LATE GOTHIC WOODCARVINGS
FROM NORMANDY

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The series of thirty-seven carved oak panels recently installed in the new Treasury at The Cloisters is one of the most impressive ensembles of late Gothic woodcarving to be found outside the churches and cathedrals of Europe. The scenes on the panels, of which a selected group are illustrated on the following pages, represent the life of the Virgin and of Christ, beginning with the story of Anna and Joachim being repulsed from the Temple and ending with the mourning over the dead body of Christ at the foot of the Cross.

Until 1950, these carvings were in the great entrance hall of Highcliffe Castle, Hampshire, England, where they had been brought from Normandy in the early years of the nineteenth century by Lord Stuart de Rothesay, then British ambassador to France. Lord Stuart, an amateur architect and lover of French art as well as a diplomat, constructed his new home, Highcliffe Castle, around units of late French Gothic buildings such as the manor house with its exquisite oriel window from Les Andelys in Normandy. These he bought in situ and had shipped across the Channel in specially built barges, thus anticipating American collectors by many years.

According to Lady Abingdon, descendant of Lord Stuart and recent owner of Highcliffe, the woodcarvings now at The Cloisters were always believed by the family to have come from the royal abbey of Jumièges in Normandy, whose rich furnishings had been removed shortly after the French Revolution and given away, destroyed, or sold. It has been impossible so far to prove this, but there are certain bits of evidence which lead to Jumièges as a likely source. The abbot Julien Loth, writing about Jumièges in 1885, said concerning the dispersal of the mural paintings, statues, relief carvings, and manuscripts of this wealthy abbey in the early years of the nineteenth century that the cloister of Jumièges “and other beautiful sculptures . . . were bought by an Englishman and reconstructed in an English Park.” Pierre Chirol in 1920 stated in a Rouen publication that “the English carried away for cash the sculptured remains” of Jumièges and added that the cloister was said to have “departed . . . with the family of the ambassador.” There is here no specific mention of sculptures in wood, but there is certainly in the French mind a red arrow pointing from Jumièges to the home of an English ambassador.

Furthermore, a history of Jumièges, carefully compiled from old archives by an unknown Benedictine monk about 1764 before the wholesale destruction of the abbey’s documents by the revolutionaries, records the fact that on July 1, 1501, the abbot of Jumièges, Jacques d’Amboise, ordered new choir stalls to be made. It is quite possible that our panels formed the high backs, “dossiers,” of these stalls. The date is consistent with the style of the carvings, which are obviously later than the stalls of Rouen, completed in 1469, and earlier than the famous stalls of Amiens, begun in 1508 and finished by 1522.

The carvings are the product of at least four different master craftsmen, each telling his part of the story with skill and distinction within the workshop traditions in which he was trained. There is the one we call the Franco-Flemish master, who seems to have been responsible for a large number of panels, including the Annunciation, the various Nativity scenes, the Baptism, the Garden of Gethsemane, and Pilate washing his hands. This woodcarver is fond of dramatic poses and dynamic compositions. His young women are piquant even if not pretty, his villains are formidable even if not evil, his Christ of the Passion scenes is aloof and slightly
Details of two panels: the angel appearing to Joachim, by the woodcarver from the Loire region; angel and shepherds, by the Franco-Flemish carver. Average height of panels 34 1/2 in.

contemptuous. His people live and act as in a fifteenth-century mystery play. By contrast, the work of the second master carver, which includes incidents in the early life of the Virgin, Christ and the Woman of Samaria, the Woman taken in Adultery, and many of the Passion episodes, is characterized by quiet calm and solemn serenity. There is drama in his interpretations too, but it is the drama of pause before action, of significant silence before speech. The young women are sweetly serious, the old men are thoughtful, and Christ is the humble Son of Man. He introduces such renaissance minor motifs as the sea shell and winged cherub heads. We can identify his work as belonging to the French school of the Loire. If these woodcarvings are from the choir stalls of Jumièges, ordered by the abbot Jacques d’Amboise, as we believe, it is not surprising to find this link with the abbot’s Loire Valley home. When choir stalls were being built and carved, workers were often recruited from many towns. For instance, in Rouen cabinetmakers and carvers were summoned from Abbeville and Amiens in Picardy, from Les Andelys and Fécamp in Normandy, from Ypres and Tournay and Brussels, and many another Flemish or Brabant center famous for the skill of its carvers in wood.

The third and fourth craftsmen who worked on our panels seem to have come from Flanders or Brabant. The Meeting at the Golden Gate, with its robust peasant figures, its agitation of drapery, and its profusion of architectural ornament, is by one, and the Flagellation, with its splendid figure of Christ, its evil executioners, and its sinuous grotesques, is by the other. These two men from Flanders or Brabant produced only two each of our panels. It may be that they devoted their particular talents to the carving of homely scenes of daily living or animals from bestiaries on the “misericords”—those parts of choir stalls on which the monks sat while appearing to stand—where obviously scenes of the life of the Virgin and Christ would be inappropriately placed.

It is a pity that Lord Stuart de Rothesay did not “carry away for cash” the stalls with their misericords and so preserve these also for posterity. We are grateful, however, that he saved from destruction, possibly as firewood, this
The series of panels which tell their story with such completeness and such understanding.

The series of panels begins with the story of Anna and Joachim as told in the Apocryphal Gospels and in Voragine's *Golden Legend*. In the first panel Joachim’s offering is being refused by the priest in the temple because God has not blessed him and his wife Anna with a child, though they have been married for twenty years. While in great sorrow Joachim fasts and prays in the wilderness with his flocks, an angel of the Lord appears to him to say that he and his wife Anna will have a daughter, whom they are to call Mary and who will be renowned among all women, for she will be the mother of the Son of God. Joachim in great joy returns to his city and meets Anna, who has received a similar message and has come running to greet her husband at the Golden Gate. And Anna “hung upon his neck, saying: ‘Now I know that the Lord God hath greatly blessed me for . . . she that was childless shall conceive.’”
The series continues with the story of the young Virgin. According to the Apocrypha, when Mary was three years old, she was taken by her parents to the temple to be brought up in the service of the Lord. “And . . . Our Lady was set on the lowest step and mounted up without any help as if she had been of perfect age.” While in the temple the little Virgin was visited daily by angels who brought her food and drink. This scene is rare in medieval art but is also found on the choir stalls at Amiens. When she was fourteen years of age it was decided that she should marry. Then all the marriageable sons of the house of David were ordered to bring their staves and lay them on the altar of the temple so that God might give a sign. It was the aged Joseph’s rod that blossomed, “and a dove coming from Heaven pitched upon the top of it.” Thus “everyone plainly saw that the Virgin was to be betrothed to him.” At the wedding of Mary and Joseph, shown above, Joseph holds his flowering staff.
The Annunciation; the Nativity; the Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple. These three are by our Franco-Flemish master carver, who did a large proportion of the scenes.

The panels of the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Presentation in the Temple follow the Gospel of Saint Luke with settings and poses suggesting the mystery plays so popular in France and Flanders at the time. As in the “Mystery of the Incarnation” presented at Rouen in 1474, the Annunciation takes place in the Virgin’s oratory, and the Virgin is on her knees in prayer when the angel enters. In the Rouen play, the scene of the Nativity is described as a hut open to the winds, containing only some hay and some branches of broom which Joseph, with Mary’s help, interweaves for an enclosure. Such a wattle fence is shown in the setting for our Nativity. The prominence given to the stylish serving girl may also be due to a Nativity play which tells the tale of Honestasse, the innkeeper’s daughter, who had had no hands from birth but was miraculously provided with these useful appendages in order to help Mary with her Child.

The Gospel of Saint Matthew tells of the wise
The Adoration of the Magi; the Massacre of the Innocents; the Flight into Egypt. These panels show the Franco-Flemish carver's interest in drama, movement, and dynamic composition.

men who saw the star in the East and came to worship the Christ Child, bringing their gifts of "gold, frankincense, and myrrh." It also tells how the wicked king Herod sought to bring about the death of the Child by ordering all the men children of the region of Bethlehem to be slain and how Joseph, warned by an angel, took Jesus and his mother by night and escaped into Egypt. The story of the palm tree which bowed down, however, is an apocryphal addition, much loved by the writers of mystery plays. During the flight into Egypt Mary asked Joseph to reach up and pick her some fruit from a palm tree because she was very hungry. When Joseph demurred, saying that the fruit was too high and he was too old and too tired to reach it, the Christ Child ordered the tree to bow down. The tree did so and the Holy Family were able to eat as much as they wished.

The story of the Child Jesus astonishing the learned doctors of Jerusalem with "his understanding and answers" is told in the Gospel of
Christ among the Doctors and the Baptism of Christ, two panels by the Franco-Flemish master carver. The third panel, the Temptation, is the work of the carver from the Loire region.

Luke. All of the Gospels give an account of the baptism of Christ and all but the Gospel of John tell how Christ, after fasting for forty days in the wilderness, was tempted three times by the devil. It is the first of the temptations that is represented in our panel. The devil appearing to Christ, who was hungry after his forty-day fast, suggested that he turn a stone into bread if he was indeed the Son of God. "And Jesus answered him saying, 'It is written that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.' " In one of the mystery plays Satan remarks after this speech, "That is indeed a subtle reply." After the failure of the third temptation he rages on his way back to hell, "Haro! haro! haro! I am in a fury! I have no hold on heaven or earth and I am more vanquished than an old dog."

Incidents in the public life of Christ are illustrated in medieval art much less frequently than scenes relating to the Nativity or the Passion. This may be due to the fact that although
the public life of Christ plays an essential part in the Gospel accounts, it had little or no place in the Church liturgy. In France, the fifteenth-century mysteries gave importance for the first time to such incidents as Christ and the woman of Samaria and Christ saving the adulterous woman from death by stoning, told originally in the Gospel of John. That these two rare scenes are included in this series of panels and are to be found also in several late Gothic stained-glass windows in Normandy, may well be the result of the visual imagery from the plays. It may even be that our master craftsman from the region of the Loire, like another, more famous sculptor, Michel Colombe, from the same district, took a major part in the staging and production of a religious drama. The story of Christ and the money-changers is also exploited in the plays, where, besides the whippcord of the Gospels, Christ uses a “soufflement de la bouche” to upset the tables of those who would make of his temple “a den of thieves.”
The scenes of the Passion, told in detail in the Gospels are dramatized to the fullest extent in the fifteenth-century mystery plays which usually bear the title *Mystère de la Passion*. In our panels, as in the plays, the Garden of Gethsemane is surrounded by a fence of palings and the cup of suffering which the very human Christ at first found “too bitter to bear” is a tangible chalice on the stage set. When the soldiers, accompanied by Judas arrive at the Garden, they carry a torch or a lantern to indicate that the scene is at night. In the Passion by Arnoul Greban, Pilate refusing to accept the responsibility of putting to death “a just man,” says to the enemies of Christ:

“
To have your good graces
I must satisfy your wishes
Though my heart does not consent
To the death of this innocent.
So, following Roman custom,
I will herewith wash my hands.
This I can well do.”
In the scene of the Flagellation as played at Mons in 1501, the brutal executioners, disrobing Christ, admire his “fine figure,” adding, “What a pity it is, He is not more wise! His back is strong enough to take hard blows; he shall have ten million of them before dinner.” After the scourging, Christ is shown to the people, dressed in a “tattered purple rag,” with a crown of thorns and a reed for a scepter. “Ye gods! What a King,” they mockingly cry. The Simon of our panels, who is helping Christ to carry his Cross, is very like the stubborn, stupid yokel of the play who keeps reiterating: “I won’t do it!” And then finally says: “Oh, all right, let’s get on with it . . .” and puts his shoulder to the Cross.

The series of panels concludes with scenes of the Crucifixion. And above the stark human tragedy of them, one can almost hear the triumphant voice of the Archangel Michael in the plays as he shouts from his place in Heaven: “Silence, Hell! Let the angels sing!”

The Flagellation, by the second master carver from Flanders or Brabant. Christ Shown to the People and Christ Carrying the Cross, by the woodcarver from the region of the Loire