TWO GOTHIC ANGELS FOR THE CLOISTERS

By JAMES J. RORIMER
Curator of Medieval Art and Director of The Cloisters

It requires no highly specialized knowledge of the art of the Middle Ages to recognize that the two angels shown on the next page are among the most delightful examples of medieval sculpture. Although these oak figures, which were recently acquired for The Cloisters, are only twenty-nine inches high, they possess the monumentality of their near relatives the stone figures on cathedral portals, in particular the celebrated thirteenth-century Angel of the Annunciation at Reims cathedral. They have the delicacy and elegance of fine ivory carvings, which have survived in larger quantities than wood sculptures of such high quality. These are not realistic figures: they are highly idealized angels robed in heavy mantles with many folds, no doubt once rich with gold and bright colors. The absence of wings, hands, and objects they may once have held—possibly instruments of the Passion or candlesticks—makes them seem even more spiritual and unreal. The rhythmical Gothic folds reveal only here and there the outlines of the svelte bodies, which are bent into the S-curves of their pose. They are standing relaxed and as if floating in space. The unearthly, archaic smile, accentuated by the elongated eyes and brows, and the neat curls bound with a fillet, belong to the traditional angelic figures that captivated the medieval carver and have long been sought by collectors.

These pieces were purchased from the Brauer collection in Florence in 1890 by Octave Homburg for his Paris collection. They have been well known in France, where they remained until they were sent to London a few years before the outbreak of the Second World War. Although they have been referred to frequently as among the masterpieces of French medieval sculpture, their place of origin and their original use are not known. They may have been freestanding figures or decorations for an elaborate piece of church furniture. They are most assuredly companion pieces to the angel in the Louvre (don Jeuniette, 1919), an oak statue of the same size. The difference of about an inch in height can in part be accounted for by the proportions of the bases.

The pair of angels exhibited in the Exposition des Chefs d’Oeuvres de l’Art Français (cat. nos. 972 and 973) from the church of Humbert, near Montreuil-sur-Mer (Pas-de-Calais), are also very similar and probably the work of the same sculptor as the Louvre and Cloisters angels, although they are about nine inches higher. The wings of these figures are restored, copied from wings found with them but believed not to have been the original ones. The Cloisters statues have sockets into which the wings were fitted. The holes in the tops of both heads may have held haloes. The curate at Humbert removed the polychromy from his angels along with an over-coating of whitewash, and, as is the case with the Cloisters statues, we have no knowledge of their original condition. An old photograph of the Louvre statue before cleaning does not reveal its medieval state.

The two smiling angels holding candlesticks in the Gothic Chapel at The Cloisters, and the smaller wood angel holding the nails of the Passion, which is on loan to the Museum from Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Martin, are other examples of this Reims school in America. Among those which are known abroad a considerable group is published by Marcel Aubert, in Fondation Eugène Piot, Monuments et Mémoires, xxxi (1930), and by Jean Lephay, in Gazette des Beaux-Arts, lxxii (1929), part II.

Many of us feel that the Middle Ages never produced more charming sculptures than these recently acquired angels.
A pair of Gothic angels. French, Reims school. Made of oak in the last decades of the XIII century. Height 29 inches. Purchased with funds provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1952
Detail of the angel illustrated at the left on the opposite page