

Saint Peter Martyr and the Three Donors

Giovanni di Balduccio's *Saint Peter Martyr and the Three Donors* is a marble relief created in 1340. It comes from Milan and is one of three panels that survived from a tomb in the Milanese Church of Sant'Eustorgio. The violent and brutal death of the Dominican friar Saint Peter Martyr shocked the people of Milan and the members of the Milanese Church of Sant'Eustorgio, influencing the commission of one of Giovanni di Balduccio's greatest works, the tomb of Saint Peter Martyr. This church holds Saint Peter Martyr's tomb as well as many other art works that honor the Three Magi and important members of the Milanese community. The relief was originally created as a funerary monument in one of the tombs of the church. Initially, Saint Peter Martyr was buried in the cemetery near the Church of Sant'Eustorgio, but his body was moved to be honored in Balduccio's tomb after being canonized by Pope Innocent IV. In this panel relief, Giovanni di Balduccio uses symbolism and visual guides to show the viewers an ample amount of information about Saint Peter Martyr as well as revealing the significance of tombs as honorary monuments at this time.

Saint Peter Martyr, also known as Saint Peter of Verona, was a 13th century Italian Catholic priest. He was also a Dominican friar in the Church of Sant'Eustorgio and a celebrated preacher among his followers. Saint Peter was known to have some enemies among Catharists when appointed inquisitor of Northern Italy, leading to his brutal assassination in 1252. Because of his importance as a Dominican friar, his body was moved to Milan and honored in his Church

of Sant'Eustorgio. The relief of Saint Peter Martyr and the Three Donors was created as part of a tomb in the Church of Sant'Eustorgio and stood with two other panels that honored the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Baptist.

The figure's identity is revealed as the Dominican friar Saint Peter through the inclusion of recognizable features. The standing figure is a friar, based on the cloth cloak that is draped around the figure's body. It can be assumed that the figure is a Dominican friar because this piece had originated in the Dominican Church of Sant'Eustorgio. Because Balduccio did not have the choice of color to depict the traditional black and white cloak of Dominican friars, he had to depend on Saint Peter's most recognizable attribute to reveal the identity of the figure, a gash in the figure's head. During Saint Peter's violent murder, he was struck in the head by an axe by his assassin. His murderer ambushed him and struck him in the head and body and left him out on the street to die. After his death, most images of Saint Peter showed an axe penetrating his skull or a gaping and bloody wound in his head¹. With the limiting colorless marble, Balduccio did not have the option of adding blood to the head to reveal the identity of Saint Peter. He chose to add a gash in the figure's head without the shocking image of an axe coming out of his skull. The artist's choice to add a simple indent in Saint Peter's head allows the viewer to identify the figure without overwhelming them with graphic images.

In Saint Peter's right hand, the palm of martyrdom is held. In Christianity, the palm branch was usually used to symbolize the victory of the faithful over their enemies. Given the gruesome circumstance of Saint Peter's assassination, this image helps viewers have a positive

¹ "The National Gallery." http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/saint-peter-martyr/*/chooseLetter/S (accessed Feb 25, 2014).

outlook on the fate of Saint Peter. In addition, Martyrs were often shown holding the palm after they had passed away to represent the victory of spirit over flesh. When the palm is depicted on tombs, it is regarded as proof that the martyr was buried at that site. “The investment in this large marble structure was part of [the Milanese’s] campaign to encourage pilgrimage” to the Church of Sant’Eustorgio². When martyring Saint Peter, the people of the Milanese church knew that this would influence an even larger population to travel to the tomb to honor the new Martyr. Balduccio’s choice to add this palm in Saint Peter’s hand offers a comment on the reality of Saint Peter’s burial space and the way the Milanese felt about his death.

The Three Donors represented in this relief can be viewed as multiple different figures. Some believe that the three laymen represent members of the family for whom the tomb was created, while others suggest it represents the Three Magi. The figures’ faces differ and seem to have distinctive facial features, which can suggest they are portraits of specific individuals of different ages.³ It can be assumed that the three kneeling are persons of high rank because the “cloth of honor” is draped behind them, which is often found in images of the Virgin and Child⁴. Saint Peter’s arms are stretched out in a protective gesture over the three figures, showing viewers that they are of high status. The Church of Sant’Eustorgio is known for its relics and devotion to the Three Magi. All three of the kneeling figures are similarly clothed, showing the unity among the

² Rosenberg, Charles M. *The Court Cities of Northern Italy: Milan, Parma, Piacenza, Mantua, Ferrara, Bologna, Urbino, Pesaro, and Rimini*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. Print.

³ Castelnovo-Tedesco, Lisbeth and Jack Souldanian. *Italian medieval sculpture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Cloisters*. New York. 2014.

⁴ "The National Gallery." <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/cloth-of-honour> (accessed Feb 25, 2014).

men. Their draped cloaks do not cover their whole bodies, which reveal their fashionable clothing, differentiating them from Saint Peter Martyr. Although the identities of the three figures are not completely clear in this relief, Balduccio's artistic use of symbolism allows the viewer to recognize that these figures are important and should be honored, whether they are representations of commissioners with high status, or the Three Magi.

Giovanni di Balduccio traveled to Milan to sculpt this tomb, but is originally from Pisa, and is credited for spreading the Pisano style of Gothic sculpture. The inspiration of the tomb of Saint Peter Martyr comes from Nicola Pisano's Arca di San Domenico. The tomb of Saint Dominic was designed in 1264 and set up in Bologna in 1267. "Shortly after the tomb's construction, monumental tombs appeared everywhere in Italy."⁵ Before this time, it was uncommon for the casket of a saint to be visible, because they were generally placed underground. Creating visible and elaborately decorated monument set above ground in a church for a venerated individual became more common in the High Middle Ages. Milan erected a monumental tomb for Saint Peter Martyr for political and religious factors. This elaborate shrine not only played a large role in the religious order, but also promoted the dominance of Milan as a civic entity. The hope was to use the tomb of Saint Peter Martyr as a visible focus of devotion to draw pilgrims to their city, strengthening their economy.⁶ Pilgrims built Milan's economy by visiting the city and drawing more guests, in turn, benefitting Milan's political system and giving their city civic power.

⁵ Anita Fiderer Moskowitz. *Nicola Pisano's Arca di San Domenico and Its Legacy*. University Park, Pa.: Published for College Art Association by the Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, page 1.

⁶ Moskowitz, 1994, page 1.

As a sculptor, Giovanni di Balduccio needed to make artistic choices while creating the relief of Saint Peter Martyr and the Three Donors in order to deliver important information to the viewers without overwhelming them. Balduccio used symbolism and simple visual aides to give the viewer insight about the figures that are seen in the relief. He was able to identify the main figure in the piece with two modest symbols, the palm and the gash, and show the viewer the importance of the three kneeling figures using their background, features and clothing. Using marble could present limitations for the artist because there is no use of color, but Balduccio was able to still show the viewers a story without hindering his story. This relief shows the power of symbolism and reveals the great potential it has to show material even in small areas. The style of this tomb was influenced by Nicola Pisano and made the Church of Sant'Eustorgio an important pilgrimage stop. The tomb of Saint Peter Martyr not only honored the life of this saint, but also gave Milan religious legitimacy and civic power in the 14th century.

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