



Seated Virgin and Child

Not on display

Title/Description: Seated Virgin and Child

Born: 1200 - 1250

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Gesso, Pigment, Wood (walnut?)

Measurements: h. 690 x w. 376 x d. 270 mm

Accession Number: 395

Historic Period: Early 13th century

Production Place: Europe, France

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This substantial figure group sits on the cusp between the Romanesque and Gothic styles. The Virgin's robe shows the last vestiges of dampfold drapery with its linear folds over her shoulders and elbows, alongside indications of the more naturalistic folds of Gothic drapery as it falls over the knee and ankles.

The pose of the group is also midway between the rigid frontal pose of earlier Virgin and Child groups of the *Sedes Sapientia* (Throne of Wisdom) type, and the more animated and intimate Gothic examples which began to appear later in the 1200s. The Virgin's right knee is deliberately placed slightly lower to seat the Christ Child, giving her figure an element of movement. The Christ Child clutches up at his mother's veil in an intimate gesture which would become popular in French ivory Virgin and Child groups of the mid to late thirteenth century. Affection between Christ and his Mother was depicted increasingly explicitly in northern Europe in the thirteenth century. In visual terms this probably originated from Byzantine representations, coming via Italy, and reflected trends in devotional practice which increasingly encouraged an intimate relationship with the Virgin as a beloved intercessor between the worshipper and God. Both style and pose thus indicate a possible date in the early thirteenth century, as suggested by T. S. R. Boase, [1] as opposed to the twelfth century date suggested by others. [2]

Given its relatively large size, this particular figure group is likely to have been intended for a church (rather than a domestic setting), where it may either have been the subject of individual devotion, or have adorned an altar, possibly dedicated to the Virgin. It may have been carried in procession on occasion. Many similar figures would have been made in wood for this purpose. Given their material, they were particularly vulnerable and this example is therefore a relatively rare

survival.

Its very vulnerability has led the sculpture to be in a condition which has proved problematic in the past: in 1992 Robert Sainsbury requested that it be removed from display, with concerns about the level of remodelling of some areas, particularly the lower face, neck and surrounding drapery, and the top of the head. The lower part of the Virgin's mantle towards the back of the Virgin's left side has been re-carved in soft wood, covered in a dark gesso. But conservation analysis since has confirmed that although these areas are indeed remodelled, this remodelling is not inconsistent with the sculpture's age and vulnerable material, was probably undertaken to remedy woodworm damage and was not done with the intent to deceive. [3] The conservation report suggested that this continual attention and treatment probably indicated that the group was highly revered in its original church setting.

Eleanor Townsend, March 2022

[1] T. S. R. Boase, exhibition review of 'Romanesque Art', *Art News and Review*, no.19 (10/10/1959), p.2.

[2] A Correspondent, 'Romanesque Art in Manchester: Medieval Craftsmanship', *Times Educational Supplement*, (16/10/1959), p.430 (illustrated).

[3] Conservation Report undertaken 2011 (updated in 2013), Sainsbury Centre Archive.

Further Reading

W. D. Wixom, 'Medieval Sculpture at the Metropolitan 800-1400', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2005
(https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Medieval_Sculpture_at_the_Metropolitan_800_1400_The_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art_Bulletin_v_62_no_4_Spring_2005)

P. Williamson, *Gothic Sculpture 1140-1300*, Yale, 1995

E. Male, (transl. D. Nussy), *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, Princeton, 1984

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1957. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
