A MEDIAEVAL STATUE OF THE VIRGIN AND CHILD

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A minor mystery can be as intriguing as a major one, especially when there are just enough clues to suggest a solution, but not enough to make the solution a sure or an obvious one. A mediaeval statue of the Virgin and Child in the Blumenthal bequest offers a mystery of this sort. On stylistic grounds the statue can at once be called a French work of the fourteenth century. As nothing is known of its origin, the hunt for clues really begins when one seeks to learn its provenance by comparing it with other statues from different parts of France. This search is facilitated by referring to some of the regional types of the Virgin and Child that are found in French fourteenth-century sculpture. (Though the relationships and the differences of the various types are as complex as the politics of that turbulent period, it is over-simplifying matters to suppose, as is generally done, that the provinces depended for inspiration almost entirely upon Paris and the Ile-de-France.)

At first glance the Blumenthal statue seems to bear a slight resemblance to Virgins at Saint-Savine and Feuges in southern Champagne; but these statues, particularly the Virgin of Feuges, have rounder faces, of a type which, together with robust proportions and heavy bodies, is generally characteristic of statues from Burgundy, Champagne, and Lorraine. The Blumenthal statue, on the other hand, is slender and lithe. Furthermore, it does not sway to one side in the exaggerated manner of many statues of the Virgin in northern France. A resemblance to the infants in Virgin groups of the Ile-de-France may be found in the sprightly urbanity of the Child, especially to one in a group at Bourges and to another in the Louvre from Mantes-la-Jolie. The serious expression of our Virgin’s face and the simple bearing of the figure are, however, quite different from the artificial suavity and self-conscious, courtly grace of most statues of the Virgin in the Ile-de-France (see ill. p. 88).

Turning to western France, beyond the valley of the Seine, one finds in Lower Normandy a group of figures with striking resemblances to our piece. Most of them stand almost straight except for a slight but sharp bend to one side above the waist, and they hold the Child high, as if elevating him before the faithful. These Norman Virgins, also like our statue, usually have a very high waistline. Parallel tubular folds in the cloak falling down on either side of the figure are likewise characteristic of these statues. Some of these Virgins are to be found in Norman towns and villages whose names are now well known to all Americans—Argentan, Avranches, Caen, Colombiers, Naftel, Saint-James, and Saint-Lô (see ills. p. 87).

Another clue pointing to a Norman origin for our statue is the stone, which closely resembles in appearance and texture a sample taken from one of the Caen quarries, a resemblance which geological tests confirm. In itself, however, this evidence is not conclusive, for Caen stone—a variety of the good local stone of Normandy which mediaeval masons and imagers used for building and decorating the churches of Caen, Rouen, Coutances, and many another neighboring town—was widely exported, even to England, where it was so extensively used that Christopher Wren later complained of the frequency of its choice in preference to English stone.

A figure that resembles the Norman statues of the Virgin just described is at Limeuil, in the Dordogne (ill. p. 87). In fact, it is more like our statue than any other work I have examined. The coupling of its strong resem-
Detail of the statue of the Virgin and Child illustrated on page 86. Bequest of George Blumenthal, 1941
French XIV century statue of the Virgin and Child in the Metropolitan Museum (Blumenthal collection)
Norman statues of the Virgin and Child. **TOP LEFT:** at Limeuil in the Dordogne (the head of the Child is modern). **TOP RIGHT:** at Colombiers. **BOTTOM LEFT:** in the Community of Le Bon-Sauveur at Saint-Lô. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Notre-Dame de Sainte-Paix in the chapel of the Franciscans at Caen.
blance to our statue with its provenance outside of Normandy seems at first somewhat disturbing to the theory that our statue is of Norman origin. It is highly unlikely, however, that there would have been two identical groups of sculpture in such widely separated regions as Normandy and the Dordogne. It is much more likely that the Dordogne Virgin was either imported from Normandy or carved under strong Norman influence. Certainly the Limeuil statue has a strong enough family likeness to the Norman group to indicate a definite relationship. Until more statues from the Dordogne can be studied, there is no more to be said.

Four dated statues from Normandy and central France—two princesses in the Navarre Chapel at Mantes (1325 or later), a Saint Veronica at Ecousis (1313-1315), and the effigy of Margaret of Artois (died 1311) at Saint-Denis—are helpful in establishing a date for our sculpture, for in all these works the robes are worn in a similar fashion to those of our figure. The cloaks hang open, and the folds of the gowns fall in long, full curves, sweeping the ground. It is therefore reasonable to give our statue a date contemporary with these figures in the first quarter of the fourteenth century.

The most curious thing about the statue is the gesture of the Child, who holds the loose end of his mother's girdle in one hand. While this seems to be but a playful gesture, it may well have a symbolic implication. For in popular mediaeval hymns and sermons and in commentaries of the Song of Songs (that by Saint Bernard, for example) Mary was often called sponsa filii, the bride of Christ. And at Prato in northern Italy her girdle was an object of veneration. This point is of particular interest in view of the fact that it was the custom in many localities for the bride to wear a special bridal girdle which was only removed after the wedding. In the Roman period, the bridegroom unloosed the girdle himself. The Child's gesture may therefore betoken the mystical marriage of Christ and Mary. (The length of the girdle may refer to her virginity since a maiden's girdle was supposed to reach to the ground.) The same symbolism is also suggested in other statues from eastern France where the Child is represented as placing a ring on Mary's finger, probably a ring of marriage. Such a combination of religious and secular themes was natural to an age which accepted the dogmas of the Church with a faith as implicit as that with which we accept the latest scientific discoveries.

The statue (acc. no. 41.190.279) which is the subject of the above article is 5 ft. 2 1/2 in. high. Traces of the original polychromy remain.

Jean Seguin, in Belles ou curieuses statues dans le diocèse de Coutances et d'Avranches (2 vols.), offers the best description available of Norman late mediaeval sculpture. Karl Weinhold, in Die deutsche Frau in dem Mittelalter, (1887 edition), discusses the bridal girdle (vol. 1, p. 388, vol. 11, p. 369) and the bridal ring (vol. 1, pp. 341-343, 370).