

11-25-2014

Saint George

RISD Museum

Sheila Bonde

Brown University, sheila_bonde@brown.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel



Part of the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

RISD Museum and Bonde, Sheila, "Saint George" (2014). *Channel*. 25.

https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel/25

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the RISD Museum at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Channel by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeii@risd.edu.

I'm Sheila Bonde and I'm a professor of History of Art and Architecture and professor of archaeology at Brown. I'm delighted to be able to talk about the figure of Saint George.

Saint George is a terrific example of a kind of object that was tremendously popular in the Middle Ages throughout Europe. This is an object that wasn't used for private devotion nor was it normally kept in a church, but had its essential function in public processions and devotions that were carried.

Now, Saint George to the modern eye may appear somewhat awkward. He is after all bigger than his horse; we have to admit that. Why is that? It's certainly not the skill nor the experience of the medieval sculptor who clearly had seen horses and men, and knew their relative size. But here size is relative, and the relative important size of Saint George underscores the fact that he's the main character in this story, and we're meant to pay more attention to him than his equine mount.

What is Saint George doing? He's not only astride the horse, but also actively inserting his feet in the stirrups, clutching his shield, and raising his sword. He's clearly a military saint, and this is underscored by the elaborate helmet, armor, and greaves that he wears. Why do we have a military saint during this period? Saint George was often seen not simply as a devotional saint, but as a saint who would contribute to the defense of Christianity against those who might oppose it. In Spain in particular, Saint George became cast as a Moor killer; a defender of Christianity against Islam.

It's notable that Saint George, though he was an early Christian saint, is here dressed in the armor of the Early Modern period. That allowed contemporary viewers to relate to him and to see their particular concerns and pre-occupations with defending and celebrating Christianity, and to see Saint George as a participant alongside them in this endeavor.

It's also notable that during the Middle Ages in the Early Modern period that many towns might have had a Saint George, and they may have all carried their individual Saint Georges in procession. We know from texts describing these processions that sometimes villages got rather competitive. They would say, for example, that our Saint George is better than yours; he's more efficacious in defending Christianity.

Objects such as this were made to be part of life. They were made to interact with people. They were in fact not passive objects to be viewed from a single perspective, but were active and almost reactive objects; interacting with us, urging us to think about our values, our identities, and our reactions to objects and people around us. In fact, Saint George really was so animated when he was in use, that he became one of the members of the village or town where he lived. Coming to see him today, I recognize him like an old friend and I'm delighted to be able now to stand next to him in the gallery and have us look at one another.