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**This reliquary shrine was a beautiful gift from a queen
to the women who dedicated their lives to Christ in the
community of Poor Clares in Old Buda, Hungary.**

Jean de Touyl (d. 1349), RELIQUARY SHRINE (1340-1350). Silver-gilt, translucent enamel, and paint, 10" x 7 7/8" x 3 5/8" (when closed). The Cloisters Collection, 62.96. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Used by permission.

A Queen's Gift

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The royal families that founded and financially supported convents and monasteries in the medieval period were often allowed to worship within these monastic complexes. The reliquary shrine illustrated here—of French origin and attributed to Jean de Touyl (d. 1349)—may be evidence of this practice. Art historians believe this silver-gilt enameled shrine, which appears in the inventory of the Poor Clares in Old Buda, Hungary, in 1781, originally belonged to Queen Elizabeth of Hungary. She founded this Franciscan convent in 1334 “in honor of the blessed Virgin,” claiming that it was the “largest for nuns in all of Hungary” and that “more than one hundred nuns and many girls of noble origin” were educated there.¹

This miniature altarpiece was intended for private devotion in a domestic setting. Yet its characteristic trefoil arches recall the elements of an enormous Gothic cathedral—the gables are decorated with crockets (ornaments in the shape of bent foliage) and topped by finials with pinnacles reaching upwards. The central scene contains the Virgin and Child flanked by angels. Mary is depicted as both the enthroned Queen of Heaven and the nursing Mother of Christ.² Each angel carries a reliquary of crystal. These figures exhibit one of the most exquisite techniques of the period, *bassetaille*, which is translucent enamel on silver or gold that has been chiseled and engraved in low relief.³

Two wings, which are shown open in this photograph, enfold the gilded central scene when they are closed. The wings contain thirty-six enameled plaques, each with a deeply tooled background in a luxurious aquamarine evoking stained glass. Enameling, the fusing of powdered glass on a metal surface at red-hot heat, was one of the great arts of the period. Each plaque depicts a scene from the infancy of Christ and the life of the Virgin.

Queen Elizabeth's reliquary shrine was a beautiful gift, but her most significant contribution to the Order of the Franciscans was to bring the Poor Clares to the country of Hungary.

NOTES

1 Margaret B. Freeman, “A Shrine for a Queen,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, 21:10 (June, 1963), 327-339, here quoting 330.

2 The popularity of the nursing Madonna (*Maria Lactans*) during the medieval period is partially due to a thirteenth-century Franciscan writer, Pseudo-Bonaventura, who addresses his work of mystical visions, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, to a nun of the Poor Clares.

3 Freeman, 335.