Occasionally a great work of art, long recorded as missing, is rediscovered, and the art historian has the pleasure of substituting facts for hypotheses. The beautiful statue on the opposite page, purchased for The Cloisters with funds provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., can now be identified as the lost Virgin from the thirteenth-century choir screen of the cathedral of Strasbourg. The acquisition of such a statue, perhaps the most important Gothic sculpture on this side of the Atlantic, is an event of rare interest.

This Queen of Heaven is as regal as any we find in art. With majestic but simple grace she expresses the most ennobling qualities of early Gothic art. The elements of the design are organized with imagination and subtlety. The relationships between the face and veil and the crown are adroitly conceived. The angular Gothic folds of the gilded mantle with rich borders studded with red and green jewels contrast with the simplicity of the Virgin’s gown. Below the carefully modeled neck the severe white border of the undergarment provides a strong accent. The modeling of the gentle features—wide brow, almond-shaped eyes, delicate mouth, and pointed chin—is enlivened by the painting of the flesh and such details as the eyeballs and the arched eyebrows. Fortunately this statue, unlike the other remaining figures from the Strasbourg choir screen, has preserved most of its original polychromy, until recently protected by later repaint. The present base is a replacement.

In view of the strange vicissitudes this statue has undergone, its recovery for a wide public is gratifying. The choir screen of which it was a part (see p. 224) was demolished in 1682 to conform with the requirements of religious practices introduced in the time of Louis XIV. Some of the statues between the gables of its façade were at that time placed in the niches of the tower by the cathedral architect. Parts of the screen were used for fill under the floor of the choir and remained there until the middle of the nineteenth century. We do not know what happened to our statue at this time. It was found at some later date in Alsace, reputedly at Sarrebourg, and may have been in the Sarrebourg castle of the bishops of Strasbourg, erected by Cardinal Rohan in 1799 and now used as a barracks. All we are sure of is that the statue was sold in November 1913 in the J. H. Fitzhenry sale in London to the late Alphonse Kann for eighty-nine pounds and five shillings. It was described as a French sculpture of the fifteenth century. By chance, while tracing the history of the statue in Europe last summer, the writer came across a modern bust, quite obviously inspired by the Strasbourg Virgin. Upon inquiry the owner claimed that he had originally bought our statue from a merchant of lighting fixtures at Sarrebourg and had sold it to Fitzhenry.

The identification of our Virgin as the miss-
xiii century Virgin from the cathedral of Strasbourg, recently acquired for The Cloisters. Originally part of a group of the Virgin and Child with angels on the choir screen of the cathedral.
Detail of the Virgin from Strasbourg
Detail of the Virgin from Strasbourg
XVII century drawing of the façade of the choir screen of the cathedral of Strasbourg, showing the position of the sculptures. The recently acquired Virgin is the fourth from the left. The drawing, now in the Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart, was made about 1660 and was to have been used for engravings in a book about the cathedral. A second sketch of the Virgin appears above the screen, with instructions to the engraver. The choir screen was demolished in 1682.
The Strasbourg Virgin and four of the other figures from the façade of the choir screen. Ten of the choir screen sculptures, mostly apostles, including the four shown here, are still in Strasbourg. Photographs of these four courtesy of the Musée de l’Œuvre, Strasbourg
The interior of Strasbourg cathedral, showing the choir screen in place. From a xix century woodcut reproduction of Isaac Brunn's engraving of 1630
ing original from Strasbourg resulted from stylistic comparisons with other statues from the choir screen. Such details as the cutting of the eyes, the treatment of the hair, draperies, and neckline, were first considerations. The block form of the back of a statue of a deacon which originally may have served as part of a lectern on top of the choir screen, is like that of the Cloisters statue and has the same kind of iron fastening for securing it. The painting revealed when our sculpture was cleaned after its arrival in America corresponds with remains of color on Strasbourg choir screen fragments. The average height of the Strasbourg figures is 55 3/4 inches; ours, broken below the feet as are other choir screen figures, is 56 inches, excluding the modern base.

The seventeenth-century drawing shown on page 224 depicts the Virgin once in her original setting as the fourth figure on the screen and again above with a note of instructions to the engraver: Dises Jesus kindlein/ hat dasz recht/ hendelein abge/brochen (“This little Christ Child has its right hand broken off”). This drawing must, of course, be considered in the light of a baroque rendering of a medieval statue but it provides conclusive evidence of the origin of this statue.

In the drawing two angels support the Virgin’s veil and two others are flying above. The Child does not sit on his mother’s arm but is seated on a rose bush and offers his mother what appears to be a fruit on which a bird is perched. Other such examples exist, including a fourteenth-century wood sculpture from Straubing in the National Museum in Munich. As far as we know, the Virgin from the choir screen was the earliest representation of this type.

The subject of the Virgin with the rose bush, or more commonly holding a rose or branch of roses, goes back to the words of the prophet Isaiah (11:1): “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.” The connection of the Virgin with the tree of Jesse is developed in the play on the words virgo, virgin, and virga, twig. This theme is well known in Brahms’s adaptation of the medieval song

“Lo, how a rose e’er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung,
Of Jesse’s lineage coming
As men of old have sung.”

The choir screen has been carefully studied by Otto Schmitt among others in his two-volume work Gotische Skulpturen des Strassburger Münsters (1924) and in Zwei verlorene Mutternottestatuen des 13 Jahrhunderts vom Strassburger Münster (Archiv für elsässische Kirchengeschichte, 1941, pp. 13 ff.). Schmitt rightly supposed, judging from the quality of the other choir screen sculptures, that the Virgin must also have been “an outstanding sculpture of the mid-thirteenth century.”

Now it will be possible to examine the influence of this early Gothic Madonna on French and German sculpture. Dr. Schmitt writes after seeing photographs of the Cloisters Virgin that it “explains in part the stylistic basis of the sculpture of the west portal of the cathedral. The facial type is the same as that of the Wise and Foolish Virgins on the right south portal of the façade.” The choir screen has also been carefully studied by Hans Haug in Les Oeuvres de Miséricorde du jubé de la cathédrale de Strasbourg (Archives alsaciennes d’histoire de l’art, 1931, pp. 99 ff.), and others. It has been dated between 1247 and 1250, at all events before 1252, when it was recorded as standing, and our statue is obviously of the same date.

It has been suggested by Professor Hans Wentzel of Stuttgart that a statue illustrated in an article in the Burlington Magazine, 1928, “An Unknown Thirteenth-century Figure,” by J. G. Noppen, came from one side of the choir screen. This statue is now in the Toledo Museum and its further publication will prove of interest.