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SAINT THOMAS BECKET IN SAN FRANCISCO

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Many works of art created during the medieval period still remain today in their original locations. These site-specific, non-traveling examples include works of architecture, such as the great abbeys and cathedrals with their attached sculptural programs and stained glass windows. Although later alterations and renovations may have changed these works from their original appearances, and some bits may have removed and sent away on various journeys, these works are still best studied *in situ*. In order to study these works, one needs to travel to view them in their permanent locations.

Other works of medieval art, especially but not exclusively those of a smaller-scale and portable nature, traveled widely beyond their original contexts even during the medieval period. Whether borrowed, bought, stolen, gifted, or passed down as family heirlooms, many medieval objects changed hands and locations during the Middle Ages, even if they were not originally designed to do so. These “accidental travelers” have often ended up at destinations far from their origins.

Some works of medieval art were, however, specifically “designed to travel.” They were never intended to remain in the location where they were originally created, nor did they travel from their creation site via any unexpected or nefarious means. These works represent a distinctive category of medieval art production – they were destined to travel beyond their creation site – to be acquired by travelers, and to travel with them.

This is the case with the many examples of the small-scale enamel reliquary “caskets” (or châsses) for the relics of the English martyr, Saint Thomas Becket (1118-1170), that were notably created in the Limoges workshops of France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This paper specifically concentrates on one very fine example of a Becket reliquary châsse that can be viewed today by visitors to San Francisco, California. Dated to 1200-1210, it is housed in the collections of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and displayed at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor museum.¹

Akin to many of the other extant examples of Limoges reliquaries created for Saint Thomas Becket, the Becket reliquary in San Francisco is small scale. (See figure 1) It measures 6.5 inches in height, 5.5 inches in length, and is 2.5 inches in depth. It is a small house-shaped box on blocky legs, with a pierced work decorative projection on the ridge line of the roof. It is enriched with pictorial narrative scenes on one horizontal side as well as on one slanting roof side. The narrative scenes show a nimbed figure standing before a draped altar clasping his hands in prayer. He is turned away from the altar and faces in the direction of two other figures that approach from the left. One of the approaching figures wields a sword and attacks the person standing before the altar by placing the sword into his neck. The other approaching figure wields an ax. The slanting roof of the reliquary shows a burial scene. A body is being laid to rest in a casket, supported on a cloth held by two figures and presided over by a figure holding a crozier and making a gesture of blessing. The back side of the châsse is enriched with geometric patterns of lozenges and triangles. The sides depict solo standing figures and circular/rosette patterned motifs.



Figure 1 Chalice with the Martyrdom and Entombment of St Thomas à Becket. Use with permission from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

The story of the brutal attack on and murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, is one of the most dramatic and well-known historical episodes of the Middle Ages. Described in contemporary sources, copiously recounted and dramatically reinterpreted in later works of art and literature, including twentieth century film, Becket's murder in the cathedral of Canterbury has gripped popular and scholarly attention through many centuries.² After Thomas Becket was appointed in 1162 by the English king Henry II to his position as the Archbishop of Canterbury, the two former friends and allies experienced repeated and complex disagreements over issues of royal and ecclesiastical authority. Sources recount that King Henry's angry desire to "be rid of

that turbulent priest”³ ultimately resulted in the murder of Becket by four of Henry’s followers who attacked and killed the archbishop in the cathedral at Canterbury in 1170. The news of this spread rapidly and was absolutely shocking for the Christian world. Becket was formally declared a saintly martyr via his canonization in 1173, and King Henry II performed public penance to atone for his role in the murderous deed in 1174.

The detailed analysis of source documents, the socio-political aspects as well as the historical and religious implications of these events, have continued to provide much painstaking study for scholars of medieval history and religion, economics and politics, the visual arts, liturgy and music.⁴ The development of the pictorial iconography for the visual telling and re-telling of the Becket saga has also received important scholarly attention.⁵ The visual sources are copious; illustrations of Becket’s life, martyrdom, and posthumous miracles appear in a wide range of medieval art media, including wall painting, manuscript illumination, sculpture, and metalwork.

Objects of metalwork designed to serve religious or specifically liturgical purposes are an extremely important category of the medieval sacred arts.⁶ From crosiers to chalices – patens, pyxes, and processional crosses, book covers, bells, and boxes for sacred objects – these works are amongst the most bedazzling surviving examples of medieval art. They were often created of rare, costly, and precious materials with supreme care and sophisticated skill.

Enamel work (the fusing, by heat, of powdered glass to a prepared metal ground) is one of the several complex metal-working processes in which medieval artists excelled.⁷ The technique has a very long history and examples of it can be found in ancient Egyptian art. During the medieval period, both western and Byzantine artists

further explored the possibilities of the art form by using either the *champlevé* or the *cloisonné* techniques (respectively, placing colored ground glass into slightly sunken areas or hollows carved out of a metal ground – or placing the enamel into finely built-up thin metal cells – or *cloisons* – that project from the metal background.) Excellently detailed descriptions of medieval enameling techniques can be found in the early twelfth century (ca. 1130) treatise, *De Diversis Artibus (The Various Arts)* authored by Theophilus (who can perhaps be identified as the German Benedictine monk and metalworker, Roger of Helmarshausen.)⁸ Although western medieval artists used both *champlevé* and *cloisonné* enamel working techniques (sometimes in combination), by far the majority of western medieval enamel production during the Romanesque and Gothic periods was done using the *champlevé* technique. This is especially characteristic of the Limoges workshops of France.

The Limoges region of southwestern France became extremely well known during the medieval period for the enamel work produced in several workshops and centers in the area. Although works of enameling were produced in many other regions during the Middle Ages as well, the enamel work of Limoges was especially renowned. The term “Limoges work” (*opus lemovicense*) that appears in some documentary sources as early as the middle of the twelfth century indicates the esteem with which these works were regarded.⁹ Thousands of examples survive and continue to be carefully catalogued and recorded.¹⁰ These works include: enamel crosses, book covers, crosiers, and reliquaries for containing saintly relics.

The practice of collecting, enshrining, displaying, and venerating the relics of holy people (such as actual bodily remains or objects associated with saintly figures) is

by no means unique to Christianity or to the medieval period. Nevertheless, the widespread devotion to saints characterized by medieval Christianity resulted in an enormous outpouring of works of art specifically designed to honor these figures. Much of medieval Christian art is hagiographic in nature, concentrating on the lives, deeds and miracles associated with saintly figures ranging from the early Christian martyrs, local and regional saints, and those ever newly added to the growing list of sanctified and Christ-like exemplars, such as Saint Thomas Becket in the late twelfth century.

The very rapid growth of the cult of Becket after his martyrdom (1170) and canonization (1173) is visually evidenced by the relative swiftness with which artistic representations of his life and martyrdom begin to appear. Various historical accounts of the martyrdom describe not only the brutal murder itself but also the immediate collection and preservation of the archbishop's body as well as the blood and brains that spilled out of his body. Small phials of Becket's blood and cloths soaked with his blood were collected as holy relics, and, shortly following his formal canonization, containers for these relics began to be produced.

One of the very earliest Becket reliquary caskets has been dated to ca. 1173-80 and is located in the Metropolitan Museum of New York. It is a small silver box with a hipped roof, enriched with narrative scenes in niello work.¹¹ The imagery includes the martyrdom, the dead body of the saint supported by two monks, and angelic figures. The work has been attributed to a German (Rhenish) artist working in England or for English patrons.¹² The earliest Limoges enamel reliquary châsses with Becket iconography have been dated just a bit later (1180-1190). These early Limoges examples (in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London) appear to have provided

the basic prototype for the many subsequent Becket reliquaries created in the Limoges workshops for the next several decades.¹³ About fifty Becket reliquaries of Limoges manufacture have been catalogued.¹⁴ Reliquaries for Becket, in fact, represent the largest surviving group of Limoges châsses with hagiographic subject matter, surpassing even those created for Saint Stephen and Saints Valerie (saints particularly associated with or venerated in the Limousin).¹⁵

The overwhelming interest in and apparent demand for Becket reliquaries of Limoges work specifically has been attributed to various political and religious factors.¹⁶ The political union of Aquitaine and England under the Plantagenet rulers, the promotion of Becket's cult by Anglo-French rulers and clerics in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and the esteem with which Limoges enamel work was already held have all been cited as contributing factors to the burgeoning production of Becket châsses at Limoges during the late Romanesque and early Gothic periods.

The many examples of these works produced at Limoges share much the same basic format and iconography. Indeed, the development of succinct and recognizable visual schema encapsulating the most salient and distinctive episodes in a saintly biography is typical of medieval hagiographic art.¹⁷ The earliest dated examples of Becket châsses from the late twelfth century thus depict approximately the same scenes and details often repeated in later versions, including the early thirteenth century Becket reliquary châsse in San Francisco. Among the many surviving examples of Becket reliquaries, the visual iconography remains quite consistent. There are variations, of course, depending on the size on the object and the amount of space allocated for the visual narrative fields. In virtually all Limoges examples, however, the images include

two scenes: 1) the martyrdom of Becket is shown on the lower front side of the reliquary (in which Becket is attacked by assailants), and 2) the scene of his burial (in which Becket is laid in his tomb) is depicted on the upper front side. Traditionally, the short sides of these reliquaries depict single, standing saintly figures. These additional figures are generally assumed to be apostles who obviously serve not as actual historical witnesses to the martyrdom and entombment events specific to the story of Saint Thomas Becket, but rather serve as heavenly witnesses to Becket's recognized position in the saintly realms. The reverse sides of most Becket reliquary chasses, as in the example in San Francisco, do not contain any additional narrative scenes and are traditionally enriched with decorative devices. This is because these reliquaries were designed to be primarily viewed from the front (placed on an altar, for example) and the back side would not generally be visible to viewers.

The relatively consistent appearance of the martyrdom and burial scenes on Becket reliquary chasses represents a visually succinct pair of related images that summarize the most dramatic and concluding details of his life. Much longer and far more detailed visual narratives of the saint's biography eventually appear in other media, such as stained glass windows and manuscript illustration.¹⁸ The visual telling and re-telling of Becket's life and death was also significantly expanded by the growing series of accounts of the many posthumous miracles associated with him, his tomb, and relics. Such expanded pictorial narrative cycles are also typical of much medieval hagiographic art generally. These longer cycles may include episodes really quite unique to the saint in question as well as a number of events (birth, death, entombment, and miracle scenes) fairly commonly found in hagiographic art and literature. The creation of detailed visual

hagiographic narratives (for example, in stained glass or illustrated manuscripts devoted to the life of a single saint – known as *libelli* manuscripts) often offered medieval artists the opportunity to present a whole series of carefully selected episodes in a saintly biography. In other cases, however, the size and function of the art work necessitated an extremely abbreviated visual treatment. For example, illustrated manuscripts devoted to the lives of numerous saints (such as Passionaries or *Vitae Sanctorum* manuscripts) are often enriched with highly condensed imagery. In some cases there was room simply for one small scene per saint, placed within an historiated initial letter or in the margins of the text. These limitations required an exceptionally careful choice of visual subject: a visually recognizable attribute or a scene or two that most succinctly captured some episode of vital importance about the saint. Western Passionary manuscripts (akin to Byzantine Menologia) are arranged according to the calendar of saintly feast (death) dates; thus martyrdom scenes are especially often found in these manuscripts.

In both western and Byzantine medieval hagiographic art, the visual catalogue of grisly demises is extensive. From the earliest Christian martyrs – to the saints who suffered and perished for their faith and convictions in the medieval period – the arts of the Middle Ages are replete with examples of saintly torture and death scenes. These are fundamentally meant to be understood as reflections of the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, the ultimate exemplar for Christians.

Some of the stories about the Christian saintly followers of Jesus as well as some of the images representing them include specific episodes and unique iconographic conventions by which the identity of the individual saint can be readily understood. Many saints are characterized by the inclusion of specific symbols – such as arrows for

Saint Sebastian – or the gridiron on which St. Lawrence suffered – or the wheel on which St. Catherine of Alexandria was tortured. There is a certain unity in the diversity of these representations however, because all Christian saints ultimately emulate Jesus – in spite of any especially unique or otherwise noteworthy facets of their *vitae*.

The literary and visual formulas (or: *topoi*) for describing and depicting hagiographic subjects appear to have been very carefully maintained and perpetuated during the medieval period to the extent that sometimes the visual narratives presented really do not match up with the events as documented in contemporary written sources of the period or even slightly later. This is the case with the visual *topoi* traditionally found on Becket reliquaries.

For example, the majority of Limoges reliquary châsses for Becket depict the saintly martyrdom as taking place before an altar in the cathedral of Canterbury. This gives the impression that Becket was, for example, praying or officiating at Mass when he was attacked. However, the documentary accounts – notably those composed by eye-witnesses to the event – do not support this visual version. Although the murder indeed took place within the north arm of the western transept of the cathedral, near the chapel and altar of Saint Benedict, Thomas was neither saying Mass nor praying at an altar when he was attacked.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the standard iconography for the martyrdom of Becket (on Limoges châsses especially and in many other works of art as well) traditionally shows the martyrdom as taking place directly before an altar. There are some early exceptions to this.²⁰ However, the murder-at-the-altar image appears to have been established very early.²¹ Although historically inaccurate, this iconography importantly serves to reinforce

the outrageous sacrilege of the deed.²² The presence of the altar does more than simply locate the episode as having taken place on the holy ground of a church interior. The altar also serves to connect the brutal murder of Becket to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. This is symbolized not only by the altar itself, but also by the chalice traditionally depicted on top of the altar. This detail is prominent in many Limoges Becket châsses, including the San Francisco example.

In addition, the depiction of the chalice (representing the blood of Jesus) may also serve to make an important connection to the specific relics of Becket's martyrdom for which the majority of Limoges châsses were doubtless created. The bodily remains of Becket were preserved and interred by the monks of Canterbury, translated to a prominent position within the cathedral in 1220, and ultimately destroyed or dispersed in the sixteenth century during the Reformation period. The whereabouts of Becket's body in the medieval period and later eras has provided much fodder for continued speculation.²³ Nevertheless, it appears that Becket's body was not dismembered in order to provide actual body part (or corporeal) relics such as often found in medieval reliquaries that may be specifically shaped to display or resemble the body part in question.²⁴ Thus, the majority of Becket relics that were avidly collected in the medieval period fall into the category of "contact relics" or *brandea*.²⁵ These would be items such as cloths soaked in the martyr's blood, cloths placed in contact with blood-soaked cloths associated with the martyr, or cloths placed near the martyr's tomb to acquire their holiness through physical proximity to the saintly remains. Pilgrims to Becket's shrine at Canterbury in the medieval period could acquire souvenirs, badges, cloth, small phials of Becket's blood, and phials or ampullae containing miraculously-healing water that was

carefully and consistently diluted by the Canterbury monks from water originally containing the martyr's blood.²⁶ However, none of the medieval Becket reliquary châsses contain any relics of Becket today, so it cannot be determined with any certainty what any of them, specifically, originally contained or was intended to contain.

The sacrifice of saintly blood is a consistent theme in medieval art and the representation of a saintly martyrdom taking place before an altar is by no means unique to Becket imagery. The theme appears with some frequency in medieval art; for example, illustrations of the martyrdom of the apostle Matthew (based on apocryphal sources) often depict the saint kneeling before an altar, attacked from behind by a sword-bearing figure.²⁷ Many other examples of this visual theme can be found in medieval art.²⁸ Although the imagery of murder before the altar is consistently associated with Thomas Becket, even within the specific context of Limoges enamel work, secure iconographic identification of saintly subjects is often challenged by a lack of inscriptions on the works themselves. For instance, a Limoges châsse dating ca. 1200 in the treasury of the cathedral of St. Etienne in Sens, while at first appearing to show all the traditional aspects of Becket imagery, includes other details (particular additional figures) that have led scholars to identify this not as a Becket reliquary but as a reliquary for Saint Savinien (the first bishop of Sens in the early Christian period.)²⁹

The sharing and reuse of the same visual schema for different saints is a notable characteristic of medieval hagiographic art in general. A great degree of consistency can also be seen in the repetition of particular visual schema for specific saints. This is especially well demonstrated in the Limoges examples of Becket châsses. Not only are the overall narratives (martyrdom and entombment scenes) remarkably consistent, but the

individual figures within these scenes similarly represent a degree of conformity to several specific types.

There are a number of figural variations often repeated in the Limoges examples. For instance, the representation of Becket's assailants (sword or ax-bearing figures) generally adheres to a somewhat limited set of poses and gestures. The sword-wielding figure that directly attacks Becket is often shown lunging towards the archbishop, bearing a sword in his right hand and raising up his left hand. The second assailant may hold an upraised sword or an ax in his right hand and (akin to the first assailant) is often shown raising up his left hand. Depending upon the size of the *châsse*, either two or three or four attacking figures will be shown, in poses similar to the types already described. Obviously, historical accuracy would necessitate that a total of four assailants be represented, but the number of attackers varies. Such visual condensation of details is typical of much medieval art, especially in cases where the pictorial space is limited. This is also true of the abbreviated Becket martyrdom imagery seen on pilgrim's badges and ampullae as well as the archiepiscopal seals used by several of Becket's successors at Canterbury that also feature the martyrdom scene.³⁰ In the majority of the Limoges examples, the attackers approach from the left, and Becket is represented on the right side of the composition, before an altar. In some cases, Becket turns to face his assailants with his hands clasped in prayer. Sometimes he is depicted holding a cross. In other instances, Becket is shown facing the altar with his back to the assailants. Sometimes a cross, candlestick and chalice are shown on the altar. The hand of God may also appear over the altar.

The entombment scene, always depicted on the roof of the *châsse*, also represents relatively few variations. The body of the archbishop is lowered into the tomb by two figures, and the entombment is presided over by a figure standing behind the tomb, often holding a crozier and making a gesture of blessing. Sometimes (but relatively rarely) additional witnessing figures are present.

In some cases (about one fifth of the total examples), the roof of the *châsse* contains an alternate scene: the soul of the deceased (represented by a half-length figure with outstretched arms in praying/orant pose) is shown ascending to heaven in a roundel supported by two angels. In just a few early examples, both the entombment and ascension are shown together.³¹ Of course, burial and ascension scenes also otherwise abound in medieval art.³²

The repetition of scenes and figural types on Limoges Becket reliquaries can, however, tend to give a casual viewer an impression of much greater uniformity than actually exists. Some of the *châsses* are remarkably similar indeed, but they do not match up exactly. While it is clear that standardized poses and scenes were employed, no examples represent exact duplicates of each other. The number, placement and poses of the figures as well as the inclusion of additional details, always varies slightly (if not significantly) when the works are carefully compared to each other. For instance, the positions of the assailants' legs and arms (and the weapons they may yield) show several similar variations, some of which appear on more than one example.³³ However, rather than being exact copies, the Becket *châsses* altogether show a creative recombination of shared motifs rearranged in many different variations. This is well demonstrated in the

San Francisco example that, in size and iconography, appears quite similar to several others, but none of them are exactly alike.³⁴

Scholars have thus speculated that the medieval Limoges artists may have used patterns, or model books containing standard figures, poses, scenes and details that could be copied and combined in different ways. Much has been written about the use of pattern/model books, copying techniques, and workshop practices especially with reference to later medieval art.³⁵ It is certainly not inconceivable that the Limoges metalworkers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries might have employed some form of stock patterns, copied meticulously or more loosely from other pictorial sources.

The subtle variations that can be seen in the Limoges Becket châsses can also be correlated to some of the stylistic changes in Limoges enamel techniques of the Romanesque and Gothic eras generally. Just as the Becket reliquaries are not all duplicates of one common model, Limoges enamel work also exhibits some important stylistic transformations in spite of the appearance of uniformity. The late twelfth century, when Becket châsses first began to be produced at Limoges, represents an important transitional period when Limoges artists began to switch the application of enamel from figures to background. Earlier Limoges works often show enamel used for the figures while the backgrounds were enriched with gilt *vermiculé* patterns (foliage scrolls.) The reverse practice of applying the enamel to the backgrounds and leaving the incised, gilt figures reserved seems to be an innovation of the late twelfth century.³⁶ All of the Becket châsses show this treatment. Vibrantly colored and decorated enamel work is applied to the background areas only and the gilt, incised figures visually stand out from the colorful backgrounds. This is the technique seen in the San Francisco example

where the enamel work serves as a surrounding background to the gilt figures. The practice of including attached elements in relief (especially heads of figures) can also be seen in the San Francisco example. Either cast or stamped, and affixed to the background by small internal posts, the projecting heads add a significant sense of three-dimensionality to the figural scenes. Limoges artists appear to have adopted the practice of affixing these type of projecting heads by the mid-to-late twelfth century and most Limoges examples of the early thirteenth century show this, as the San Francisco example does. The color scheme used for the enamel work in the San Francisco example is typical of Limoges production of the medieval era and represents the brilliance and vibrancy for which Limoges work was so highly regarded. Several different shades of blue are generally dominant in Limoges work, with tones of green, red, yellow, and white as well.

Specialists in medieval Limoges enamels have noted both innovation and continuity in the realm of *opus lemovincense*. The great number of Becket reliquary châsses, produced at Limoges from the late twelfth century and well into the thirteenth century, are lauded as stellar representatives of not only the fine metal-working skills of the artists of Limoges but also as visual witnesses to the growth and development of the cult of this important medieval saint. Even so, many questions remain about the Limoges reliquaries that have only been partially answered to date by scholarly specialists. For example: from whom and by who were these works commissioned and created? How and by whom were the relics obtained? How much did these enameled reliquaries cost? How were the commissions conveyed to or ordered from the Limoges workshops? Who were the enamel artists who worked in Limoges in the Middle Ages? Were any of them

lay professionals in urban workshops? How did these enameled works travel from their place of origin in Limoges to their intended destinations in the medieval period? And how and why have these works traveled to much wider destinations in subsequent centuries?

All of the Becket châsses, produced at Limoges during the medieval period, were designed to travel. They were created in the Limoges workshops for patrons in numerous locations in medieval Europe. Among the fifty or so surviving Becket châsses produced at Limoges during the medieval period, a relatively small percentage appear to be still today situated in the locations for which they were originally intended.³⁷ The vast majority of these works have, however, continued to travel widely – and many of them have journeyed quite far afield – well beyond the boundaries of the medieval world.

In some cases, the original medieval patrons for these objects have indeed been identified. For example, the important early châsse located in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London has been attributed to the specific patronage of Benedict of Peterborough (d. 1193), who was a monk at Canterbury in 1170 and a probable witness to the murder of Becket. When he became abbot of Peterborough in 1177 he brought with him several relics of Becket: some articles of clothing, two large vessels of the martyr's blood, and two stones from the church pavement from the site of the martyrdom (which he incorporated into altars in the church at Peterborough.) The Limoges châsse he commissioned was doubtless intended to house the other Becket relics he had acquired during his earlier days as monk, care-taker of Becket's tomb, archdeacon, and prior of Canterbury.³⁸ Several other châsses have been associated with the patronage of Pope

Innocent III (1198-1216), and others have been attributed to several other important royal and ecclesiastical figures of the medieval period.

It can be assumed that all relics of Becket came originally from Canterbury and were either acquired there directly by visitors to the site, or sent to other locations at the request of various patrons unable to visit Canterbury themselves. The specific processes by which reliquaries were commissioned from the Limoges workshops remains somewhat unclear, but letters, contracts and various other documents regarding medieval art commissions do exist.³⁹ In some cases, the original medieval locations of the Becket châsses have been determined, as well as the processes by which they changed hands, traveled, and have arrived today in their present locations.

Not all stages in these journeys can be traced, of course. There are significant gaps in the itineraries. During the English Reformation period as well as the French Revolution, many medieval works of religious art were lost, destroyed, or hidden. Those that were preserved, however, began to interest collectors and antiquarians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially.⁴⁰ The Gothic revival period brought about a great interest in medieval sacred objects not simply as archaeological curiosities but as art works worthy of study, preservation and emulation. A number of important collections of medieval art objects, including Limoges enamels, were amassed by prominent European collectors in the nineteenth century. This interest was mirrored by a number of American collectors of the early twentieth century.⁴¹ The care and interest demonstrated in the preservation of medieval European works of art by early twentieth century American collectors represents an important phase in the history of American art collecting. Collectors such as J. Pierpont Morgan, George Grey Barnard, and William

and Henry Walters (to name just a few) followed and expanded the trends and tastes of European collectors in their acquisition of medieval art objects. Thus, several American museums, founded by these collectors or by collectors inspired by them, include a wide range of materials including works of art from the medieval era. Limoges châsses for Thomas Becket are found in several American museums including: the Cleveland Museum of Art (Ohio), the Toledo Museum of Art (Ohio), the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College (Ohio), the Glencairn Museum (Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania), and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco.

The California Palace of the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco was established in the early 1920s. Like the M. H. de Young Museum, to which it is now linked under the umbrella of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, it reflects not only the generosity of continuing donors/supporters but also the astute collecting interests of its benefactors. It has a quite noteworthy permanent collection and regularly hosts many important traveling exhibitions too. The Limoges enamel châsse for Becket is one of the many treasures to be seen in the museum's permanent collection, in the small section devoted to medieval art. Although it is a petite object, it stands out boldly and significantly. How did this object come to San Francisco? By what means did it travel so far – from medieval France – to California?

As with many medieval art works designed to travel, the specific journeys of the San Francisco châsse from early thirteenth Limoges to twentieth century America remain unclear. It is believed that the work may have been created for a church in northeastern France (during the medieval period: the County of Flanders.) This speculation is supported by documentary evidence indicating that other works of medieval Limoges

manufacture were in collections in that area in the later Middle Ages and by the fact that veneration of Becket is long attested in the region. Simone Caudron, specialist in medieval Limoges reliquaries of Becket, has identified the San Francisco châsse as one of the several Limoges works in the possession of Aimé Desmottes, a French collector of the nineteenth century who lived in Lille.⁴² It was exhibited in Lille in 1874, and in Amiens in 1860 and 1866. The Desmottes collection was sold in Paris in 1900 and other Limoges works from his collection were eventually acquired by several collectors including J. Pierpont Morgan. Limoges works from the Desmottes collection are today located at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Louvre, and the Musée de Picardie in Amiens. The Becket reliquary châsse in San Francisco was, by the later twentieth century at least, in the collection of members of the prominent Magnin family of San Francisco.⁴³ The work was given by Mr. and Mrs. E. John Magnin to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 1975.

Several members of the Magnin family provided generous donations of various forms to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The bequests of Mr. and Mrs. E. John Magnin are especially notable. Ranging from examples of ancient Roman glassware, Chinese porcelain, Flemish tapestry, fifteenth to nineteenth century paintings, and eighteenth century works in bronze, their gifts to the Fine Arts Museums are myriad. Other Magnin family members bequeathed important examples of designer jewelry and clothing as well as paintings to the museum. Although not otherwise recognized as especially prominent American art collecting specialists of the twentieth century, it is clear that the Magnin family was well positioned, as were many other wealthy American families of the early twentieth century, to acquire works of art for their personal

collections and eventually to bequeath these art works to support, establish, or enhance American museum collections. The wide range and diverse nature of the works given by the Magnin family members to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco represents an assortment of tastes and interests that is characteristic of many collectors who, rather than forming specialized collections in one particular area, devote their interests to acquiring important examples of excellent art works representative of a range of periods and media.

The thirteenth-century Limoges reliquary *châsse* for Saint Thomas Becket that is located in San Francisco today thus reflects not only the trends and tastes for medieval art collecting in Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but also the truly remarkable survival and continued careful preservation of a medieval work of art that was originally designed to travel. In this case, the *châsse* has certainly traveled well beyond its initially-planned itinerary from Limoges to Flanders in the early thirteenth century. To be sure, the many later peregrinations of this art work, and its eventual presence in San Francisco, would have been inconceivable to its makers, commissioners, and indeed for the saintly martyr himself. Nevertheless, this important example of medieval Limoges enamel work has found an excellent location – as a cherished and rare example of medieval art in San Francisco

¹ It is listed and described in: Simone Caudron, *Thomas Becket et l'Oeuvre de Limoges* (CD; Ville de Limoges: Musée Municipal de l'Evêché, 2003), catalogue # 34.

² The bibliography on Becket is extensive. An excellent source still remains: Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). More recent biographical contributions include: Anne Duggan, *Thomas Becket* (London: Arnold, 2004) and John Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel* (New York: Random House, 2012).

³ The accounts of Henry's angry and reckless wording vary slightly between different sources. Nevertheless, his desire to have Becket silenced in some way was ultimately interpreted by four of his knights in the most dramatic fashion.

⁴ Kay Brainerd Slocum, *Liturgies in Honor of Thomas Becket* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), and Kay Brainerd Slocum, *The Cult of Thomas Becket: History and Historiography through Eight Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁵ Tancred Borenius, *Saint Thomas Becket in Art* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press; reprint of 1932 edition, 1970); Madeline Caviness, *The Early Stained Glass of Canterbury Cathedral* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), especially chapter 8: Hagiographical Subjects, 139-150; Caudron, *Thomas Becket et l'Oeuvre de Limoges* (CD); Richard Gameson, "The Early Imagery of Thomas Becket," in *Pilgrimage: The English Experience from Becket to Bunyan*, eds. Colin Morris and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 46-89; and Marie-Madeleine Gauthier, "Le meurtre dans la cathédrale: thème iconographique médiéval," in *Thomas Becket: Actes du Colloque International de Sédieres, 19-25 August 1973*, ed. Raymonde Foreville (Paris: Beauchesne, 1975), 247-253.

⁶ Peter Lasko, *Ars Sacra 800-1200* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Henk van Os, *The Way to Heaven: Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam; Nieuwe Kerk and Utrecht: The Museum Catharijneconvent, 2001); Hanns Swarzenski, *Monuments of Romanesque Art: The Art of Church Treasures in Northwestern Europe* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

⁷ Isabelle Biron, Pete Dandridge, Mark Wypyski and Michael Vandevyer, "Techniques and Materials in Limoges Enamels," in *Enamels of Limoges, 1100-1350*, ed. John O'Neill (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 48-62.

⁸ Charles Reginald Dodwell, ed. and trans., *Theophilus: The Various Arts/De Diversus Artibus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) and Leslie Ross, *Artists of the Middle Ages* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 81-92.

⁹ The earliest reference to "Limoges work" appears in a letter (c1167-69) written to Richard, abbot of St. Victor in Paris, by Jean, a French cleric, who was engaged (interestingly enough) to accompany Thomas Becket during his exile in France. Jean's reference to a book cover of Limoges work has been cited as notable evidence of the recognition and high regard for Limoges enamel work in the twelfth century. See: Marie-Madeleine Gauthier, *Emaux Méridionaux: Catalogue International de l'Oeuvre de Limoges. Vol. 1: L'Epoque Romane* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987), 104-5.

¹⁰ Gauthier, *Emaux Méridionaux*.

¹¹ Niello work involves the heat-fusing of a black alloy of lead, silver, copper and sulphur into incised designs on a metal ground.

¹² *English Romanesque Art: 1066-1200*, ed. George Zarnecki, Janet Allen and Tristram Holland (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1984), 282.

¹³ For the early examples in London (Victoria and Albert Museum, c1185-90) and the Louvre (c1195), see Caudron, *Thomas Becket et l'Oeuvre de Limoges* (CD), catalogue # 1 and 4.

¹⁴ Caudron, *Thomas Becket et l'Oeuvre de Limoges* (CD).

¹⁵ Simone Caudron, Geneviève Francois and Vénique Notin, *Valérie et Thomas Becket. De l'influence des Princes Plantagenêt dans l'Oeuvre de Limoges* (Limoges: Musée Municipal de l'Evêché, 1999).

¹⁶ Raymonde Foreville, "La diffusion du culte de Thomas Becket dans la France de l'Ouest avant la fin du XIIe siècle," *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 19 (1976): 347-367.

¹⁷ Leslie Ross, *Text, Image, Message: Saints in Medieval Manuscript Illustrations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Janet Backhouse and Christopher de Hamel, *The Becket Leaves* (London: The British Library, 1988) and Caviness, *The Early Stained Glass of Canterbury Cathedral*.

¹⁹ The earliest written accounts of the murder by eyewitnesses describe the details of the setting somewhat differently. John of Salisbury states that Becket "stood in the cathedral, before Christ's altar;" other writers mention the altar of Saint Benedict; and others situate the murder between the altar of Saint Benedict and an altar dedicated to the Virgin Mary. As Staunton points out, "The eagerness of some to place the murder before the altar is explained by the symbolism of Thomas's murder as a sacrifice, with Thomas as both priest and sacrificial victim." Michael Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2006), 195.

²⁰ The Becket niello reliquary in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York does not include the altar. This work is of notably small scale and the half-length figures are presented in a very compressed space. An ivory liturgical comb (also in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York), that has been dated to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, shows the murder scene on the reverse side, includes many figures, but does not depict an altar. See: Charles Little, "The Road to Glory: New Early Images of Thomas Becket's Life," in *Reading Medieval Images: The Art Historian and the Object*, eds. Elizabeth Sears and Thelma Thomas (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 201-211.

²¹ The earliest manuscript illustration of Becket's martyrdom (London, British Library Cotton MS Claudius B.ii, f. 214v, c1180) includes a pictorial sequence of scenes, including the four knights attacking Becket. In this case, the murder scene is placed next to but separated by architectural forms indicating the door to the church, the church

interior (with an altar – with chalice, cross, and host) and the shrine of the martyr being visited by pilgrims (or the knights themselves).

²² Ursula Nilgen, “The Manipulated Memory: Thomas Becket in Legend and Art,” in *Memory and Oblivion*, eds. Wessel Reinick and Jeroen Stumpel (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 765-772.

²³ John Butler, *The Quest for Becket’s Bones: The Mystery of the Relics of St. Thomas Becket of Canterbury* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

²⁴ Barbara Boehm, “Body-Part Reliquaries: The State of Research,” *Gesta* 36, no. 1 (1997): 8-19.

²⁵ For a description of these “holy tissues,” see: Henk van Os, *The Way to Heaven: Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: Nieuwe Kerk and Utrecht: The Museum Catharijneconvent, 2001), 28, 68; Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978, 1990), 160, n. 6; John M. McCulloch, “From Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Continuity and Change in Papal Relic Policy from the Sixth to the Eighth Century,” in *Pietas: Festschrift für Bernhard Kötting*, eds. Ernst Dassmann and K. Suso Frank (Münster: Aschendorff, 1980), 313-324.

²⁶ Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski, eds., *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400* (London: Royal Academy of Art, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 218-219.

²⁷ Ross, *Text, Image, Message*, figs. 23 and 28.

²⁸ Marie-Madeleine Gauthier, “Le meurtre dans la cathédrale.” It should also be noted that several of the Limoges enamel châsses for Saint Valerie, many of which were produced during the same decades as the Becket châsses, contain some similar iconographic details. Saint Valerie is often depicted being attacked by one or two sword-bearing figures; after her decapitation she is shown presenting her own head to Saint Martial who stands before an altar in the cathedral of Limoges. The altar in these scenes often displays a cross and chalice, and the hand of God may appear in the heavens. Of course, the cephalophoric (saintly severed head-carrying) motif is distinctly different from the Becket iconography; nevertheless, in overall impression, size, technique, and images of murder and cleric before an altar, the Valerie and Becket châsses share some similarities. See: Caudron, Francois and Notin, *Valérie at Thomas Becket*. For more on Saint Valerie, see: Cynthia Hahn, “Valerie’s Gift: A Narrative Enamel Chasse from Limoges” in *Reading Medieval Images: The Art Historian and the Object*, eds. Elizabeth Sears and Thelma Thomas (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 187-200.

²⁹ Caudron, *Thomas Becket et l’Oeuvre de Limoges* (CD), catalogue # 51.

³⁰ Kay Brainerd Slocum, “*Martir quod Stillat Primatis ab Ore Sigillat*: Sealed with the Blood of Becket,” *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 165 (2012): 61-88.

³¹ London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1185-90; and Cologne: Schnütgen Museum, 1195-1200. Caudron, *Thomas Becket et l'Oeuvre de Limoges* (CD), catalogue # 1 and 6.

³² For many years the images depicted on the Becket châsse in San Francisco were incorrectly identified as the Murder of Becket and the Entombment of Jesus (rather the Entombment of Becket.) It would be easy to make such an error as the iconography for entombment images is so similar. Happily however the identification of the two images has now been corrected by this author and the corrected description appears in the current description of the châsse in both case labels and on-line catalogue.

³³ Simone Caudron, "Les Châsses de Thomas Becket en Email de Limoges," in *Thomas Becket: Actes du Colloque International de Sédieres*, 19-25 August 1973, ed. Raymonde Foreville (Paris: Beauchesne, 1975), 233-241.

³⁴ About sixteen of the fifty Limoges châsses (including the San Francisco example) that are illustrated and described in Caudron, *Thomas Becket et l'Oeuvre de Limoges* (CD) show the same combination of narrative scenes (burial on top and martyrdom on front side) and depict only two assailants approaching the archbishop. The San Francisco example depicts one sword-bearing and one ax-bearing figure. Many of the other examples, however, depict both attackers holding swords. In the six examples that depict both an ax and sword-bearing figure, the pose of the ax-bearing figure and the direction in which the head of the ax is turned differ from the San Francisco example. Where additional attackers are shown (three or more), no ax-bearing figure exactly duplicates that shown in the San Francisco example.

³⁵ For example, see: Robert Scheller, *Exemplum: Model-Book Drawings and the Practice of Artistic Transmission in the Middle Ages (ca.900-ca.1400)* (Haarlem: De Erven F. Bohn, N.V., 1996) and the excellent, wide-ranging collection of articles in: Brigitte Dekeyzer and Jan Van der Stock, eds, *Manuscripts in Transition: Recycling Manuscripts, Texts and Images* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2005).

³⁶ Simone Caudron, "Connoisseurs of Champelevé Limoges Enamels in Eighteenth-century England," *The British Museum Yearbook 2: Collectors and Collections* (London: British Museum, 1977), 19.

³⁷ These are: in France: the church of St. Laurent in Le Vigean (Caudron, CD catalogue #26); in Germany: the church of St. Laurentius in Clarholz (Caudron # 8); in England: Hereford Cathedral (Caudron, #12); in Italy: the cathedral of Santa Maria at Anagni (Caudron, #5), San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome (Caudron, #27), the cathedral of San Martino at Lucca (Caudron, #42); and the parish church of Trono in Sweden (Caudron, #21). See also: Simone Caudron, "La diffusion des châsses de saint Thomas Becket dans l'Europe médiévale," in *L'Oeuvre de Limoges at sa Diffusion: Trésors, objets, collections*, ed. Danielle Gaborit-Chopin and Frédéric Tixier (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011), 23-41.

³⁸ Caudron, CD catalogue #1; see also Caudron, "Connoisseurs."

³⁹ Oft-cited examples include the useful “Sources and Documents in the History of Art” volumes: Caecilia Davis-Weyer, *Early Medieval Art 300-1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986) and Teresa Frisch, *Gothic Art 1140-ca. 1450* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ Caudron, “Connoisseurs.”

⁴¹ Barbara, Boehm, “La gout des Américains pour l’Oeuvre de Limoges aux XIX et XX Siècles,” in *L’Oeuvre de Limoges at sa Diffusion: Trésors, objets, collections*, ed. Danielle Gaborit-Chopin and Frédéric Tixier (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011), 123-38.

⁴² Caudron, CD catalogue # 34.

⁴³ For an engaging history of the Magnin family and their enterprises in San Francisco, see James Thomas Mullane, *A Store to Remember* (San Ramon, CA: Falcon Books, 2007).

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