

Images and stories of saints in the regional territory and in its museums

Montone, Chiesa-Museo di San Francesco

Late 14th-century painter

Holy martyr bearing her severed head (Valerie of Limoges?) and angel

Fresco; measurements unobtainable

The fresco fragment depicts a holy martyr bearing her severed head. An angel guides her towards a door, the entrance to a sacred place.

The perfect adherence of the iconographic features to the *Passionary* of Valerie of Limoges allows the girl to be identified as the French saint, making this work practically unique in central Italy, where there are no attestations of her cult.

According to the hagiographies, the saint was beheaded by order of her betrothed, who on returning from the war had been rejected by Valerie, who in the meanwhile had been baptised and had devoted herself entirely to Christ. While her soul rose up to heaven amidst choirs of angels, Valerie took her head in her hands and took it to the bishop Martial, who gave it a worthy burial.

In her cult Valerie is always associated with Martial, as demonstrated by numerous French iconographic tokens, including various articles of Limoges ware and the fresco cycle by Matteo Giovanetti in the palace of the Popes of Avignon, where the *Beheading of Saint Valerie* is included among the *Stories of Saint Martial*. The existence of various, albeit rare, places of worship named after the French saint in Tuscany, in Colle Val d'Elsa, and in Umbria, in Gubbio, might also justify the spread of the cult of Saint Valerie in these areas, perhaps fuelled by an eponymous commissioner who may have had the fresco in Montone painted, inspired by an iconographic model probably derived from some article of Limoges ware, where the image of the saint bearing her severed head accompanied by an angel is quite usual.

As the several adjoining figures that have survived go to show, the fresco fragment must have been part of a larger cycle realised by an anonymous painter in

1390, the date still being perfectly legible in the frame surrounding an adjacent scene. This artist, trained in the Umbrian pictorial models of the first half of the century, reinterprets them here, softening them and enriching them with ornamental motifs that, together with the lightened tones of the complexions, herald precious late-Gothic atmospheres.