showing the original appearance of the copper bust. In the X-ray photograph, center, this is seen as a solid profile, with the later gesso appearing as a shadowy outer contour. Far right, the bust as it looks today.
such an explanation is not plausible. The width of the interior of the tabernacle is 29 centimeters. The present width of the shoulders of the reliquary is 22.3 centimeters. By extending the curvature of the copper ribbons, it is possible to reconstruct the original width of the base, and at the most this comes to 26 centimeters. Thus, since the entire reliquary could easily have fitted inside the tabernacle, the shoulders must have been cut at some later date.

Exactly why William chose to remake a bust of a half-century earlier will never be known. Perhaps it was an economy measure that was not brought directly to the attention of Gabriella Bontempi. Whatever the reason for it may have been, this reuse and transformation of earlier elements is by no means unique in medieval art. Long are the lists of paintings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that were, century by century, systematically brought up to date and fashion. The use of “spoils” in medieval architecture was a common occurrence: anyone who has visited the early medieval churches of Italy can recall numerous cases in which pagan capitals support Christian arches.

In metalwork medieval artisans did not differ from painters and architects. In the treasury of the church of Sainte Foy at Conques, there is another reliquary, an image of the patron saint, of the second half of the tenth century. A few years ago this renowned statue was taken apart, painstakingly, piece by piece. This dissection produced an amazing discovery: the golden head of the saint turned out to be earlier than the tenth century and, like the inner face of the Cloisters reliquary, is male, not female. It is an image of a Roman emperor of the fourth or fifth century A.D., reused and adapted for the statue of a girl who, like Juliana, was martyred during the persecutions of the Emperor Diocletian.

In view of his self-imposed difficulties, William's finished product is surprisingly elegant and expressive. Admittedly there is a lack of stylistic and technical continuity, but the defects are minor. Not in the least do they detract from the handsome contrast between the gold of the soft hair and the subtle tones of the smooth complexion. To those not accustomed to the conventions of fourteenth century portraits, the features of this young woman may at first seem too stylized. But this impression soon gives way before the charm of the young face, so full of vitality.
8. Reliquary of St. Juliana
REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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