

Mary, Throne of Wisdom: Twelfth Century Statue, Twenty-First Century Icon

by Catherine Combiér-Donovan

Introduction

The wood “Throne of Wisdom” sculptures of twelfth century France played a vital role in the religious experience of the Romanesque period of the Middle Ages and are for us powerful examples of the transcendent yet grounded connection that the icon mediates. These statues will be examined in their illustration of Marian theology, their role in the development of devotions and the cult to Mary, their contribution to the re-emergence of religious sculpture, as well as their function in liturgical and devotional practices. The artistic creation of the twelfth-century “Throne of Wisdom” sculptures will be explored, illustrated by the beautiful collection of photographer Dennis Aubrey. The *Sedes Sapientiae* statue known as the “Mabon Madonna” in the Abbey Church at St. John’s University in Colledgeville MN, will serve as the specific example. The Latin term *Sedes Sapientiae* is properly translated as “Seat of Wisdom,” but the art-historical term is “Throne of Wisdom.”¹



During the twelfth century when church architecture was massive and earth-bound and the liturgical celebration primarily clerical, the Throne of Wisdom statues provided a three-dimensional iconographic connection that helped diminish the gap between heaven and earth. In our churches today, though Christ is our primary symbol, do we have iconographic symbols that speak to us of the transcendent connecting to the immanent, the already and the not yet? Is there a gap between our experience of liturgy and the aesthetic? Lastly, do we experience Mary as the living embodiment of communion between the human and the Divine? Perhaps the following will allow us to better understand the role of sacred art as intermediary.

Vierge de la Sagesse; Eglise Saint André, Prades (Haute-Loire) France
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Theology of Mary as Seat of Wisdom

Mary, the all-holy ever-virgin Mother of God, is the masterwork of the mission of the Son and the Spirit in the fullness of time. For the first time in the plan of salvation and because his Spirit had prepared her, the Father found a *dwelling place* where his Son and his Spirit could dwell among men. In this sense the Church’s Tradition has often read the most beautiful texts on

¹ This type of statue is encountered under other names as well: *majesté* or majesty, *icona* and *imago*, *vierge reliquaire* or *vierge assise*..

wisdom in relation to Mary. Mary is acclaimed and represented in the liturgy as the “Seat of Wisdom.”² (CCC #721)

St. Augustine was the first to use the descriptive phrase, “Seat of Wisdom.”³ The image of Mary, Seat or Throne of Wisdom, has been an iconographic concept since Early Christian times, a concise expression of the Incarnation dogma stated above. Mary is understood as both the Mother of God and the *cathedra* or seat of the Logos incarnate. As a mother she supports her son in her lap, yet as the Mother of God she serves as a throne for the incarnation of Divine Wisdom, whom she is holding and presenting to the world. Her action is a prelude to the Redemption and takes on an eschatological dimension. Both Christ’s humanity and divinity are equally apparent in this image. The quotation from the *Catechism* underscores the relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit, Mary and the Father, and designates her as sanctuary of the Trinity.⁴

Devotions and the Cult of Mary

The growth of the cult of Mary and of devotions in general in the Middle Ages corresponds to the progressive disengagement of the laity in the Roman liturgy. Without a doubt the most important factor in this disengagement was a linguistic one. By the ninth century, Latin, the language of the liturgy, was no longer widely understood except by clerics; the language of the people and the language of the hierarchy used at liturgy had become estranged from one another. This loss of language led to a distancing of the worshiping community from the altar and the sanctuary, and to the widening of the gulf between clergy and laity. “Since the priest (and very few others) can control the specialized hieratic language of the celebration, he can also claim a certain possession of the sacrament. For to possess language is to possess the reality; and conversely, to lose control of the words is to forfeit one’s claim to reality.”⁵



Notre Dame de la Brune
Eglise Abbatiale Saint Philibert, Tournus (Saône-et-Loire) France
Photo Copyright: Dennis Aubrey, 2007

The development of the cult of Mary, of the saints and their relics, and of eucharistic piety represents the attempt by the laity to recover their claim and their connection to the holy through the alternative language of devotion, one that relies on the reality of strong visual

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori MO: Liguori Publications: 1994), 191 .

³ Michael O’Connell, “Seat of Wisdom,” *Theotokos: a Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Glazier-Liturgical Press, 1982) 368.

⁴ Johann G. Roten, “Mary and the Way of Beauty,” *The Virgin Mary in Art*, Marian Studies (Dayton: Mariological Society of America: 1998), 49:109-116.

⁵ Nathan Mitchell. *Cult and Controversy: the Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass* (Collegeville: Pueblo-Liturgical Press, 1990), 73.

images. The *New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* states that medieval Mass-goers were taught to worship by looking: to follow and interpret the movements of liturgical ministers.⁶ But looking from afar was not enough for their emotions needed to be actively engaged. As Jesus appeared more and more distant in the theology of the period, Mary seemed more accessible and became the gentle intercessor. Popular religion concentrated on the more concrete aesthetic expressions of faith. Doctrine and devotion fashioned fresh themes for sacred art, among them the iconography of the Throne of Wisdom as an invitation to prayer and access to one both human and holy.⁷ In the Byzantine world, iconography was highly developed but in the Western world it would evolve more slowly and in three-dimensional form. A look at the renaissance of sculpture situates this evolution within art history and religious experience.

The Re-emergence of Religious Sculpture



The year 1000 marks the transition from the early Middle Ages to the high Middle Ages and marks the beginning of the Romanesque period of art and architecture.⁸ The Iconoclast controversies of previous centuries and the anti-anthropomorphic ideas of the Barbarians and of the Islamic communities controlling the Western Mediterranean had seriously affected the visual arts. As a result of the exodus that took place from Byzantium to Italy during the 8th century, however, Byzantine ideas and models would continue to influence sacred art but would be translated into a different form.

Notre Dame de Monistrol
Eglise Saint Pierre, Monistrol d'Allier (Haute-Loire) France
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Though architecture and sculpture were negligible in the Holy Roman Empire, works of art of another kind were produced in the shape of exquisite ivories, textiles, goldsmith's work and illuminations of sacred books. The rebirth of sculpture came by way of all these media, which were first collected by the *ateliers* or workshops of abbeys to serve as models for new experiments in sculpture. These patterns were translated into the carvings of stone capitals and columns, and eventually into woodcarvings. Extraordinary bas-relief sculptures precede the more difficult and daring execution of sculpture in the round. By the eleventh century renescent sculpture was evident in the beautiful carvings of the highly decorated capitals and tympana of Romanesque churches, but three-dimensional religious statues depicting Christ, Mary, and the

⁶ Carl Dehne, "Popular Devotions," *New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. by Peter E. Fink (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 336.

⁷ Benedict Avery, O.S.B. *Mary The Throne of Wisdom* (Collegeville: St. John's Abbey, 1963)

⁸ The term was invented in the mid-nineteenth century to describe the style thought to derive from Roman architecture. In England it is often referred as "Norman."

saints were still very rare. In the south of France, more influenced by classical remains, statuary reappears, first rude and tentative but soon gathering force and beauty.⁹ The desire for anthropomorphic forms to serve as a bridge between the venerated one and the worshiper was not satisfied by carved capitals because their role was architectural. Nor did box-shaped reliquaries suffice. An image was necessary on which could converge the devotion of all the faithful. “Again and again religion searches for art, because it cannot live without form and figure.”¹⁰

Statuary had been used in ancient pagan traditions for a similar purpose, and their use was now channeled and diverted to Christian purposes, as pagan temples had similarly been converted to Christian use in earlier centuries by installing relics and consecrating them.¹¹ A few of the early Mother and Child statues, for example, are traceable to representations of pagan goddesses. But there was demand for a new type of religious imagery. The desire to render such



figures as Mary and Christ in the round was induced by the desire to make them experiential. Sculpture, as the most representational of the arts, was capable of rendering the Incarnation with particular immediacy.¹² A stylistic type evolved influenced by the existing iconographic tradition of the Byzantine Theotokos (God-bearer), as in the famous mosaics of Ravenna and Rome, or depicted in the Adoration of the Magi in ivories and in manuscripts. Portraying the Virgin in solid, three-dimensional form was quite different from rendering the subject in painting or even in relief. The big leap taken from two- to three-dimensional representation is wonderfully illustrated in the carvings of the Throne of Wisdom statues found and still venerated in many small churches, sanctuaries, and shrines of the rural part of central France.

Notre Dame de la Trinité
Chapelle de la Trinité, Prunet- et- Belpuig (Pyrénées-Orientales)
Photo Copyright: Dennis Aubrey 2008

Function in Liturgical and Devotional Practices

⁹ Xavier Baral I. Altet, *The Romanesque: Town, Cathedrals and Monasteries* (Cologne: Taschen, 1998), 68-70.

¹⁰ T. Dunne, *Lonergan and Spirituality: Towards a Spiritual Integration* (Chicago: Loyola U. Press, 1985), 111.

¹¹ One of the most interesting examples of this conversion is that of an unused pagan temple called the Pantheon (built by Marcus Agrippa in 27 BCE), given as a gift to Pope Boniface IV by Emperor Phocas in 609 (610). The Pope brought 28 wagonloads of martyrs' bones to the church from the catacombs and then consecrated it as a Christian church in honor of the Virgin Mary and all the martyrs, calling it St. Mary-in-the-Martyrs, also known as Santa Maria Rotunda.

¹² Ilene H. Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), *passim*.

Though not all were originally created for that purpose, the use of many of the statues as reliquaries made them objects of great veneration. Texts of the period provide valuable information on the function of the statues and their interesting contents. The Throne of Wisdom statues were popular in churches and shrines along the pilgrimage roads. Set on an altar, on a pedestal near the altar, or at the entrance to the sanctuary, they were viewed from all sides, hence the fine carving on all four sides. These statues show greater wear than purely devotional statues do, usually around the base, reinforcing the fact that they were meant to be portable. On the occasion of feasts and festivals they were carried in great processions through the streets of the city, or from shrine to shrine, as is still common in Auvergne on August 15. I remember as a child there participating in the procession of the Feast of the Assumption, singing and clutching a lighted candle as we followed behind the statue of the seated Mother and Child, held aloft. It is clear from various accounts that these statues played a part in the medieval liturgy according to the liturgical calendar. Within these chronicles and stories there are also medieval accounts of miracles and healings ascribed to these statues, attributing special powers to them as being sacred presences. There are valid accounts of the use of these statues in liturgical dramas such as the *Officium Stellae*, a medieval play performed at the Epiphany recalling the Adoration of the Magi. Mary and the Christ Child were “impersonated” by the Throne of Wisdom statue who presided over the reception of the gifts of the Three Kings.

The Throne of Wisdom Sculptures of the 12th Century, Then and Now

The earliest, well-documented Seat of Wisdom statue known is dated ca. 946. The development can be sketchily charted through the eleventh century (there are 16 statues of that period known through literary sources or evidence of extant statues). But it is in the twelfth century in France that their brilliant culmination is illustrated by the more than one hundred examples that survive, having escaped the “triple terror” of the Wars of Religion, the French Revolution, and the restorer.

The most recognizable statues of the “Throne of Wisdom” came from the woodcarving workshops of central France, specifically Auvergne, though there were a few workshops in Burgundy and in the Pyrenees, as well.¹³ Statues of the Virgin and Child were their specialty, as were crucifixes. The rather harsh stylistic features that developed in these wooden statues, especially evident in the rigid frontality and abstract conventions for drapery patterns, and in the expressionless carved faces, superbly convey the more transcendental or iconic function of the image. The design is formal and symmetrical and the position of the figures shows little variation. The Virgin is seated on a *cathedra*, a low- or high-backed chair, facing the viewer with the Child on her knees. Her Son is neither the helpless infant nor the playful child of later Gothic sculptures, but serene and majestic. His right hand is raised in a three-fingered (Trinitarian) blessing and in his other he holds a Gospel book,¹⁴ occasionally a globe of the world. Mother and Child often resemble each other closely, as is very evident in the St. John’s Madonna.

¹³ Numerous Spanish, Swedish, and Italian Madonnas in Majesty exist, as well as Belgian, German and Swiss examples, but they are greatly outnumbered by the French sculptures.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that in the Byzantine icon, the Christ Child holds a scroll of the Word of God.

The statues are always smaller than life-size and were either carved out of one piece of wood, later hollowed out, or made of joined panels of wood of alternating grain to resist fissuring. In the second method, the Child and the head and hands of the Virgin were also worked separately. After the carving was finished, thin linen was normally affixed to the surface, followed by layers of gesso and polychromy. The statues with traces of linen are referred to as “marouflé.” The final enhancement of polychromy has rarely survived in its original state for the statues were repeatedly repainted.¹⁵ It is difficult to ascertain the original colors, and one of the most interesting variations is found in the so-called “Black Virgins.” There seems to be no single explanation – though many conjectures - for the appearance of the dark faces. Some early statues were covered by thin sheets of gold or silver and encrusted with jewels.

The lovely "Seat of Wisdom" statue in the St. John's Abbey Church in Collegeville, Minnesota, was carved from one piece of walnut with no trace of an original joint anywhere. The back of the statue was hollowed out, not to be used as a reliquary but to remove the center



core of the log that would shrink more slowly than the outside, and perhaps also to lighten the weight of it. Since the drapery “calligraphy” or fold pattern usually characterizes regional styles, the provenance of this one appears to be from Burgundian workshops in the second half of the twelfth century. The statues follow the rigid conventions of the genre. Large hand open, the Mother is presenting the Redeemer to the world with the unique dignity of the Theotokos, while her other hand often tenderly and lightly holding him. Though the pose is always quite static when seen from the front, viewed in profile there is vitality implicit in the forward thrust of the heads of both Mother and Child. The statues radiate serenity and majesty, welcome and gift, immanence and transcendence. Almost all of the statues still rest in their original churches or chapels, serving as a sacramental image of the Dwelling Place of God.

*The "Mabon Madonna," 12th c. French Vierge de la Sagesse
St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, MN*

Though far from a Romanesque church, the Marcel Breuer Abbey Church of St. John's has the same massive, earth-bound architecture, minus the curves. In this church, the Throne of Wisdom statue plays a similar iconographic role, reminding all who worship there of the merging point of the humanity and Divinity of Christ, and the role of Mary in the Incarnation and Redemption story. It also serves as a reminder that in the contemporary church, we too need symbols that speak our story beyond words, and that a work of art may be the most expressive way.

¹⁵ Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom*, 18-21.

Conclusion

Like a French Catholic pilgrim of nine hundred years ago, my fervor and interest ignited during the summer of 1999, when I traveled the pilgrimage road of the rural churches where the Thrones of Wisdom still welcome the faithful into their mystery. That experience was a profoundly aesthetic and spiritual one. This research is an attempt to understand intellectually – historically, artistically and theologically – the spiritual and emotional response that these statues have always evoked in me, and the link between heaven and earth and between art and faith I have always felt in contemplation of their impassible faces. Their unique stature as sacred art of the Romanesque period deeply fascinates me as a lover of art history. Their aesthetic interpretation of the mystery of Mary as the Sanctuary of the Trinity profoundly moves me as a lover of God. They express no emotion yet somehow carry it within them.



There are lessons to be learned from this study of the Throne of Wisdom statue, as icon of both a twelfth century Romanesque church and a modern American church. Though there is no language barrier in our contemporary American liturgy, it can be impoverished by our spare use of the symbolic, by our reticent use of the aesthetic dimension of worship. Our sanctuaries must be places that nurture the visible encounter of both the transcendence and immanence of God, and where ministers and assembly discover the aesthetic dimension of the liturgical environment - art, sculpture, movement, music - to be a port of entry into the heavenly, the ineffable love and beauty of God.

Notre-Dame-du-Mont-Cornadore
Notre Dame de Saint Nectaire, Saint Nectaire (Puy-de-Dôme) France
Photo Copyright: Dennis Aubrey 2006

Rupert de Deutz (+1129), a contemporary of the Throne of Wisdom artists, wrote the following about the Blessed Virgin Mary, “temple and sanctuary of the Father of all Wisdom, of his Word, and of the Holy Spirit:”

Beware of weakening these strong truths by seeing there nothing but an allegory! Everything that Scripture, holy and true, tells us of the love of God, or of a loving God, proves itself so real and so constant that our physical realities, which provide us with terms of comparison, are themselves nothing but shadows and transitory images of the eternal Truth. But for us who are of the earth, these earthly things are the first things we know, and so seem to us to be reality, and heavenly things to be only images. Nevertheless, it is the heavenly that is the

thing, the earthly that is the image. The earthly will pass and the eternal will endure forever.¹⁶

The twelfth century interpretation of the Throne of Wisdom icon of Mother and Child is valuable not only as an art historical image but as a symbol of the eternal Truth expressed in the language of Romanesque sculpture, a monument to God's own art: the unbreakable unity and complementarity between God and humankind, the gift that is Alpha and Omega, the source and object of our loving. That is the true role of the Throne of Wisdom.

Catherine Combiier-Donovan is the Director of the Office of Worship for the Diocese of Richmond in Virginia, USA. This article was written for EnVisionChurch.org and may not be copied, reprinted or otherwise reproduced without permission.

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¹⁶ *Vierges romanes: les vierges assises*, Vol. 4, Les Points Cardinaux ([Pierre-qui-vire] : Zodiac, 1961), 144-145.

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