LATE MEDIEVAL SCULPTURE FROM THE BYWAYS OF BURGUNDY

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Many hours of search in the departmental library and archives in Dijon, ancient capital of Burgundy, failed to uncover any new records pertaining to four limestone statues from the little town of Poligny now in the Metropolitan Museum’s collections. But when a photograph of the Museum’s life-size seated Virgin and Child was shown to an elderly collector of Poligny he revealed that in years long past he had been the original purveyor of these four statues and a number of other distinguished sculptures from Poligny for the international art market.

With his help it was possible to ascertain that the statue of Saint Paul, purchased for the Museum in 1922, stood formerly on a corbel in the chapel of the Pleine family in the church of the Dominican monastery in Poligny. This fifteenth-century statue has sometimes been ascribed to Claus de Werve, the nephew of the famous Claus Sluter, who is recorded as having worked at Poligny. It was no doubt included in the purchase of the Dominican church from the state by Claude Antoine Dubois about the time the monastery library was sold at public auction on the ninth of October, 1792 (the first year of the Republic). We also found that the statue of Saint John the Baptist, published in 1934 as possibly by Claus Sluter himself (Bulletin, vol. xxix, pp. 192-195), and the companion statue of Saint James the Greater (opposite page), had been in two of the five niches on the road side of a sixteenth-century garden wall of the church of Moutier-Viellard and were probably originally made for the church. Three of the Poligny sculptures are shown in the Main Building. The Saint James is a new acquisition and has recently been installed at The Cloisters, in the Cuxa Cloister at the entrance to the Heroes Tapestry Room.

The three other new acquisitions illustrated here are in the rearranged Fifteenth-Century Sculpture Hall, in which they have been substituted for less important sculptures acquired many years ago. In the rearrangement two other Burgundian statues have been placed together, a small statue of Saint Francis, found on a roadside near Beaune, and a figure thought to be Frederick, Bishop of Utrecht, discovered in an art dealer’s loft. The Saint Francis was used not so long ago to keep water from a gutter from splashing on a newly planted plot of primroses. When the antiquarian who had carelessly placed the sculpture in front of his shop insisted that it was valueless, there was no occasion to point out to him that the washing of the water had already uncovered a section of the fifteenth-century polychromy. The remaining modern repaint was later removed, showing a face with delicate, naturalistic features, as expressive as those of a portrait in a fine Flemish painting.

The Saint Barbara (pp. 185, 187) holding her symbol, the tower in which she was imprisoned by her father, is a realistic representation of a demure maiden of a noble family of the time. This sculpture has been for many years at Trillora Court on Long Island and is a welcome gift from Mrs. Solomon R. Guggenheim. Saint Barbara’s gold tresses and her blue gown patterned in silver are superbly preserved, as are the colors on the bishop with donor (pp. 184, 186). The bishop is very similar to a late medieval statue of Saint Nicholas in the parish church of Moutiers-St.-Jean. Another statue of Saint Barbara, the gift of Mr. Edward G. Sparrow, is dependent on the carving of the sculptor rather than on color for its vitality and charm (pp. 188, 189). The heavy drapery folds and the exquisite modeling of the features are more accomplished than in most of the Burgundian sculpture that has survived.
Saint James the Greater. Burgundian, about 1400, possibly by Claus Sluter. Purchased, 1947, with funds provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.
Saint Barbara. xv century. Gift of Mrs. Solomon R. Guggenheim, 1950. Both the statues are of stone, painted and gilded.
Detail of the bishop with donor
Detail of Saint Barbara