

St. Tryphon, 250 AD.

How this ancient Saint depicted in the medium of marquetry travelled through the centuries to honour the mother of a son in Oxford.

When I reflect on our annual Christmas exhibition, which the Oxfordshire Craft Guild holds at the Oxfordshire Museum at Woodstock, I feel that the display we held there in 2022 retains a special meaning for me. The Guild had come up with the idea for their members to choose an artefact at the Pitt Rivers Museum — and be inspired by it to create something made in their individual medium — and I took up the challenge.

And so I went to the Pitt Rivers Museum to look for something that would inspire me. I was attracted by a particular object in the section under 'Luck and Protection' called Artisan of Memory which showed some miniature amulets that had been crafted as *ex-voto* in earlier times, in gratitude to Saints who had helped the believer overcome illness or accidents.



I spotted a medallion with the figure of a man riding a horse.

Among those sacred and secular objects on display — 'Flaming Hearts', silver shaped legs, pocket shrines, church bells — I spotted a medallion with the figure of a man riding a horse and holding a falcon on his right hand. The image was depicted in graphic simplicity, a delightful primitive style that immediately brought back to me influences from my own cultural background.

I was brought up in my childhood reading about the saints and their stoicism in the face of adversity. This piece appealed to me for its proportions: small enough to hold intimately in the palm of a hand and for its aesthetic quality of design and colour. Although the name of Tryphon was new to me, I learned later that he had been martyred for his Christian faith in the city of Nicea in AD 250.

St. Tryphon is still venerated in the Orthodox Eastern Churches and he is designated as a Protector of the city of Moscow. According to legend, Tzar Ivan the Terrible was hunting one day when his falcon flew away. His falconer, Tryphon Petrikolev was ordered to find the bird in three days or face death. Falconer Tryphon searched the forest, but could not find it.

Exhausted, he lay down and prayed to his Patron Saint for help. That night he dreamed of the Saint riding a horse holding a falcon in his hand. When he woke and looked around, he spotted the falcon in a pine tree nearby. Happily both man and bird returned safely to the Tzar.



Saint Tryphon is also a Patron Saint of birds. Above, a first sketch I made on my return from the Museum.

I began thinking about how I could transcribe this inspirational find into my own medium, Marquetry. The process of cutting slim wood veneers into sizes and shapes, and getting them into place with accurate adjustment to space is demanding and laborious but infinitely satisfying. I thought the image would be charming on a small box so, like the medallion itself, it could be held and cherished when held in one's hands.



I developed my sketch.

I would go on to decorate the Saint encircled by birds. But one of the practical difficulties I had to overcome was working with the very small size of the box I had chosen — only 12cm by 8cm — onto which I would have to cut the surface to accommodate the Saint on horseback with his Peregrin falcon at the centre with 6 birds in total: three on his right side and three on his left, and all presented in colour and detail. I chose the type of birds I wanted to decorate: the White Throat, who sings while flying; the Redstart with his bright russet tail; the friendly Robin; the yellow-crowned Palla's Warbler; the tiny European Gold Crest; the Coal Tit with his charming acrobatic skills. I recalled what Michelangelo wrote about getting to work: Art is made with the mind, not by the hands.



I took up my scalpel and began to work.

I had to make many cuts and insertions in the wood to help give the birds a colourful appeal. The background veneer had held up well for me, no mishaps, and I completed the box in time for the opening of the exhibition. The judges of the Artwork took their time over each entry and finally announced the winner: a gorgeous large handbag made of fabric felt. My little box

looked indeed sad. Then I also wondered, in the run-up to Christmas, if anybody would offer to buy my little box with the name of St. Tryphon written on it.

To take my mind from it, I started paying attention to our exhibition display. It was a pleasure to look at the variety of media and techniques used by each craftsperson to express their ideas. The potters, the weavers, the glass makers, the embroiderers, the jewellers, and me the marquetry maker. We were all on equal footing — indeed, this was a founding principle promoted by the newly established Oxfordshire Craft Guild in 1985 which proved to be such a "Creative Guild" for so many years.

What I have written is interesting, not really amazing. But wait! Among the various notices promoting the exhibition on social media, I also advertised my box on the Ashmolean social staff link. One day, out of the blue came a message saying:

"Hello, good afternoon. My name is Tryphon. I am a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Oxford. I was wondering if it would be possible to buy the box from you? Coming from Greece, my Saint has a special place in my heart."

When I handed over the box to him, while holding it in his hand he said, "I shall give this to my dear mother as a present."



*He said to me,
"This Saint has a special place in my heart."*

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