Illus 1 The figurative oak panel from Bridgend, Perth, front and back. (Copyright Perth Museum and Art Gallery)
A Renaissance carved figurative wooden panel from Bridgend, Perth, Scotland

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with a contribution by Anne Crone

Introduction

On display in the Human History Gallery (‘The Time of Our Lives’) of Perth Museum and Art Gallery is a carved oak panel decorated with a female figure. It is accessioned with the registration number 2487 and its register entry reads: ‘Carved oak panel representing the figure of a woman, dug up by James Keen, 18 Watergate, Perth (gardener) in a garden at Steel of Stormont Cottage, Bridgend on 6 March 1925, found about 2 feet below the surface lying face down. Presented by the finder 7 March 1925 …’

Hitherto the panel has escaped any detailed enquiry and so the opportunity is taken to publish this note to facilitate its fuller consideration alongside other examples of late medieval decorative woodwork from Scotland. A description follows before a consideration of the broader context of such woodwork from Scotland and the local context of late medieval Perth, followed by the results of recent dendrochronological analysis carried out by Anne Crone.

Description

In the following description, left and right are given as one looks at the panel (see Illus 1). The panel comprises a single board of oak and measures 450mm (l) x 199mm (w) x 12mm (th). It has a border defined by a rebated edge that survives down the right-hand side and along the bottom edge, which would have permitted it to slot into a frame or another panel, tongue-and-groove fashion. The back of the panel is plain and roughly smoothed-off. It has an irregular bevelling along the upper and lower short sides which has the feel of being a later modification, possibly a combination of wear and tear and its re-fitting as a single panel into a new frame or piece of furniture. The chamfering and plainness of the back are also typical of backs of small cupboard doors. Such a panel could have been used in one of more ecclesiastical or domestic contexts including as a screen panel (redors, rood or parclose for example) or part of a screen door or as a furniture panel such as would be used on a cupboard, chest, bench (cf Tracy 1988, pl.127, cat.327), chair (ibid, pl.123, cat.321), or table (ibid, pl.119, cat.319).

The decoration is in medium to high relief and comprises a single, elaborately dressed female figure, her body facing but her head turned left. The face is bold and vital with a pronounced right cheek (making good use of the grain) and a large right eye, full lips and a large curving nose. The figure wears a cap with an elaborate front band atop the forehead decorated with four deep, dumb-bell like incisions at its widest point (where it sits above the left ear); the band narrows across the forehead and is decorated with much more slightly incised curves and squiggles. A high-buttoned collar is fastened with a single button, a lozenge shaped opening beneath it showing a small area of neck. Over this is worn a low-necked robe with elaborate slashed sleeves. The slashing and the incised curves and squiggles noted above are comparable to such devices used on other figurative carving notably the Arrest of Christ panel from a series of Passion Panels dating to the second quarter of the 16th century now at Traquair House, Peeblesshire (RCAHMS 1967, pl.111) and a number of the Stirling Heads (RCAHMS 1960, notably plates 1, 3, 6 and 18). The figure’s left hand points upwards with the fingers drawn together at chest height, possibly holding the robe. The right hand makes a similar gesture but is placed beneath the left hand and pointing downwards. Thinner sleeves hang down from within the heavy robe cuffs. The left hand is quite thickly cut, with hints of fingernails visible. The right hand is more crudely fashioned, the fingers appearing narrower and longer and with no indication of nails. Below the level of the hands the robe becomes a rather vague profusion of costume folds and lines, with no decorative detailing and an unfinished appearance. This unfinished feel would perhaps have been reduced significantly if the panel were originally painted (there is no trace of any paint evident however). A wavy line along the bottom edge of the panel may be meant to suggest the hem of the robe but there is no suggestion of legs or feet.

To the left of the face and appearing to grow out of the shoulder of the figure is a thickly stalked flower with a cone or spike-like elongated head projecting from an asymmetric collar or rosette of foliage. From the stalk grow four linear alternate leaves typical of a grass. The plant seems to be both real and yet not quite real. ‘A conventional flower resembling a lily’, to borrow Tracy’s phrase (1988, pl.11a, used to describe a 15th century version carved on a Scottish roof boss) points to a possible resolution of this contradiction. The grass-like leaves and the elongated flower-spike or spadix suggest a lily-like plant may be intended. *Arum* or ‘Lords and ladies’ (and having several colloquial names which allude to its phallic-like spadix, hooded in a large pale green leaf or spathe) seems the most compatible choice. Compare, for example, the botanical description in Blamey, Fitter and Fitter (2003, 340). For detailed accounts of the folklore surrounding this plant—including its use to
make starch for aristocratic ruffs from the 16th century onwards see Vickery (1995, 223–6) and Mabey (1996, 385–6).

Dendrochronology
Anne Crone

The ring-pattern of the panel was accessible along the flat upper edge. This surface was very lightly sanded and brushed to enhance the ring-pattern. A cast of the ring-pattern was then taken using FIMO, modelling clay which can be hardened at low temperatures and which has been used successfully to replicate ring-patterns for measurement (Crone 2004). There was one gap in the ring-pattern where the panel had been damaged; a cast of the ring-pattern which bridged this gap was taken across the cap of the carved figure.

The cast of the ring-pattern was measured and a sequence of 94 rings was recorded. This sequence was cross-matched against all available chronologies, from Scotland, England, Ireland and Europe, but no significant correlations were found. New casts were taken and re-measured to ensure that there were no errors in the ring-pattern but the results of cross-matching were still negative.

The chances of dating a single sequence are always less than those of dating a larger assemblage but a successful result is still possible, as the recent dating of a lintel from John Knox’ House, in Edinburgh demonstrates (Crone 2003). The barrel from the High St, Perth (Crone this volume) remained undated for several years until other barrel chronologies were constructed. As the Bridgend panel sequence will now form part of the European tree-ring database it may eventually be dated when new master chronologies become available.

Wood-carving in 16th-century Scotland

The dimensions of the panel, the style of the carving and the attire of the female figure place it stylistically in the 16th century, circa 1520–1560. Within this date bracket fall a number of parallel carvings. These include the Montrose panels and doors of c. 1515 and the Beaton panels of c. 1530 (Caldwell 1982, 108–9) and perhaps most tellingly the four mid 16th century carved oak panels from Dundee (Caldwell 1982, 110; Shiel 1885–6, 108–20) and from Stirling Castle both the so-called Stirling Heads, figurative medallions of the 1540s (RCAHMS 1960; Macmillan 1990, 33) and the probably related medallion panels used as wainscoting (Richardson 1926, 403—a set of 15 panels—and 403–4—three isolated examples probably from Stirling).

Within the examples from Stirling and Dundee, there are particular parallels in the treatment of the hands and the costume (already noted above). Richardson (1926, 403) suggested that the Stirling panels may have been carved by a French hand and one of three carvers potentially connected with the Stirling Heads was the Frenchman Andrew Mansioun, possibly part of a contingent of French craftsmen sent to Scotland at the time of James V’s second marriage, to Mary of Guise (the others included the painter, Pierre Quesnel, whose son, Francois, also a painter, was born in Edinburgh—Macmillan 1990, 35). Mansioun (also Mansion) is also cited (after MacRoberts) by Caldwell (1994, 182) in his revaluation of the Beaton Panels (which persuasively suggests a St Andrews castle provenance rather than an Arbroath Abbey one) as a possible carver of those panels. The other two possible carvers—Robert Robertson and John Drummond—were Scotsmen, both of whom worked in Stirling and Falkland and Drummond is known to have visited France in 1538 (RCAHMS 1960, 8–9).

This fits the accepted pattern of native and foreign craftsmen operating at an international commissioning level identified in other craft areas, notably painting (see for example Higgitt 1990, 31–44; Caldwell 1990, 45–66 and Holloway 1990, 67–75; and also Apte and Hannabuss 1978). Caldwell’s discussion of the Beaton Panels (1994) shows how a French influence on such work could make itself felt out of a combination of factors—French craftsmen working in Scotland, Scottish craftsmen working alongside Frenchmen or having spent time abroad and the availability of French Books of Hours as templates—without requiring wholesale manufacture abroad. The affinities between the Perth panel and the Dundee panels may even hint at a carver based either in Dundee or Perth.

Both towns had extensive craft bases and in some instances sought specialised craft skills in the neighbouring community. The Perth Guildry Book records a payment of 20 shillings made in 1489 to the goldsmith Robert Smith, ‘for his time, labours and expenses at Dundee concerning the Eucharist’ (Stavert 1993, no. 1121)—presumably the making of a monstrance or a Corpus Christi reliquary. In 1486 the Baker’s Guild of Dundee purchased from Thomas Tournor of Sanct Johnstoun (Perth) a Mass Book, ‘newly written and bound’ for their altar in St Mary’s Parish Church, Dundee (Mackinlay 1914, 345). The royal burgh of Perth had several royal properties and apartments in the 16th century (including Blackfriars monastery and Mary of Guise’s house on Watergate) making it feasible also for the royal craftsmen, French or otherwise to have worked in the town.

Turning to the subject matter of the Perth panel, it would be easy to see the panel as a secular depiction, possibly even a portrait (the Stirling Heads for example include a number of portraits of Royal family members and courtiers, see RCAHMS 1960, 11). Without ruling out the Perth panel as portrait its imagery may be more complex than this. By the end of the 15th century the highest social circles were clearly combining portraiture and religious (or other) symbolism. The Melan Diptych, painted by Jean Fouquet c. 1450, is a portrait of Agnès Sorel (mistress of Charles VI), as the enthroned Virgin, offering a breast to the Christ child on her knee. It was commissioned by Etienne Chevalier, Charles’ treasurer.
and also infatuated with Agnès (Warner 1976, pl.28). In a similar vein, François Rabelais wrote a letter in 1536 to Bishop Geoffrey d'Etissac noting that the then pope, Paul III, was the illegitimate son of his predecessor Alexander VI and his sister, and that in Paul’s palace (built by Alexander) there hung a portrait of Alexander’s sister (Paul’s mother) depicted as Our Lady (Frame 1991, 774). These examples are part of a much wider phenomenon of artists (and their patrons) describing a historical/spiritual reality through a contemporary reality of recognisable individuals and landscapes. For many commentators its apogee is marked by Jan van Eyck’s Ghent altarpiece (painted 1432) with its rich details of contemporary real landscape, costume and people (including the patrons) (see Gombrich 1995, 236–40).

So, whilst the Perth panel may be a portrait, it may equally be a portrait with a symbolic value or a portrait inserted into a series of narrative panels. Equally, it may have no portrait significance. Precise identification is made difficult by its lack of provenance and its apparent incompleteness, i.e. it is unlikely that it was fashioned as a stand alone panel.

It is likely that the Perth panel formed part of a set or series of panels, not unlike the Stirling, Montrose, Beaton, Traquair and Dundee carvings already referred to. The four panels from Dundee comprise three with clear Biblical scenes—the Judgement of Solomon, the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi—associated with a fourth panel bearing the royal coat of arms of James V (whom we noted above as employing French and Scottish woodcarvers). These may have originally come from the chapel of the Franciscan nunnery in Dundee (for the nunnery see Cowan and Easson 1976, 154) but were found in a house in the Overgate (D. Caldwell pers. comm.).

The attribution to an ecclesiastical establishment was really an over-interpretation of their religious imagery a scenario comparable with that of the Beaton Panels which also combined religious themes (including the Annunciation, the Tree of Jesse and the Arma Christi) with the arms of James V and which were long held to have been originally carved for Arbroath Abbey (Caldwell 1982, 109) until Caldwell’s re-examination (1994) suggested Beaton’s residence at St Andrew’s castle was a more plausible origin. Of course within the castle they may have been furnishings for the chapel or more secular rooms. A similar overlapping of boundaries (religious and secular, sacred and domestic) is suggested by the Traquair House panels and their possible original attribution to a royal chapel in Leith (RCAHMS 1967, 323). Looking slightly wider we could also note the series of wall paintings at Kinneil House, executed in c. 1553 for the Regent Arran. In two rooms survive two schemes, one showing six scenes of the Good Samaritan and also St Jerome, Mary Magdalene and St Lucretia (?) and the other including Samson and Delilah, David and Bathsheba, the Sacrifice of Isaac and the Temptation of St Anthony (Macmillan 1990, 36 and pl 23). This serves to remind us that the sacred and the secular were thoroughly mixed: religious imagery was never confined to ecclesiastical spaces and such spaces were never limited to displaying overtly religious imagery.

The Perth context

Does a consideration of the local context of the panel, ie the burgh of Perth, help to clarify some of this complexity? The recent dendrochronological analysis of eight carved oak geometric openwork panels from Perth (found in 1849 re-used in a building on George Street) permitted a consideration of the architectural contexts for such work in Perth (Crone, Fawcett and Hall 2000).

There is no need to rehearse those arguments again here. Suffice to say that in the mid 16th century there were a number of ecclesiastical foundations in and around Perth that would have required a variety of wooden screens and panelling, paramount amongst them St John’s parish kirk but also several monastic houses—Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite and Carthusian—hospitals and chapels—St Paul’s, St Laurence’s, St Anne’s, Our Lady’s-on-the-Bridge, St Leonard’s, St Mary Magdalene’s and a Loreto chapel. There were also royal apartments in Blackfriars and royal and other aristocratic houses on Watergate, for example.

As has already been detailed, the panel was found in garden ground at Bridgend. This would appear to have originated as a medieval suburb of Perth at the northern end of the bridge over the Tay (that left Perth at the bottom of the High Street) and adjacent to the suburb of Kinnoull (with its own parish church, St Constantine’s). Routes to and from Scone, Coupar Angus, Dundee and St Andrews met on this bank of the Tay, using the bridge (when not washed away by floods) and or the ferries across the Tay to reach Perth and points south. The precise find spot of Steel of Stormont cottage can be equated with 8 Strathmore Street (and is so listed in the 1924/5 valuation roll of the burgh of Perth, Perth & Kinross Council Archive reference: CC1/8/3/136; it was then owned by Robert and Margaret Steele, who presumably gave their name and place of origin to the cottage). This property is approximately 500 metres from the area in which the Leper Hospital, to which I now turn, was located.

Given the existing known pattern for the destruction, dispersal and appropriation or reuse of late medieval woodwork during and after the Reformation, it is entirely plausible that one of the ecclesiastical establishments of Perth was the source of the panel or that it came from a wealthy, secular domestic property or lodging. However the Bridgend provenance brings one further candidate into play, the least known medieval Perth hospital, a Leper hospital sited in Bridgend (and so appropriately liminal in relation to the town and to the River Tay) but for which we do not know the dedication nor the foundation date, though it was extant until the Reformation. This hospital is not listed by Cowan and Easson (1976) and though we have no structural or
archaeological evidence for its location sufficient documentary evidence survives to confirm its existence. This has recently been compiled and reviewed by Derek Hall and Ray Cachart (unpublished 1997, a database on Scottish hospitals prepared for Historic Scotland). The earliest reference is 1577, when an action in the Perthshire sheriff’s court (the text from the Register of Decrees of the Sheriff Court of Perth is reproduced in Fittis 1885, 288–9) named the ‘Lipperland’ as being within the croft of Potterhill, Bridgend (part of the lordship of Pitcullen and the barony of Kinnoull) and proximal to a Rood Chapel, which may have been part of the hospital. The Chapel appears to have been still standing in 1577 and the same record talks of the ‘road that passes from the house of the Lipper folk to the last furrow of the headriggs on the east part …’(ibid). There are several later documents referring to Andrew Mercer’s tenancy of the Lipperland, including a 1650 compiled list of writs for King James VI Hospital Perth which records Mercer as a tenant of the Lipperland in 1572. The description of the boundary of the area in question is sufficient to map an area in which the Leper Hospital is likely to have stood, and is indicated on illus. 2 (borrowed from Derek Hall’s original map in the unpublished database).

The Montrose panels have already been referred to above. Their possible contextual parallel with the Perth panel is striking. They were found in an old house in Montrose (re-used as a garret partition) but originally may have come from ‘the hall of a hospital founded by Abbot Patrick Panter of Montrose …’ (Caldwell 1982, 108). It remains far from certain but entirely plausible that the single figurative panel found at Bridgend is an important clue to the late medieval, pre-Reformation furnishing and patronage of the leper hospital there.

In his catalogue of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s medieval woodwork collection, Charles Tracy, in describing two 15th century wooden roof bosses from Scotland observed ‘so little Scottish medieval woodwork has survived that there is no stylistic context into which these bosses may be fitted’ (1988, 39, no. 30–31). This is a bleak but realistic assessment (and one echoed by other writers, including Crone, Fawcett and Hall 2000). It is compounded by the fact that what does survive
generally has a limited (if tantalising) provenance. However, from the limited analysis offered here (to try and contextualise the Perth panel) there is clearly a significant corpus of woodwork from Scotland for the first half of the 16th century which aptly fits into Caldwell’s attribution (1994, 181) of the Beaton Panels as belonging to ‘a late medieval North European tradition of woodcarving.’ The line between this and what is conventionally described as Renaissance woodcarving is perhaps less sharp than has been allowed hitherto, hence my use of both terms in this paper.

I offer this paper as a clarification of the potential Perth context and as an encouragement for a more comprehensive, fresh examination of the whole corpus. The Perth panel has been in the Museum for the best part of a century (and for much of that time on display), known and yet unknown. Increased research of the rich collections of Scotland’s museums is an essential prerequisite of a better understanding of and increased access to the nation’s past.

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Crone, B A 2005 Dendrochronological analysis of a lintel from John Knox’ House, Edinburgh, unpub report for CFA.

Abstract

A carved oak figurative panel found in Perth in 1925 and currently on display in Perth Museum is here dated to the second quarter of the 16th century, and assessed in terms of other Scottish late medieval/Renaissance figurative panels and in terms of its possible association with Perth’s medieval leper hospital in Bridgend.

Keywords

Bridgend carved-wood dendrochronology leper hospital medieval oak panels Perth Renaissance