THREE KINGS FROM LICHTENTHAL

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Life-size statues of Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, formerly in the convent of Lichtenthal in Baden, Germany, have been acquired for The Cloisters and are shown this Christmas for the first time. A full-page illustration and a full description of “three fine German Gothic carved wood [linden] figures . . . in richly decorated robes . . . the property of a gentleman” in Sotheby’s Sale Catalogue of July 28, 1939, was not sufficient in that troubled year to arouse more than the most meager interest. They were sold for sixteen pounds. Shortly before they had been offered privately for two thousand pounds. A German museum director who happened to be in London then was “very anxious to acquire the Kings but could not risk public money to buy them without knowing how much there was under the Baroque decoration.”

When the figures were purchased for The Cloisters with funds provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., only some of the mawkish refurbishing had been removed by the successful bidder at the auction. Now that the repainting and restorations have been cleaned away, revealing the original painting and gilding, the statues show a remarkable state of preservation. The brocaded garments, achieved by yellow and red glazes combined with tin foil applied in squares and scratched with a tool, the flesh colors, and the gilding give an excellent impression of the resplendence of the original ensemble.

During the war years the Three Kings had been housed in a specially built wing of a remote cottage in Ireland. It was their owners’ hope that they might one day find their way back to the convent of Lichtenthal. But their importance for the central section of the retable of the high altar of the monastic church at Lichtenthal no longer exists, as with successive changes through the centuries the complete structure of the altarpiece has been destroyed. In its original state the Adoration of the Virgin and Child by the Three Kings was used as the central sculptural group; hinged wings painted on both sides with scenes from the life of the Virgin could be open or closed as in the Tiefenbronn altarpiece illustrated on page 89. The Birth and Death of the Virgin were to be seen to the left and right of the central group; the Annunciation and Visitation, painted by an inferior hand, were located on the backs of these panels. To judge from the size of these paintings, the central section with the sculptures was approximately ten and a half feet in width and must have been eight feet in height to the cornice line.

In 1724, a marbleized structure, making use of the original figures, was substituted for the earlier altarpiece. By 1757, because the sculptures were “damaged,” the painter Liehl of Rastatt was commissioned to paint a picture to replace the sculptured group. When the convent published Maria Deodata’s Frauen-
*Kloster Lichtental* in 1915, the Three Kings had long been relegated to the antiquities room of the convent. Records show that the wings of the altarpiece were in Mannheim from early in the nineteenth century until 1913 and more recently were exhibited in the Kunsthalle at Karlsruhe. Only the statue of the Virgin and Child remained at the convent, where it is still a coveted possession of the nuns, who say that the veneration of this statue contributed to their safety and the welfare of the convent during the time of Hitler.

OPPOSITE PAGE AND BELOW: *Balthasar and Melchior, two of the life-size wooden statues of the Three Kings from the convent of Lichtenthal, Baden. German (Ulm school), late 15th century*
Morris dancer by Erasmus Grasser, in the ballroom of the old City Hall, Munich. Wood, about half life size. German, xv century
Life-size wooden statue of King Caspar, from Lichtenthal. German, xv century. It is similar in style to the figure by Grasser shown opposite.
As the framework of the altarpiece must have been discarded during the eighteenth-century renovations, the complete reassembling of the original monument will never again be possible. At present it is uncertain whether or not the statue of the Virgin and Child may one day be acquired, thus making it possible to recreate the original group for the benefit of the millions of visitors to The Cloisters.

Through the kindness of the nuns a full-size photograph of the Lichtenthal Virgin and Child is now exhibited with the Kings. It has not seemed advisable to attempt making casts of any of these somewhat delicate painted sculptures.

The simple Gothic church of the convent of Lichtenhal was nearly completed by 1248; its decorations were added from time to time. In
the first quarter of the fourteenth century one of the nuns, Greta Pfrumbom from Speyer, ordered a small silver-gilt and enameled casket to contain the Host on the altar of the church at Lichtenthal. This box, now in the Morgan Library, with the Three Kings and the Virgin and Child separated in arches, may have suggested the subject and form of the central sculptured section of the altarpiece which was made a century and a half later.

In the fifteenth century, following a miraculous vision during the plague, Katherine of Austria, wife of Margrave Karl I of Baden and niece of Emperor Frederick III, sent her daughter, Princess Margaretha, to the convent. After becoming a nun the princess was chosen abbess in 1477 and ruled the abbey until 1496. In the upper right corner of the
The Birth and Death of the Virgin by Hans Schüchlin (d. 1505), the inside of the wings of the Lichtenthal altarpiece. When open, the wings framed the Adoration scene with the large sculptures of the Kings and the Virgin and Child.
Altarpiece in the abbey church at Tiefenbronn, with wings painted by Hans Schüchlin in 1469. The altarpiece in Lichtenthal also combined a sculptured group with painted wings.
Virgin and Child, originally part of the altarpiece in Lichtenthal, now in the convent
painted panel depicting the Birth of the Virgin is a stained-glass window with the coat of arms of Baden in the center, surrounded by a German inscription stating that the window was given by Lady "Margret," born a mar-gravine and abbess of Lichtenthal in the year 1489. The altarpiece was probably executed about this time and in no event after Margretha's death in 1496.

The paintings have been ascribed to various artists, including Michael Wolgemut, Bartholomäus Zeitblom, and Hans Baldung. But at present there seems to be little hesitation in considering them to be by Hans Schüchlin (or Schülein), whose only undisputed work is his altarpiece at Tiefenbronn, dated 1469. In 1480 his name appears on the records at Ulm, where from 1494 until two years before his death in 1505 he was one of the three artists responsible for the care of the cathedral of Ulm. There is no record of any sculpture by his hand, and although it is likely that he planned the retabe for the high altar at Tiefenbronn the sculpture is surely not his work. The inner sides of the painted wings of the Lichtenthal altarpiece are reminiscent of the similar scenes on the outside of the Tiefenbronn wings; but the Lichtenthal paintings are less characteristically Flemish and more personal, as would be expected of the mature work of a German master painter of the period.

Like so much German sculpture of the late Middle Ages the Three Kings may be derived from a lost print by the Master E. S. His influence is described at length by Edith Hessig in "Die Kunst des Meisters E. S. und die Plastik der Spätgotik" (Jahresgabe des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft; Berlin, 1935; see especially illustrations pp. 52-54) and by Hans Huth in "Ein Verlorener Stich des Meisters E. S." (Das Siebente Jahrzehnt, Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Adolph Goldschmidt; Berlin, 1935; pp. 74-76). However, our highly personalized adaptation of this subject cannot be directly related to any other known sculptures. The position of the Lichtenthal Virgin, the attitude of the Child and kneeling king, the courtly gesture of Balthasar removing his crown, the artfully balanced pose of the Ethiopian king, give a mannered elegance to the sculptor's interpretation of this legend.

For comparable sculptures one thinks of the work of the Ulm sculptor Jörg Syrlin the Younger, particularly his altarpiece of about 1496 at Bingen and another of about the same date at Ennetach, and Gregor Erhart, who may have executed the Virgin and the relief panel of the Adoration for the high altar (1493-1494) of the monastery church at Blaubeuren. Although these sculptures and those from the Lichtenthal altarpiece have many common characteristics it is not possible to attribute the Lichtenthal pieces to any specific artist. Nothing remains, for instance, of the work of the sculptor Niclaus Weckmann, who became a citizen of Ulm in 1481 and in 1490 finished an altarpiece for the high altar of the church of Saints Mary and Martin at Biberach. Weckmann is known to have made a payment to Schüchlin in 1496 or 1497 for collaboration on an altarpiece, a fact which suggests the possibility that he may have worked at Lichtenthal in collaboration with Schüchlin. In reviewing the work of the German sculptors of the last quarter of the fifteenth century, one is also tempted to single out the work of Erasmus Grasser, whose vivacious morris dancers in the ballroom of the old City Hall in Munich have so much of the feeling of arrested motion that lends distinction to the Three Kings at The Cloisters. A comparable large wood figure of King Balthasar in the Suermontd Museum in Aachen, no doubt from an Adoration group, is usually associated with Grasser's lyrical style. Perhaps in the future some undiscovered documentation for the Lichtenthal altarpiece will be found.

These late fifteenth-century German statues of the Ulm school will surely be great favorites of visitors from near and far, as they were for many years for the nuns of Lichtenthal. This Christmas season they are being shown in a special setting at the entrance to The Cloisters, and afterwards they will be placed with other works of the same period in the Late Gothic Hall.