

Master of Rosselló

### Altarpiece

Northern Catalonia (?), around 1400

Carved and polychromed wood

MEV 569

The interplay of concealment and revelation – expressive of the mystery of the Incarnation – found a fitting medium in opening altarpieces and small sculptural ensembles intended for private chapels. The exterior surfaces of such furnishings typically featured painted scenes alone, while the more intense sculptural language, suggestive of tactility, was reserved for the interior. A similar dynamic could be found in small sculptural or low-relief ensembles.

### Casket with the Annunciation

Catalonia (?), 15<sup>th</sup> century

Carved, dowelled and tempera-painted poplar wood; wrought iron

MEV 6856

Many late medieval caskets and textile pouches preserved in Catalan museums feature both religious and secular decorative motifs. Secular examples are documented in religious contexts, such as reliquaries, while devotional ones appear in domestic inventories. Both types of object could shift between functions with relative ease.

### Saint John the Baptist

Catalonia, around 1400

Carved ivory, with traces of polychromy and gilding

MEV 3087

Miniature emulations of large-scale sculpture or goldsmith work found in liturgical settings – such as devotional figures or crucifixes – could also serve as focal points for private devotion. The precious yet portable nature of these small objects suggests they may have accompanied their owners on journeys, possibly offering spiritual support in moments of danger.

### Saint James with two pilgrims

Santiago de Compostela, early 16<sup>th</sup> century

Carved jet

From Lleida

MEV 8192

Relics were the quintessential mementos of pilgrimage to holy sites. More commonly, however, pilgrims acquired badges made of humble metals – or, in Compostela, of jet – which were more affordable and easier to obtain. Relics, in their exalted form, and badges, at a popular level, allowed for the spiritual repetition of the pilgrimage and signalled the status of those who had undertaken it. They were also regarded as protective amulets.

### Harness fitting

Castile, 14<sup>th</sup> century

Cast and chased copper

MEV 9127

For all manner of non-religious activities – especially those involving danger – medieval men and women often carried amulets or objects that invoked divine aid. Many fittings used to decorate harnesses not only signalled the knight’s status but also bore inscriptions referring to God or the protection sought during travel.

## Transcultural Instruments

Certain objects from distant lands came to be associated with religious functions or proved especially apt for conveying spirituality. A rare glass or metal might be donated by a nobleman to a church for use in worship, or simply incorporated into its treasury of mirabilia. Such items could evoke a significant place through their origin, form or material. While modern notions of interculturality – let alone religious coexistence – cannot be applied, these pieces nonetheless moved between cultures and thus became a kind of meeting point between distant spiritual worlds.

### Phial reused as a lipsanoteca

Córdoba, around the year 1000

Glass and wax

From Sant Pere de Casserres (Osona)

MEV 2286

Rock crystal – and to a lesser extent glass – fascinated not only as a translucent evocation of the celestial realm, but also for its rarity and value. This prestige encouraged its reuse for religious purposes, even when the objects originated in distant lands shaped by other beliefs. For instance, vessels that had originally held cosmetic products were often repurposed as lipsanothecae.

### Lipsanoteca in the form of a staurotheke

Catalonia, 12<sup>th</sup> century

Carved wood

MEV 9735

Relics of the True Cross originally came from Palestine, which for much of the Middle Ages – except during the Crusades – remained under Muslim rule. Late medieval and early modern *verae crucis* often replicated the shape of the cross itself. This strategy had been adopted centuries earlier by Byzantine *staurothekai*, later imitated in the West, and even more so by cruciform *encolpia* made in the Holy Land.

### Holy water vessel

Al-Andalus, 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries

Cast, moulded, pierced and chased bronze

MEV 175

Even non-precious metals could transcend geographic, cultural, mental and even religious boundaries through certain types of objects. Boxes and vessels made in Muslim lands – sometimes even inscribed with verses from the Qur’an – were readily repurposed as lipsanothecae or holy water containers. Metalwork imported from northern Europe or in the Flemish style also enjoyed considerable prestige.

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# Instruments of the Soul

## Matter and Spirit in Medieval Catalonia

There is no religion without objects. We tend to think of spirituality as independent of matter, yet reality tells a different story: now as in the past, many objects serve as intermediaries between the everyday and the divine. This idea of mediation, so present in modern communication theory, has in fact been shaped over centuries by religious thought.

Medieval Europe was no exception. Despite its Platonic foundations, which set matter and spirit in opposition, Christianity soon embraced matter as a possible site of divine manifestation. Indeed, especially in the late Middle Ages, this was reflected in the Christian world’s close attention to the properties of materials. This exhibition, jointly curated by the MEV, Museu d’Art Medieval, the Museu de Lleida : diocesà i comarcal, the Museu Diocesà i Comarcal de Solsona and the Museu d’Art de Girona, explores various aspects of this phenomenon in the context of medieval Catalonia. From relics to sculpture, painted images to metalwork, parchment to crystal, a range of instruments will reveal the material paths of the soul as it rises from the senses towards transcendence.

## With All Five Senses

The senses are the primary gateways through which the external world enters the inner life of the individual, including in spiritual terms. Today we are captivated by multimedia spectacles, yet we may forget that premodern societies also embraced multisensory experiences. Medieval liturgy appealed to all five senses at once, both to construct a symbolic representation of heaven and to encourage the faithful’s disposition to participate.

### Thurible

Catalonia, 13<sup>th</sup> century

Cast, pierced and engraved bronze

MEV 1950

Burning incense – a precious, aromatic resin – was a ritual gesture typical of ancient religions. Once the trauma of persecution had passed, Christianity inherited the practice from the Greco-Roman world and imperial court ritual, giving it a dual sym-

bolism: an offering rising towards God and the sweet fragrance of Christ. Whether in grand cathedrals or humble rural chapels, incense helped create an exceptional sensory atmosphere.

### Altar candelabrum

Catalonia, circa 1400

Wrought iron

MEV 2298

Light is essential to sight and, by extension, to the symbolic language of painting, sculpture and ritual. It also shapes the atmosphere within the church and, in proportion to its brightness, marks the significance of each feast. Moreover, it symbolises spiritual understanding: in the Old Testament, God appears surrounded by light, while in the New, Christ defines himself as the Light of the World.

### Wafer Iron

Aragon, 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries

Wrought and engraved iron

From Monzón (Huesca)

MEV 4990

In the Middle Ages, it was not customary for the faithful to receive communion every Sunday. Yet within the framework of the Mass, foods were often offered that shared in its sacred aura, such as the small loaves blessed by Saint Blaise or, especially at Christmas, wafers. Some wafer irons bear inscriptions that express this perfectly, such as: “Whoever eats me shall have God’s blessing.”

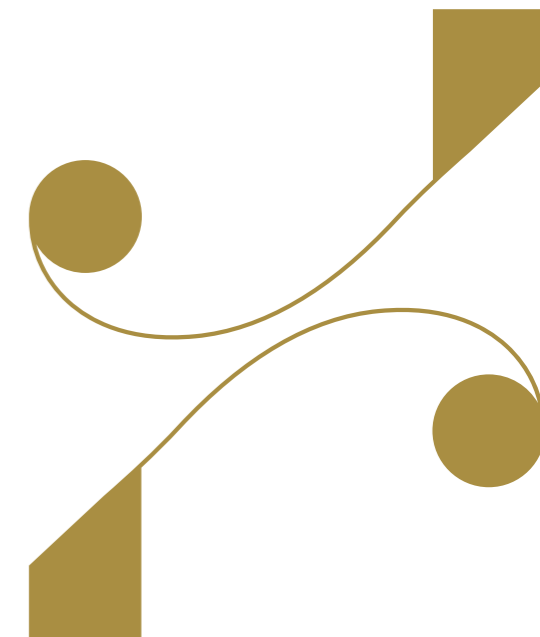
### Handbell

Catalonia, 16<sup>th</sup> century

Cast bronze

MEV 2041

The Bible calls the faithful to listen; that is, to understand and obey the word of God. Sound is therefore a fundamental element of liturgy, such as through the human voice in speech or song. The sound of instruments including bells also solemnises key moments in the rite, while announcing feast days, gathering communities, marking collective time and, according to medieval belief, even dispersing storms.



<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Pax</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Catalonia or Limoges, 16<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Painted enamel on copper
<b>MEV 17165</b>

In biblical texts, touch evokes purity and access to the sacred. During Mass, the celebrant touches the bread, the eucharistic vessels, the books and other ritual objects. The tactile participation of the faithful, discreet but not absent, included exchanging a gesture of peace. Carried by an altar server and kissed or touched by the congregation, the pax replaced direct physical contact – considered dangerous – and expressed that true peace comes from the altar.

## The Language of Matter

Beyond the form of objects and the iconography they might support, the very materials from which they were made – and their inherent properties – were also objects of contemplation in medieval art, extending far beyond notions of wealth or luxury. At times, material and image interacted and reinforced one another; in other cases, the gleam of gold, the transparency of glass or the whiteness of alabaster conveyed messages more effectively than images or words.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Gospel book with silver covers</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Vic, final quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Illuminated parchment; wood; repoussé, chased and enamelled silver
From the Cathedral of Vic
<b>MEV 2189</b>

Beyond its role in proclaiming the Gospel during Mass, the gospel book represents Christ as the incarnate Word of God. Its covers had a tactile dimension activated in processions and oath-taking rituals. The other liturgical books also shared in this aura, though to a lesser extent – not only because they contain ritual texts, but also, indirectly, because they are made from the skin of a living being.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Reliquary</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Barcelona, mid-16<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Gilded, repoussé and chased silver; glass
<b>MEV 3615</b>

Unlike lipsanothecae, which were concealed within altars, reliquaries were designed to display relics. Medieval glass – often uneven in finish, and even more so when made of rock crystal – not only allowed visual contact with the relic, but also evoked the supernatural waters of the heavenly realm where God, the angels and the blessed dwell, thus helping to affirm the sanctity of the relic it revealed.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Lipsanoteca</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Catalonia, 11<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Alabaster
From Sant Pere del Grau (Lluçanès)
<b>MEV 3964</b>

During the ritual of altar consecration, relics were placed inside while texts such as “the bodies of the saints are buried in peace” were sung. The repository for relics was also called a “sepulchre.” For this reason, some lipsanothecae – small boxes for containing relics – imitated the material and form of sarcophagi, and even bore the names of those who took part in the rites, spiritually “buried” within the altar.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Virgin and Child</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Catalonia, first quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Carved and polychromed alabaster
<b>MEV 10654</b>

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards in Catalonia, the use of alabaster for religious statuary marked an aesthetic shift at the altar. Although the figures were painted – especially the flesh tones – alabaster lent a distinctive quality to the colours and, when left unpainted, allowed for the depiction of pale garments. In Marian images especially, the whiteness of the stone, associated with purity, became symbolically fitting.

## In Body and Soul

In Christian theology, the idea of incarnation is central: Christ becomes human in the flesh, which thus becomes a vehicle of God’s presence. This concept has far-reaching consequences – from the belief in real presence in the Eucharist to the Western custom of sculpting images as complements to worship, and to everything that concerns the body: relics as bodily remains, the animation of inanimate forms, and ritual gestures.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Host container</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>P. Gili (blacksmith)</div>
Catalonia, 14 <sup>th</sup> century
Wrought and engraved iron
From Sant Pere de Castanyadell (Osona)
<b>MEV 8096</b>

The real presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Mass was the subject of extended theological debate between the 8th and 13th centuries. Early hosts often bore the initials IHS (Iesus Hominum Salvator) and simple decorations – crosses or borders resembling those of coins – to evoke the price of salvation. Later, they were also engraved with images of Christ crucified or as the Man of Sorrows, echoing altar crosses and retable imagery.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Chalice</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Barcelona, 15<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Repoussé and chased silver
<b>MEV 1612</b>

From the beginning, the wine of the Eucharist was to be held in a cup like the one mentioned in the account of the Last Supper. As a sign of reverence, medieval practice required this vessel to be made of noble materials, with a gilded interior – valued for both its cost and its incorruptibility. So prestigious were sacred vessels that, in versions made of less noble metals, they often accompanied bishops and priests to the grave.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Pyx</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Limoges, second quarter (?) of the 13<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Gilded copper, with engraved decoration and applied champlévé enamel
<b>MEV 7750</b>

Initially, the Eucharistic elements were consumed during the Mass, but over time, bread began to be reserved for the viaticum of the sick. Precious boxes were first repurposed for this use, before being produced in series, like the enamelled copper examples from Limoges, often decorated with the Christogram IHS. Later, bases were added: the result was the chalice-like ciborium that endures to this day.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Tabernacle</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Perot Gascó (Vic, 1502–1546) and workshop</div>
Catalonia, 1538
Carved, gilded, and polychromed wood
From Sant Cristòfol de Tavertet (Osona)
<b>MEV 7296</b>

Consecrated hosts were initially kept on the altar, but were later reserved in more solemn and secure places, such as the tabernacle. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, these small cupboards were often integrated into the lower sections of altarpieces. They were commonly painted with imagery related to the Mass – such as the Crucifixion or the Man of Sorrows – and sometimes featured openwork panels that offered a glimpse of the presence of Christ’s Body.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Lipsanoteca</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Al-Andalus or Mediterranean basin, 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Glazed ceramic, bitumen and impressed wax
From Santa Eugènia de Berga (Osona)
<b>MEV 9732</b>

The use of hands makes it especially clear that liturgy engages the body. The bishop encases his hands in gloves that highlight his dignity, removing them, for instance, when sealing lipsanothecae, some of which preserve his fingerprints. The faithful use their hands to bless themselves with holy water in church or, when praying at home, to move the paternoster or rosary beads.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Rib reliquary</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Limoges (?), mid-13<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Partially gilded copper (?), engraved and set with gemstone cabochons
<b>MEV 9736</b>

The underlying idea behind goldsmith reliquaries – like the silver halos that accompany certain images – is to express that God, Mary or the saints already enjoy a glorious, luminous body in heaven. Reliquaries reveal the supernatural nature of aged, fleshless bones, while halos convey the radiance that emanates from the transfigured bodies of the blessed, shining through the head, the noblest part.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Christ in Majesty with cavity for relics</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Catalonia, 12<sup>th</sup> century (with later modifications)</div>
Carved and polychromed wood
<b>MEV 3838</b>

Unlike in Byzantium, the Latin Church tradition did not reject sculptural representations of God, the Virgin Mary or the saints. The Incarnation offered a fundamental justification: if Christ chose to take on a human body, it is legitimate to depict him through a bodily artistic language. In some cases, such sculptures also functioned as reliquaries, containing fragments of other bodies.

## Windows onto Heaven

The principal aim of medieval liturgical art was to make the invisible visible, not only through “portraits” of God, the Virgin Mary and the saints, but also as openings through which a supernatural reality could be perceived. The depiction of the human figure using formal conventions, the evocation of episodes with the power to transport the viewer, and the framing of spaces where God was made present were common strategies in sacred art, whether in two or three dimensions.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Jaume Cabrera (active in Barcelona between 1394 and 1432)</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div><b>Veronica with the Holy Face of Mary</b></div>
Barcelona, first quarter of the 15 <sup>th</sup> century
Tempera on wood
From the Cathedral of Vic
<b>MEV 1885</b>

From the ninth century onwards, the Byzantine Empire imposed a strictly two-dimensional representation of God, Mary and the saints in icons. In the West, where sculptural images were permitted, the tradition of authentic portraits or “Veronicas” of Christ and Mary also took hold. Some icons arrived directly from the East, but various versions of these two faces became popular on altars and as devotional panels.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Portable altar</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Italy, 15<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Carved wood, jasper, ivory and horn
From Jorba (Anoia)
<b>MEV 5442</b>

The portable altar was used for celebrating Mass while travelling, as a reliquary, and as a safeguard in cases where the consecration of a fixed altar was in doubt. The surface of the consecrated stone – beneath which relics were placed and which had to support the chalice and paten – is typically very smooth. The marked frame of the slab makes clear its status as a site of divine presence, set apart from profane space.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Fleur-de-lis cross</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Catalonia or Limoges, 14<sup>th</sup> century</div>
Cast, chased and parcel-gilt brass; enamel with ground removed
<b>MEV 15425</b>

Carried in procession and placed on the altar – commonly from the 11<sup>th</sup> century and obligatorily from the 13<sup>th</sup> – the cross encapsulates the mystery commemorated in the Mass. Moreover, since the Eucharist makes present the sacrifice of Christ, the cross, however modest, can spiritually transport the most devout participants to the foot of Calvary, as if they were eyewitnesses across space and time.

<div><div><span></span></div><div><b>Antoni Marquès (active between 1493 and 1507)</b></div></div>
<span></span> <div>Christ, Lord of Sorrows and the Arma Christi</div>
Catalonia, between 1506 and 1507
Tempera on wood, gilded
From the Trinity altarpiece of the Cathedral of Manresa (Bages)
<b>MEV 10743</b>

Empathetic meditation on Christ’s Passion, characteristic of late medieval devotion, often used the Arma Christi – the instruments of the Passion, later known as the *Improperia* – as a visual aid for spiritual reflection. Western mysticism of the period also interpreted Christ’s side wound as an echo of the portal through which Jesus entered the world, depicted vertically in several northern European manuscripts as a protective image.

## Living with the Sacred

Especially in the late Middle Ages, adherence to devotional practices became increasingly visible in private settings. In domestic spaces – particularly among the well-to-do – objects appeared that either miniaturised or evoked liturgical environments. In addition, various portable items (images, caskets, pendants, pilgrimage souvenirs), and even certain elements of interior decoration, continually made the spiritual and devotional dimension present in everyday life.