



Alabaster Statuettes of St Anne with the Virgin and Child and St Jerome

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ILL. 85

St Anne in polychrome
alabaster – Garden
with Daniel in the
Lions' Den

The *Enclosed Garden with Daniel in the Lions' Den* (G4) contains two alabaster statuettes amid a highly diverse assortment of other objects. It is the sole example to include alabaster sculptures among the seven Mechelen Enclosed Gardens. Consequently, the use of this soft stone import from England in an Enclosed Garden can be considered rather exceptional. Other examples in which alabaster sculptures form part of the tableau are the Enclosed Gardens from the Stedelijk Museum in Diest, the Abbey of Our Lady of Tongerlo, St Andrew's Church in Balen and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Arras (France). Despite the absence of maker's marks, there is no doubt at all that the statuettes in the *Enclosed Garden with Daniel in the Lions' Den* were manufactured in Mechelen. In fact, from the second quarter of the sixteenth century until the early seventeenth, Mechelen was the most renowned centre for alabaster work in the Southern Netherlands.¹

The statuettes flank the central sculpture in walnut of Daniel in the Lions' den and represent the church father St Jerome and St Anne with the Virgin and Child. The seated church father is depicted with a variety of attributes. The open book on a stand alongside him refers to his translation of the Bible into Latin: the Vulgate. The lion to his left and the thorn in his right hand refer to the popular legend in which

Jerome removed a painful thorn from the beast's paw. Although Jerome was never a cardinal, he was usually portrayed wearing a cardinal's hat and garments. His apparel owes itself to the fact that, between 382 and 384, he was secretary and advisor to Pope Damasus I in Rome.

On the other side of the central wooden statuette of Daniel is the sculptural group of St Anna with the Virgin and Child, a reference to the Immaculate Conception. St Anne is seldom portrayed alone; she is usually associated with the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus as an earthly Holy Trinity. She is standing in a frontal pose with a slight *contraposto* and wears a long belted gown over which is draped a long cloak. Her head is covered with a wimple. At waist height, St Anne is carrying a person in each hand. Her daughter, the Virgin Mary, is seen in her left hand as a young girl with long hair, her hands piously clasped together. Opposite Mary, in St Anne's right hand, we see the Virgin Mary's son. The infant Jesus is dressed in a long tunic and he holds a book open in his hands. His lower left leg is bent slightly backwards, lending him a playful sense of motion. The profiled hexagonal plinth bears the legend in gold leaf: *SAN-ANNA*.

A separate piece of alabaster has been used for the plinth for each statuette. The original joints in the statuettes themselves are less conspicuous. For example, a small piece of alabaster was added for the head of the Christ child prior to its sculpture. The assembly of different pieces of alabaster when creating small works of art, as here, points to the costliness of the imported material, as well as to the thrifty and careful use to which it was put in the workshop.

The present-day partial polychromy is more extensive than in the original, which was probably limited to gilding of the hair and the hems of the clothing, as well as, perhaps, a few highlights for facial expression.

¹ Michael K. Wustrack, *Die Mechelner Alabaster-Manufaktur des 16. und frühen 17. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt-Bern: Peter Lang, 1982).