

Three Alabasters From the Burrell Collection in Context

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Summary

If fame were measured in photographs, the Burrell Collection's Head of St John the Baptist in a Tabernacle would be a celebrity (Inv. 1.34; Pl. X). Few objects have been reproduced as frequently or as generously in treatments of English alabasters or of St John's severed head. It has increasingly stolen the limelight from all other known examples and all but entirely eclipsed its two Glasgow fellows (Inv. 1.33 and 1.35; Pl. XI and Pl. XII). Yet this Head of St John in a "howsyng" has been a reluctant star. Its pre-museum life remains buried in the past. Many of the same ideas have been rehearsed again and again. This chapter sets out the state of research to date and looks at Burrell's trio of tabernacles afresh with a focus both on the central panels and on their wooden cases.

SIR WILLIAM - ST JOHN

Though it has usually been stated that Sir William Burrell (1861–1958) acquired his first English alabaster in 1900/1 in Paris, he probably began acquiring them in the 1890s. In 1944, he gave twenty-nine examples to Glasgow, complemented by a further nine, in 1948, 1949, 1951, and 1955. Burrell was competing with other voracious collectors, such as Walter Leo Hildburgh (1876–1955) and Philip Nelson (1872–1953). The tendency has been to see the Burrell Collection as exactly mirroring the collection that the Burrells assembled and enjoyed in their homes. Yet a closer reading of Sir William's meticulous purchase books begun in 1911 reveals that alabasters were occasionally returned or given to others. The tabernacles discussed here were acquired at fairly regularly spaced intervals.

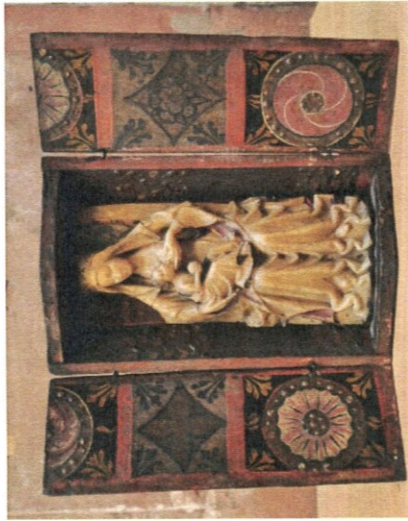
The first of the group to be acquired was Inv. 1.34 (Pl. X). Published in 1920 as in Burrell's collection, this never-before-seen example does not appear in Burrell's notebooks, suggesting purchase before 1911. Philip Nelson clearly states that it goes back to George Grosvenor Thomas (1856–1923), an Australian artist-cum-dealer. Grosvenor Thomas was based in Glasgow between 1885/6 and 1899. Burrell is likely to have known him through his sales of paintings of the Barbizon and Hague Schools, or through his relationship with the Glasgow Boys.

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Worcester Cathedral



Icelandic National Museum



Carmarthen, Wales



Leicester Museum, Inv. 277 i849



Burrell Collection, Inv. 1.33



Burrell Collection, Inv. 1.34



Burrell Collection, Inv. 1.35



Notes:

Tabernacle Inv 1.34 is one of the most celebrated of all Alabaster Tabernacles. The hinges are made of interlocking twisted wire, stapled to the wooden frame. Holes on the back-board are used to secure the alabaster carving in place with wire straps. Head of John the Baptist, with the Man of Sorrows below, rising from a tomb:



Decorations vary and are quite sophisticated but are standardised, sometimes with just changes in colour. Some have gesso added to build up and give texture. The white rose and sun motifs relate to the Virgin Mary and to York.

From Ash Wednesday to Easter the doors of the tabernacle would be closed but enlivened with a cloth cover (cloth of gold) when closed to cover the plain unpainted box exterior. When opened, the painting, gilding and carved alabaster would have had a great impact – especially at home as a private devotional piece.

Tabernacle 1.33 shows the Man of Sorrows pointing at his wound:

