A medieval French proverb, “Len ne connoist pas les genz aus drapiaus” (“One cannot recognize people by their clothes”), is very apt in the case of an early fourteenth-century Flemish statue that has recently been added to the Cloisters collection. For at least a hundred years this fine and rare painted wooden figure has been called the beggar saint, Alexis, though it wears the crown and habit of a king.

In the nineteenth century the statue was in the possession of the Grand Beguinage of Ghent, for which it may have been made. The Grand Béguinage, built in the thirteenth century in the northwestern corner of Ghent, was a small community of lay sisters, or Beguines, who lived together and devoted themselves to good works such as taking care of the sick and other useful manual labors. Within its walls were a hundred and three houses, eighteen convents, and two churches. In all probability our statue came from one of the churches, although it may represent a patron saint of another building.

The style of the statue is not inconsistent with this place of origin, for the treatment of drapery and hair is typical of Flemish sculpture of the first quarter of the fourteenth century. But it is also allied to lower- and middle-Rhenish works, as there was a strong common feeling in style along the entire length of the Rhine in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Similar conceptions are found from Switzerland down the Rhine to Cologne and into Flanders and Holland, as well as farther east in Germany. The face of our statue is like that of the Saint Catherine in the church of Saint Leonard at Leau, and similar treatment of hair is found in the oak masks from the Salle Échevinale of Ypres, now in the Ypres Museum. The reliquary crystal set in the center of the chest of our figure was a favorite feature of the period and may be seen on the Saint Catherine of Leau, a seated Flemish Virgin of the late thirteenth century from Oignies, which is in the Metropolitan Museum, and the statue of Saint Leonard at Leau, which has no less than fifteen applied crystals.

In 1864 the Grand Béguinage lent the statue, with the label “Saint Alexis,” to an exhibition of medieval religious art at Malines. Alexis was the son of a rich fifth-century Roman citizen, who decided on his wedding day to abjure his wealthy life. He ran away to the Syrian desert, where he lived as an ascetic for seventeen years. Later, he returned to Rome and dwelt unknown as a beggar beneath the outer stairs of his father’s house, or, as some stories say, under a ladder. When he died a document was found in his purse showing who he was, and for his life of poverty he was canonized. Saint Alexis is represented in art in the costume of a beggar, and his attributes are a purse or his document and a ladder.

Our statue has none of the attributes of Alexis and is not dressed as a beggar but as a king, wearing a low crown. The “drapiaus” consist of a pale orange cotte and cape with green linings and a jeweled collar. The relic that must once have been beneath the cabochon crystal is now missing, as, unfortunately, are the arms and hands, which may have held an identifying attribute. The reason for having called the statue Saint Alexis is evident in a photograph taken at the time of the exhibition at Malines in 1864; both arms are present, and in the left hand is a ladder.

The statue may have been sold in 1875, when the Grand Béguinage was torn down, for in 1913 it appeared in an exhibition at Ghent, “L’Art Ancien dans les Flandres,” as the property of Henri de Tracy. A glance at the catalogue illustration shows that “Alexis” had undergone several changes since 1864; a very low octagonal base had been added and his ladder had disappeared. In addition, the rather slick and heavy paint film shown in the 1864 photograph seems to have been removed, revealing the original painted surface. The statue is still called Alexis...
in spite of the fact that it no longer holds the ladder, but it continues to hold the stub of a palm branch, more clearly seen in the Malines photograph, in its right hand. As Alexis died a natural death the presence of the palm, a symbol of martyrdom, is clearly incorrect.

Between 1914 and 1939 the statue passed into the hands of a Paris dealer, and two photographs taken in these years show even further changes. Both arms are missing in the first picture, and a new octagonal base has been substituted for the older one. Also, the toes of the shoes, which are round in the earlier photographs, have now become pointed. The second photograph shows that before leaving the dealer's shop the original jewels around the collar were removed and replaced by others in silver-gilt frames. The cabochon crystal was likewise reset, and the face was overpainted. It was in this state, with very little change, that “Saint Alexis,” after passing through several other collections, arrived at The Cloisters.

Now that the statue has been cleaned and the modern additions removed, one can imagine how it became disguised as the beggar saint. Early in the nineteenth century the Grand Béguinage must have wanted a statue of Saint Alexis. Instead of making a new statue they took a damaged one, which they either obtained or already had, and refurbished it as Saint Alexis by giving it his chief attribute, the ladder. The overpainting of the whole statue must have been done at the time of the transformation. Subsequent owners realized that the statue was not in its original state. The ladder was taken away, perhaps by Henri de Tracy, because it was obviously modern, although the arm with the palm was kept. The arms were removed in the Paris dealer's shop because they were also recognized as being modern, most likely added when the statue was refitted to be Saint Alexis. The reason for changing the front halves of the feet is not yet clear, unless they were damaged when the base was replaced. At any rate, they date from the addition of the new base.

The crown and hair of the statue still have

*Oak statue of a king, with its original paint. Flemish, first quarter of the xiv century. At The Cloisters*
The statue at three stages of its history. Left, as Saint Alexis, with a ladder, photographed in 1864; owned by the Grand Béguinage of Ghent. Center, still called Alexis, but without the ladder, photographed in 1913; owned by Henri de Tracy. Right, at a later date, in Paris, with the arms removed and with minor restorations.

remains of their first gilding, and the pale flesh tones of the face are almost intact. Traces of a later, complete gilding can be seen overlying the original orange and green of the costume. The bogus gems of the collar that were added in the Paris shop have been replaced with old glass to approximate the jewels shown in the earlier photographs, and the reliquary crystal on the chest has been reattached in the old, simple manner.

The figure has therefore been returned as closely as possible to its fourteenth-century state, and, as it was obviously never intended to be Saint Alexis, the problem remains to identify the young king represented. There seem to be four solutions, suggested by his costume and pose. He could be a king or prince donor, who once held a church or charter in his hands; a royal saint, such as Saint Louis; the King of the World, or the Tempter, who held the apple out to the Foolish Virgins, like the figures of Strasbourg, Freiburg, and Basel; or he could be the youngest of the Three Kings, offering his gift to the infant Christ.

Without knowing what attribute was once held it would be extremely difficult to identify the statue as a donor. The founder of the Grand Béguinage was a woman—the Countess Jeanne of Flanders—so that the statue could not represent the founder of that institution. But this does not rule out the possibility of its being another donor.

As for representing a king saint, one can only point out that none of the special saints of Ghent
were kings. Saint Bavon, the chief patron of the city, is usually shown wearing a nobleman's clothes but not crowned. That the figure is Saint Louis, which has been suggested, seems highly improbable. The statue dates from the first quarter of the fourteenth century, and Louis was only canonized in 1297. Also, during the first forty years of the fourteenth century Flanders and France were continually at war, and although there were strong French factions in Ghent it is unlikely that statues would have been dedicated to a French king in this turbulent period. There are other king saints, however, that the figure might represent, like Oswald or Heinrich.

In spite of the general similarity of type and costume the possibility of the statue being cast as the Tempter of womankind, who held out the enticing apple, would tend to be eliminated by the facial expression, lack of torsion, and the reliquary cabochon. This leads us to the last and most probable solution: that our statue is one of the Magi.

The Three Kings are especially revered along the reaches of the Rhine, as their relics are enshrined in Cologne. From the early fourteenth century there remain numerous statue groups, complete or fragmentary, of the Three Kings, carved in Germany and the Low Countries, which show the prevalent iconography. In several cases one of the Kings, often the unbearded one, stands in a simple position holding his gift in front of him with both hands. One of the best examples of this is the sandstone statue of a King from the Lorenzkapelle, now in the Bavarian National Museum. Another, in wood, closer in style to ours, is the King at Adelwil bei Sempach, near Lucerne. Others may be seen at Peiden, the Jakobskirche, Nuremberg, and the parish church at Frauwiilesheim. The frequency of examples so similar in date and style suggests that our statue is the youngest King from an adoration group, which may have been carved for one of the churches of the Grand Béguinage of Ghent. But although this is the most likely supposition, it, as well as the others, is impossible to substantiate without a picture or description of the statue before the arms were broken.