

## Treasure Hunting

TREASURE HUNTING IS A fascinating pursuit. It is well worth making a journey, organizing it properly, and following a route that takes in the more interesting treasuries, searching them out also in lesser-known abbeys. There may no longer be any point going to Saint-Denis, on the outskirts of Paris, where in the twelfth century the great Abbot Suger, an avid collector of jewelry, pearls, ivory, gold candelabra, and figured altarpieces, had turned his collection of precious objects into a kind of religion and mystical philosophy. Sadly, the collection of reliquaries and sacred vessels, the robes worn by kings at their coronations, the funeral crowns of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, and the panel of the adoration of the shepherds presented by the Sun King have all gone, though some of the finest pieces are still to be found in the Louvre.

A visit to Saint Vitus's Cathedral in Prague, however, should not be missed—here are the skulls of Saint Adalbert and Saint Wenceslas, the sword of Saint Stephen, a fragment of the Cross, the tablecloth from the Last Supper, a tooth of Saint Margaret, a fragment of the tibia of Saint Vitalis, a rib of Saint Sophia, the chin of Saint Eoban, Moses' staff, and Our Lady's robe. Saint Joseph's engagement ring was listed in the catalog of the fabulous but now dispersed treasury of the duc de Berry, but it is apparently at Notre-Dame in Paris. And on display in the Imperial Treasury in Vienna are a piece of the manger from Bethlehem, Saint Stephen's purse, the lance that struck Jesus' flank, a nail from the Cross, Charlemagne's sword, one of Saint John the Baptist's teeth, a bone from the arm of Saint Ann, the apostles' chains, a piece of Saint John the Evangelist's clothing, and another fragment of the tablecloth from the Last Supper.

But however interested we might be in treasures, those closest to home are the ones we are least likely to know. I reckon, for example, that few people who live in Milan, not to mention tourists, have ever visited the treasury at Milan Cathedral. There you can admire the cover of the Book of the Gospels belonging to Archbishop Aribert (eleventh century), with beautiful cloisonné enamel plaques and gold filigree, inset with precious stones.

Searching out precious stones and their various qualities is one of the favorite pursuits of enthusiasts—it is not just a matter of looking for diamonds, rubies, or emeralds, but also for those so often mentioned in the holy scriptures, such as opal, chrysoprase, beryl, agate, jasper, or sardonyx. If you're clever, you will be able to distinguish between real and false stones. There is a large silver baroque statue of Saint Charles Borromeo in the Milan Cathedral Treasury whose whole breastplate and cross are covered with glistening gems, since those who had commissioned it regarded silver as a poor material. And some, according to the catalog, are real while others are just colored crystal. But leaving aside mercantile considerations, we have to admire above all what the makers of these objects wanted to achieve: an overall effect of amazing richness—not least because most of the precious materials are genuine, and the shop window of the finest Paris jeweler, in comparison to any treasury side-cabinet, is worth little more than a stall in a flea market.

I suggest you then have a look at the larynx of Saint Charles Borromeo, but take a closer look at the Pax of Pope Pius IV, a small shrine with two gold and lapis lazuli columns that frame in gold the Deposition in the Holy Sepulcher. Above it is a golden cross with thirteen diamonds on a disc of banded onyx, while the small pediment is decorated with gold, agate, lapis lazuli, and rubies.

Going back further in time, to the period of Saint Ambrose, there is an embossed

silver chest for relics of the apostles, with magnificent bas-reliefs. But the most interesting bas-reliefs are those of the fifth-century Five-Part Diptych, an ivory Ravenna-style series of scenes from the life of Christ; at the center is the Mystical Lamb of God in gilded silver with molded glass, a single image in pale colors on a background of ancient ivory.

They are examples of what historical tradition has wrongly accustomed us to describe as lesser arts. They are quite clearly "art," without the adjective, and if there is anything "lesser" (meaning worth less artistically) it is the cathedral itself. If there was a flood, and I was asked whether to save Milan Cathedral or the Five-Part Diptych, I would certainly choose the latter, and not because it would be easier to fit inside the ark.

Nonetheless, even considering the crypt (known as the Scurolo) for Saint Charles Borromeo, with the body of the saint in a container of silver and crystal that seems to me more miraculous than its contents, the Cathedral Treasury does not display all that it might. Reading through the Inventory of the Vestments and Sacred Furnishings of Milan Cathedral, we realize that the treasury itself is only a tiny part of a collection spread around the various sacristies, which includes splendid vestments, vessels, ivories, sumptuous gold objects, and reliquaries, including several thorns from Christ's Crown, a piece of the Cross, and various fragments of Saint Agnes, Saint Agatha, Saint Catherine, Saint Praxedes, and Saints Simplician, Caius, and Gerontius.

On visiting a treasury, we should not approach the reliquaries with a scientific mind; otherwise there's a risk of losing faith—in the twelfth century, for example, according to legend, the skull of Saint John the Baptist at the age of twelve was kept in a German cathedral. Once, in a monastery on Mount Athos, talking to a monk-librarian, I discovered he had been a student of Roland Barthes in Paris and had taken part in the demonstrations of 1968—and therefore, knowing him to be a man of culture, I asked whether he believed in the authenticity of the holy relics he kissed devotedly, each morning at dawn, during a magnificent and interminable religious ceremony. He smiled kindly, with a certain malicious complicity, and said that the problem was not one of authenticity but of faith, and that when he kissed the relics he sensed their mystic aroma. In short, it is not the relic that makes faith, but faith that makes the relic.

But not even a nonbeliever can remain immune to the fascination of two phenomena. First of all, the objects themselves, these anonymous yellowing pieces of cartilage, mystically repugnant, pathetic, and mysterious, these scraps of clothing from who knows what period, faded, discolored, frayed, sometimes enclosed in a vial like a mysterious manuscript in a bottle, materials that have often disintegrated, that have become one with the cloth and the metal or bone on which they lie. And secondly, the containers, often incredibly ornate, sometimes made by a devout bricoleur from pieces of other reliquaries, in the form of a tower or a small cathedral with pinnacles and domes, and then those baroque reliquaries (the finest are in Vienna), a forest of tiny sculptures, looking like clocks, carillons, or magic boxes. Some of them will remind contemporary art enthusiasts of Joseph Cornell's surrealist boxes and Arman's vitrines filled with ordered objects—secular reliquaries that show, however, the same taste for worn, dusty materials, for manic accumulation—and they require a detailed, analytical study that cannot be done in a simple glance.

Treasure hunting also means knowing not only about the tastes of early medieval patrons but also about Renaissance and baroque collectors, up to the Wunderkammern of the German princes: no clear distinction was made between a devotional object, a curiosity, and a work of art. An ivory high relief was precious for its workmanship (today we would say for its artistry) as well as for the value of its material. And a curiosity was recognized, at the same time, as precious, amusing, and marvelous,

so that in the duc de Berry's collection, alongside chalices and vessels of great artistic worth, there were also a stuffed elephant, a basilisk, an egg that a priest had found inside another egg, some manna from the desert, a coconut, and the horn of a unicorn.

All lost? No. The horn of a unicorn is to be found in the Imperial Treasury in Vienna, providing proof that unicorns existed, even though the catalog states with positivistic ruthlessness that it is the horn of a narwhal.

But at this point, the visitor, having entered into the spirit of the keen devotee of treasuries, will study with the same interest a horn; a fourth-century agate cup said to be the cup of the Grail; the imperial crown, orb, and scepter (splendors of medieval jewelry); and also—since the Treasury of Vienna has no bounds of time—the imperial four-poster bed in which slept the unfortunate son of Napoleon, the king of Rome, known as the Eaglet (who at this point becomes as legendary as the unicorn and the Grail).

We have to forget what we have read in the art history books, to lose our sense of the difference between curio and masterpiece, to enjoy above all the mass of wonders, the procession of marvels, the epiphany of the incredible. And to dream about the head of Saint John the Baptist at the age of twelve, imagining its reddish veins on an ashen background, the arabesque of crumbling, corroded joints, and the reliquary that has to contain it, of blue enamel like the altar of Verdun and the cushion under it of yellowed satin, covered with withered roses in a glass cabinet, airless for two thousand years, immobilized in a vacuum, before the Baptist could grow up and the executioner was able to chop off his other head. That other, more mature head has a lesser mystical and commercial value since, though it is supposed to be conserved in the Church of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome, an older tradition claims it to be in the cathedral at Amiens and, in any event, the head in Rome has no jaw, which is said to be in the Church of San Lorenzo in Viterbo.

All we have to do is take a map and plot a few possible routes. For example, the True Cross, discovered in Jerusalem by Saint Helena, mother of Constantine, was seized by the Persians in the seventh century and then retrieved by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius. It was carried by the Crusaders in 1187 onto the battlefield at Hattin to ensure their victory over Saladin; but the battle, as we know, ended in their defeat and all trace of the Cross was lost forever. Numerous fragments, however, had been taken over previous centuries and are still conserved in many churches.

The three nails (two for the hands and one for the feet, nailed together) were found still attached to the Cross and were said to have been brought by Helena to her son Constantine. According to legend, one of them was mounted on his battle helmet and another was made into a bit for his horse. The third nail, according to tradition, is to be found in the Church of the Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, in Rome. The Sacred Bit, on the other hand, is in Milan Cathedral, where it is shown to the faithful twice a year. There is no trace of the nail on the helmet—one tradition suggests it is to be found today in the Iron Crown, conserved in Monza Cathedral.

The Crown of Thorns, long kept in Constantinople, was then passed on to King Louis IX of France, who put it in the Sainte-Chapelle, specially built by him in Paris for this purpose. It originally had ten thorns, but over the course of the centuries they were given to churches, sanctuaries, and important people, and all that remains today is the branches woven into the shape of a helmet.

The pillar of the flagellation is in Santa Prassede in Rome; the Sacred Lance belonged to Charlemagne and his descendants, and is now in Vienna; Christ's foreskin was kept and displayed each New Year's Day at Calcata, a small town near

Viterbo, until the 1970s, when the priest announced it had been stolen. But Rome, Santiago de Compostela, Chartres, Besançon, Metz, Hildesheim, Charroux, Conques, Langres, Antwerp, Fécamp, and Puy-en-Velay in the Auvergne have all made claims to possess a similar relic.

The blood that poured from Christ's side was, according to tradition, collected by Longinus, the soldier who had pierced him with the lance: he is said to have taken it to Mantua; the ampoule supposed to contain the blood is kept in the city's cathedral. Other blood attributed to Jesus is kept in a cylindrical reliquary that can be seen in the Basilica of the Holy Blood (Heilig-Bloedbasiliek) at Bruges in Belgium.

The Sacred Crib is at Santa Maria Maggiore (Rome), the Sacred Shroud in Turin, the linen napkin used by Christ to wash the feet of the apostles at the Church of Saint John Lateran in Rome, but also at Acqs in Germany—indeed, the latter napkin is said to bear the footprint of Judas.

The swaddling clothes of the infant Jesus are at Aachen; the house of Mary, where the Annunciation took place, was transported through the air by angels from Nazareth to Loreto; many churches hold what is claimed to be the hair of Mary (one hair, for example, is at Messina) or her milk; the sacred girdle of Our Lady is at Prato; Saint Joseph's wedding ring is at Perugia Cathedral; the engagement rings of Joseph and Mary are at Notre-Dame in Paris; Saint Joseph's belt (brought to France by Joinville in 1254) is in the Church of the Feuillants in Paris, and his staff at the Camaldolese church in Florence. There are also fragments of this staff in the churches of Santa Cecilia in Rome, Sant'Anastasia in Rome, and San Domenico and San Giuseppe del Mercato in Bologna. There are fragments of the tomb of Saint Joseph at Santa Maria al Portico and Santa Maria in Campitelli in Rome.

Fragments of the Holy Veil of Our Lady and the cloak of Saint Joseph are to be found at Santa Maria di Licodia, in Sicily, conserved in an artful silver reliquary, made in the seventeenth century. Until the 1970s, this reliquary was carried in procession on the last Saturday of August to mark the festival of the patron saint.

The body of Saint Peter was buried in Rome near where he was martyred, at the Circus of Nero: a basilica was built on the site during the reign of Constantine, and later, the present Saint Peter's Basilica. In 1964, after archaeological excavations, it was announced that the apostle's bones had been found, and today they are beneath the altar.

According to legend, the body of Saint James, son of Zebedee, was transported by the currents to the Atlantic coast of Spain and buried in a place called Campus Stellae. The Sanctuary of Santiago de Compostela stands there today, one of the major pilgrimage destinations, along with Rome and Jerusalem, since the Middle Ages.

The body of Saint Thomas the Apostle is in the Cathedral of Ortona (Chieti), taken there in 1258 from Chios, an island in the Aegean Sea, where it had been brought to safety by Christians after the fall of Edessa in 1146. It had been taken to Edessa by order of the Emperor Alexander Severus in around 230 C.E., from Madras, where Thomas had been martyred in 72 C.E..

One of the thirty pieces of silver for which Judas Iscariot betrayed Christ is in the sacristy of the Collegiate Church at Visso. A body of Saint Bartholomew the Apostle is in Rome (brought to Isola Tiberina by Pius IV); another is at the Church of San Bartolomeo in Benevento. In any event, both bodies ought to be without their skullcaps, since one is conserved in Frankfurt Cathedral and the other at the Monastery of Lüne (Lüneberg). It is not known which body the third skullcap comes from, which is now at the Charterhouse in Cologne. An arm, once again belonging to

Saint Bartholomew, is in Canterbury Cathedral, though Pisa boasts possession of a piece of his skin.

The body of Saint Luke the Evangelist is kept in the Church of Santa Giustina in Padua; that of Saint Mark, originally kept at Antioch, was taken to Venice. What were said to be the remains of the Magi were conserved in Milan in ancient times. They were seized by Frederick Barbarossa in the twelfth century as spoils of war and taken to Cologne, where they remain. Some relics were returned to Milan in the 1950s and are now in the Church of Sant'Eustorgio.

The remains of Saint Nicholas of Bari, otherwise known as Santa Claus, were at Myra, in Asia Minor, until 1087, when they were smuggled away by seamen from Bari and transported to their city.

The body of Saint Ambrose, patron saint of Milan, is buried in the crypt of the basilica dedicated to him, together with the bodies of Saints Gervase and Protase. In the Basilica of Saint Antony of Padua are the saint's tongue and fingers; the hand of Saint Stephen of Hungary is kept in the basilica at Budapest; two ampoules of the blood of Saint Januarius are in Naples; part of the body of Saint Judith is in Nevers Cathedral, while a fragment of bone is kept in a magnificent rock crystal reliquary in the crypt of the Medici Chapel at San Lorenzo in Florence.

At Misterbianco, in Sicily, the arm of Saint Anthony the Great is displayed every January 17; that of Saint Benedict of Norcia was donated to the monastery of Leno, near Brescia, in the eighth century at the behest of King Desiderius.

The body of Saint Agatha at Catania was divided up, and the goldsmiths of Limoges made reliquaries for the limbs—one for each thigh, one for each arm, and one for each lower leg. One was made in 1628 for her breast. But the ulna and radius of her forearm are at Palermo, in the Royal Chapel. One of Saint Agatha's arm bones is at Messina, in the Monastery of the Santissimo Salvatore, another at Ali, just outside Messina; one of her fingers is at Sant'Agata dei Goti (Benevento); the body of Saint Peter of Verona is in the Portinari Chapel at Sant'Eustorgio, in Milan (devotees bang their heads against his sarcophagus on April 29 to ward off headaches).

The remains of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus are at Saint Peter's in Rome, but a portion was donated by Pope John Paul II to the patriarch of Constantinople in 2004. Relics of Saint Lucidus are at Aquara, near Salerno: they were stolen several times and the head was eventually found by police in a private house in 1999. Relics associated with Saint Pantaleon (the sword that cut off the saint's head, the wheel on which he was tortured, the torch used to burn his flesh, the trunk of an olive tree that sprouted on contact with his body) are to be found in the church named after him at Lanciano, in the Abruzzo.

A rib of Saint Catherine is at Astenet in Belgium; one of her feet is in the Church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice. A finger and her head (detached from her body in 1381 by order of Pope Urban VI) are in the Basilica of San Domenico in Siena.

A piece of Saint Blaise's tongue is at Carosino, near Taranto, an arm in the cathedral at Ruvo di Puglia, and his skull at Dubrovnik. We can find a tooth of Saint Apollonius in Porto Cathedral, the body of Saint Judas Cyriacus in Ancona Cathedral, the heart of Saint Alfius at Lentini in Sicily, the body of Saint Roch in the high altar of the Church of the Scuola Grande in Venice, part of the shoulder bone and another bone fragment at Scilla, part of an arm bone in the Church of San Rocco at Voghera, near Pavia, another piece of arm bone at the church of the same name in Rome, a tibia and other small parts of the massa corporis and what is said to have been his staff in his sanctuary at Montpellier, a phalanx bone in the parish church of Cisterna di Latina, part of his heel in Frigento Cathedral,

and several bone fragments in the Basilica Mauriziana and the Church of the Confraternita di San Rocco in Turin.

Relics were venerated in Constantinople but dispersed after the Fourth Crusade, such as Our Lady's mantle (the Maphorion), Christ's sandals, the cloak of Saint John the Baptist, an ampoule of Christ's blood used to sign certain solemn documents, the parapet of the well where Christ met the Samaritan woman, the stone on which Christ's body was laid after his death, Solomon's throne, Moses' rod, the remains of the innocents slaughtered by Herod, a piece of dung dropped by the donkey on which Jesus entered Jerusalem, the icon of the Hodegetria (an image of Mary and child said to have been painted by Saint Luke), other icons considered miraculous since they were not painted by human hand (acheiropoieta), and the Mandylion, the cloth imprinted with the face of Christ (originally at Edessa, where it was famed for making the city impregnable when displayed on its walls).

I wouldn't wish to give the impression that the conservation of relics is exclusively a Christian, or indeed Catholic, practice. Pliny tells us about the treasured relics of the Greco-Roman world, such as Orpheus's lyre, Helen's sandal, or the bones of the monster that attacked Andromeda. And by the classical period, the presence of a relic already provided a point of attraction for a city or for a temple, and was therefore a valuable tourist "commodity" as well as a sacred object.

The cult of the relic is to be found in every religion and culture. It depends, on the one hand, upon a sort of impulse that I would describe as mytho-materialistic—so that by touching parts of the body of great men or saints we are able to experience something of their power—and, on the other hand, upon a normal antiquarian taste for the past (so that a collector is prepared to spend money to have not just the first edition of a famous book, but also the book that belonged to an important person).

In this second sense (though perhaps in the first too) there is also a secular cult of the relic—all we have to do is read Christie's auction catalogs to see how a pair of shoes belonging to a famous diva is being offered at prices higher than that of a picture by a Renaissance painter. These kinds of memorabilia can be the actual gloves of Jacqueline Kennedy or those simply worn by Rita Hayworth for the filming of *Gilda*. In that respect, I have seen tourists in Nashville, Tennessee, going to admire Elvis Presley's Cadillac—which by the way wasn't the only one, since he changed them every six months.

The most famous relic of all times is, of course, the Holy Grail, but I wouldn't advise anyone to set out in search of that (or those) since past experiences haven't been too encouraging—in any event, it has been scientifically proven that two thousand years aren't long enough.

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The end