A twelfth-century statue of the Virgin enthroned has been placed on view for the first time this Christmas season as an important permanent addition to the Romanesque Chapel at The Cloisters. The statue, carved from a single block of walnut, has traces of polychromy and in the back an aperture intended to hold a relic.

Such cult statues had been fashioned in central France at least as early as the tenth century in the plateau province of Auvergne. The earliest one on record was ordered about 946 for the cathedral of Clermont, a great pilgrimage shrine dedicated to the Mother of God. This statue was of wood covered with “fine gold.” It enclosed precious relics of the Virgin and was known as the “Majesty of Saint Mary.” The cathedral of Rodez also had a golden “Majesty” of the Virgin, already venerable in the first years of the eleventh century, when it was described by one Bernard of Angers, a student at Chartres, on a visit to the region.

How a northerner of the time felt about “images” is graphically told by this same Bernard, who was shocked to the core of his soul to see the saints become idols and the people bowing down before them as if they were pagan gods. It seemed to him that only the Christ crucified might be sculptured in the round; for all the rest, paintings on walls should suffice. He changed his mind, however, before he left the district, after he had been beaten—so he says—“nearly to death” by one of the statues, at which he had dared to sneer. This statue, of course, was not of the Virgin, of whom such a tale would never have been told, but of Saint Foy, protector of Conques.

Although the people of the north of France in general shared Bernard’s prejudice against images of saints there are several statues of the Virgin recorded elsewhere than in Auvergne in the eleventh and early years of the twelfth century. Many of those that are mentioned were supposed to be of miraculous origin, not ordered by a bishop or carved by a pious monk. One was said to have been discovered by woodcutters enclosed in a tree, another found by young girls floating on a fountain. The wooden statue at Boulogne-sur-Mer arrived in a ship without sailors or oars, enveloped in a dazzling light. The famous statue in the crypt at Chartres was said to have been made at the order of a pagan prince before the Christ Child was born and to have been kept with pagan idols in a secret place.

Almost all the early, highly venerated statues of the Virgin in France have been destroyed, chiefly by the Revolutionists, who disliked images even more cordially than Bernard of Angers. Fortunately, many twelfth-century replicas of the “Majesties” of Auvergne remain, of which two are in the medieval collection at the Metropolitan Museum. Our new statue at The Cloisters, also of the twelfth century, is not one of this group, but of an entirely different school of sculpture associated with the more northerly regions of France.

There are, of course, certain similarities in all these Romanesque statues. Ours like the Madonnas from Auvergne is severe in pose, solemn in spirit, archaic in style. The people of France in the twelfth century did not yet demand that Mother and Child be charming and gracious and smiling like humans, for the Child was God and she was the Mother of God. She was the “Throne of the new Solomon,” “incomparable, sublime, different from all thrones.” She was the “seat of the Most High, the seat on which Our Lord sits, who governs the universe.” “In her hands she holds the Eternal and her knees become a throne more sublime than the cherubims.” The Romanesque sculptors of France, whether of Auvergne or elsewhere, attempted...
The Virgin enthroned, from Autun. Purchased for The Cloisters with funds given by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. The Virgin’s gown and veil were originally painted green with vermilion borders. Her hair was black and her eyes were inlaid with lapis lazuli. First half of the xi century.
Virgins from Auvergne: x century drawing of the “Majesty of Saint Mary” of Clermont, in the Library at Clermont-Ferrand; statues in the Metropolitan Museum, second half of the xi century

to interpret in visual form this concept of the Mother of God as a Throne for the Most High.

In the expression of this theme our Virgin is like the ones from Auvergne. In other significant ways she differs widely. The Auvergne Madonnas are regularly more bulky and blocklike, stolid and immobile; their peasant faces are more severe, with square chins and pronounced cheekbones; and they are clothed, following Byzantine tradition, in cloaks and veils that swathe their heads and shoulders as if they were priestesses. Our Virgin is tall and slender, with emphasis on the linear rather than the three-dimensional; even the Child’s feet point downward to preserve the flat plane. It is as if she had been derived from a drawing in a Carolingian manuscript. She sways slightly to the side and leans somewhat forward while the drapery stirs at her feet. There is a movement and a lightness about her not found in the statues from Auvergne. Her face is delicately oval with a small chin, her thin veil falls in fluted folds with scalloped edges to show the neck of her gown; she is garbed like a twelfth-century lady and she is crowned like a queen.

In fact, she is unique among existing Romanesque statues of the Virgin. She is obviously not a copy of a copy of a traditional statue but an original creation by an unnamed artist who approached his subject with freshness and fervor, with tenderness and grace. To be sure, our Virgin, as the era demanded, is the formal, dignified “Throne of Divinity”; but she is also a woman, with delicately fashioned clothes and tiny breasts. She is Empress of the Heavens, but she is also the humble young girl of the Annunciation and the Mother who stood sorrowing at the foot of the Cross. She has quiet power and also infinite pity. If Saint Bernard in the early twelfth century had carved statues of the Virgin instead of composing hymns to her, he might have achieved something like this. Our statue, like the hymns of Saint Bernard, transforms the high dogma of the church into personal poetry, appealing to the heart as well as the mind.

The Abbé Terret of Autun, author of impressive volumes on Burgundian sculpture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who owned our statue at one time, states that she “undoubtedly came from one of the churches of Autun in Burgundy or from a village nearby.” If this is true, we have one of the few surviving
Details from the tympanum of the cathedral of Saint-Lazare at Autun. Above, heads of apostles; below, the drapery of an angel and the figure of the Virgin. About 1120-1132
wood sculptures in the round from that vital Burgundian school that sprang from the great abbey of Cluny, produced such magnificent Romanesque capitals and doorways as those of Vézelay and Autun, and infused new life into the art of all of France.

Although Autun in the twelfth century was not one of the great shrines of the Virgin, as were Clermont or Rodez or Chartres—she depended rather on the relics of Lazarus for her wealth and her fame—it is recorded that she was the proud possessor of a piece of the Virgin’s veil. It may be that our statue was carved to contain this precious relic. In style the Cloisters Virgin is closely related to the sculptures on the doorway of the cathedral of Saint-Lazare at Autun, which were executed by one Gislebertus from about 1120 to 1132. Here is the same attenuation of form, the same linear quality, the same treatment of thin drapery with the folds indicated by parallel ridges set close together, the same upward swirl of the garments at the hem as if blown by a sudden gust of wind. They have the same heavy-lidded eyes, the straight mouth, and the same softly modeled oval face with tiny chin. On the great tympanum of the portal, which represents the Last Judgment, the Virgin is shown as Intercessor, seated at the right hand of her son. Although the head is severely damaged, and the figure is sculptured in stone instead of wood and in relief instead of in the round, it is evident that this Virgin is a close cousin to ours. The crown and the veil and the full-sleeved gown with its movement of drapery at the feet are executed with greater elaboration but in the same tradition and with the same conventions used by the school of Autun.

Our statue has also been compared with those masterpieces of Romanesque sculpture the Mary and Martha from the tomb of Saint Lazarus, also at Autun, sculptured by the monk Martin, “marvelously skilled in stonework,” about the year 1160. It seems to us, however, that the tomb sculptures are carved with greater plasticity, more freedom of movement, more emotional content, than ours. The flutter of drapery at the hem, characteristic of early Burgundian sculptures, has disappeared. One would venture to suggest that the monk Martin knew our statue and possibly used it as a model for his later, more sophisticated work in stone.

Mary Magdalen and Martha. Tomb of Saint Lazarus, Autun, about 1160