

# Medieval Art in Focus

I

Marc Antoine du Ry

2012



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I

A  
Sedes Sapientiae  
from  
León

Second half of the twelfth century

Catalogue

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Photography

Alan Tabor; Marc du Ry; Max Hirmer 1965 (Camara Santa, Sangüesa); © MNAC - Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photographers: Calveras/Mérida/Sagristà; © Cabildo de la Catedral de Santiago de Compostela. Derechos reservados; © MAN - Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid ; © Fundació Francesco Godia, Barcelona.

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## Description

*58 cm high, limewood with polychromy, carved in the round with both parallel and v-folds, the Child carved separately and attached with a nail, substantial remains of original paint, a blue on the cloak and a clear red on the tunic, also visible on the sleeves either side, white on the veil, some flesh tints on the faces, most of the eyes and even a few lines of writing on the open Gospels preserved, the right hands of Mother and Child missing, surface losses to upper back of Virgin and other small areas, the tip of the left foot of the Virgin and part of bottom and back sections of the throne now replaced, old iron brace in crown left.*

## Provenance

This "rare Spanish Romanesque wood group of the Madonna and Child, Leon", as Sotheby's described it in 1984, came from the collector Eric de Kolb who, together with his wife, assembled one of the largest collections ever of these groups. It was dispersed on his death in the 1980s, when this one, always a personal favourite of de Kolb, was bought by a collector from Texas.

New York  
23/24 November,  
lot 27





It is indeed "rare" and for various reasons. Sculptures from the 12<sup>th</sup> century are scarce compared to the healthy number of later ones, the provenance from León is uncommon since the majority are Catalan or from the Pyrenees and the unusually fine treatment sets it apart from a certain rustic or 'primitive' style associated with this tradition. Lastly, it is rare because it has suffered such minimal losses and repairs and has no layers of later paint, unlike many, if not most, of the surviving ones.

All these factors together fully justify the term "exceptional" in relation to this unassuming group and it can safely be said that it is one of the finest early examples of its type which survives anywhere and certainly one of the very few in private hands.

## **Exhibited**

Art Gallery, University of Notre Dame, July-September 1969, no 16.

De Kolb, no 3.

## Iconography

That this image represents a theological idea is already clear from the unusual frontal and hieratic representation of what is otherwise an ordinary maternal scene depicting a mother and son. This idea can be precisely dated to the words of St John Damascene following the Council of Ephesus decision in 431 to proclaim the divine maternity of Mary: "her hands will hold the Eternal and her knees will provide a throne more sublime than the cherubim". Louis Brehier rightly saw in this decision also the source of the word "majesty", a term applied to these groups from the very beginning.

Aubert 1943

In the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and thus well into the period when their manufacture had multiplied, Adam of St Victor refined it with the phrase "tu thronus es Solomonis", referring to the notion of "sapientiae" associated with this representation. The theologically confident Christianity that this thinking represents was famously put to the test, also in the very region in which this sculpture was made, by an imperialist Islam. The city of León was one of the first cities retaken by the princes of neighbouring

Patrologia  
Latina, vol 196,  
cols 1503 ff.  
(quoted by  
Ferber)

Asturias, - that being the place that never fell to moorish conquests, - while, with the retaking of Toledo by Alfonso VI in 1085, it proved its importance for the first phase of the decisive part of the *Reconquista*. Alfonso VII of León had already styled himself "Imperatur Totius Hispanniae" on Pentecost in 1135, the first in the Spanish kingdoms to do so. The later advances of the Almohad dynasty up to Seville in the second half of the 12th century, or the family-based border disputes with Castile and Portugal, do not seem to have impeded the great cultural advances of León under Ferdinand II and his son Alfonso IX. It had part-funded the great Abbey of Cluny, which in turn brought French influence back, set up the glorious road to Compostela and its Romanesque treasures, and, under Alfonso IX in 1188, even introduced the first representative parliamentary session for all citizens in Europe, the *Cortes*.



Alfonso IX detail  
of cloak  
Tumbo A  
Cartulary  
Archivo de la  
Catedral de  
Santiago de  
Compostela

## Commentary

The first quality that this small sculpture exhibits is at the same time one of the greatest achievements of Romanesque art, the reason it represents one of the high-points in the history of humanity. Not only does it provide for the enjoyment of sheer line and form and volume without sacrificing content to mere abstraction, - for it has the presence of a figure linked to life as we perceive it, - but it also makes theology visible, concrete and relevant. In this case it can be summarised as the idea that the Word was, once only, made flesh, that at least once a Child was born to woman who would come to demonstrate the most divine way of life possible for any man insofar as that abject and sinful creature we call man was nevertheless loved by the Father of all men.

The second quality we notice is a straightforward purity, in the best sense, meaning the absence of fard or fuss, with no later paint hiding clumsy carving, no elaborate dress or attitude, just the simple and profound message, backed up with a penetratingly earnest gaze: here is my Son whose Word (Book) will change your life

forever for it is the fount of Divine Wisdom itself and I am but its Throne, humble Mater of both Ecclesiae and Sapientae.

Thirdly, and linked to the foregoing is that what one might call the sculptural effect is one of gentle insistence rather than brutal imposition; easily overlooked at first it tends to draw one back in with the most truthful charm.

It is worth quoting the relevant part of Dr Stanley Ferber's excellent introduction to the 1969 exhibition of De Kolb's extensive collection of early Madonna and Child groups because it hits the nail on the head in defining some of the qualities that make this group stand out.

"One cannot bypass the delicacy of carving that resembles great oriental low reliefs in the small Virgin and Child from León. Especially in its frontal view, there is a fine vertical architecture about the image that lends it special dignity. Mother and Child are serious and attentive. The levels of parallel planes along the two bodies, the draped limbs, the face and the crowns all contribute a special force and impact by repetition to this figure as we confront it.

Again, the fine thin cuts of line which indicate gracefully and subtly the flow of drapery and outline of features impose a special decorative charm upon this sculpture. As de Kolb suggests, this sensitive low relief of the Mother and Child, with its echoes of quiet line upon line, and plane upon plane, gathers a force of attraction that draws from the worshipper an 'utmost concentration'."

Though we are dealing a freestanding figure carved in the round, the emphasis on 'architecture' is indeed important, for one of the main definitions of both the notion of Romanesque and the very beginning of Gothic as a historical style is this subordination of the figure to an architectural function such as a column, and there is an echo of this in this instance in the subordination of a mother to her function as seat. In an architectural context, we find this frontality in the jamb figures by Leodegarius of the portals in Santa Maria la real in Sangüesa (Navarra) for example (c. 1170 to 90), or the similarly dated figure of the blessing Christ on the facade of Ciudad Rodrigo cathedral (Salamanca).



Santa Maria la  
real

At the same time, 'delicacy' is certainly the right term to describe the thinnest of vertical lines in the veil contrasting with the broad strokes of the mantle, or the contrast of the square and unadorned throne or *banco* contrasting with the concave curves of the legs, themselves divided between straight nested v-folds on the right and ones which, besides being hidden by the Child, are interrupted by a diagonal fold created by the left foot turning slightly outwards to the left, as if to accentuate the reality of His weight, while echoing the left-moving diagonal fold of His cloak across both knees and shoulder.





Again, there is delicacy and simple beauty in the way the parallel folds on the back are also subtly broken and curved to suggest a more natural fall while on the side they curve round the elbows with great energy and sophistication.

Most scholars, from Elie Lambert to Neil Stratford, Paul Williamson to Michael Ward, have noted the profound influence of French sculpture on all of the masters mentioned above, that of Burgundy most of all but also avatars from Ile de France and (South-) Western France. Some of the traveling *ymagiers* of this period who brought in novelties such as the "column sculpture", derived from work in Chartres and Burgundy, have a name, such as Leodegarius in Sangüesa (Navarra) and Uncastillo (in nearby Aragon). These and similar influences contributed to making sculpture along the Camino Francés to Santiago that passed through León so distinctive. Moreover, the close links between the nobility of León and the Cluniacs of Burgundy are well known, while the later (13<sup>th</sup> century) cathedral of León is entirely modeled on Northern French Gothic work.

Lacoste, 2006

The conjunction of French influence with the

fact that the bench is not only hollow but shows most wear (now repaired) where hinges or catches might have been fitted, - not to mention the care with which detail is rendered on the back, - might suggest the possibility that this figure once served as a reliquary too. Though this would immediately explain the unusual quality of the whole there is not sufficient evidence. The Auvergne Majesty in the Cloisters, possibly the sheathed Madonna in Essen, and certainly what one would have had to call the Mother of all Majesty groups if there had not been a law against feeble puns, the earliest recorded example of this representation, housed, in a cavity of the back often covered with rock crystal, relics such as drops of the Virgin's milk, Her hair or a fragment of dress.

67.153

Forsyth fig. 30

This latter group, a veritable 'prototype', - which was made for Bishop Etienne at Clermont-Ferrand in 947, destroyed in 1792 and only survives in a drawing in an Ms from the xith century, Codex Claramontanus, - already has many of the stylistic traits, such as the frontality, staring eyes and outsized hands, that we encounter so often in later groups and centuries.

Bibliothèque de  
Clermont-  
Ferrand



## Style

As mentioned earlier, the very first thing one sees here is what it is not. We do not have the Gothic models of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, even less, the later provincial models done in an archaic and/or popular style. Thus, the small seated sedes in the Museum of León or the similar scale Catalan sedes in the Metropolitan Museum, are clearly already 13<sup>th</sup> century, that is, much more "naturalised" with wider angles and a less severe expression.

Gift of R. Lehman  
1943





The prominent eyes, distinctly modeled in a manner not far removed from the style of the figures from the West portal of Saint Denis, and here painted into a slightly accentuated stare, and the strong, sharp-ridged nose, the bunched tubular folds ending above the ground with an interior tau-shaped shadow (or 'dovetail'), the combination of slightly broken, v-shaped folds with parallel vertical as well as horizontal folds, following antique models, are all within the stylistic ambit of the glory years of Northern Spanish Romanesque of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century as best represented by the second Domingo de Silos workshop, the artists working on the Portal of San Vicente in Avila, and, the crowning achievement, Master Mateo. Mateo is believed to have lived between the years

Head of a queen,  
Musée national  
du Moyen Age,  
Paris

1150 and 1200, and we know about him through a document dated 1168 in the archive of Santiago Cathedral, which states that he was working in the cathedral at the time and was receiving 100 *morabetinos* a year, a significant sum of money, from, precisely, Ferdinand II of León. There is little information about his training, but everything points to his having had a notable career, famously culminating in the Portico of Glory in Santiago Cathedral where he inscribed his name.

Of course, many details such as the size, the feet, seat, 'damp' folds, dove-tailed ends of the vertical folds, the broad edge of the cloak, etc. are features of Romanesque sculpture right across Europe as summed up in the term "*muldenstil*" (see, for example, the seated angel in Berlin, Cologne c. 1170 or the Hildesheim golden Madonna when the sheath is removed, or the Gotland Madonnas such as Hejdeby), and all these Madonnas have the conventional long tunic, mantle and veil. Specifically, the sharper v-folds on the legs below a circular knee were widely used at the time, including on the Child's leg on the famous virgin from Puentedura (Burgos) in the Frederic Mares Museum in Barcelona, which is otherwise executed exclusively in

Forsyth figs. 37, 38

Kunz, 2007

parallel folds in the French style. Likewise, our figure shows that handling such stylistic factors as frontality and serenity and regularly spaced parallel folds with purpose, was not confined to the famous French versions from Auvergne, such as the Madonna of Orcival.

Even the very distinctive and finely carved veil which is closed round the neck, which is certainly a feature of the region judging by eg. the Mary of the stone Adoration group in the Cloisters New York, from Castile-León (Burgos), between 1175-1200, and the similar one in the Museo-Catedralico-Diocesano, León, is also found on a similarly delicate example which is perhaps from Le Mans. Interestingly, this latter, which is even smaller, also has the near symmetrical frontality and the large hand of the Virgin on the arm of the Child.

Now Walters Art  
Gallery, Forsyth  
fig.186



St John detail  
Camara Santa  
Oviedo Cathedral

This disproportionately large and protective left hand of the Virgin, the almost spidery articulation of the elongated fingers around the joints, all carved directly on the Child's body, when taken together with the sharp traits of the face, - the modeling of the eye lids (though the pupils were reset with stone in the case of the Camara Santa apostles in the restoration of 1939), the prominent brows and distinctive lips,



St John detail  
Camara Santa  
Oviedo Cathedral



- as well as the delicate parallel folds mentioned earlier, - are most strongly reminiscent of the style of the mysterious artist and assistants responsible for the column apostle figures in the Camara Santa of Oviedo cathedral, conventionally dated to c. 1165-75, especially St John with the large



hand, clutching his book. There is no final consensus as to the exact origin of these figures or their sculptor(s) and bomb damage and restoration campaigns have not helped, but style and iconographic program are consistent with the dating conventionally given.

Lastly, it goes without saying that our group shares its general features with various Madonnas from Northern Spain. Thus, the open book and fluid symmetry around a frontal axis are reminiscent of the Ger virgin of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the more schematic Mare de Déu de Matadars



Left  
Mare de Déu de  
Matadars. Museu  
Nacional d'Art de  
Catalunya,  
Barcelona

Right  
Virgin and Child,  
unknown, 12<sup>th</sup> c.  
National  
Archeological  
Museum Madrid

now also in  
MNAC

said to have come from the Church of Santa Maria of Matadars o del Marquet, and this, together with some facial and drapery traits can be seen in the Virgin of Gósol, while the v-folds on one leg with the Child holding the Book on the other is shared with i.a. the small 12<sup>th</sup> century group of unknown provenance in the National Archeological Museum Madrid.

There are, however, some distinctive features that place it in León. We have mentioned the closed veil or coif which is a highly distinctive trait. It is graphically shown in the portrait of Queen Urraca in the Cartulary of Santiago,



Cartulary Tumbo  
A  
Archivo de la  
Catedral de  
Santiago de  
Compostela



as in the Annunciate Mary in the fresco in

the Panteon de los reynos chapel in the Basilica San Isidoro of León, painted between 1157-1188, and again, in sculpture, in the Mary of the Crucifixion in a 12<sup>th</sup> century capital of the Church of San Esteban of Sograndio, near Oviedo. On a smaller scale, we find it in the veil of the small ivory Mary on the reliquary diptych of Bishop Gundisalvius in the Camara Santa of Oviedo Cathedral dated between 1160-80. Most conclusively, we also find it on the well-known whalebone ivory carving in the Victoria & Albert museum depicting an Adoration of the Magi with a dominant Mary, - whose general dress and style bears more than a passing resemblance to our group, - which, long thought to be English, was recently reclassified as Northern Spanish Romanesque at least in part because of this very distinctive coif.

142-1866

We have also already mentioned the more general and hieratic, indeed column-like presentation and strong yet fine lines. Finally, it seems that the elliptic yet robust shape of the head with its simple crown, large eyes and thin lips is another distinctive trait of the school of León. All of these traits can be found in a very close cognate, a similarly small-scale sedes group with closed veil attributed to León, now in the Fundació Francesc Godia in Barcelona.



Fundació  
Francesco Godia  
Barcelona

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