

A PALMESEL AT THE CLOISTERS

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Last year The Cloisters acquired a rare wooden sculpture of Christ riding on a donkey at his entry into Jerusalem. Statues like this, used in Palm Sunday processions in certain regions up to the Reformation, have a special name in German, *Palmesel*, or donkey of Palm Sunday. This charming word, in its precise definition of the subject, has no equivalent in English. Therefore, one is tempted to use it without translating it.

Practically all medieval *palmesels*—of which some fifty-odd were recorded as still in existence at the end of the nineteenth century—date from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century; they are unsigned and anonymous, some of them of rather crude workmanship. They range from the size of a toy to almost life size, like the one at The Cloisters, which is among the most attractive of the surviving examples.

The Cloisters sculpture fittingly illustrates Christ entering Jerusalem as described in the *Synaxarion*, a liturgical book of the Eastern Church giving accounts of holy events for every day: "Although he had heaven as a throne, he entered Jerusalem having mounted a foal of an ass." The statue interprets well the quiet majesty and sad resignation of Christ going voluntarily to suffer earthly martyrdom and death for the salvation of mankind. Christ, his slim body erect,

sits astride the trim, roundish donkey. He is clothed in a tunic, with enough of the old paint remaining to show that it was purple. His red cope-like mantle, held together with a strip of gold galloon, has traces of decoration in embossed gold and a gold border with simulated jewels. Christ's right hand is raised in blessing; in his left he probably held the reins. His sensitive hands appear emaciated, and his feet hang bare. He looks into space. On his head are indications that at some time there may have been a halo. The platform on which the donkey stands is a later replacement; the original one probably had wheels to enable the *palmesel* to be pulled around on Palm Sunday.

The sculpture is said to have been found in the nineteenth century walled up in a niche in a church at Mellrichstadt, Bavaria. Since then it has been owned by Ernst Münzenberger, the Historisches Museum of Frankfurt am Main, and Carl von Weinberg.

The *palmesel* was probably made in the 1470's. It cannot be attributed to any great master, but whoever carved it possessed skill and a lot of feeling. The drapery softly molds the body, breaking here and there into the angularity of the late Gothic style. One end of the mantle is gracefully thrown over the left arm. Christ's hair and beard, as well as the animal's mane, are crisp and pre-



A Palm Sunday procession in the medieval tradition, a print from a XIX century Calendar of Festivals



Painted lindenwood figure of Christ riding on a donkey. German, xv century. Sculptures of this kind were used in Palm Sunday processions and were called "Palmesels." The paint on the donkey and on Christ's hair has been restored, and also the platform, the donkey's hoofs, and three fingers of Christ's right hand. At The Cloisters

cise. The same treatment of hair and a close facial resemblance are found in a late fifteenth-century standing figure of Christ in the Grossenberg chapel at Mellrichstadt. Very near in style and date is the figure of Christ in a Coronation of the Virgin, the center group of an altarpiece datable in the 1480's. Made for the chapel of the Kilchberg castle in Württemberg, it is now in the Stuttgart Gemäldesammlung. The wings and predella of this altarpiece were painted and signed by Bartholomäus Zeitblom, but the sculptor's identity is unknown. Julius Baum, in *Die Ulmer Plastik*, says of this sculptor: "In the Master of the Kilchberg altarpiece . . . we meet one who has developed the mid-century style in a very decorative manner."

While usually the donkeys are represented walking, the one at The Cloisters is standing firmly, its legs braced, its head bent. In this it is similar to some others from various parts of Bavaria. The closest in appearance is an early sixteenth-century palmesel from Vilseck, Bavaria, now in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich; for all we know it could be a later copy of the Cloisters palmesel.

Christian religious processions, derived from ancient Jewish ones, were probably introduced in the West in the late sixth century by Pope Gregory the Great. With the development of liturgical drama, the Palm Sunday procession changed into a pageant, forming a kind of introduction to the Passion plays of Holy Week. In a mid-fifteenth-century life of Saint Ulrich, Bishop of Augsburg (924-973), based on a contemporary biography, we find a description of a Palm Sunday celebration: "Saint Ulrich blesses the palms; after this a magnificent procession is formed of priests and lay people with crosses and banners and the Holy Gospels; in front, the image of Our Lord sitting on a donkey, and everybody carrying palms in their hands; and the procession goes from Saint Afra up to Perlach. And here the procession is met by canons and priests of Our Lady and with them the citizens of the town . . . and many other people from villages and hamlets who came for the Festival. Here hymns are sung, palms strewn, and clothes spread out on the ground, in accordance with the custom of the Feast. After this Saint Ulrich

preaches a sermon to the people about Christ's Passion . . . making everybody cry as usual. Then they go to Our Lady's and Saint Ulrich says Mass. After this everybody goes home."

The procession, after picking up the palmesel at the church to which it belonged, either went around the building or to another church in town where Mass was celebrated, and after this the palmesel was returned to its owners. The palmesel was pulled by representatives of guilds and other citizens. Persons banned from the town for certain crimes could be pardoned if they took part in the pulling. King Maximilian, at Schwäbisch-Hall in 1489, was astonished to see lowly folk drawing the donkey, and ever after it was done by the city councilmen.

The hymns and hosannas that were sung were sure to include words like those recorded by Saint Matthew: "Hosanna to the son of David. Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest," and the whole performance followed closely the events described by the Evangelists. Where palms were not available, flowers or willow boughs coming into bloom in early spring were used. The blessed palms left over were burnt and the ashes used for Ash Wednesday. The whole procession represented the triumphal entry into Jerusalem of Christ victorious over death by his coming resurrection. In the ancient East palms were symbols of victory; they were bestowed on heroes, and eminent persons were met by crowds holding palms. Clothes were spread out on similar occasions (II Kings ix. 13). The ass indicated a peaceful entry, as on military occasions horses were used. It was also in accordance with the words of the prophet Zaccharias (ix. 9): "Behold thy King cometh unto thee, he is just and having salvation; lowly and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass."

Saint Ulrich's life speaks of an image of the Saviour seated on a donkey in the tenth century, and directions for Palm Sunday processions in some fourteenth-century service books also mention such images. Other references tell us of fifteenth-century palmesels. Two are attributed to Hans Multscher or his workshop: one in the museum of Ulm, the other from Saint Ulrich's monastery in Augsburg, in Wettenhausen. It is

believed that it was for this last one that ten florins were paid to “a master of Ulm” in 1456. The accounts for 1497 of the church of Saint Jacques in Louvain, Belgium, note that a certain Janne van Bullestraten was paid for making “a Redeemer who sits in the church on a donkey . . . on four new rollers . . . for the procession on Palm Sunday.” Most of the existing palmesels come from the regions where they were especially popular: southwestern Germany, Austria, Tyrol, Switzerland, and Alsace. These are only the few survivors of the many that were the proud and revered possessions of countless abbeys, monasteries, and parish churches. In Verona there was a wooden donkey that supposedly contained the bones of the one Christ rode into Jerusalem. The donkey, it was said, left the Holy Land after Christ’s Passion and, traveling over land and sea, finally came to end its days in Verona.

With the Reformation elaborate ceremonies were abolished, as were performances of liturgical drama in churches, and the use of palmesels was declared to be equivalent to idolatry. The custom survived in some Catholic places, but the buffoonery that sometimes accompanied the processions in later periods, changing the once solemn tradition into a carnival entertainment, and the importance placed on the donkey rather than on the Feast itself, led the ecclesiastical authorities in 1782 to forbid the use of palmesels. From unmitigated enjoyment of the carved donkeys the populace went over to a frenzy of mistrust; the figures began to be considered as almost devilish intruders into religious services, and wholesale destruction of the wood sculptures followed. They were burned, drowned, hacked to pieces; in other cases their legs were chopped off to prevent their being used in processions. When the nuns of Nonnberg, near

Salzburg, insisted on the protection of their palmesel, which they placed on Palm Sundays at the entrance of their church, bedecked with rich silks and jewels, they were forced to dismember the sculpture and to deliver the donkey quartered to the authorities. When reverence for the figures of Christ prevented destruction of the whole group, they were removed from their mounts and saved, or the donkeys were simply cut or sawed off. At present it would be hard to

find a locality where palmesels are still used, although isolated cases were reported in the nineteenth century. In Oberammergau, where the Passion plays have been kept up because of a vow made by the people during the great pestilence of 1633, the actor representing Christ sits on a live horse. This was also the custom in Antwerp, where, according to a chronicle of 1487, only a pilgrim returned from the Holy Land was allowed to rep-

resent Christ. In Russia, up to around 1700, the Patriarch sat on a horse led by the czar himself and the most prominent boyars. Pritius (Johann Georg Pritz), a German theologian who visited Russia in 1698, said that donkey ears were attached to the head of the horse.

Luckily, some of the palmesels escaped destruction. Banished from behind the altars and sacristies where they used to stand through the year, some were relegated to barns and lofts, while others were taken to private homes, where they might be shown to visitors for a fee. Later they found their way into various local or larger museums. There were several palmesels in Berlin before the last war; others are in Strasbourg, Basel, Cracow, Cologne, and elsewhere. But, as far as is known, there have been none up to the present time in the United States, and the palmesel at The Cloisters is the first to cross the ocean.



Central part of the Kilchberg altarpiece in Stuttgart. German, xv century. The figure of Christ is similar to the one on the donkey at The Cloisters.