

# INVESTIGATION OF TWO ANTIQUE CHAPEL DOORS OWNED BY THE UVA SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

SOME UNFINISHED RESEARCH BY MUNGO NAPIER, LAIRD OF MALLARD LODGE, 2016  
SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS REMOVED FOR BREVITY

## ABSTRACT

The subjects of this report are a pair of antique doors with various carved religious figures. At the time of this writing the doors hung on a wall near the faculty offices at the University of Virginia School of Architecture. As an amateur historian, I became interested in the doors' origin and the meanings behind the scenes depicted in the various panels. I was surprised to learn that neither of the Architecture School nor the University's Fralin Museum of Art had much information about these doors. I began a quest, as it turned out a rather unsuccessful quest, to discover the door's history. While not an absolute certainty, they were apparently a gift from the Albert Adsil Clemens estate, though they are without provenance. With the help of a local Catholic priest, I was able to establish the identities of the religious figures depicted on 15 of the 16 panels, which I consider a great victory. It is my hope that in the future that someone with training in art history will use what I have discovered to further establish the origin of these doors.



## A. A. CLEMENS

Albert Adsil Clemens, a nephew of Mark Twain, was an avid, eclectic, and many would say rather eccentric art collector. In 1900 he purchased Halcyon House, a huge Georgian-style mansion in the Georgetown area of Washington, D.C. In the belief that he could gain immortality if he kept the house under construction, workmen were kept busy for years building stairways that went nowhere, rooms with no windows, doors that opened to blank walls, and many other odd features. Clemens was said to have practiced a religion of his own making, and among the rooms was a private chapel, the possible source for

the UVA-owned doors.

Halcyon House still exists, now restored to its former appearance. The mansion is said to be among the most haunted buildings in the Washington area. Clemens himself is believed by some to be one of the resident ghosts.

Clemens died 17 March 1938. His obituary states "The will directed that all works of art . . . be given to friends, and that the bulk of the estate be given to Harvard University." Through correspondence with the Harvard University Archives, I learned they have no record of such a donation. As for his the art being given to friends, there is a probate record for his estate filed in the Washington, D.C. archives, but the document has not been examined. Some of his art collection was at least offered to UVA, as supported by surviving documents

## **LACK OF PROVENANCE**

The Fralin Museum has a folder with some incomplete correspondence, circa 1939, concerning gifts from Albert Adsil Clemens' estate. Among the items offered to the University of Virginia were two doors that at that time in Clemens' private chapel, presumably at Halcyon House. These may be, or may not be, the doors in question, as there is no description provided. There is no mention of these doors in Edmund S. Campbell's papers held by UVA Special Collections. Enquiries to Professor K. Edward Lay and Mr. Garth Anderson, brought an interesting, if disappointing response. The University Art Museum (predecessor to the Fralin Museum) did not accept donations into their collection without approval from the Virginia State Art and Architecture Commission, and approval usually required provenance. Gifts lacking approval could be accepted as "decorative objects", and might be displayed in offices, hallways or even outdoors. The doors apparently received this . . . uh . . . cavalier treatment.

The Fralin's records make no mention of provenance for any of the other items from the Clemens gift. One might expect an inventory of some sort, and such a list may still exist somewhere. That said, I am dubious Clemens had, or even cared about provenance. He was apparently a voracious hoarder of antiques, and even owned a second house in Georgetown just to store his surplus purchases.

There may not be any provenance for the doors. They might have come from a small church, minor monastic house, or possibly from the private chapel of a well-to-do merchant or lesser noble, and were deemed to have little historical value. Such lower-priced objects seem to have been common on the European antiques market, especially after World War I. There was a fad among wealthy American collectors to furnish their mansions with such antiques, and some even imported entire houses. We have two such examples in Richmond, Virginia House and nearby Agecroft Hall. This sort of scavenging was prevalent enough to have been lampooned in a 1935 Robert Donat film, *THE GHOST GOES WEST*, where a spirit is "imported" to America along with his Scottish castle.

## **OBJECT DESCRIPTION**

The doors in question are carved wood (species unknown), each roughly 240 cm high by 84 cm wide, with a thickness of 8 cm. The faces on each door are divided into eight panels, two panels wide and four panels high. The panels measure 56 cm high by 36 cm wide. Each panel contains high-relief carved figures of obvious Christian themes, usually one or two figures per panel, with one panel having a chief figure and four smaller figures. In some cases the figures are accompanied by symbolic animals. Some panels show furniture or other details. The figures stand on bases supported by baroque-style foliage or grotesques. This treatment is different on each panel. Each scene is surrounded by formal carved frames with a consistent motif.

The doors share a sliding bolt across the top, but the latch mechanism at the center is missing. Parts of the

hinges remain on the reverse side (possibly modern). The reverse is largely unfinished, except for bracing and a modern metal frame for mounting.

Age has not been kind to the doors. They are badly scratched and dented, and there is evidence of insect damage, possibly beetles, below the missing latch mechanism. Some of the figures are cracked where the wood has shrunk, and many of the frames show poor fit at the corners. Several figures have damage to their details, and the chief figure in panel 6 has obviously had his head replaced by one carved from a different wood, and a bit oversized.

Former Head Librarian at the University's Fiske Kimball Fine Arts Library, Lucy Stylianopoulos, suggested the doors are Counter-Reformation period from the so-called Northern School. This suggests they could be as old as the 16th century.

## **IDENTIFICATION OF THE FIGURES**

Using several books on Catholic saints, an online resource (<http://catholicsaints.info/alphabetical-list/>), and with considerable help from Father Gregory Kandt, pastor of the Church of the Incarnation in Charlottesville, I was able to identify the figures in 15 of the panels. One figure ( panel 6) stumped both Father Gregory and myself, and remains unidentified.



**Panel 1. Saint Luke the Evangelist**



**Panel 2. Saint John the Evangelist**



**Panel 3. Saint Anthony of Padua (left), Doctor of the Church;  
Saint Alexis of Rome (right), pious hermit**



**Panel 4. Saint Henry II, Holy Roman Emperor,  
and his Empress, Saint Cunegunda of Luxembourg**



**Panel 5. Saint Lucy of Syracuse (left);  
Saint Agatha of Sicily (right), martyrs**



**Panel 6. Unidentified (Saint Paul?)**



**Panel 7. Saint Ambrose of Milan, Doctor of the Church**



**Panel 8. Saint Mark the Evangelist**



**Panel 9. Saint Augustine of Hippo, Doctor of the Church**



**Panel 10. Saint Gregory the Great, Doctor of the Church**



**Panel 11. Saint Clare of Assisi (left);  
Saint Francis of Assisi (right), founders of orders**





**Panel 12. Saint Ursula, with four of the Eleven Virgin Martyrs**



**Panel 13. Saint Benedict of Nursia (left);  
Saint Scholastica (right), founders of orders**



**Panel 14. Saint Laurence of Rome (left);  
Saint Vincent of Rome (right), martyrs**



**15. Saint Matthew the Evangelist**



**16. Saint Jerome, Doctor of the Church**

Figures in panels 5 and 14 appear to be carrying large quill pens, but the objects are actually palm fronds, the sign of a martyred saint. Most of the martyrs depicted here had popular devotional cults. One may also note that all four of the Gospel writers, five Doctors of the Church, as well as the founders of several Catholic monastic orders, are depicted here. In keeping with the Council of Trent's dictates on art, the figures all strongly represent Catholic doctrine and message. Surprisingly, there are no depictions of Christ or the Virgin Mary, and no verifiable figures representing Saint Peter or Saint Paul.

The least likely figures are Henry II and Cundgunda in panel 4. Their presence is not surprising if one considers that if this piece is indeed from the Counter-Reformation Northern School, it was likely created in Flanders or some other nearby territory under of the control of the Holy Roman Empire. The inclusion of a Holy Roman Emperor/saint and his Empress, herself a saint from nearby Luxembourg, makes perfect sense and might be either shrewd politics or very good marketing.