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### **The Head of Saint John the Baptist on a Platter. The Gaze of Death**

This article starts from a specific image-type that occupies a particular position in the iconology of death: the so called *caput Iohannis in disco* or the *Johanneschüssel*. The Johanneschüssel embodies new tendencies in art science and art theory, such as the increasing interest in the image as part of performative and ethnographic patrons. Also, the Johanneschüssel unfolds complex interactions between the artifact and the beholder and thus contributes to the study of the *Andachtsbild*, the gaze and the senses. Finally, the Johanneschüssel questions the relationship between medium and content at the stage of early Modernity. Therefore, I define the Johanneschüssel in three chapters: Image type and performativity, *Andachtsbild* and empathy, and Medium of head and face.

The Scripture and the martyrologies say that John the Baptist's head was served by a young maiden by order of Herod, and that his skull was found in the course of the fourth century. The existence of a head relic becomes apparent from the twelfth century onwards in letters and registries from the East. After the fourth crusade of 1204, even a small deluge of supposed St John skulls waves over the West. No less than twelve skulls were accounted for by the end of the Middle Ages. Most popular among these skulls was beyond doubt that of Amiens.

The Johanneschüssel is an image type that sprang from both text and relic. It is also an image type that presents death. This death is not an ordinary death; it is the mother of all deaths: the decapitation of the last of the prophets and the forerunner of the martyrs. Indeed, on the basis of exegetical interpretations, John was the *precursor (prodomos)* and the *proto-martyr*. He belongs to the Old and the New Covenant. This special position will be important for the meaning and the function of the John's platter. In short, during the age of the crusades, a new image type comes to be, which simulates St John's head on a platter. The first Johanneschüssels can be found as independent objects, but also on keystones, Johannite seals and on amulets. On the one side, the Johanneschüssel is based on the words of Herodias, Salome's mother, in Matthew 14:8: "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter" (*in disco*). On the other side, this artifact forms a kind of *Ersatz* or *Devotionalkopie* (Kretzenbacher) for the motherobject of devotion: the skull head.

From the thirteenth century onwards we notion independent Johanneschüsseln for devotional use in the sacred or private space. The frontal display of the pieces and in the invitation to eye-contact show important analogies with the phenomenon of the *Andachtsbild*. With the increasing importance of the *Andachtsbild* during the late Middle Ages, also the Johanneschüssel seems to develop more towards a strategy of gazing, an empathy of suffer. His eyes, broken, even closed are indeed tunnels towards another living face, divine and invisible in this world. John's gaze of death is a disclosure, a shimmering towards the *Beata visio*. As the face of Christ leads us towards the father, also the face of John, strongly rooted in the idea of the proto-martyr, might lead us to Him. Böhme speaks therefore of the 'martyrotheologie' of the Johanneschüssel.

This brings me to the involvement of the other senses, such as speech and more particular the role of the voice. Some scholars connect the typical macabre iconography of the Johanneschüssel (the open mouth, the tongue visible) to the quote *Ego sum vox clamantis in deserto* in John 1:22-23. De tongue is a topos for the prophet. 'The truth by the tongue' brings to mind the influential typology between *vox* and *verbum* that Augustine developed in his 288<sup>th</sup> sermon.

During the fifteenth century, when the cult of the Johanneschüssel reaches its apogee, the subject begins to appear also in a pictorial form. Idol becomes icon; Johanneschüssel reaches *vera icon*.

A specific variant of this medium shifts is visible in Italy where the influence of humanistic pictorial theory is stronger than above the Alps. The *tondo* by Giovanni Bellini in the Musei Civici of Pesaro no longer suggests that the head lies on a dish. Instead, it appears to be suspended in a vacuum. The head is painted with a 'spectacular' *raccourci*, transforming the neck wound into a morbid cynosure. Bellini's work shows the extent to which this subject becomes a focus of the quintessence of painterly possibilities, and how this isolated head thereby becomes the *Andachtsbild* of pictorial illusionism, the ultimate *paragone* of decollation. Moreover, in the sobering features of the agonies of death and the emphasis on the neck, the

*tondo* links up with the Medusa genre. Couldn't we consider indeed the very essence of the Johannesschüssel as the image of abyss and absorption?

In conclusion, metaphorically speaking, the Johannesschüssel relates to the archetypical idiom where images were unmediated and the impact of figurative art was believed to be so great that it could kill (Medusa). But it also eagerly looks forward to the age when images are the skin-bearers of a procreative God. It has not yet reached the countenance of the incarnation – visibility – but it is already removed from the all-destructive face, which is consequently forbidden by law – invisibility. The extinguished pupil is freed from the fatal impact of the figurative and is, *at the same time*, not yet that first living gaze of the incarnated face. This point zero on the threshold, this *Mittlerfunktion*, is where the Johannesschüssel rests. On account of this function and significance, the head of the Baptist exists in its *rigor mortis*, but simultaneously promises new life in the *vera icon*.