Medieval Sculpture at the Metropolitan
800 to 1400

WILLIAM D. WIXOM

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
Director’s Note

The Museum’s rich collection of medieval sculptures housed in the main building, like so many other areas of the Metropolitan, has benefited greatly from the generosity of two of New York City’s greatest private collectors: financier J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913) and investment banker George Blumenthal (1858–1941). Morgan, one of the most intense, omnivorous yet perceptive collectors America has ever known, was a man of high intelligence, strong will, and at times, formidable stubbornness. A benefactor, trustee, and president of the Museum from 1904 to 1913, he was honored in this publication shortly after his death with these words: “Knowing that art is necessary to upholding the ideals of a nation, he gave to the Museum generously of his possessions and more generously of himself.” Nineteen works from his collection appear on the following pages.

Blumenthal, a benefactor, trustee, and president of the Metropolitan from 1934 to 1941, was a slight man with an acute sense of the tactile. His collection, bequeathed to the Museum in 1941 (along with his house, the source of the patio from Velez Blanco), included extraordinary sculptures and decorative arts ranging in date from 1000 to 1600. Seven works from his collection are illustrated here. Other major New York collectors who have donated or bequeathed sculptures discussed in this Bulletin include Isaac D. Fletcher, Michael Friedsam, Michael Dreicer, Joseph Pulitzer, and Irwin Untermyer. It is worth noting that in 1985 Ruth Blumka, a prominent dealer, specialist in medieval and Renaissance art, and a Museum benefactor, gave the Metropolitan the domestic tabernacle (illustrated on page 45) that had once been part of the J. Pierpont Morgan collection.

This is the second Bulletin by William D. Wixom, former Michel David-Weill chairman and now curator emeritus of the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, devoted to a survey of medieval sculptures in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum. The first volume, published in the winter of 1989 and still in print, provides a summary of independent sculptures at The Cloisters; the present volume focuses on similar works, as well as several from architectural contexts, on display in the galleries of the Medieval department in the main building on Fifth Avenue. These range in date from the ninth century to the late decades of the fourteenth century. A third Bulletin is planned that will complete the survey of our medieval sculptures, examining Gothic works dating up to the early sixteenth century. I hope these publications will lead the reader and the visitor to a greater understanding of European sculpture from the time of the Carolingian renaissance through the Late Gothic era.

Philippe de Montebello
Director
Introduction

Chronology, style, iconography, and context offer the primary and multifaceted basis for the present study of medieval sculptures. In addition these works should be considered in terms of their expressive and decorative formal elements, including the interrelationships of mass, line, proportion, symmetry, texture, and color. It is by viewing them in this way that the rich artistry of the largely anonymous medieval artists represented in this publication may be more fully appreciated.

The sculptures are arranged under distinct, and occasionally arbitrary, headings; the first group includes four ivory reliefs representing the Carolingian, Ottonian, and Early Romanesque periods (pp. 7–9). While not conforming to modern concepts of what constitutes medieval sculpture—large works in wood or stone—these ivories exemplify the traditional medieval concept of such images, those made to respond to the needs of the church. They also demonstrate that classifications by size and material can be irrelevant in our context. In the hands of a gifted artist, monumentality and expressiveness can be achieved in only a few inches.

The first two periods discussed here are named after prominent imperial founders: Charlemagne (742–814) and Otto I (the Great, 912–73). Charlemagne, king of the Franks from 768, was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in 800. Otto was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope John XII in 962. The signal importance of these two rulers, more than that of any of their successors, lies in their historic and pivotal position at the beginnings of art in the early medieval period.

Charlemagne instigated a cultural renewal, especially in the arts, that was based in part on a revival of classical and Early Christian prototypes. Otto I consolidated imperial power and built his domain out of the diminished late Carolingian empire. With his nomination of bishops, his patronage of religious foundations, his granting of special privileges, and his augmentation of the civil administrations of his appointed archbishops, he was able not only to rebuild the power of the Holy Roman Empire but also to provide the conditions for a revival of the arts.

The period ending about 1100 saw the development of what may be designated as Early Romanesque art, which followed on the heels of late Ottonian in central Europe and Anglo-Saxon in the British Isles. Large-scale sculpture rarely appeared before the end of this period, although exceptions may be seen in certain tympana reliefs in Regensburg, Münster, and Cluny and in the large Corpus Christi sculptures that were placed or suspended in high positions in churches. No works of this kind from the eleventh century are represented in the Museum’s collections.

The next sections dealing with high Romanesque and Early Gothic works dating from the twelfth century begins with two selections from the Museum’s rich group of Corpus Christi figures cast in copper alloys and then gilt (pp. 10, 11). Such hand-size figures echo the sculptural and sacred intent of their larger counterparts in wood and stone. The movability of some works, which were independent of architecture, resulted in their often being carved in the round, as is the magnificent Auvergne Virgin and Child in Majesty (cover, p. 12). This fine sculpture is the first of the images included here to be the focus of special veneration and to become a cult object. The presentation of explicit biblical stories, begun in earlier periods, finds clarity and power in the ivory reliefs coming from Léon on the Iberian Peninsula and Cologne on the Rhine (pp. 14, 15). These carvings not only show action but also imply speech through gesture or through inscription.

Other twelfth-century sculptures came from architectural contexts. Included are the imposing stone heads taken from full-length relief figures on monastic church facades in Provence and Aquitaine and from the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris (pp. 16, 17). Fairly complete figures from the Royal Abbey at Saint-Denis, from northern Italy, and from the cathedral at Noyon give a vivid idea of figural style at this time (pp. 18, 19). Primarily architectonic, linear, and geometric, the works were designed for their settings. These figures, along with those depicted on the Temptation of Christ capital (p. 21), hint at the Early Gothic style: architectonic emphasis, while dominant, begins to be tempered by naturalistic detail and a more organic conception of the human form.

The first half of the thirteenth-century is represented initially by two enthroned figures, each independent of architecture: the first, a movable wood cult figure of the Virgin and Child and the second, a massive stone king (pp. 22, 23). The carvers of these works are of special importance because each eloquently presented the draped human figure in a way that anticipated the High Gothic in their respective regions, Lotharingia and northern Italy. The startling and extraordinary sense of ennobled humanity reached the pinnacle of expression in the bearded head of a king (p. 24), the first exponent in this publication of the High Gothic style of the great French cathedrals. Judging by its pervasive weathering, the head must have belonged to an exterior figure on a prominent church portal or facade.

In contrast, the two subsequent sculptures, of the second half of the thirteenth century, were displayed in the interior of a great cathedral (pp. 25–27). The impressive enthroned Virgin and Child from eastern Bavaria is a continuation of an older type of a devotional cult image, whereas the large stone relief from a choir screen, probably formerly in Amiens Cathedral, presents a dramatic narrative scene from the Passion. Despite their differences in intent, these works share some stylistic features characteristic of their period: both show massive figures partly enveloped by deeply undercut drapery folds, and their individualized facial expressions suggest an incipient naturalism. Their carvers demonstrated an
interest in figural movement as well, as seen in the animated Christ Child barely constrained by the Virgin and in the more intensely dramatic gestures that dominate the Passion relief.

Of this same period is a series of small-scale carvings in ivory and wood that document sculptural concepts and details of full-scale works. One of the finest French statuettes of the second half of the thirteenth century illustrated in this Bulletin is a magnificent ivory corpus of Christ from a crucifix (p. 27). Like the Corpora Christi in gilt-copper alloy of earlier periods (pp. 10, 11), such ivory counterparts were also intended for altar crosses, which could also be carried in procession. Unlike the earlier examples, the ivory works invariably depict Christ as suffering or already dead. Because the arms of the figures were carved separately and pegged in place, it is not surprising that most of the rare examples of the Corpus Christi in ivory have lost their arms. The naturalism in the depiction of the dead Christ receives an elegiac expression in the Museum’s example.

Stylistically dependent at first on the monumental trumeau sculptures of the great cathedral facades such as at Amiens and Paris, ivory and wood statuettes of the Virgin began to develop their own principles of proportions—in the fall of drapery folds, in the contrapposto stances, and in the suggestions of arrested movement—each in keeping with the restraints of their medium, their small scale, and, above all, their private devotional use. Many examples tend to emphasize an intimate and reciprocal tenderness between the Virgin and the Child. The accessibility of the Virgin is reflected in devotional texts of the period, such as the rhymed Miracles of Notre-Dame (ca. 1220), by Gauthier de Coincy, canon of Soissons. The rigid frontality of the Romanesque twelfth-century Virgin as the Seat of Holy Wisdom (Sedes Sapientiae, p. 22) has been abandoned.

There are several small standing and seated thirteenth-century statuettes of the Virgin and Child at the Museum, either in the Medieval department galleries (pp. 28, 29) or at The Cloisters, where a few of the finest examples may be found. Many of these are French and were mostly carved in the Ile-de-France or in Paris. Evidence of the continuing popularity of the cult of the Virgin, such small sculptures must have been intended for the altars in countless chapels and in private oratories, many of which belonged to royal or noble families or princes of the church. Some of the statuettes may have been kept in the private chambers of their owners. Each image took on contemplative importance on the calendar days dedicated to the Virgin. In contrast to the public art of ecclesiastical furnishings, these small figures in ivory and wood were the focus of private meditation. Their format, intimacy, and mobility must have facilitated the spread of their stylish characteristics to large sculptures intended for public worship, not only in France at this time and later (pp. 30–35), as well as in Germany, in the Rhineland, and in England, especially during the reign of Edward I (ca. 1272–1307). A recently acquired Virgin and Child of about 1300 and attributed to Alexander of Abington, presents a striking adaptation of French style (fig. 1) achieved perhaps through an ivory intermediary.

Turning to the first half of the fourteenth-century, six larger French sculptures of the Virgin illustrate the continuation of some of the conventions of proportion, pose, and drapery configuration of the previous period. These works, among others, exemplify a particularized development not only in seated or standing positions but also in a whole vocabulary of variable features and iconographic details: the Virgin with and without a crown; holding a flower stalk, a cluster of drapery, or pyxis; her mantle is drawn apronlike across her lower body, or she wears a long gown open with long belt or girdle buckled high on her torso. The Christ Child is seen playing with his mother’s belt, suckling, holding a bird, displaying a scroll, writing, reading, or simply offering an open book.

Common features include the Virgin’s contrapposto stance, evident despite form-denying draperies, which may be angled, bent laterally, or hung vertically. Curvilinear drapery edges were exploited. Full or selective polychromy and gilt decoration were used. The Virgin’s gently waving locks of hair, usually gilt, often disappear partly within and beneath her veil.

Only rarely are these sculptures to be found today in the
locations for which they were intended. Such sites could have been as diverse as a parish church or a great cathedral, a remote crossroads shrine or a town entrance, an aristocratic oratory or a monastic chapel. While widely scattered today, some of these works have found their way through the art market to notable private collections and then to museums in Europe and America. The Medieval department’s rich collection of such pieces was assembled through purchases and through gifts from such illustrious donors as J. Pierpont Morgan, Michael Friedsam, and George Blumenthal.

The fourteenth-century diffusion of types and styles of the sculptures of the Virgin, which came about almost without regard to the materials (limestone, marble, alabaster, and wood), resulted both from the movements of the sculptors, as well as of their works, and from the widespread distribution of small statuettes in ivory, wood, and metal, which may have served as models. While the problems of localization and dating continue, scholarly studies have helped pinpoint some undocumented sculptures. Assembling both stylistic features and iconographic details, for example, has afforded us a chance to identify specific French regional styles and groupings such as those in Normandy, the Meuse Valley, Lorraine, Ile-de-France, Champagne, Berry, and Burgundy. Patronage (especially of the courts) and the creative efforts of sculptors were important factors in the overall development of modes of the presentation of the Virgin and Child in the fourteenth century and beyond.

While nearly all of the fourteenth-century sculptures of the Virgin have rudimentary carving on the backs, each example of this group was intended to be seen by the medieval worshipper nearly frontally, certainly above eye level, as on or behind an altar or on a bracket mounted on a church wall or pier. For the most part, it may be assumed that the larger examples were accessible to the lay public as well as to members of the church and political and aristocratic hierarchies.

The raised shelves resting on the tables of the altars often provided the setting for figurative reliefs, called retables, and they were an important location for sculptural decoration for the church. The Museum owns two fine fourteenth-century examples, among others, one of which exhibits a series of Christ’s disciples standing beneath intricately cusped-and-pointed arches and surmounting pinnacles, while the other depicts the angel Gabriel from an Annunciation scene (pp. 36, 37). Both are notable for the easy contrappostal stance of the figures and their flowing draperies with suspended curvilinear edges. Such reliefs share a softly expressed elegance that sometimes finds resonance in contemporary funerary reliefs, such as the epitaph of Milon de Donzy (fig. 2).

Fourteenth-century funerary effigies in the Royal Abbey at Saint-Denis, outside of Paris, and elsewhere provided many opportunities for sculptors to focus their talents on a type of portrait, not in the modern sense but one emphasizing an idealized approximation. Visitors to the Medieval department galleries are offered several examples, rare in many American museum collections: four are illustrated here (pp. 38, 39). While they are only loosely naturalistic, it is tempting to read something of the real personalities in their representations. Netherlandish sculptors participated in such efforts, especially for French royalty; the most prominent among the artists were Jean de Liège (b. ca. 1330–d. 1381) and André Beauneveu (ca. 1330–d. 1401/02) of Valenciennes, on the Scheldt River, who carved the effigy of the Valois king, Charles V, at Saint-Denis.

The Metropolitan Museum owns one of the most comprehensive collections in the world of aquamaniles, a type of

Figure 2: Epitaph of Milon de Donzy, dean of the Cathedral of Saint-Cyr at Nevers (d. 1337 or 1338), French (Nivernais), ca. 1357–58. Limestone, h. 48¼ in. (122.5 cm). Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916 (16.32.28)
water vessel, the modern appeal of which lies in their three-dimensionality as sculptures in the round. The Museum’s vessels are found in three locations: the Robert Lehman Collection, The Cloisters, and the Medieval department galleries. Three outstanding examples from the Medieval department appear here (pp. 40, 41). The earliest record of such works is in the 1252 inventory of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Saints Martin and Stephen in Mainz, Germany. The generally accepted origins for the aquamanile include Lotharingia, Lower Saxony, and Nuremberg. It is tempting to relate the aquamanile in the form of an equestrian knight to the famous monumental stone Bamberg Rider, of about 1235–37, mounted high against a pier in the east choir of the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Bamberg, Germany (fig. 3). Although the identifications of the Bamberg Rider vary—most recently as Constantine the Great or as Saint Stephen of Hungary—the common denominator with our aquamanile may be in the glorification of “the knight as a guardian of Christian values,” as suggested in relation to the Bamberg group, by Michael Camille (1989, p. 289).

While the largest number of sculptures in the Museum dating from the first half of the fourteenth century are French, a significant closely knit group of marble works comes from the middle Meuse River Valley, in present-day Belgium (pp. 42, 43). Assembled and published by William H. Forsyth in 1968, these sculptures may be attributed to a single regional workshop active primarily in the second quarter of the fourteenth century. It is clear that at least one of the sculptures was influenced by royal commissions in Paris.

Of the Italian sculptures in stone and wood in the collection, two especially significant but contrasting examples have been selected for discussion (pp. 44, 45). The first is the dramatic culminating element from a church interior furnishing, a marble pulpit-lectern of 1301 by one of the greatest Gothic sculptors of Tuscany, Giovanni Pisano (b. 1245–48, d. 1314–19). The second, more modest work is a polychromed domestic tabernacle by an anonymous artist working in the northern town of Verona in the third quarter of the fourteenth century. Both of these sculptures in very different ways may be regarded in part as exponents of the empirical world of Late Gothic naturalism, without direct reference to Renaissance humanism or, in the case of the tabernacle, to the classical world.

Medieval spirituality and mysticism were well developed in the twelfth century by Bernard of Clairvaux (1091–1153) and his pupils. Further exploration in this direction by Hildegard of Bingen (12th century), Saint Bonaventure (1221–74), Meister Eckhard (1260?–1327), Catherine of Siena (1347?–1380), and others became the basis for evolving concepts of mysticism, which Webster defined as an “intercourse with the divine Spirit, and a knowledge of God and of spiritual things unattainable by natural intellect, and incapable of being analyzed or explained” (1913, p. 1431). About 1300 special visual aids were adopted for prayer and meditation, such as the two examples on pages 46 and 47. These works were originally a significant part of the spiritual life of German monastic institutions, especially nunneries.

By far the greatest number of large sculptures in the collection of the Medieval department are dated after about 1400, the cutoff point in the present publication. Many nearly life-size, wood or stone works of this later period from northern Europe will be presented in a later Bulletin, which will stress their functional contexts, their specific regional styles, and their version of the late medieval naturalism that flourished before giving way to the increasing influence of the Italian Renaissance.

Note: Biblical citations throughout are from the Vulgate Bible.

Figure 3: The Bamberg Rider.
German (Bamberg Cathedral), ca. 1335–37. Stone.
Photograph: Eric Lessing/Art Resource, N. Y.
Virgin Mary as a Personification of the Church Triumphant
Carolingian Court school, 800–825
Elephant ivory, 8¼ x 5¾ in. (22 x 14.6 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.49)

Christ Blessing a Model of Magdeburg Cathedral
Ottonian (Milan?), 962–68
Elephant ivory, 5¼ x 4½ in. (13 x 11.3 cm)
Gift of George Blumenthal, 1941 (41.100.157)

Otto I’s expansion eastward to Slavonic territories included his establishment in 968 of Magdeburg on the Elbe River in Saxony as an archbishopric. His patronage of Magdeburg cathedral, his burial place, is symbolized in this ivory relief, one of sixteen surviving carvings illustrating the life, passion, and glorification of Christ. The plaques were probably intended to decorate a cathedral furnishing, such as a chancel door, a pulpit, or an altar frontal.

Christ is seated at the center on the wreath of heaven, and his feet rest on the curve of the earthly realm as if to illustrate Isaiah’s words: “The Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” (Isaiah 66:1). Otto the Great, 912–973, bearded and crowned, is shown in profile at the left holding up the model of the cathedral for Christ’s blessing. The figure embracing Otto is probably Saint Mauritius, to whom the cathedral was dedicated along with Saint Peter. The nimbed head of an angel and portions of his wings appear behind this group. At right three saints witness the dedication and blessing. The foremost of this group is the tonsured figure of Saint Peter holding his attribute of two keys. The plaque may originally have been backed with gold.

Carved in an important imperial artistic center, possibly Milan, this ivory has an engaging simplicity and almost emblematic character, and, along with the rest of the series, seems to recall Early Byzantine images in the flattened or pleated drapery folds and late Carolingian ivory carving in the stocky figures and expressive gestures. The carver of the Museum’s relief suggested Otto’s theocratic aspirations through the immediacy of Christ’s gesture directed toward the emperor.

This enthroned female figure holds a spindle and distaff in the left hand, suggesting a connection with the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation; but the heavy cuffs, sleeves, and scepter with a cross finial are more characteristic of the militant personification of Ecclesia, or the Church Triumphant. The intricate flutings of the drapery folds and the round foliated arch revive the classicizing style of Early Christian and Byzantine ivories, while other details, such as the Virgin’s veil (or maphorion), plump-cushioned throne, textured palm-tree trunks, and peacocks in the spandrels, refer to a Byzantine fifth-to-sixth-century, possibly Ravennate, patrimony. In its rigid frontality, symmetry of drapery folds, and hulking mass filling the architectural space, the figure displays an almost threatening monumentality. The function of this imposing relief is not known.
Plaque from a Book Cover
Southern Italian (Benevento?), 975–1000
Elephant ivory, 9 ¼ x 5 ⅞ in. (23.5 x 13.7 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.38)

Carved in southern Italy (possibly in Benevento) between 975 and 1000, this plaque depicts the busts of the four creatures of the Apocalypse surrounding the Lamb of God (Agnus Dei), which is at the center of a cross carved with intricate palmettes and half-rosettes at the terminals. Traditionally, the four have come to represent (from top left): Matthew (the winged man or angel), Mark (the winged lion), John (the eagle), and Luke (the winged ox). The imagery was intended to remind medieval viewers of the glory and mystery of God as postulated in vivid terms in Ezekiel (10: 4) and in the Apocalypse (Revelation 4: 6–8, 5: 6, 12, 13).

Originally intended for the center of a deluxe binding of a Bible or Gospel book, the ivory is notable for its dramatic simplicity, emphatic symmetry, and balance of the symbols within the fields allotted to them. The Lamb of God, standing within a ribbon-bound foliate wreath, is the focus. This motif together with the palmette patterns and the half-rosettes of the cross create a distinct classicizing flavor that recalls details on sixth-century ivory consular diptychs. The style of the symbols is similar to that of images in illuminated manuscripts from the region of Benevento, especially in those produced at the great Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino. The symbols also have stylistic parallels in the less-refined, simple low-relief examples on southern Italian marble altar frontals, such as the Museum’s, which is said to come from the cathedral of Sorrento in Campania.

Altar Frontal Relief. Southern Italian (Campania), 9th century. Preconnessian marble, h. 29 ⅜ in. (74.6 cm). Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.30)
Lateral arms of equal length, attached by metal dowels, once completed the original cross shape of this relief. A hole at the top indicates that it was intended to be suspended, and the greater wear on the reverse suggests that it was worn as a pectoral. The eyes of the figures on both sides were probably originally inlaid with dark glass. Two remnants of copper-alloy gilt inlays in the background recesses on the obverse and attachment holes in the border areas suggest that the ensemble was once quite opulent. Crosses of this size and richness were worn by princes of the church, such as archbishops and bishops.

Christ in Majesty is depicted with a cruciform halo, his right hand raised in blessing, while the other steadies a Gospel book on his left knee. He is seated on an arc of heaven with his bare feet resting on a suppedaneum, or footstool. The reverse shows the Lamb of God, or Agnus Dei, standing on a book; a processional cross appears in the background. The ensemble is framed by a rhombus enriched with open acanthus leaves. Above, the eagle of Saint John holds a scroll, as the winged ox of Saint Luke, grasping a book, looks upward to the Agnus Dei. The iconography of this relief reflects the imagery of the Apocalypse texts (Revelation 4:6–8, 5:6, 12, 13).

The closest stylistic parallels for the double-contoured drapery folds and the expansive foliate ornament are found in the so-called Winchester First style of Anglo-Saxon illustrated manuscripts of the late tenth and first third of the eleventh century. In the boldness of its frontal pose, staring eyes, splayed knees, and drapery drawn tightly over the body masses, the enthroned Christ is so large in concept that it prefigures the monumental stone tympana images of the Romanesque period during the twelfth century.
**Romanesque Corpus Christi of the 12th Century**

**Triumphant Christ from a Cross**
French, mid-12th century
Copper alloy with gilding, 8⅛ in. (19.7 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.765)

Masterful large examples of the triumphant living Christ on the cross (p. 20) are found in the Medieval department and at The Cloisters, and the same majestic image may be seen in countless smaller examples in silver, ivory, and gilt-copper alloy.

This corpus, rigidly symmetrical in both figure and in drapery folds, displays remarkable dignity and the implication of larger scale in keeping with its triumphant subject. The modeling and incisions of the torso, abdomen, pectorals, and ribs are in dramatic contrast to sharp flutings, planes, and zigzag edges of the loincloth (*perizonium*). The muscles of the bare outstretched arms are rendered schematically, with the upper and lower arms dovetailed in a V-configuration at the elbows. The work is hollowed out in the back, indicating that it was meant to be seen at the front of a stationary cross placed on an altar. Such crosses could be also carried in processions.
Dead Christ from a Cross
French or English, early 12th century
Copper alloy with gilding, h. 10 1/2 in. (26.6 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.760)

In contrast to the previous example, this figure of Christ is depicted in the process of bodily collapse. The torso and head sag to the right, while the outstretched arms hang limply. The hands bend down at the wrists. The legs and knees, rather than extending forward, turn slightly to the side, causing the breaking folds of the perizonium to be off center. The dynamic concept of arrested downward movement was meant to engender in the devout empathy for the suffering of Christ at the moment of his death. This work was intended to grace an altar or a processional cross.
Two Enthroned Romanesque Virgins of the Late 12th Century

Virgin and Child in Majesty
French (Auvergne), late 12th century
Walnut with linen, gesso, and polychromy,
h. 31\(\frac{3}{4}\) in. (76.8 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916 (16.32.194)

In France during the twelfth century a number of sculptures of this subject were designed for mobility and frequently moved: in processions, from church to church, or from altar to altar. When carried about, such images were reported to have effected miracles. Contemporary sources describe them as included in Christian feast-day celebrations and even featured in liturgical dramas. There were also “practical” functions; such sculptures were often taken to various locations to encourage donations for repair or rebuilding of a church. In times of war they could be paraded around town walls to ward off invaders. They might also “preside” at synods, and moving an important image of this kind to a new area helped to assert monastic territorial claims.

Yet the primary belief in conjunction with the two rigidly frontal depictions of the Virgin illustrated here was the concept of the Throne of Wisdom (Sedes Sapientiae), in which Mary serves as a throne for Christ. The Child, who would have held a Bible or Gospel book, represents divine wisdom and justice. As a palpable expression of the mystery of Incarnation, the iconography had its origin in the Early Christian church.

The Virgin is seated upon a five-sided backless throne. Constructed of several components, the work is well preserved except for the loss of the Child’s forearms, book, and feet, and of four colonnettes (which have been restored). The crudely covered relic cavity in the Virgin’s chest, while old, is not the original, which is nearly invisible at the back of her left shoulder. Original molded gesso decoration remains on the hem of her tunic and on the edge of the throne. Portions of polychromy are also preserved, especially on the cushion above the rear of the throne.

The frontality and symmetry of the Auvergne Virgin are underscored by the parallel rising ellipses of the upper sleeves and the reverse descending ellipses on her torso,
lower legs, and “apron” of folds beneath the Child. Also balanced are the splayed, shallow, and scalloped folds adjacent to the outer edges of the Virgin’s slippered feet. In keeping with the processional function, the sculpture is fully three-dimensional; the Virgin’s massive back is a fugue of multiple catenary curves. All of the elegant, linear patterns on the two figures are rhythmically ordered and mass-defining.

Restrained and majestic, this sculpted icon was created to impress. The high quality and the subtle vitality of its formal elements make it one of the finest works of the late Romanesque period.

**Virgin in Majesty**
Scandinavian (perhaps Gotland, Sweden), late 12th century
Poplar with traces of polychromy,
 h. 34 in. (86.4 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.716)

Unlike the Auvergne Virgin and Child (opposite), this work is not three-dimensional. Hollowed at the back, it was probably the centerpiece, with the now-missing Child, for a tabernacle or altarpiece. Also missing are the tall sides of the throne, the only remnant of which is the arcaded footstool. Comparison by Charles T. Little (1987) with a closely related group, the Virgin of Viklan, in Gotland, Sweden, has led to an attribution to this northern area.

The theme of the Virgin holding the Christ Child on her lap (*Sedes Sapientiae*) is the same as that of the Auvergne Virgin, but here the Virgin, as the Queen of Heaven, wears a crown. The multiple ellipses of the drapery folds are softly composed and part of a gentler expression. A subtle echo of these curves is found in the smooth planes of the face. The broad expanse of the torso would have been interrupted by the centrally placed and separately carved Christ Child, held in place by dowels.
Plaque from a Reliquary Shrine
Spanish (Léon), ca. 115–20
Elephant ivory with traces of gilding, 10⅞ x 5⅛ in. (27 x 13.5 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.47)

The earliest of the several narrative works illustrated in this publication, this plaque may have belonged to a cycle representing the last episodes of Christ’s life and death. The other extant relief is in halves, divided between the Masaven Collection, Oviedo, Spain, and the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia. The scenes they depict are the Deposition (top half) and the Three Marys at the Tomb (lower half).

The episode in the upper register of the Museum’s ivory illustrates the account (Mark 16:12, 13; Luke 24:13–27) of the Journey to Emmaus. Jesus, at the left, appears as a pilgrim with his staff, bottle, and pouch, which is adorned with a cross identifying the location as Jerusalem. His plain nimbus, not inscribed with the usual cross, underscores the fact that he has not yet been recognized. As if to emphasize the authority of his words, Jesus grasps one of the disciples by the shoulder.

The inscription for the lower scene reads: **DOMINUS LOQUITUR MARIE** (The Lord speaks to Mary). Here Christ, cross-nimbed, repulses Mary Magdalen (John 20:11–17) with the words “**Noli me tangere** [Do not touch me] for I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

The rhythmic torsion and arrested movement of the forcefully delineated figures in both scenes is embodied in the treatment of the curvilinear draperies, the successive swinging pleats, and the four mysterious, suspended knots. The narrative could not be told in a more expressive and engaging manner. The size and readability of the double image are such that the subjects are clear from some distance, suggesting that the reliquary shrine from which the plaque came must have been very large. The entire cycle was intended to instruct both members of and visitors to the monastic community where the work once resided.
Two Plaques
German (Rhenish, Cologne), ca. 1135
Walrus ivory, 8 7/8 x 7 3/4 in. (21.3 x 19.7 cm); 8 1/4 x 7 3/8 in. (21.2 x 19.5 cm)
Gift of George Blumenthal, 1941 (41.100.201, 202)

These reliefs and their borders are made up of sections of walrus ivory. They are part of a larger series, of which five scenes survive. The three in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, illustrate the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Ascension of Christ.

The plaque above, on the left, depicts the Three Marys at the Holy Sepulchre, where the angel of the Lord announces that Jesus has risen (Matthew 28:6, 7), as two soldiers doze below. Two of the holy women carry jars and one swings a censer as if taking part in the liturgy in a church. Above hangs a circular candelabrum with openings and towers, a possible reference to the immense Romanesque gilt-copper candelabrum made in the third quarter of the eleventh century now in the cathedral at Hildesheim and to the example of about 1130 in the abbey church at Gross-Kumburg. The inscription on the latter establishes that the mammoth structure symbolizes the heavenly Jerusalem. The fact that the scene represented took place in the historical Jerusalem may be confirmed by the tiled domes in the upper corners of the background. These may reflect, however distantly, the fourth-century domed martyrium for the Holy Sepulchre, known as the Anastasis, in that city. Certain details of the facade, towers, and windows may also reference Ottonian and early Romanesque structures, most particularly the abbey church of Saint Pantaleon in Cologne dating from 966 to 980. The complex architectural scheme of columned arcades, pedimented facade with ashlar masonry, tall towers, and many windows suggests both exterior and interior space.

The second episode shows Saint Thomas approaching Jesus to touch the wound in his side (John 20:26–29). The apostles gather as witnesses. The architectural excerpts above and below suggest the location is a walled town, probably also symbolic of Jerusalem.

Both reliefs present their subjects in a clear, almost emblematic fashion, with an emphasis on the distinct actions of the individual figures as well as of the groups. The draperies are carved in a linear manner, with pricked edging along the lines, a characteristic of ivory carving in Cologne workshops of this time.

The original context for the series is unknown, although as decoration for an altar frontal, a retable, or a pulpit has been suggested. The frames are ornamented with palmettes (41.100.201) and foliated rinceaux (41.100.202).
Monumental Romanesque and Early Gothic Sculpture of the Mid- to Late 12th Century

Head of a Youth
French (Provence, St.-Gilles-du-Gard, Gard), mid-12th century
Limestone, h. 7 in. (18 cm)

Crowned Male Head
French (Aquitaine), mid-12th century
Limestone, h. 18 in. (46 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederic B. Pratt, 1935 (44.85.1)

While it has not been proven, this large head probably came from an equestrian statue on the lower facade of Notre-Dame-de-la-Couldre in Parthenay (Deux-Sèvres) in the Aquitaine (Poitou) or from another church facade in the region. The complete work may have been a symbol of militant and triumphant Christianity and possibly a reference to the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great (r. 306–37). (Constantine was misidentified as the subject of the bronze equestrian group of Marcus Aurelius, in Rome, and much-admired during the twelfth century.)

The head is more finished on the right side, indicating that the group was viewed when moving from left to right. While

The broad facade of the pilgrimage church at Saint-Gilles-du-Gard has suffered many losses and damages to the relief sculptures, particularly to the heads of the full-length figures. This imposing example is remarkably similar to one of the heads: in situ, that of Saint Michael at the northern end of the facade. Similar are the sloping eyes, shallow, concave pupils, pursed lips, fleshy cheeks, broad jaw, and wavy parallel grooves in the hair. The Museum’s head is highly finished on its right side but not on the left. This suggests that the relief figure of which it was a part faced mostly to the viewer’s right. The influence of ancient Roman art has been cited in relation to the facade and sculptures of the church of Saint-Gilles-du-Gard, and the present fragment is no exception, as is evident in the full, rounded face, deep-set eyes, and firm mouth. The Romanesque sculptor, in assimilating some of the details of Roman sculpture, transformed them into a new massive and powerful form.
its origin continues to be tentative, stylistic comparison with two figural fragments in the Louvre, of lesser scale and representing the Elders of the Apocalypse, tends to support this localization. Similar are the elongation of the heads, high cheekbones, ridged edges of the almond-shaped eyes, and the broad-banded crowns (the points are mostly missing). The nose of the Museum’s head has been broken away and restored. The large globular eyes with ridged edges, high cheekbones, smooth brow, full, slightly parted lips, incised strands of hair, and large ears are all carved in a deft shorthand that emphasizes the bold massiveness and planar accents of a very expressive Romanesque style particular to the Aquitaine.

**Head of King David**

French (Paris), ca. 1150  
Limestone, h. 11 1/4 in. (28.6 cm)  
Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1938 (38.180)

The right entrance of the west facade of the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, the portal of Saint Anne, was badly damaged in 1793 during the French Revolution, when the large sculptures of Old Testament kings and others were pulled down in the belief that they represented the early rulers of France. The lost carvings were later replaced under the direction of the architect Viollet-le-Duc and museum curator Geoffroy-Dechaume, following the now-lost drawings of 1725–28 by Antoine Benoist, later reproduced in engravings by Bernard de Montfaucon. The engravings have been helpful in identifying many of the fragments from the cathedral. The Museum’s head, identified by James J. Rorimer in 1940, was among the earliest sculptures of about 1150 located on the Saint Anne portal, where it was part of a column statue on a right jamb.

Despite having suffered several obvious losses—mostly along the central axis—the inlay of the eyes (originally filled with lead), and the fleurons of the crown, the head of King David can still be appreciated for its remarkable eloquence of line and form, its forceful frontality and solidity in the Romanesque tradition—softened and made elegant by nuances of modeling—and the beginnings of the naturalistic tendencies associated with the approaching Gothic era.

The King David and other figures on the exterior of the cathedral were public images with, potentially, an audience of the entire population of Paris.

*Column Figure of King David.* French, from the Portal of Saint Anne, Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Paris. From Dom Bernard de Montfaucon, *Les Monuments de la monarchie française,* I, Paris, 1739, pl. 8 detail
That the statue and the column were carved from a single, tall narrow block of limestone may explain in part the slender and frontal conception of the figure. Yet in its architectonic character it continues what may be seen as a traditionally Romanesque form. On the other hand, based upon the explicit rendering of the kingly vestments and its date, this important work may be regarded as poised between the Romanesque and Gothic styles.

The sculpture depicts an Old Testament king with a jeweled crown and a pearl-edged nimbus. Richly arrayed, the figure wears a long thinly pleated or crimped tunic with a textured collar and a broad waistband or girdle—a pair of long tassels are suspended below—and a mantle with a decorated border. A remnant of a scroll, once possibly grasped in both hands and inscribed, appears at the right side. While the sculpture has been subject to some recutting and sharpening of certain details, it is still a treasured survival from the destroyed cloister originally constructed in the 1160s beside the Royal Abbey Church at Saint-Denis, which had been augmented and enriched by Abbot Suger (1181–1151). Although of a reduced scale, this cloister figure is partly reminiscent of the earlier columnar jambs figures of the west facade portals dating from Suger’s abbacy. While only a few of the heads of the largest figures survive, the details of the figures were recorded in eighteenth-century drawings by Antoine Benoist.

This figure, also reflecting the confines of the single block from which it was carved, is columnar in character. Bearded and bald, it wears a classical pallium, or mantle, over a long tunic. Traces of a nimbus and a scroll help to identify the subject as one of the twelve apostles of Christ. As suggested by Lisbeth Castelnuovo-Tedesco, the fingers of the raised right hand assume the apostles’ traditional gesture of bearing witness. Many details elicit our admiration. These include the preserved features of the head, beard, vertical flutings of the drapery folds, and repeated curvilinear drapery edges. The underlying body masses of the figure are barely depicted, and this statue may be considered late Romanesque in style, although its date indicates it is on the cusp of the Gothic. Stylistically, it seems to derive, however distantly, from some of the draped relief figures of about 1140 by Nicholaus (act. Verona, 1114–ca. 1140) mounted on the right side of the main porch of the basilica of San Zeno Maggiore in Verona. The original location and function of the Museum’s statue are unknown.
Old Testament Priest
Northeastern French (Noyon), ca. 1170
Limestone, h. 50⅔ in. (128 cm)
The Bequest of Michael Dreicer, 1921 (22.60.17)

This sculpture is an example of Early Gothic sculptural style, as is evident in the organic treatment of the fully robed figure, with a clear, logical approach to the intricacies of the draping of heavy textiles. The tunic is partly covered by a mantle with deep converging folds. The mantle, pulled over the top of the head and shoulders and clutched in both hands, is gathered toward the middle of the body and draped over the left knee and leg. A scroll, held in the right hand and extending across the body and the left thigh, may have been painted with an identifying inscription. The impression of the figure as a whole is one of tautly drawn mass and imposing dignity.

Little (1992) has suggested the subject is Aaron, a patriarch of the Levite priesthood and brother of Moses. Part of a series of Old Testament figures including the Museum’s Moses (acc. no. 65.268), it has been placed by Little in the context of a complex embellishing the south transept portal of the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Noyon, in northeastern France. The Aaron would have been one of the jamb sculptures high above clusters of engaged columns that flank each side of the entrance steps, a placement that makes clear that the jamb sculptures were not intended to be seen in the round; they were meant to be viewed from below, either frontally or from an oblique angle as the steps and entryway were traversed.
Crucifix
Northern Italian, ca. 1200
Walnut (body) and willow (arms) with polychromy,
h. 80 3/4 in. (205 cm)
Fletcher Fund, 1947 (47.100.54)

This imposing crucifix depicts a somber but triumphant living Christ. The figure wears a colobium, an ankle-length tunic that is usually sleeveless. Long narrow folds fall from the belted waist, while the drapery over the torso is modeled by the underlying forms of the pectorals and slightly swelling belly. The gentle swags of shallow folds on the sleeves are suspended from the abstractly indicated biceps and muscles of the lower arms. These configurations of the colobium are elegant and symmetrical. Traces of layers of polychromy make difficult a clear assessment of the original colors; the tunic appears to have been blue with gilded borders and belt.

Sculpturally, this is a powerful image, with the strong vertical of the body, the upright head, and the extended, separated feet (the toes are restored) contrasting with the emphatic horizontal of the arms in their heavy sleeves (the hands are replacements). Great sensitivity is shown in the ovals of the face and eyes, as well as in the modeling of the successive, rounded clusters of hair and beard. The style may be regarded as transitional between late Romanesque abstraction and incipient Early Gothic naturalism.

The sculpture is said to have come from a convent near Treviso, Italy. The colobium, which denotes Christ's kingly and priestly nature, appears early in eastern Mediterranean art, as on the lid of the Museum's enamel reliquary of the True Cross (acc. no. 17.190.715a,b) made in Byzantium (Constantinople) about 800.

The depiction of the living Christ on the cross wearing the colobium may be related to the Volto Santo (Holy Face) works preserved in the Borgo San Sepolcro (7th-9th century) and in Lucca Cathedral (11th-12th century). A sculpture of this type, carved by Nicodemus, Christ's disciple, was thought to have been carried to Italy in the eighth century. Whether examples such as the Museum's have a direct connection to the cult of the Volto Santo is open to conjecture.
Capital with the Temptations of Christ
French (Île-de-France), ca. 1200
Limestone, h. 10½ in. (26.7 cm)
Rogers Fund, 1923 (21.21.1)

The dimensions of this small capital suggest that it originally may have been a part of a series for a cloister. Although no other candidates for the series have been identified, it is possible that the subjects may have been mostly or entirely Christological, with each capital depicting closely related subjects.

Analysis of the stone indicates an origin somewhere in the Paris basin. A tentative stylistic comparison may be made with several of the archivolt relief figures of the central facade portal of about 1200 of the cathedral of Saint-Etienne in Sens (Yonne). The present capital shares with the figures at Sens the transitional figure style of about 1200, in which the human form begins to be seen beneath the folds of the classicistic draperies and the figures are in a contrapposto stance.

Recently, after a thorough examination, Lucy Adams has clarified the subjects of each of the sides of the Museum’s capital and established it as a rare narrative depicting the three temptations of Christ. The scenes on the four sides are: on the first face, the Devil tempting Christ to change stones into bread (Matt. 4:3; Luke 4:3); on the second, the Devil tempting Christ with the kingdoms of the world (illustrated below; Matt. 4:8; Luke 4:5); on the third, the Devil taking Christ to the temple (Luke 4:9); and on the fourth, the Devil tempting Christ to cast himself from the roof of the temple (Luke 4:9). By adding the episode on the third face, the designer (possibly the carver) provided a clever solution to the presentation of the three temptations on a capital with four sides.

If the original context was indeed a cloister, the audience was a monastic community and presumably literate. In performing their various practical tasks the monks probably repeatedly passed through the walkways, where they may have contemplated the Christological narratives and iconographic program represented there.
Virgin and Child in Majesty
Lotharingian (Valleys of the Meuse and Upper Rhine rivers), 1215–20
Oak with traces of polychromy, h. 48 in. (122 cm)
Bequest of George Blumenthal, 1941 (41.190.283)

Crowned as the Queen of Heaven, the Virgin is seated on a richly ornamented throne that resembles a bishop’s cathedra. Her missing right hand may have held a scepter. The Christ Child raises his right hand in blessing, while holding an orb in his left. The dragon beneath the Virgin’s feet is a reference to God’s words in the Book of Genesis (3:15): “I will put enmities between thee and the woman [Eve]…She shall crush thy head and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel.”

Larger than the twelfth-century examples (pp. 12, 13), this work is more imposing and monumental. The very different style emphasizes the natural fall of drapery, such as over the throne and around the Virgin’s feet. The folds, with their multiple linear, thin flutings, delineate form and imply the underlying masses of both figures. While the near-symmetry of the folds underscores the frontality of the Virgin’s pose, the effect is tempered by the offset Child and the subtle variations in the disposition of the folds of the Virgin’s mantle. The sculpture is hollowed out at the back.

The audience intended for this devotional image would have been a monastic community, possibly the priory of Oignies in northern France (Pas-de-Calais). It has been suggested, on the basis of comparison with other sculptures from that region, that this regal and hieratic Virgin and Child was carved in the valley of the Meuse River. However, its similarity to a work attributed to Cologne or Aachen (Schnütgen Museum, Cologne) of about 1220–30 points to an origin in the broader region of Lotharingia, which corresponds roughly to the Lorraine of eastern France and includes the valleys of the Meuse and Upper Rhine rivers.
Enthroned King
Northern Italian (Lombardy or the Veneto), ca. 1230–35
Limestone (pietra di Aurisina, province of Trieste), h. 39½ in. (100.3 cm)
Mrs. Stephen V. Harkness Fund, 1922 (22.31.2)

This imposing sculpture represents a ruler, a role indicated by the regal attire: a high spherical crown and an amply draped cloak (a version of the ancient *pallium*), which is secured with a brooch at the shoulder. A scepter was formerly held in the left hand and rested on the shoulder. Rigidly erect, with slipped feet planted firmly on the plinth, the figure displays dominant frontality tempered only by variations in the drapery and a partly exposed lower right leg, an ancient Roman motif associated with high rank (Peter Cornelius Claussen 1973).

Carved from a single block of limestone, the sculpture is in relatively good condition except for several obvious losses. The cutout area between the feet at the front of the plinth is probably not original. Both figure and architectural throne are carved in the round, suggesting that the sculpture was intended to be seen from multiple points of view.

This sculpture has been compared to several northern Italian sculptures, especially those from Venice, that are recognized as continuing stylistic features of works by the great Benedetto Antelami, who was active from 1187 to 1233 in Fidenza and Parma. In any case, the Museum’s sculpture combines elements of the Romanesque style, as in the round arched throne, and of the Gothic, in the incipient naturalism of the flowing drapery folds and the emphasis given to the body masses reflected beneath the clothing. While the exact use of this stone sculpture is unknown, Little has speculated (2002) that it served possibly as an imperial portrait as part of a city gate or in conjunction with a law court as an image of justice.
Head of a King
French (Île-de-France), ca. 1239–40
Limestone, h. 133/8 in. (34.3 cm)
Fletcher Fund, 1947 (47.100.53)

This head is a remnant of a full-length statue, probably a jamb figure for a church portal. The back is only roughly carved, suggesting that the principal viewpoints were from the front or slightly from the sides. The obvious losses and overall weathering do not seriously diminish an assessment of the style as an outstanding example of the High Gothic in France, as practiced in the workshops producing sculpture for the great cathedrals and chapels during the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Indeed, the best comparisons may be seen in Parisian sculptures, such as the so-called King Childebert in the Louvre and the earliest of the apostles in and from the Sainte-Chapelle. The Childebert was the pier or trumeau figure from the portal of the former refectory of the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The decorated crown, the waves of hair at the sides of the head, the tight curls above the forehead, and the treatment of the mustache and beard are especially similar to those of the Childebert.

Heroic and rich even as a fragment, the Museum’s head is a marvel for its variegated textures and subtle modulation of mass. It is deftly carved in a simplified naturalistic manner and evokes a mood of spiritual reflection. The almost metallic hardness of the bejeweled crown contrasts with the soft undulating locks of hair and spiral curls extending below it, as do the smoothly arched brow and slightly in-drawn cheeks with the curvilinear fall of the wavy mustache. Very rarely since the great achievements of the Late Classical and Hellenistic eras has the rich tactile monumentality of the human head been so brilliantly and expressively achieved.

Enthroned Virgin and Child
German (Regensburg?), ca. 1280
Oak with polychromy, h. 50 1/2 in. (128.3 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916 (16.32.183)

That this large, imposing sculpture was long-treasured is evidenced by its several paint layers dominated by colors of the Baroque era. The Virgin is crowned as Queen of Heaven. Her proportionally very long torso indicates that the group was intended to be seen—foreshortened—from below. It is hollowed out at the back, indicating that it was placed against a wall, pier, or niche. The full deep folds of drapery over the Virgin’s knees, the slight undulations of her belted tunic, the stiff hanging pleats of her short veil, her rounded puffy eyes, and her smile combine in such a way as to suggest a comparison with works emanating from the region of Regensburg in lower eastern Bavaria on the upper Danube. Of special relevance in this regard is the large Annunciation group of about 1280 in the cathedral of Regensburg.

Below the Virgin’s slippered feet are two dragonlike creatures, possibly an abbreviated reference to a passage in the book of Psalms (90:13): “Thou shalt walk upon the asp and basilisk and thou shalt trample under foot the lion and the dragon.” Alternatively, the creatures may reflect an apocryphal episode of the Flight into Egypt, from the Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew, in which Jesus tamed dragons coming from a cave.

Virgin of the Annunciation
German, Cathedral of Regensburg, ca. 1280. Polychromed stone. From The Cathedral of Regensburg (1977), p. 13
The Betrayal and Arrest of Christ
Northeastern French (Picardy, Amiens [Somme]), 1260–70
Chalky limestone with traces of polychromy and gilding, 39½ x 42¼ in. (101 x 107 cm)
Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection,
Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1917 (17.120.5)

Part of a large choir screen representing the Passion, this dramatic tableau illustrates three events surrounding the betrayal and arrest of Christ. From left to right are represented Saint Peter sheathing his sword after severing the ear of the high priest’s servant, Malchus (seated), and the ear’s miraculous restoration by Christ; the Kiss of Judas; and Christ’s arrest by Roman soldiers. The compression of these episodes, the judicious use of gesture and details of clothing, the intensity of facial expression, and the complex interweaving of the figures create a powerful expression of conflict and emotion. The work is a masterful example of narrative art.

Despite the losses, it is clear that the sculptor conceived this relief not only frontally but also obliquely, as several specific actions can be fully understood by viewers only as they move past it. This is the case with Christ’s hand reattaching Malchus’s ear and Judas approaching to kiss Christ. Details of the figure arrangements as well as specific gestures continue in the ivory diptychs of the next century, as seen in several examples in the Museum’s collection (acc. nos. 50.195, 17.190.208, 17.190.289). The details and proportions of some of the heads are reflected in the contemporary ivory below.

Carved in white limestone, the sculpture is said to come from the vicinity of Amiens (Somme). Little has recently (1999) cited the choir screen, destroyed in 1755, of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame at Amiens as the origin of this monumental image. In this context it would have been one of five separate episodes depicting the Passion; other sections are preserved in Paris and Amiens. The blocks of stone of each scene were set up against the recesses of the upper arcade of the choir enclosure facing the nave.

Diptych with Scenes of the Passion (detail).
French, Paris, ca. 1370–80. Elephant ivory, overall 8 x 3¾ in. (20.3 x 10 cm)
Rogers Fund, 1950 (50.195)
Corpus of Christ from a Cross
French (Paris ?), ca. 1260–80
Elephant ivory with traces of polychromy, h. 6½ in. (16.5 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Maxime L. Hermanos, 1978 (1978.521.3)

Hardly more than a handful of French ivory carvings of Christ on the Cross survive, most of them fragments. Generally they show the perizonium (loincloth) with the ends of the cloth tucked in at both sides as here, not fastened by a knot as in some Romanesque metalwork examples of the twelfth century. Typically, Christ’s closed eyes are horizontal slits, his head is inclined, and his wavy locks of hair fall over his right shoulder. His beard and mustache are trimmed, leaving the middle of the upper lip bare. Pectorals, ribcage, and abdominal muscles are also represented. In all of the ivory corpora of the Gothic period Christ is depicted as having suffered before death.

The Museum’s ivory is of the highest quality and one of the most eloquent of such works. Little (1999) has suggested that this piece conveys a sense of “pathos and agony,” as expressed in the sensitivity of the face, and in the “subtle twist in the torso . . . produced, in part, by the positioning of the legs, which were crossed and mounted on the cross with a single nail.”

The monumentality of this small carving is clearly evident, and Little has proposed as comparisons large-scale examples produced at this time in the Île-de-France and now located in Sens, Amiens, and Bourges. Many elements of the corpora of the thirteenth century continued in works of the fourteenth century, but with more elegance and softer modeling (see below).
Virgin and Child
Northeastern French, ca. 1260–70
Elephant ivory, h. 5 ¼ in. (14.6 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.175)

Although carved in the round, this exquisite diminutive work was intended to be seen from the front, as was consistent with the focus of a medieval worshiper. The theme of the Christ Child tenderly embracing the Virgin and touching her chin may derive from both Byzantine iconography (as a variation of the Byzantine Virgin Eleousa [Gr., “compassionate”]) as well as from the Song of Songs (2:6, 8:3): “His left hand is under my head and his right arm embraces me.”

Several other features may reflect the monumental Vierge dorée that stands against the central pier of the south transept portal of the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Amiens: the downward turn of the Virgin’s gaze toward the upturned face of the Christ Child, her contrapostal stance (with her weight on her hidden left leg), and the dramatic diagonal pull of the folds of her mantle, ending in tightly converging bunches beneath the Child.

The overall impression of this proportionally tall statuette, also carved in the round, is at once courtly and humane. The Virgin wears a gown and mantle of the court, and she once wore a metal crown over her short veil. The Christ Child chucks the Virgin under the chin, while she, without responding, gazes into the distance. The masterful expression of this group is only partially tempered by the postmedieval reworking of the polychromy and the obvious loss of portions of the figure of the Child.

With the changes in the relationship of the Virgin and the Child and the slightly different configuration in the folds of the Virgin’s mantle, this statuette seems to be based on a different source than the ivory at the left, that is, the monumental Virgin and Child placed against the trumeau of the north transept portal of the cathedral of Notre-Dame, Paris.

Nearly two inches taller than the ivory statuette, this equally refined work is also expertly carved in the round, although it is primarily frontal. The subject is uncertain because of the loss of the left shoulder and arm, which may have supported the figure of the Christ Child. A possible alternative subject is the Virgin of the Annunciation, in which case there would have been a separate figure of the Angel Gabriel.

An origin in the eastern region of present-day France, in the vicinity of the upper Rhine River Valley, depends upon stylistic comparisons with the large-scale stone jamb figures of the late thirteenth century created for the west facade of the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Strasbourg. Similarities in physiognomy and in the deeply undercut, looping drapery folds suggest this regional source for the Museum’s walnut statuette.
Standing Virgin and Child
Northern French (Vexin), 1300–1325
Limestone with traces of polychromy and gilding, h. 61 1/2 in. (156.2 cm)
Bequest of George Blumenthal, 1941 (41.190.279)

Representations of the standing or seated Virgin with the Child appeared frequently as independent stone sculptures during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially in Netherlandish and French areas. The widespread popularity of this votive subject grew out of the developing cult of the Virgin. Its stylistic roots were in the much-admired trumeau and tympanum figures of the thirteenth-century cathedrals, such as Vierge dorée at Amiens (see p. 28).

The largest of the four sculptures illustrated on pages 30 to 33, this Virgin, crowned as the Queen of Heaven, is distinctive in the sharp bend of her waist that throws the head and shoulders to the side opposite the Child. The figure, with the lower body in a contrapposto stance and the weight on the left leg, is draped in long curves of nearly parallel hanging folds falling from a high waist. The Child, described as “affable, extremely aware” by Vera Ostoia (1969), is held high, his head level with his mother’s forehead and cheek. The gesture of the Child holding an end of the Virgin’s belt or girdle may refer to the mystical marriage of Christ and the Virgin, the Maria Sponsa Filii Dei, in Saint Bernard’s (1091–1153) commentaries on the Song of Songs, traditionally attributed to King Solomon (ca. 971–ca. 932 B.C.).

The limestone, which resembles that from Caen, the open mantle displaying the folds of the Virgin’s gown, and the Child grasping his mother’s belt are features that have led scholars to locate this work in the Vexin region, between Normandy and the Île-de-France.
Standing Virgin and Child
Eastern French (Lorraine), ca. 1310–20
Limestone with polychromy, h. 38 1/2 in. (97.8 cm)
The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931 (32.100.406)

Unlike the previous example, this work depicts the Virgin’s mantle drawn across her body, allowing only a glimpse of the upper and lower portions of her gown. The traces of the original polychromy and gilding are especially nuanced and delicate. The Virgin’s smooth broad cheeks have a cameo perfection; the features are drawn closely together. Again, she is represented crowned as the Queen of Heaven. The relatively large Christ Child holds an inscribed scroll in his outstretched hands that bears the painted words Ave Maria.

This statue fits within a group of sculptures located in the Lorraine area of eastern France that was studied by William H. Forsyth (1936) and J. A. Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth (1965). These works share a refinement of modeling, similar proportions, and physiognomic type: broad faces with slightly pinched features. The most prominent example is the Virgin and Child of about 1310–20 in the cloister of the cathedral at Saint Die in the department of Vosges.
Standing Virgin and Child
Northern French (Île-de-France), ca. 1340
Marble with gilding, h. 31 7/8 in. (81 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.721)

The fine marble, the exquisite carving of the fleshy areas, including the rounded perfection of the Virgin’s face, the highly subtle configurations of the drapery folds, and the original delicate gilded decorations of this elegant image make it a prime example of court or aristocratic patronage. Although it has not been proven, this work may have been the gift of Jeanne d’Evreux (d. 1371), queen of France, to the Cistercian convent of Pont-aux-Dames (the provenance of this group), located near one of her châteaux. The mantle drawn across the Virgin’s body, a feature of two other sculptures associated with or commissioned by the queen, is also seen frequently in other figures of the Virgin without this association.

The overall refinement of this statuette includes gilt borders and scattered rosettes and sprigs of foliage. The rounded recessed top surface of the Virgin’s veil indicates that she was intended to have a gilt and possibly jeweled metal crown. The eucharistic pyxis, held in her right hand and blessed by the Child, prefigures the Passion.

Guillem Sequer, Spanish (Catalonia), active mid-14th century
Standing Virgin and Child
Northern Spanish (Catalonia), ca. 1350
Limestone with polychromy and gilding, h. 51 1/2 in. (130.8 cm)
Bequest of George Blumenthal, 1941 (41.190.282)

Erect and modeled with the precision and hardness of metalwork, this crowned Virgin is again presented as the Queen of Heaven. Her face and the Christ Child’s are masks, almost doll-like, in their immutability. The Virgin wears a thin belt, two jeweled chains, and a decorated mantle, and she holds a bird in her right hand (the head is missing), while the Child points to an open book steadied with his left hand. The painted inscription reads: veri/caro (on the left page) and factum est et abit uit m/ on the right (John 1:14: “And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”). This work has been identified as by the Catalan sculptor, architect, and painter Guillem Sequer, who was active in the diocese of Lleida (Lérida) and elsewhere during the mid-fourteenth century.
Enthroned Virgin and Child
Northeastern French (Champagne), ca. 1300–1330
Limestone with polychromy and gilding, h. 42½ in. (123 cm)
Fletcher Fund, 1939 (39.63)

The Virgin is seated on a backless throne, the sides of which are enriched with blind arcades of pointed arches. A separate block of stone that forms the base is decorated with rosettes recessed in a shallow scotia. The Virgin’s mantle is open wide and pulled back over each knee, and the end of her long, rosette-decorated belt or girdle falls from her high waist and between her knees to the base. She bends to the viewer’s left, while the Christ Child appears to lean in the opposite direction. The attributes formerly held in the Virgin’s right hand and by the Child have been lost. The Virgin’s crown shows remnants of fleurons. Her broad rounded face recalls that of the Virgin from Lorraine (p. 31). The substantial preserved portions of polychromy and gilding suggest the original richness of this majestic work. Notable is the exterior of the rose-red mantle decorated with diamond-shaped patterns in gilded gesso to imitate brocade; the lining is painted to imitate vair (the gray and white fur of a squirrel). The reverse of the throne is flat and that of the Virgin only partly carved and painted, indicating that the statue was meant to be seen from the front or from a three-quarter viewpoint.

The provenance of the parish church of Saint-Chéron (department of Marne) is confirmed by stylistic comparisons with works in the region and by archeological evidence. The high quality of the carving, the simulated brocade, the patterned and gilded borders, and other details suggest that this prestigious work was commissioned by one of the local seigneurs.

Seated Virgin of the Annunciation
Northern French (Île-de-France), 1320–25
Limestone with traces of polychromy, h. 16½ in. (42.2 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.739)

Seated on a backless throne with blind Gothic arcades at the sides, this Virgin leans to her right as she steadies herself with her right hand on a prayerbook and modestly holds the end of her veil in her left. The composition and the absence of the Christ Child presupposes a figure of the message-bearing Angel Gabriel, from whom she recoils in illustration of Luke 1:29: “But she was greatly troubled at what was said.” Crowned and in courtly dress, she is depicted as the Queen of Heaven. A portion of her mantle is drawn in deep folds across her lap, like an apron, while other parts are draped over the throne. The Virgin’s head is slightly downcast, and her delicate face displays widely placed, almond-shaped eyes, a high rounded forehead, and a sensitive small mouth with a hint of a smile. Stylistically comparable sculptures, found principally in the Île-de-France and dating to 1320–30, are the basis for the attribution of this elegant work.
Two Retable Reliefs of the 14th Century

Portion of a Retable with Six Apostles
Eastern French, 1325–50
Limestone with traces of polychromy, h. 24⅜ in. (62.5 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916 (16.32.169)

This relief was part of a larger work, a retable intended to be viewed above and behind an altar. Originally representing Christ and the twelve apostles, it offered a rhythmic pairing of facing and elegantly draped figures across its full width, half of which is seen here. A smaller portion of four apostles is preserved in the Musée du Louvre. The apostles shown here may be partly identified, beginning at the right: Saint Peter holding keys and facing the missing figure of Christ; the youthful Saint John the Evangelist also facing Christ; Saint James facing Saint Andrew; and Saint Bartholomew facing an unidentified apostle at the left. The entire series was united by a richly cusped and pinnacled arcade. The complete retable once resided in the collegiate church (begun in 1326) of Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Vaudémont (Meurthe-et-Moselle), in the old province of Lorraine. The gentle elegance of the figure style is not that of this region (see page 31), but rather that of Burgundy, as suggested in a comparison with several relief sculptures of the right portal of the west facade of the cathedral of Saint-Etienne at Sens (Yonne) and the west facade of the cathedral of Saint-Etienne in Auxerre (Yonne).
Angel of the Annunciation from a Retable

French (Paris), ca. 1375–80
Marble, h. 24 in. (61 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.390)

With knees flexed, shoulders forward, head upturned, and bearing a scroll, this fragmentary relief figure represents the Angel Gabriel in an Annunciation scene. The scroll, to which the angel points, would have originally borne a painted-and-gilded salutation to the Virgin Mary, who would have appeared just to the right. The relief, together with another marble relief of the Presentation (h. 63 cm) preserved in the Cluny Museum, Paris, may constitute all that remains of an important retable with scenes of the infancy of Christ. The retable was probably carved in the late fourteenth century in one of the royal workshops in Paris, possibly that of Jean de Liège (see p. 39).

Like the elderly Simeon in the Cluny Presentation relief, the angel is shown in three-quarter view, and the suggestion of arrested forward movement is palpable. The subtle modeling of the elegant draperies and the round, fleshy face and lips parallel those of the Virgin in the Presentation relief.
Three Royals
French (Ile-de-France), ca. 1340–50
Marble with traces of polychromy and gilding; (king) h. 15¼ in. (40 cm); (queen) h. 15¾ in. (38.7 cm); ( prince) h. 15¼ in. (38.7 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.387, 388, 392)

There are many extant portraits from the late Middle Ages found on reliefs representing donors of church furnishings, as funerary effigies, and on pages of deluxe illustrated manuscripts. These works provide insights into the history and patronage of the time, as well as into appearances and personalities of real people.

The three kneeling royal figures shown in prayer have been variously identified. The most recent scholarly opinions suggest that the crowned couple represents Philippe VI de Valois (r. 1328–50) and his queen, Jeanne de Bourgogne (d. 1349). The crownless figure is thought to represent their son, Jean de France (r. 1350–64, as Jean II le Bon).

Because the backs are flat, it is assumed that they were intended to be mounted on a background, perhaps on marble of another color or on black, as part of a retable that the royals may have donated. The focus of their veneration would have been a central group of the Virgin and Child or the figure of Christ. Because it has been suggested that these sculptures came from the ruined royal abbey at Jumièges in Normandy, the retable may have been commissioned for the high altar or a chapel altar in that church.

Can one perceive the nature of a real personality in any of the royals? Certainly the cares of office seem to be reflected in the intense face of the king. The queen, a woman of middle age wearing a cloth strap, or barbette, under her chin, is harder to read; yet she seems submissive in her piety. The dauphin may be seen as youthful, brash, inexperienced yet determined. Today we might call him ambitious.
Jean de Liège, Franco-Netherlandish, b. ca. 1330, d. 1381

**Tomb Effigy Bust of Marie de France (1327–1341)**

French (Île-de-France), ca. 1381
Marble with lead insets, h. 12⅛ in. (31.1 cm)
Gift of George Blumenthal, 1941 (41.100.132)

Marie de France, daughter of Charles IV le Bel (r. 1322–28), died at fourteen, forty years before the creation of her tomb effigy by Jean de Liège, a sculptor working in Paris for the French court. Marie’s mother, the widowed queen Jeanne d’Evreux (bef. 1313–1371) commissioned this effigy portrait along with one for her sister Blanche de France (1328–1393) for their double tomb in the chapel of Notre-Dame-la-Blanche in the royal abbey of Saint-Denis, near Paris. Both were full-length effigies. The Museum’s bust was separated from the rest of the figure during the French Revolution. As recorded in a seventeenth-century drawing, Marie’s head rested on a pillow beneath an arched canopy.

Originally, the coronet was decorated with metal ornaments or jewels, as evidenced by the attachment holes in the band above the forehead. The tight braids covering the temples and ears and the bands of actual fabric once held by the two small lead plaques visible just below are characteristic of women’s fashion about 1380, when Jean de Liège was working on the effigies.

While the artist could not have known Marie, who died more than a generation earlier, he was able to provide such an engaging portrait of her that he must have referred to records of her features (a lost painting?), as well as to those of her sister Blanche, who died at sixty-five. In any case, the sculptor has shown great sensitivity in the nuanced modeling of the facial planes and delicate precision in the delineation of the features of this young woman of the court.
Aquamaniles are vessels to hold water for washing the hands. Probably first employed by priests during the Mass, they subsequently came into favor at the dinner tables of princes, aristocrats, and wealthy merchants. Early examples were in the form of lions, dragons, birds, and griffins; later ones, created for domestic use, included horses, mounted knights and falconers, dogs, centaurs, and unicorns. It is generally difficult to prove that a particular aquamanile had symbolic significance, but biblical or literary references such as bestiaries and romances cannot be ruled out.

This example was filled through an aperture at the top of the head, and water was poured from the spout between its pointed teeth. Stout, short legged, and menacing, the small aquamanile holds its own in any company.

The monumental bronze lion monument of Duke Henry the Lion, set up in the cathedral square in Brunswick (Braunschweig) in 1166, was a strong influence on the craftsmen producing aquamaniles. While the influence is not so obvious in this work, it is still possible to postulate that the lion originated in Lower Saxony because of its resemblance to several aquamaniles produced there that date from the first third of the thirteenth century. While treatment of the mane appears to be unique, the sturdy proportions, short legs, upturned head, and spout protruding from the sharp teeth are features in common.
have been thought to have been made in foundries of the town of Hildesheim in Lower Saxony. The knight’s flat-topped helm and sleeveless tunic over mail provide a basis for dating this work in the late thirteenth century.

**Aquamanile in the Form of a Unicorn**  
German (Nuremberg), ca. 1400  
Brass, cast in lost-wax process, with natural patina, h. 15¼ in. (38.7 cm)  
Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964 (64.101.1493)

This work exhibits several casting flaws, which have been filled with lead. The horn, cast separately, may be a replacement, while the turncock jutting from the animal-head aperture in the chest is of later date. The vessel was filled above the forehead. The massive body, swelling chest, upright neck, and large head are impressive. The dragon handle ends just above the tail, which extends upward. The tail is distinctive for its flat, almost cutout quality and the virtual absence of modeling in contrast to the rounded surfaces of body and head. The flame shape of the tail is characteristic of a number of aquamaniles produced in the brass foundries at Nuremberg about 1400 and into the early fifteenth century.

Less elegant and more massive than the previous example, this aquamanile is a robust work, a fine representative of the end of a tradition of aquamaniles shaped as dramatically posed animals.
Standing Virgin and Child
Southern Netherlandish (middle Meuse River Valley), 1345
Marble with traces of gilding, h. 45 3/4 in. (116.2 cm)
Fletcher Fund, 1924 (24.215)

This work is one of the very few documented fourteenth-century statues of the Virgin and Child. It was formerly near or on the high altar of the church of the Beguinage of Saint Catherine in Diest (in present-day Belgium), where it was recorded in 1345 that the sister superior of the Beguinage paid two pounds for the image “in alabaster stone.” (It is actually a variety of marble.) The Beguines were lay sisters who lived a semi-religious communal life and performed charitable services.

The documentation and the stylistic association with other marble sculptures in the region confirm the attribution to a workshop in the middle Meuse Valley region. At the same time it is clear that this sculpture is partly dependent on two Paris commissions of the French queen, Jeanne d’Evreux, the standing Virgin and Child in silver gilt made between 1324 and 1339—when it was given to the royal abbey of Saint-Denis—and a large marble standing Virgin and Child, which she ordered in 1340 for her chapel at Saint-Denis (now in the Musée du Louvre and the church in Magny-en-Vexin, respectively). The gesture of the Child reaching to touch the Virgin’s cheek in the Museum’s sculpture derives from the Louvre statuette, while the mantle drawn across the middle of the Virgin’s body and other configurations of the drapery depend on both of the queen’s commissions. Also comparable is the Virgin from Pont-aux-Dames (p. 32). The suggestion made by Forsyth (1968) that the Magny Virgin was carved by a Mosan sculptor indicates the difficulty in clarifying the regional and stylistic interpretations in fourteenth-century sculpture, particularly that from Netherlandish areas and the Île-de-France.

The Virgin Supported by Saint John the Evangelist and the Centurion and Two Soldiers
Southern Netherlandish (middle Meuse River Valley [Huy]), ca. 1350 Marble with traces of gilding, hts. 22 in. (56 cm); 26¾ in. (68 cm) Gift of Archer M. Huntington, in memory of his father, Collis Potter Huntington, 1926 (26.101.6, .7)

Flat at the back, these two groups were part of a larger relief illustrating the Crucifixion. As suggested by Albert Lemeunier (1980), the central figure of Christ on the cross may be the work on loan to the Musée d’Art Religieux et d’Art Mosan in Liège. Figures of a mourning holy woman, of the Ecce Homo, and a relief of the Descent into Hell in the collection of the Prince de Ligne in Belœil have been identified as possibly coming from the same large ensemble, probably a retable. The Museum’s soldiers illustrate the moment when the centurion, pointing to Christ, exclaims, “Truly, this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54).

Both Metropolitan groups are said to have come from the collegiate church of Notre-Dame at Huy. This possibility is made credible by the close stylistic connection, observed by Forsyth (1968), with the tympanum of the Bethlehem portal of this church. Especially similar are the proportions of the figures, the broad facial types, and some of the armor details.

The purpose of the retable was in part to vivify Christ’s Passion as a background for the celebration of the Mass on the supporting altar. The figure style of the Museum’s groups testifies to the fact that the Netherlandish sculptors, some of them working in the Meuse Valley, were in the forefront of the evolution of dramatic religious art. The most famous heir to this tradition in the next generation was Claus Sluter (b. Haarlem ca. 1342, d. Dijon 1406).
Giovanni Pisano, b. ca. 1245–48, d. ca. 1314–19

**Lectern with the Eagle of Saint John the Evangelist**

Central Italian (Tuscany), 1301
Carrara marble with restored head in Pentelic marble,
h. 27 3/8 in. (70.5 cm)
Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.70.28)

Of the several Italian Gothic sculptures in the Medieval department galleries, this work is the most imposing. Carved by Giovanni Pisano, a powerfully expressive sculptor active principally in Tuscany, the lectern was once a dramatic crowning element of the large columned and multpaneled marble pulpit in the Church of Sant’Andrea, Pistoia. An
inscription on the pulpit provides the date of completion, 1301, and names Giovanni as the sculptor and Canon Arnoldus as the donor. Originally located on the right, or north side, of the church and before the choir screen, the lectern faced the main nave and represented the symbol of Saint John the Evangelist. The sculpture immediately below it completed the tetramorph with symbols of the evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke in a combined imagery derived from Ezekiel (10: 4) and from the Apocalypse (Revelation 4: 6–8).

The eagle’s head, which is a restoration, is modeled on that of Pisano’s eagle lectern on the pulpit of 1302–10 in the Duomo of Pisa. Losses, which have not been replaced, are found around the talons and the base. Despite these changes, the sculpture is notable for the striking chiseling of the eagle’s body and wings and the horizontal windblown feathers on its sturdy legs. The fine technique, combined with the dramatic stance and the strong spread wings, makes this imposing symbol of the evangelist a fitting tribute to the inspirational nature of John’s writings since early Christian times. The stirring words of Sedulius, the mid-fifth-century author and poet, referred to John’s texts when he wrote, “Calling out like an eagle, the word of John reaches the heavens,” and in doing so, he anticipated the expressive intent of this work of nine centuries later.

Domestic Tabernacle
Northern Italian (probably the Veneto), about 1350–75
Poplar and oak with polychromy and gilding.
h. 38½ in. (97.8 cm)

This rare, easily portable domestic tabernacle includes three nearly three-dimensional sculptures—the crucified Christ and the mourning figures of the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist—and four painted, winged, lamenting angels silhouetted against a dark blue sky. The composition is framed by a possibly later proscenium arch with a Gothic ogee that has openwork in the spandrels supported by simple capitals on twisted engaged columns. The cross is imbedded in the rocky hill of Golgotha, where Adam’s skull is depicted.

Crowned with thorns and nude except for the loincloth and attached to the cross with three nails, the sagging figure of Christ is a pitiful one and appropriate to the pious devotions of the owner of this private tabernacle. The figures of the Virgin and John, in their gestures and bowed heads, together with the anguish of the angels, clearly mark the ensemble as the focus of empathetic worship.

Formerly in the collection of J. Pierpont Morgan, the sculptural group and the setting may have come from the Veronese workshop of Turone di Maxio da Camengo, active in the second half of the fourteenth century.
Schreinmadonna (Shrine Madonna)
German (Rhenish), ca. 1300
Oak with linen covering, gesso, polychromy, and gilding, h. 14½ in. (36.8 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.185)

Closed, this work represents the enthroned Virgin Mary nursing the Christ Child, who holds a dove in his left hand and his mother’s breast in his right. Open, the statuette is transformed into a miniature altarpiece depicting the Trinity at the center. Only God the Father remains; the Crucified Christ and dove of the Holy Spirit are missing. Holes in the central figure’s chest and in the crossed tree trunks, the lignum vitae, show their former positions. The open shutters reveal painted scenes illustrating the infancy of Christ. At the viewer’s left, top to bottom, are the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi; at the right, top to bottom, the Visitation, the Presentation in the Temple, and the Annunciation to the Shepherds.

A combination of statuette, altarpiece, and shrine, this rare devotional work was intended to make manifest the biblical miracle of the Incarnation, through which the Son of God became the child the Virgin Mary would bear (Luke 1:35). Assuming that this piece came from a convent cell (somewhere in the Rhineland), it must have been the focus of a nun’s daily prayers, as she contemplated the multiple images: the Virgin nursing the Child (Madonna lactans); the Trinity as an image of salvation (Throne of Grace); and the birth and infancy of Christ.

The intimacy between this Schreinmadonna and the individual praying before it was intended to elicit an emotional and empathetic response and the possibility of personal salvation. As one of the contributions of medieval monasticism, such works became visual aids to spirituality and the mystical identification with God.
Attributed to Master Heinrich of Constance, active beginning of the 14th century

The Visitation

German (Southern Swabia, Constance), ca. 1310–20
Walnut with polychromy, rock-crystal cabochons, gilding, and silver, h. 23 in. (58.4 cm)
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.724)

Depicting the lives of the saints, both factually and fictiously, The Golden Legend, compiled about 1260 by Jacobus de Voragine, became possibly the most widely read text after the Bible during the late Middle Ages. Included was the meeting of the expectant Virgin Mary and her kinswoman Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Expanding the episode described in the Gospel according to Luke (1:39–45), de Voragine relates how John “already filled with the Holy Spirit, sensed the Son of God coming to him and leapt for joy in his mother’s womb, . . . as one wishing to greet his Lord and to stand up in his presence.”

A sculptural parallel to this legend and its role in monastic devotions may be seen in this three-dimensional group representing the biblical narrative. The cavities covered with crystal probably once displayed images of the infants Jesus and John. The Virgin, on the viewer’s left, gently places her hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder. The latter receives the Virgin’s right hand in hers, while she raises her left to grasp a narrow scroll inscribed: Vnde hoc mihi vt veniat mat(er) (“And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Luke 1:43).

Carved in walnut and retaining most of the original paint, gilding, and exquisite decorative patterning of drapery edges and veils, this work is a marvel of elegance and tender expression entirely in keeping with its role as an object of prayerful contemplation in its former home, the Dominican convent of Katharinental near Diessenhofen in present-day Switzerland. It is one of a small group of devotional images attributed to the master sculptor Heinrich of Constance, who was active in the region of Lake Constance about 1300.