

An English Alabaster in 15th-Century Naples

Abstract

The Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte conserves a monumental alabaster altarpiece of the Passion that is as remarkable for its exquisite craftsmanship as it is for its rare state of preservation. Made in the third quarter of the 15th century in a sculptor's workshop in Central England, and enclosed in a custom oak case, this multipart sculpture travelled by land and by sea to the Aragonese court city of Naples. The alabaster is first documented in the late 17th century at the Neapolitan church of San Giovanni a Carbonara. However, the circumstances of its production in England and its physical and art-historical context in 15th-century Naples have not been fully investigated. This article sets out to explore the early history of the Capodimonte alabaster, and to restore a work of great art-historical significance to Renaissance Naples and its wider artistic worlds. Through study and analysis of material, documentary, historical, and historiographic evidence, the article argues that the Capodimonte alabaster was commissioned by or for the Aragonese court of Naples, that it could have been displayed in a space like the chapel of the ducal palace of Castel Capuano, and that it was one of a group of four Passion alabasters destined for recipients in a constellation of interconnected court cities. Further, the article sets the Capodimonte alabaster in the context of court practices of artistic patronage, collecting, and giftgiving, practices in which the geographic origins and movements of artworks carried meaning. In 15th-century Naples, the alabaster joined artworks from a range of places and times, in an array of mediums, that together created the abundance, variety, and splendour of the Neapolitan court. Finally, the article shows that the altarpiece's narrative program and the nature of the alabaster medium invited the work's first beholders to take part in imagined tactile experience as a mode of interacting with the Passion.