Up until the end of the eighteenth century, the great brass lectern shown in Figure 1 stood in the collegiate church of St. Peter in Louvain, Belgium. Then, in 1798, it was sold. There seem to exist no records that tell who ordered it, exactly when and where it was made, the name of its maker, who bought it after it was sold in 1798, or where it was then kept. The only certainty about the lectern is the fact that it is mentioned in the notes of M. F. Pelckmans, an amateur historian of Louvain, as being part of the furniture of the church of St. Peter. These notes list the objects in a sale that took place on the outside steps of the church on the eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh of August 1798. The sales list of August 8 (Figure 2) includes, as number 13, *den grooten coperen pelicaen aldaer*—"the great copper pelican in the same place [as number 12: in the choir]"—which was sold for 315 livres.

This sale was not unique. It was one of a series of confiscations ordered by the French rulers. On July 18, 1794, for instance, following a decree confiscating works of art in religious institutions, a triptych by Quentin Massys and a painting by Gaspard de Crayer were taken from the church of St. Peter in Louvain and sent to Paris. By the decrees of September 1, 1796, many other works from the Louvain region that belonged to noble families and guilds, trade organizations, and religious institutions were confiscated in the name of the French nation. These pieces were stored in the old deaconry, the Driutiuscollege, and the convent of the Augustines, but most were later placed at the disposal of the Academy of Art, established in 1801, and of the reestablished Municipal Museum in 1823.

The sale of 1798 was one of many held during that year as a result of the decree of November 14, 1797. This decree ordered the closing of churches; it also ordered the public sale, administered by the French Commission of National Property, of all confiscated furniture, buildings, and real estate owned by churches, abbeys, monasteries, convents, cloisters, chapels, trade organizations and guilds, any other institutions, and the nobility.
During the sale on the steps of St. Peter's, in addition to the great lectern, other interesting items of cast brass were sold: the "small pelican in the choir," the tomb plates, the big paschal candlestick of 1484-1485 (comparable to that still existing in the church of St. Leonard in Leau in Brabant) by Renier I van Thienen, the holy-water vessel, and an eighteenth-century enclosure for the tabernacle in which the Holy Sacrament was kept. Still other remarkable ecclesiastical ornaments were sold on the ninth, tenth, and eleventh, including sculptures, furniture, altars, ironwork, and embroidery.

Many pieces were secretly bought by trustworthy people on behalf of the churches and the other religious organizations to whom they had belonged. Because of these clandestine deeds, when the churches reopened in Louvain on January 28, 1800, some of their original furniture and works of art were back in place.

Nevertheless, through the sales a major part of our artistic patrimony went to dealers, antiquarians, and less responsible buyers. A typical loss can be illustrated by the recorded fact that some French gendarmes bought the wooden statues of St. Joseph, St. Norbert, and St. Theresa from the church of St. Peter, and when they could not resell them at a profit, they simply chopped them to pieces for firewood.

During the early 1800s, a large number of these art treasures were available for sale. An important sale, for instance, took place on May 10, 1837, in a gallery at 3 Savoyestraat in Louvain. The sales list includes a set of four panels painted on both sides from the church of Korbeek-Lo near Louvain, and pictures by famous masters, Flemish and non-Flemish, among them works by Isaac van Ostade, Hendrik van Balen, David Teniers, Jan van Goyen, Gonzales Coques, Joachim Patinir, Nicolaes Berchem, Jan Molenar, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Willem Claesz. Heda, Peeter Snayers,
Jan van Huchtenburgh, and Pieter ("Velvet") Brueghel. These and other works came, through dealers specializing in medieval art, into the possession of private collectors both at home and abroad. Most of these art lovers were English, because the Gothic Revival had created enormous interest in medieval art. The revival of the Gothic in England during the first half of the nineteenth century paralleled the revival of Roman Catholicism. Many new churches, convents, monasteries, and colleges were built in neo-Gothic styles, and were often decorated with authentic medieval works of art, most of which had been bought in the southern Netherlands and in the Rhineland. Among the buyers was England’s great proponent of the Gothic Revival, A. W. Pugin, who traveled all over these regions with his friend and protector John, sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury.

Pugin used the objects he acquired on his trips as illustrations in his theoretical writings (such as his Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament and Costume of 1844) and as inspiration for his designs for neo-Gothic artistic works, including ecclesiastical furniture, stained-glass windows, liturgical items, and so forth. He also placed some of the pieces he had bought into the neo-Gothic churches, cloisters, and colleges for which he drafted the plans, and for whose furniture and decoration he was responsible. A typical example of these projects is St. Chad’s Cathedral in Birmingham. In St. Chad’s, next to Gothic Revival works can be found real medieval objects. Among these is a pulpit that had been sold from the church of St. Gertrude in Louvain on July 30, 1798: it is a late Gothic work, carved of oak in a Brabantine workshop in about 1520. And, at the cathedral’s inauguration in 1841, the Earl of Shrewsbury gave it a great brass eagle lectern; according to a tradition current in Birmingham in the first half of the nineteenth century, this lectern had belonged to the church of St. Peter in Louvain. In 1851 it was transferred to the chapel at St. Mary’s College at Oscott near Birmingham, and last year was bought from the college for The Cloisters in New York. St. Mary’s, one of the many Roman Catholic colleges founded during the Gothic Revival, still owns several sculptures and church vestments from Brabant, as well as a cylindrical silver-gilt monstrance, dated 1547 and stamped with the town mark of Louvain, the deacon’s letter r, and the maker’s mark m, indicating the goldsmith Matthias of Louvain. A famous historian from Louvain, Edward van Even, recorded seeing the eagle lectern at Oscott in 1858, and mentioned the tradition that it had originally belonged to St. Peter’s.

This tradition is believable and probably based on fact. Pugin could have bought the lectern during one of his trips to the Netherlands, when he bought other works from the Louvain region, such as the pulpit from the church of St. Gertrude, now in St. Chad’s, the silver-gilt monstrance in Oscott, and a copper statue of the Madonna, also in Oscott, made during the last quarter of the fifteenth century in the Brussels workshop of the van Thienen. The latter may have come from the paschal candlestick of St. Peter’s at Louvain; this candlestick was auctioned off in 1798 with the eagle lectern and with another copper statuette, representing the Virgin in Glory (now in Oscott), the product of a metalcasting workshop in the southern Netherlands and made about the end of the fifteenth century. It is possible that the Virgin in Glory was

3. The Cloisters lectern
part of the chandelier from the church of St. Leonard at Léau, mentioned in 1888 as being in a church in Birmingham; this chandelier may have been part of a lot of copperwork sold in St. Leonard’s to the English in 1827.

Support for the tradition of the lectern’s Louvain origin can be seen in one of the elements of its iconography. This is the statuette of St. Peter (Figure 6) on the base, which could point to the church of St. Peter and to the city of Louvain, of which Peter is the patron saint.

The lectern does not appear in old paintings or drawings of the interior of St. Peter’s, such as the one painted by Hendrik van Steenwyck the Younger and Frans II Francken in the beginning of the seventeenth century, nor in the one by Wolfgang de Smet (Figure 7), dated 1667. This fact, however, should be considered in the light of the lectern’s ecclesiastical function: a church’s big— or gospel—lectern was placed to the left of the officiating priest, and the small— or epistle—lectern was placed on the other side of the choir. All the known pictures of the interior of St. Peter’s give a view up the middle of the nave; the sides of the choir (and the lecterns) cannot be seen, for they are mostly hidden by altars on both sides of the church.

It is probable— although admittedly hypothetical —that the lectern belonging to St. Peter’s at Louvain and sold by the French in 1798 is the one presented to St. Chad’s Cathedral in 1841, transferred to Oscott in 1855, and bought last year by The Metropolitan Museum of Art for The Cloisters.
Technologically, the eagle lectern is one of the most monumental cast-brass pieces from about 1500 still in existence. In form, type, and technique it is similar to the lecterns in the parish churches of Venraai (Figure 9) and Vreren (Figure 10). All three are probably products of the same Mosan workshop, and possibly by the metalcasters Aert van Tricht the Elder and Aert van Tricht the Younger of Maastricht.

The lectern was assembled from many separately cast parts. The hexagonal base is supported by lions couchants. The central prism-shaped core is surrounded by statues of Christ the Saviour, St. Peter, and St. Barbara, each beneath a baldaquin surmounted by the figure of a seated prophet. Three knotty branches spring from the core, two ending in candle holders and the central one supporting statues of the Virgin and Child and a kneeling Wise Man. The other Wise Men are borne by two of three vertical columns that rise from the base (the statuette of a lion that once surmounted the third column, shown in a nineteenth-century drawing, is lost). Three small lions, which probably held armorial shields, ring the top of the core, and from this rises, in the pride of his beauty, the magnificent eagle with spread wings, holding in his claws a dragon symbolizing evil. The eagle’s wings support a big bookrack, with a smaller rack, possibly for the use of the choirboys, below.

Some scholars believe that the parts were cast by the lost-wax technique, in which a clay mold is made of a wax model, the clay heated so the wax melts and runs out through a hole, and the metal then poured into the seamless mold. Other specialists think that the sand piece-mold process was used, in which the mold is made of sand mixed with clay, and is composed of several sections. Personally, I think both techniques were used. Further technical research and studies of contemporary records could lead to a solution of this problem in the near future.

In all probability the lectern was repaired and some additions were made during Pugin's time. Differences in style, technique, color, and weight indicate that the statues of St. Barbara (Figure 4) and the Wise Man kneeling before the Virgin were made in the nineteenth century. During the 1930s the lectern was painted black and gilded, in which condition it was found in a coal shed at Oscott in 1961. When the overpaint was removed in the conservation department of the Municipal Museum at Louvain, in preparation for the exhibition Ars Sacra Antiqua, we found that under the black and gilt layers was another, of blue and red laid on a ground made of white lead and chalk. After all this paint was taken off, the brass was polished with fire clay mixed with pumice and chalk. Thus the great eagle lectern regained its original splendor.

Translated from the Flemish by F. Lenaerts

REFERENCES

E. van Even, Monographie de l’Eglise de Saint Pierre à Louvain (Louvain, 1858) gives the history of the church of St. Peter's. He mentions seeing the eagle lectern at Oscott on p. 35.

Flanders in the Fifteenth Century: Art and Civilization (Detroit, 1960), exhibition catalogue, pp. 267-271, refers to the paschal candlestick by Renier I van Thienen.
9. Eagle lectern. Possibly to be attributed to the van Trichts. Mosan, about 1500. Brass, height 6 feet 7½ inches. Church of St. Peter Banden, Venraai

10. Eagle lectern. Possibly to be attributed to the van Trichts. Mosan, about 1500. Brass, height 6 feet 1½ inches. Parish church, Vreren

C. Piot, Rapport à Monsieur le Ministre de l'Intérieur sur les travaux sur les tableaux enlevés à la Belgique en 1794 et restitués en 1815 (Brussels, 1883), pp. 4-5, gives the fact that paintings by Massys and de Crayer were taken from St. Peter's to Paris in 1794.

J. A. Torfs, Geschiedenis van Leuven (Louvain, 1899), p. 379, says that the Louvain churches were reopened in 1800 with some of their original objects back in place.


Ars Sacra Antiqua (Louvain, 1962), exhibition catalogue, gives more information about the pulpit from St. Gertrude's (pp. 185-186, Eng. 25), the silver-gilt monstrance (p. 192, Eng. 34), the copper statue of the Madonna (p. 188, Eng. 39), and the Virgin in Glory (pp. 188-189, Eng. 31).

P. V. Bets, Zoutleeuw, beschrijving, geschiedenis, instellingen II (Tirlemont, 1888), p. 140, suggests that the chandelier from St. Leonard's at Leau was among the copperwork sold to the English in 1827.


V. Demunter, Catalogue du Musée Communal Van der Kelen-Mertens (Louvain, 1927), p. 14, no. 18, mentions the painting by de Smet.

During the Ars Sacra Antiqua exhibition in 1962 Professor J. K. Steppe made the comparison of the three lecterns that points toward their attribution to the van Trichts.