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Saint Apollonia

The legend of Saint Apollonia has been a source of comfort to toothache sufferers since early in the Middle Ages. During the eighteenth century, the patronage of this Saint was extended to include the dental profession.

The story of Apollonia begins in the year 249 A.D., a period when the Christians of Alexandria were being sorely persecuted for their religious convictions. Bishop Dionysius, in a letter describing their sufferings, relates how Apollonia was tortured in an effort to force from her a renunciation of her faith. For her defiance, she was stoned, as a result of which her teeth were knocked out and her jaws broken. Subsequently, on being threatened with death at the stake, she appeared to be ready to relent but, on being released from her chains, she cast herself into the flames to die a martyr's death.

In the fifteenth century Apollonia motif reproduced here, the hand laid on the swollen cheek of the sufferer represents the healing power of the Saint, while her bowed head denotes sympathy and the act of intercession. Apollonia's own insignia, a tooth held in the forceps, is shown in her free hand.

This illustration is reproduced from an enlargement of a woodcut approximately 6" x 4½", which is a part of the Wessler Collection at the Royal School of Dentistry in Stockholm.



2

Saint Apollonia

This illustration, taken from an eighteenth century prayer book, portrays Saint Apollonia as a contemporary lady of distinction. Her general appearance, as well as the small necklace and the fashionable cut of her sleeves, is suggestive of the style employed by court artists of this period.

The diminutive crown worn by Apollonia in this picture, symbolizes royal blood, which, however, is not consistent with early accounts of her life. The church chronicler Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* I, VI:41) makes no mention of any royal background, implying only that Apollonia enjoyed a prominent position in the Christian community of Alexandria. It was not until late in the Middle Ages that the records were interpreted as meaning that she was of royal birth.

The palm branch signifies a martyr's death. Her martyrdom is further emphasized by the prominence with which her insignia, the forceps holding a tooth, is displayed. The somewhat unruly background is obviously an attempt, by the artist, to suggest the manner of her death — the pyre.

The original painting, from which this picture was reproduced is an aquarelle on parchment, approximately 4½" x 3", and is a part of the Wessler Collection at the Royal School of Dentistry in Stockholm.





4

Saint Apollonia

Even the early history of Saint Apollonia abounds with reference to angels, four of which are depicted in this reproduction of an eighteenth century woodcut. The Saint is shown holding an exaggerated forceps and tooth.

One story relates how an angel appeared and carried Apollonia to a place of baptism. At that time, the Angel of the Lord is said to have changed her name from Dina to Apollonia. Another angel then laid a white cloak over her slender shoulders, and said, "Thou art Apollonia, servant of Jesus. Go thou to Alexandria, and proclaim thy belief in Christ." The Angel of the Lord, then, reappeared and told her that death would be inevitable for her if she were to carry out these instructions.

Nevertheless, Apollonia chose to remain steadfast in her faith. When she was eventually thrown into prison, where her teeth were stoned out, she was visited by angels, who sought to comfort her. In her prayers to God, Apollonia pleaded that all those who suffered from toothache should be granted freedom from pain upon invoking her name. Another angel then appeared to tell her that this appeal had been granted.

This reproduction is from a colored woodcut hand-printed in Nuremburg in the middle of the eighteenth century. The original, measuring 4" x 5", is a part of the Wessler Collection at the Royal School of Dentistry in Stockholm.

