PINACOTECA COMUNALE
CASTIGLION FIORENTINO

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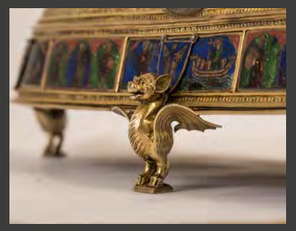
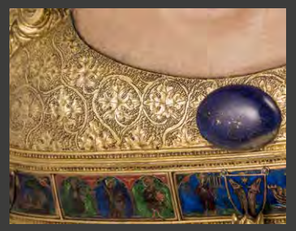
SISTEMA MUSEALE
CASTIGLIONESE

BUSTO DI SANT'ORSOLA
CROCE SANTA





BUSTO DI SANT'ORSOLA

It is not known how the reliquary bust of St. Ursula arrived in Castiglion Fiorentino: however, it is ascertained that the work stayed at the Benedictine monastery of Santucce and at the Santa Chiara complex afterwards; since 1921, the bust is preserved in the local art museum. Its dating and origin have been long debated: originally attributed to a French artist from the second half of XV century, it was later backdated several times, until the third decade of the XIV century, and attributed to High Rhine production, as generally accepted today. The bust is in silver lamina, mercury-gilt, with melted parts; the face and neck of the Saint were painted in mixed technique, by directly applying the paint on the underlying silver lamina, using an uncommon technique which makes this work particularly rare and precious. Over the head is a silver-gilt lily crown, stones, coloured glass and enamels. The quality of the translucent and opaque enamels, representing several saints along the base and always attributed to Parisian production, is exceptional.

According to Jacobus de Varagine's Golden Legend, an exceptionally beautiful young woman, Ursula, daughter of the King of Brittany, was asked for marriage by the pagan son of the king of England. Ursula, who had secretly dedicated herself to God, asked to postpone the decision by 3 years, in order to understand better the will of God and in the hope that the future groom would convert to Christianity. For this reason, she asked her father the permission to undertake a pilgrimage to Rome with her future groom, who would have been baptised. 'The request was

accepted and the two betrothed, with Other 11,000 virgins, left for Rome, where they were received by the Pope Cyriacus. An angel appeared to the princess in a dream, announcing her martyrdom. During the return journey, joined by the Pope as well, all the virgins were exterminated by the Huns in Cologne, held by them in siege. Only Ursula was spared and asked for marriage by Attila, captivated by her beauty. After her refusal, Ursula was Shot by arrows.

The legend of St Ursula and the 11,000 virgins, handed down for centuries, was extremely popular in the Middle Age and inspired many literary creations and works of art. The origin of this legend comes from the historical finding of relics in a church in Cologne, together with an ancient inscription. This inscription declared that Clematius wanted to build a sacred building where some virgins were killed because of their faith, this martyrdom supposedly happened under Diocletian. The inscription bears some of the names of these martyrs, among them Ursula.

In art, Ursula is reproduced in several moments of her life: her dream, the meeting with Pope Cyriacus, the journey, the martyrdom. She is represented as a princess, in royal clothes, in general wearing the crown: Her attributes are the palm of martyrdom, the arrow that killed her, a white emblem with a red cross, symbolising victory over death by means of martyrdom, and a boat.

CROCE SANTA

The reliquary cross of Castiglion Fiorentino, commonly known as Holy Cross, is an exceptionally valuable work, with a richly decorated polylobed profile with spoked edges. The silver-gilt surface, carved on both sides, is covered with precious silver-gilt filigrees, which support big gemstones of several colors (unfortunately, some of them went lost), protruding inside high conic settings, whose profile is adorned with smaller settings with stones.

On the front, at the centre of the intersection of the arms, is a small stauroteca, in pierced and engraved gold, which contains the relic of the Sacred Wood. It is surrounded by four small medallions. Another precious relic, a Thorn of the Crown of Christ, is instead preserved in the lower part of the long arm, in a small quatrefoil case, surrounded by sixteen small settings with stones.

On the back, at the centre of the intersection of the four arms, on a high setting is a large blue-green stone, the central part of a flower whose petals are four plates (one of them went lost) in champlevé enamel.

The edge of the cross is open and adorned only with filigrees, thinner than the filigrees in the front and back sides, Silver wires join the filigrees with several small and irregularly shaped pearls. The Holy Cross, which comes from the church of S. Francesco, is inserted in a copper-gilt base, almost certainly built afterwards. The small top cross is also a later addition.

The relics were donated to Fra Mansueto by Saint Louis IX, King of France, in 1258. Fra Mansueto was a Franciscan monk from Castiglion Fiorentino, and the relics were a gift for his important diplomatic efforts as Pope Alexander IV apostolic legate for his critical role in the dispute between France and England, ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1259. This gift was accompanied by a letter from the Kings dated Compiègne, 24th August 1258, preserved, at least until the XVIII century, in the church of S. Francesco in Castiglion Fiorentino.

Currently, this letter is lost; however, a XVI century wood reliquary that certainly contained the letter has recently been found: it still preserves the precious wax seal of Louis IX. Despite the loss, we have some handwritten copies that are believed to transcribe the original letter.

It is recognised that the Holy Cross of Castiglion Fiorentino is currently subject of a dispute among scholars: some of them attribute it to Sienese artists, Other to French production.

Although perfectly incorporated in the reliquary, it is clear that the small stauroteca which contains the Holy Wood is unrelated to the Other parts of the work, because of its technique, material and language. The interpretation of this small golden cross is however quite complicated: first of all, it is rather illogical that the vertical arm shows decorative patterns and a surface treatment quite different from the horizontal arm. Moreover, the vertical arms feature prominently a lily, maybe originally repeated on the two lateral arms, slightly shorter.

The central part also contains another small patee cross which, at the end of each arm, bears a tiny fleur-de-lis of France. However, its structure cannot be associated to French or Sienese production; its formal and technical language appear to come from the Constantinopolitan provinces.

The Eastern origin of the stauroteca is also confirmed by two small cavities on the upper lateral parts, as if originally worn on the neck as an engolpion. Therefore, it is plausible that the stauroteca was an engolpion containing the Holy Cross relic, built in the Holy Land for Louis IX, King of France.