OBJECT OF DEVOTION:
MEDIEVAL ENGLISH ALABASTER SCULPTURE FROM THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM
AN EXHIBITION ORGANIZED AND CIRCULATED BY ART SERVICES INTERNATIONAL, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

ON VIEW AT THE DAYTON ART INSTITUTE,
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Alexandria, VA – Art Services International is pleased to announce “OBJECT OF DEVOTION: Medieval English Alabaster Sculpture from the Victoria and Albert Museum.” The 60 alabaster panels and free-standing figures in the exhibition are drawn from the world’s largest collection of medieval alabasters, that of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Dramatic, and intricately crafted, these pieces are some of the finest examples of the elegant, yet, neglected art form of alabaster sculpture. The exhibition travelled to North America for the first time in December of 2010.

The Exhibition
The sixty prime examples, including a complete set of panels from an altarpiece, have been carefully selected for this exhibition, representing all the major types produced by English sculptors. The exhibition is organized in six sections:

The Art of the “Alabastermen”
Serving as an introduction to the exhibition, this section includes three works that perfectly represent the best work of the alabasterers: a dramatic, startlingly stylized figure of Saint Christopher carrying an infant Christ and two highly engaging and attractive relief panels, one of the Fifth Sign of the Last Judgment and one of the Adoration of the Magi.
Martyrs and Miracles: The Lives and Deaths of the Saints
Saints served numerous roles in everyday medieval society including protecting the souls, well-being, health, and even wealth of believers. Brightly gilded and polychromed carvings of Biblical episodes reflect the color and drama of medieval religious life and belief. Alabaster images of saints were made for private homes, intended for private worship and comfort. These objects were often affordable – within the reach of “ordinary” people – and the works included here illustrate a folk art aspect of the medium. This is seen in their rougher, less delicate carving; reduced attention to proportion, scale, and perspective; and unsubtle painting techniques – all perfectly acceptable to an audience that was generally less sophisticated in its tastes than wealthier patrons. The highlight of this section is a small, devotional altarpiece made for a private patron. It is comprised of an alabaster panel depicting the Trinity, and is set in a beautifully painted wooden casing, complete with doors and painted figures of saints.

Word Made Flesh: The Life of Christ
Over time, styles and techniques for carving alabaster changed, as did the designs and compositions. This section presents scenes from the life of Christ -- from the Annunciation through to the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension -- exploring the changes in alabaster production as well as those in Christian iconography. Spanning the years from 1380 through the 15th-century – the zenith of alabaster production -- and on through the Reformation, this stylistic overview includes the delicacy and finesse of late 14th-century sculpture in panels of the Annunciation and the Resurrection.
The Altarpiece: Worshipping at Church  
Altarpieces played an important role in late medieval devotional practice and public worship. Most alabaster altarpieces took the form of rectangular relief panels designed to be fitted into wooden casings in groups. Providing an impressive and stately focus to this section is a spectacular set of five panels from an altarpiece that are set into a specially made casing, illustrating how the panels were initially intended to be seen. In contrast to the folk-art aspects of private devotional alabasters, altarpieces in churches sought to hold the attention of crowds of churchgoers through sophisticated carving techniques and elaborate, multi-episode compositions – particularly apparent in a large and elaborate carving like the late 15th-century Panel of the Betrayal.

Business and Religion: Making and Selling Holy Images  
The working methods of the alabastermen and the actual stages involved in the production of reliefs and sculpture -- from the mining of the stone and its transport to the artists, to the actual carving of objects and the coloring of them -- are explored in this section. Some works included were selected to show latten (an alloy resembling brass) hooks, and assembly marks on the back. The export trade in alabasters will be explored through two key heads of Saint John the Baptist. While both depict the same subject, the differences in composition and carving are geared toward two different audiences --- one at a higher, more aristocratic end of the market, and the other aimed at customers with less money to spend but just as much desire to furnish their homes with religious images of comfort. Like everything else in their lives, the aristocratic version is more carefully finished, more heavily gilded, and more elaborate. Ironically, it may well be the humbler, simpler version that appeals more to many of us today, with our modern taste for minimalist simplicity.
End of an Era: The Reformation
The Reformation of the 1530s ended the alabaster industry in England as part of its wholesale rejection of religious art. Workshops quickly sold off their stock to remaining Catholic areas of Europe while, in England, mobs defaced and destroyed much alabaster sculpture. Examples of defaced and vandalized sculpture are included to illustrate these dramatic social changes and the end of alabaster production in England. In particular, a late 14th-century panel of the Crucifixion bears the scars of Reformist zeal, with the images of Christ and other figures having been violently but methodically “defaced.”

The Legacy
English alabaster art was forgotten or dismissed as ‘folk art’ up until the late 19th century. At that time, the Arts and Crafts movement, both in Britain and the United States, was concerned with ennobling the more modest home of the rapidly expanding middle class, not unlike the work of the “alabastermen.” Along with heightening an appreciation of medieval technique, the Arts And Crafts movement encouraged our ability to empathize and understand the strange, mystical aesthetics of medieval English alabaster sculpture.

In continental Europe, artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, and Auguste Rodin also displayed an affinity towards English alabasters. All share a delight in expression through abstraction, shapes and color, and the creation of dream-like realities. Later, the fabulously surreal, conceptualized images of English alabaster were to have a profound influence on 20th-century sculpture, particularly on artists working in abstract or conceptual styles. These sculptors conveyed the magnitude and emotion of their subject matter by stylizing and distorting perspective, scale, color, and reality itself.

Today, it is possible to detect the powerful legacy of these anonymous master craftsmen in the work of more recent artists such as Henry Moore and Jacob Epstein, the American-born British Expressionist sculptor. To carve his masterpiece, “Jacob and the Angel,” Epstein actually used a block of English alabaster, quarried from the same part of the country where the medieval artists sourced their alabaster. In North America, traces of the ‘alabasterers’, as medieval writers call them, is evidenced in the work of 20th-century figurative sculptors like Elie Nadelman. A full illustrated color catalogue published by Art Services International accompanies the exhibition.
Itinerary

Credit Information
Please mention Art Services International in any articles or written references to the exhibition: The exhibition is organized and circulated by Art Services International, Alexandria, Virginia. This exhibition is supported by a grant from The Samuel H. Kress Foundation. His Excellency Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Former Ambassador of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United States of America, is Honorary Patron of the exhibition.

About the Victoria & Albert Museum
The Victoria & Albert Museum is one of the world's greatest museums of art and design, with collections unrivalled in their scope and diversity. It houses more than 3000 years' worth of amazing artifacts from many of the world's richest cultures including ceramics, furniture, fashion, glass, jewelry, metalwork, photographs, sculpture, textiles and paintings.

Organizer
Art Services International is a nonprofit educational institution that organizes touring art exhibitions of the highest quality for museums worldwide, accompanied by scholarly all-color catalogues. These exhibitions include paintings, drawings, prints, photographs, sculpture, and decorative arts that range from the art of the ancient world to works of the Old Masters, and continue through to the contemporary period. ASI exhibitions are drawn from museums and private collections internationally, and are hosted by museums throughout the United States and Europe. ASI shares with the hosting museums a commitment to enhancing the appreciation of art.