

49. Standing Saints in Tapestry

The Boppard Standing Saints window is a wonderful example of a group of saints that have a special significance to the church. Depictions of saints in the Middle Ages were often chosen because of a special connection; this included patron saints for local families, craft guilds, towns and regions, saints who had lived or were associated with miracles in the region and saints linked to religious stories or people of importance to the church and its members.

Another fine example of a group of standing saints can be seen in the Burrell Collection in a German tapestry, from the middle Rhineland dating to the late 15th century and depicting five female saints.



BURRELL COLLECTION IN A GERMAN TAPESTRY, FROM THE MIDDLE RHINELAND DATING TO THE LATE 15TH CENTURY AND DEPICTING FIVE FEMALE SAINTS .– ST DOROTHY IS BELOW RIGHT

They are, from the left, St. Dorothy, St. Barbara, St. Anne with Jesus on her arm and a small crowned Virgin Mary at her side, St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Agnes. The tapestry was woven in a convent, probably to be used as an altar hanging. St. Anne was the mother of Mary, so her attributes are the Virgin Mary and Jesus. All of the other four saints are ‘Virgin Martyrs’, with St. Dorothy, St. Barbara, Catherine of Alexandria and Margaret of Antioch (who does not appear on the tapestry) being the four “Main Virgins”. For young nuns in the convent, giving up a normal life of marriage and family to be married to their faith, these saints would have been ideal role models and women they could aspire to follow. The stories of the four saints, are outlined below but do vary between sources.

St. Dorothy (or Dorothea of Caesarea), during the period of persecution of the Christians by the Roman Emperor Diocletian, had refused to marry or worship and give offerings to the pagan gods. She was sentenced to death, and on the way to her execution was taunted by a young roman lawyer called Theophilus. Dorothy had said she was looking forward to entering the garden of heaven so he asked her to send him some fruits and flowers when she got there. As she was executed, she prayed that he should receive this gift, and upon her death an angel boy delivered a basket of three apples and three roses to the young man. He later converted and was in turn martyred. Therefore she is shown with a small boy holding a basket of apples and roses.



St Barbara, shown on the right, was kept locked away by her evil father in a tower so she would be pure for an arranged marriage. Despite this, she managed to be converted to Christianity and was baptised, then refused her father's wishes to marry. On one occasion, when her father was away, she managed to get workmen to install a third window in her room in the tower in honour of the Holy Trinity. Her father, enraged, denounced her and beheaded her himself. As she went to heaven, her father was struck by lightning and went off to a less desirable destination.



St. Catherine, on the left, of fireworks fame, was the highly intelligent and well educated princess daughter of the King of Alexandria. She had a vision in her youth of being given in marriage to Christ by the Virgin Mary. She said she would only marry someone more intelligent, better looking and wealthier than she. The Roman Emperor Maxentius attempted to break her in debate by using the best pagan philosophers but without success. Her arguments converted many of the philosophers and others including the emperor's own wife to Christianity and subsequent martyrdom. She was tortured but refused to budge and the emperor even asked her to marry him which

she refused as she was already married to Christ. She was condemned to die on a spiked breaking wheel, but the wheel was destroyed when she touched it. She was finally beheaded.

On the lower right is St. Agnes, whose emblem is a lamb – the Latin name for which is 'Agnus', similar to her name – was the beautiful young daughter of a wealthy family and had many suitors. Agnes refused them all through her pious desire to remain a virgin. She was reported to the authorities for being a Christian, and was condemned to be dragged through the streets and raped at a brothel. Her hair grew to cover her naked body and any man who attempted to rape her was struck blind. She was sentenced to death by fire, but the wood would not burn so she died by the sword.

