



## ST. AGATHA of SICILY

Attributed to a Master of the Fercolo di St. Agatha panels  
Sicily (Catania or Messina), Italy; ca. 1638  
Copper; 202.2 x 147 mm

### *Provenance:*

Private collection (Piasa auction, 17 Dec 2015, Lot 96)

Contemporary cast. Gilt obverse. The relief's finishing features a generous amount of chasing and punching. An uneven ground, possibly hammered for effect or due to wear over time. Minor losses to the gilding. MSSO DEPL chased onto the relief, being a reduction of the lengthier inscription on the reliquary bust it reproduces: MENTEM SANTAM SPONTANEAM HONOREM DEO ET PATRIAE LIBERATIONEM (A holy and spontaneous spirit, lover of God and the liberator of the Fatherland).

This finely finished plaque of extraordinarily high relief depicts the 14th century reliquary bust of St. Agatha located at Catania Cathedral in Sicily (Fig. 01). The reliquary, commissioned by a Benedictine monk in 1373 and executed by the Sienese goldsmith, Giovanni di Bartolo, is believed to preserve the head, ribs and several organs belonging to the venerated saint.

The present relief, a rare subject for this medium, was probably commissioned by a prominent member of Agatha's cult or for a clergyman of the Catania Cathedral. St. Agatha is one of the earliest documented and venerated Virgin martyrs of Christendom. In common with most early saints, her story is one of steadfast faith in the face of torture, death and the miraculous.

The present relief exemplifies the craftsmanship of a qualified goldsmith. The remarkably high relief, incuse on its reverse to maintain thin walls for the bronze to be cast without error is noteworthy as is the lavish gilding and extravagant afterwork rendered through carefully chased contours and elaborate punching for the drapery.

The artist has liberally depicted the bust of Agatha, rendering her visage in simplified form. She lacks

the angels which flank her on the reliquary and various other adornments. Agatha's proper right arm is extended further across her body while her drapery is the artist's own invention. At the time of the present relief's conception the reliquary's garments were rendered invisible, being riddled with an incredible quantity of precious jewels including what tradition presumes to be the crown of King Richard I of England (1157-99). That the drapery is the artist's own invention is confirmed by comparison with the original reliquary, stripped of its decorations in the 1960s for restoration and portraying a simplified Gothic manner. The drapery of the present relief instead appears to draw its influence from a group of saints, in the round, featured in a series of niches along the sides of a silver treasure chest also in the cathedral. The chest was made ca. 1470-1556 for the purpose of housing a group of additional relics belonging to the saint. The chest was commissioned to replace an older wooden one, formerly housing the relics, and brought to Catania in 1126 from Constantinople by the Bishop Maurizio. The replacement chest was executed by various regional silversmiths including Angelo Novara of Catania, Filippo de Mauro, Nicolò Lattari, Paolo Guarna, Vinzezo Archifel and his son Antonio, the latter of whom were responsible for the stepped base, made ca. 1519, now supporting





Fig. 01: Reliquary bust of St. Agatha by Giovanni di Bartolo, ca. 1373 (Catania Cathedral, Sicily)

Agatha's reliquary bust and also shown reproduced in the present relief. The seated, forward facing postures and Gothic iconographic disposition of the saints featured on the silver treasury chest compare with the present relief with their heavy, loosely folded draperies and widely-trimmed collars. It is sensible the maker of the present relief would refer to these statuettes with the intent of preparing an object readily familiar to the patrons of the cathedral and their intimacy with the objects comprising its treasury.

Of specific interest to the present relief are a series of silver panels depicting the life of St. Agatha forming a plinth beneath a processional carriage also created in the same period as the replacement chest for the treasury and likewise executed by a compilation of regional silversmiths over an extended period of time. The carriage is originally the invention of Vincenzo Archifel, ca. 1514-19, but has been subject to frequent embellishments during its history and especially after suffering severe damage during WWII.

According to records, in 1638 the original silver panels for the plinth of the processional carriage were commissioned by the Catania Senate. While



Fig. 02: *The Torture of St. Agatha's Limbs*, by a Master of the silver Fercolo di St. Agatha panels, ca. 1638 (Museo Diocesano, Catania)

some of the panels are damaged or were lost, one surviving example depicting *The Torture of St. Agatha's Limbs* (Fig. 02) shares stylistic correspondences with the present relief. The rendering of Agatha's hair which flows in a flame-like manner and the modeling of Agatha's face depicted with full cheeks, a similar nose and browline as well as likewise rendered elastic fingers collectively relate. The large eyes with their wide pupils featured on the characters of the processional carriage panel also recall the signature manner of the present relief. Its large size and use of a dense hammered treatment for the drapery of several characters on the processional carriage panel also generically relate to the present relief. The style of the panel exhibits a possible Spanish influence which leads the present author to speculate if its Sicilian maker was from Spain or was perhaps trained there.

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