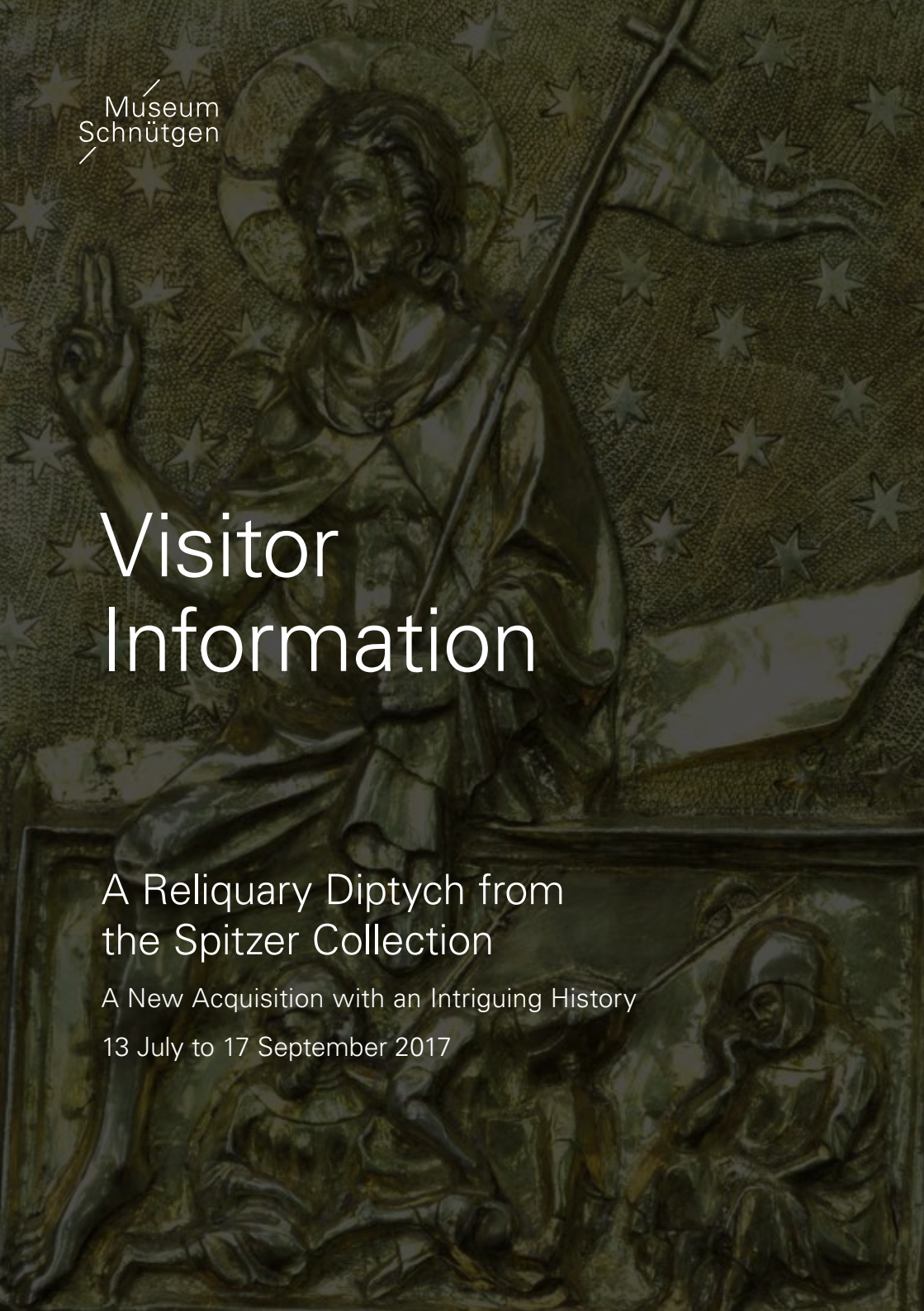
Museum Schnütgen

Visitor Information

A Reliquary Diptych from the Spitzer Collection

A New Acquisition with an Intriguing History

13 July to 17 September 2017



The New Acquisition

In 2015, the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation acquired a mysterious object from a Canadian private collection for the Museum Schnütgen.

The object in question is a box that can be opened like a book to reveal a complex and unusual inside that raises a multitude of questions about the object's age and origins.

The outside is covered in a seventeenth-century velvet and embellished with silk and metal-thread embroidery.

First Opening

Opened, the box reveals two hinged panels (diptych). These are embellished with four polished rock crystal cabochons and gilded reliefs in chased silver. The two central scenes of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ are flanked by four vertical silver strips, each embossed with four angels, and framed by eight smaller square reliefs set in the corners which show the symbols of the four evangelists (eagle, man, lion and ox) as well as seated male figures with scrolls who probably represent the evangelists or the four major prophets.

The Silver Reliefs

Probably made in France in the first half of the fourteenth century, the silver reliefs are exceptionally rare. In France, most Gothic goldsmiths' work was destroyed or melted down in the wake of the French Revolution and, more recently, as a consequence of the two world wars. Prior to the acquisition of the reliquary, the Museum Schnütgen had no comparable chased silver pieces of the Gothic era.

The well-modelled figures of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection scenes stand out against a background that is enlivened with a punched pattern of small dots and stars. The expressive gestures of the figures, which appear quite large in relation to the picture field, heighten the sense of three-dimensional space, especially in the relief of the Resurrection.

Possible Models in the Work of Other Goldsmiths

Among the few surviving objects of French Gothic goldsmiths' work that one might draw on for comparison are the covers of a handful of precious books from the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris which exemplify the courtly style of the time of Louis IX (Saint Louis) around 1250.

The cover of the so-called First Gospel Lectionary of the Sainte-Chapelle (Paris, BnF, ms lat. 8892) is comparable to the Spitzer Diptych in the juxtaposition of the same principal motifs. The back and front covers show the Crucifixion and Resurrection executed in gilded chased silver reliefs set into a recessed frame with small figures under arcades in a similar arrangement as the strips with the angels in the diptych.

Possible Models in Sculpture

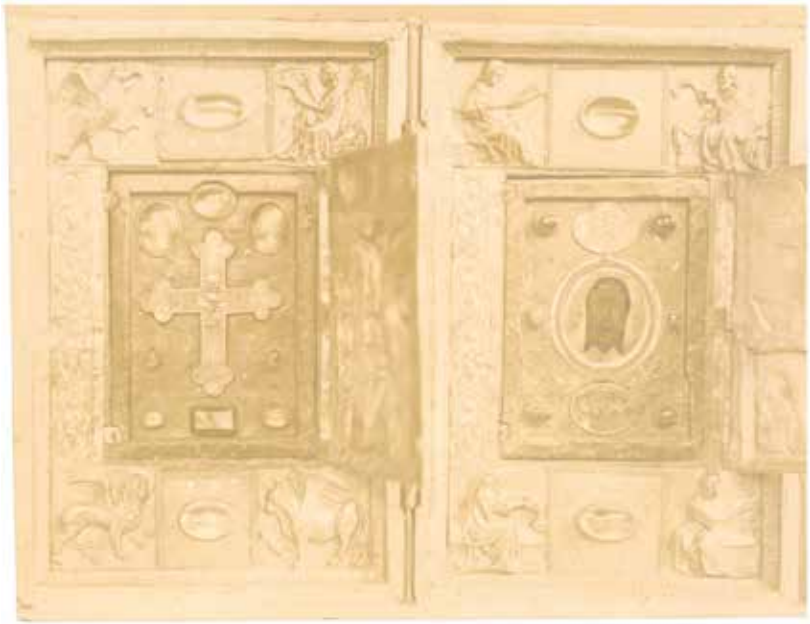
The Crucifixion on the cover of the so-called Second Gospel Lectionary of the Sainte-Chapelle (Paris, BnF, ms lat. 9455, ill. left) of around 1240 is comparable to the Spitzer Diptych in the depiction of a special motif: the figure of the Virgin standing at the foot of the Cross. Her pose and gesture do not so much give expression to her grief as to her veneration of the crucified Christ.

The scant survival of goldsmiths' work makes it necessary to look for stylistic similarities in other forms of art. In the realm of stone sculpture, for example, one might turn to the reliefs of the first half of the fourteenth century on the southern choir screen in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, among them a figure of Christ as Gardener who appears to Mary Magdalene in the Noli me tangere scene.

Second Opening

The two central silver reliefs were originally hinged on the right and could be opened (cf. historical photograph). They conceal two small tablets set into the large wooden panels of the box. Their leather-covered frames are painted in red.

The tablet beneath the Crucifixion features a central reliquary cross with quatrefoil ends. The small, three-dimensional figure of the corpus (crucified Christ) can be lifted to reveal a small compartment for a still extant relic, a splinter of the True Cross. Set into the other tablet is a reverse glass painting of the Holy Face of Christ. It depicts a miracle-working image of Christ's face, the Vera Icon or the so-called Mandylion, a true painted likeness of Christ.



The Collector

Of particular note is the fact that the object comes from the collection of Frédéric Spitzer (1815–1890). Spitzer was a collector and one of the leading art dealers of his time. Originally from Vienna, he settled in Paris around 1860. His mansion, the Musée Spitzer, housed a vast collection of works of art from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

A great many of his objects ended up in the Louvre and other great museums. However, the Spitzer collection has also come to be known for its numerous pastiches made up from diverse components from older objects as well as for outright forgeries.

While there was never any doubt about the authenticity of the gilded silver reliefs, the art trade was evidently wary of the diptych as a whole and regarded its motley assortment of elements from different periods with some scepticism.

Thus, when the object was offered for sale, focus was placed on the ten fire-gilded silver reliefs, which were assumed to have originally been made for a sumptuous book cover. The rest of the diptych was treated as a somewhat questionable montage.

And it is for this reason that the Museum Schnütgen has embarked on an in-depth examination of the object as a whole. The investigation has not yet been completed, but it has already yielded some fascinating results.

Frédéric Spitzer in Fancy Dress,
c. 1880, photograph by Nadar,

Examination of the Silverwork

The investigation opened with an analysis of the silver reliefs, which are made of the same silver alloy (nearly pure silver with 2-3 percent copper) as the arcaded frames of the two large panels. Another important result was the discovery that the hinges which allowed the two tablets depicting the Crucifixion and the Resurrection scenes to be opened were part of the original object. This invalidated the hypothesis that the reliefs had originally been intended for a book cover.

The basic design of the figurative reliefs was raised from the back of the silver sheet by means of small hammers (repoussé technique); definition and fine detail were added from the front (chase work), as was the punched pattern of stars and dots. Accidental splits in the silver sheets were fixed on the back with small strips of soldered silver.

Taking a closer look at these repairs, the metal conservator of the Museum Schnütgen made an important discovery…

A Crucial Detail

To repair a split along Christ's loincloth on the side facing the Virgin in the Crucifixion panel, the silversmith used a leftover piece of the strip with the arcade motif framing the wooden panels. Since the frame is complete, the piece used for the repair must have been surplus to requirements. This gave rise to the hypothesis that the silver reliefs were in fact made at the same time as the framing strips and intended for the diptych and not, as had previously been assumed, reused from another object.

Reversal of the History of the Diptych's Creation

These findings forced us to completely reverse our initial assumptions about the history of the object. The hypothesis that it was a seventeenth-century montage – if not indeed a nineteenth-century one (Spitzer Collection) – that incorporated a range of older components was thus no longer tenable.

This freed us to pursue the more compelling theory that the small red-framed tablets not only formed the oldest, but, because of their relics, also most precious part of the diptych, and that it was set into the larger diptych at some point in the fourteenth century, when it was also embellished with the luxurious silver reliefs. Scientific confirmation of this theory was obtained by radiocarbon dating of tiny samples of the wood. The test results placed the most probable origin of the small tablets in the early thirteenth century and that of the large panels in the last third of the thirteenth century.

Certainties and Questions

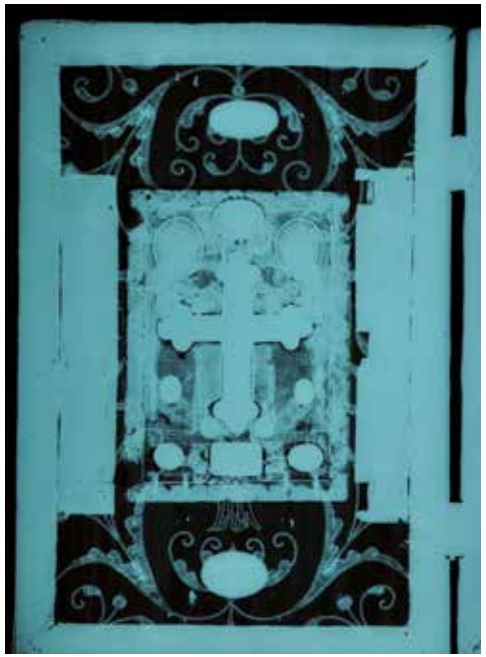
The medieval origin of the diptych was now by and large established. It was created in two phases. The original small reliquary diptych dates to the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century, it was set – presumably largely unaltered, otherwise one would not have needed to go to as much trouble – into the larger hinged panels.

This conclusion, however, raises new questions. The very parts that had been conclusively identified as the oldest, i.e. the inner reliquary tablets, also feature some distinctly Baroque traits. Among these are the relics of saints that can be seen beneath polished rock crystals and glass cabochons and the way these are tastefully arranged by colour – pink on the left and green on the right – instead of striving for greater chromatic diversity. Similarly, the painting of the two tablets is unlikely to predate the seventeenth century. As the sculpture and painting conservator of the Museum Schnütgen points out, it is executed in part on primed canvas, and the painted motifs take account of the assitional reliquary containers that were added in the Baroque period.

A Look Beneath the Surface

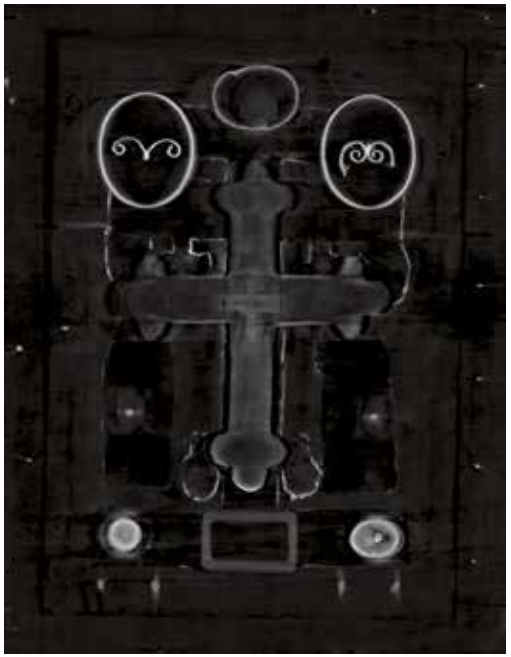
These new questions prompted us to subject the object to a radiological examination. The X-ray images clearly show the metal-thread embroidery of the seventeenth-century velvet cover, which, as the textile conservator of the Museum Schnütgen found, was custom-woven for the diptych.

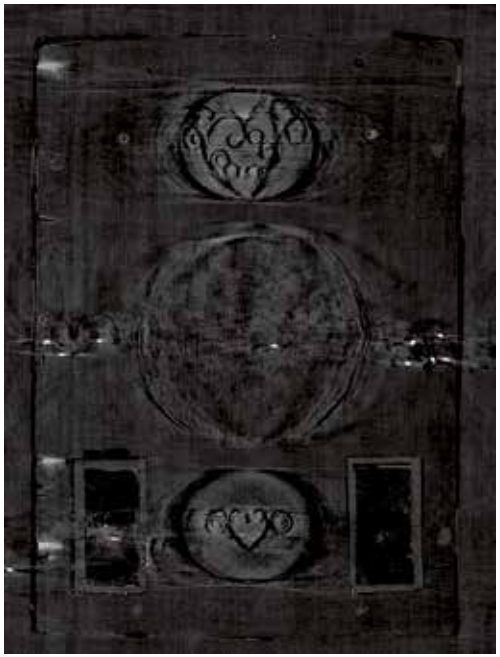
The X-ray images also revealed structures inside the small tablets which do not match their surface appearance.



A Closer Look Beneath the Surface

This gave rise to an even more detailed radiological examination in a special laboratory for computer tomography. The resulting images show several empty reliquary chambers beneath the surface, noticeably with one large chamber directly beneath the reverse glass painting of the Holy Face.





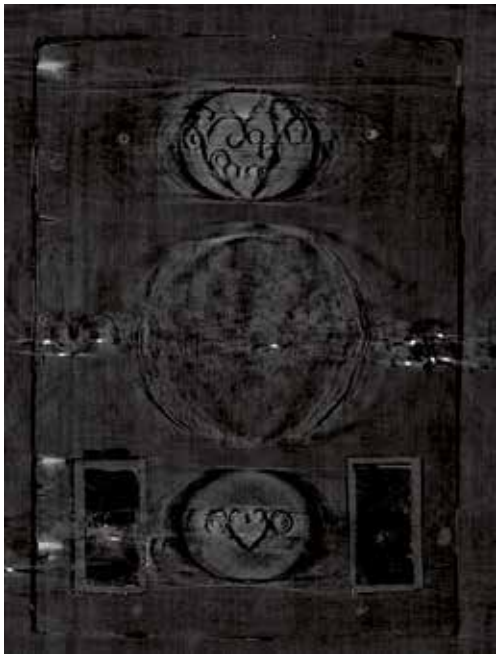
New Questions

It was precisely the oldest and, from a religious point of view, the most valuable parts of the diptych – the small inner tablets which contain the relics – that underwent extensive alteration in the Baroque period.

One reason for these modifications could have been the desire to make the previously hidden relics visible and to put them on display beneath rock crystals and glass in line with the prevailing taste of the time. But other explanations are equally conceivable.

A Possible Link with Northern France and the Abbey of Saint-Pierre in Corbie

The coats of arms painted beneath the cross probably reference the county of Corbie and Corbie Abbey in Picardy. A painting of two kneeling monks can now just barely be made out beneath the Vera Icon. These painted decorations presumably date to the same time as the embroidered seventeenth-century velvet cover of the diptych.
A 1757 description of the abbey's treasury of relics mentions not only a reliquary in book form containing a piece of the True Cross but also elsewhere a Vera Icon. Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642) commissioned several copies of the latter, one of which he presented to his niece, the Duchess of Aiguillon (1604–1675). Unfortunately, here the trail goes cold. We cannot establish an undisputable connection between the references in the description of the Corbie treasury and the diptych from the Spitzer collection.
The velvet cover and its lost lozenge-shaped coat of arms set beneath a still extant crown suggest that the owner of the diptych in the seventeenth century was a lady from the high nobility.



Research Continues

The acquisition of the diptych enriches the collection of the Museum Schnütgen. It has been established that the key elements of the diptych are very old and that the most significant alterations it underwent over the course of its history cannot be ascribed to the colourful personality of the collector Frédéric Spitzer – although that too would have been an interesting result. The key modifications can be dated to the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, a time when the object was still in religious use, but smaller alterations continued to be made well into the twentieth century.

Many questions remain unanswered. They concern the modern-era alterations to the inside of the earliest small reliquary tablets, the dating of the silver cross and the reverse glass painting as well as other matters. A comprehensive scholarly assessment of the object has yet to be published.

That notwithstanding, we have decided to present this splendid and puzzling work of art to the public. It testifies to the fact that museums are not only treasure houses but also places of continuing research, where answering one question frequently raises several new ones.

Credits

Reliquary Diptych from the Spitzer Collection

Acquired in 2015 by the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation, on permanent loan to the Museum Schnütgen, Inv. G 693

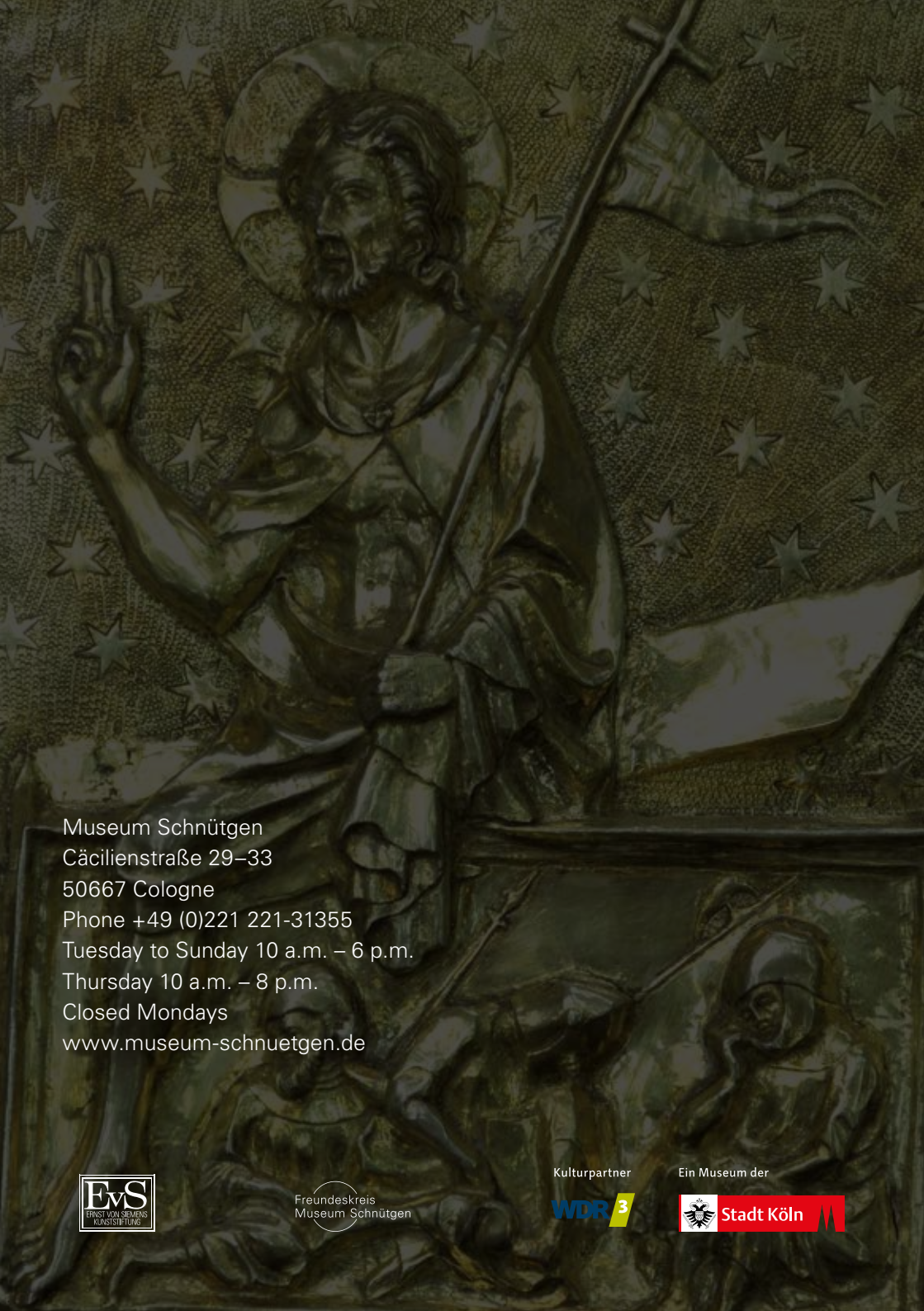
The presentation and examination of the object were generously supported by Inge and Manfred Schubert and the Friends of the Museum Schnütgen (Freundeskreis Museum Schnütgen e.V.).

Text: Moritz Woelk

The technical examinations were undertaken by Hendrik Strelow (metal conservator), Andrea Hünteler (sculpture and painting conservator), Katharina Sossou (textile conservator). Art-historical team: Manuela Beer, Iris Metje, Adam Stead, Karen Straub, Pavla Ralcheva.

We wish to thank Christoph Bouillon, Sam Fogg, Heidi and Erwin-Walter Graebner, Martin Hoernes, Lothar Lambacher, Joachim Oepen, Matthew Reeves, Cornel Soltek and Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen for their support and advice.

Illustrations: pp. 5–6: Marie-Pierre Laffitte / Valérie Goupil, Reliures précieuses de la Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, 1991, plates 31-33; p. 7: Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, Triumph der Gotik 1260-1380, Munich 1988, p. 107, ill. 84; pp.8, 14: Auction Catalogue Van Ham, Cologne, no. 327, Europäisches Kunsthandwerk, 2013, pp. 80, 86; p. 9: © bpk/The Metropolitan Museum of Art. All others: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Cologne/Patrick Schwarz and Museum Schnütgen.



Museum Schnütgen
Cäcilienstraße 29–33
50667 Cologne
Phone +49 (0)221 221-31355
Tuesday to Sunday 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Thursday 10 a.m. – 8 p.m.
Closed Mondays
www.museum-schnuetgen.de