A SAINT TO TREASURE

By MARGARET B. FREEMAN
Curator of The Cloisters

It is a difficult thing indeed to portray the countenance of a saint. In the Middle Ages many an artist was content to draw a circle around a head to indicate saintliness; and often only a halo distinguished Jesus from Judas. But every now and again, a very skilled craftsman succeeded in creating a portrait of true saintliness. It seems to this observer that even without the halo our little silver-gilt statuette at The Cloisters would be recognized as a saint.

His face has the beauty of an angel and the radiance of a soul in paradise, the courage and integrity of a human being who would die for his beliefs, the sweet gentleness of one who could forgive his executioners. He is clad in the vestments of a deacon, the dalmatic falling in the gleaming, intricately varied folds of a thin silken material, the borders of the sleeves and amice decorated with gems and filigree. His narrow hands with long, sensitive fingers undoubtedly once held a precious relic, which was apparently at some time wrested from his grasp, leaving the hands and fingers slightly bent out of shape.

The identity of our saint is fortunately established by a vigorous engraving on the back of the copper-gilt plaque to which he is affixed. Here, unmistakably, in the lower scene is shown the stoning of Saint Stephen, who was the first in the long, long line of Christians to be martyred for the faith.

The story of this well-loved saint is told in the Acts of the Apostles, chapters 6 and 7. According to this account Stephen was selected by the apostles to be one of seven ministers to the poor, especially the widows, in the early Church. He was chosen because he was “of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom”; he was also a man “full of grace and power.” He not only saw to the fair distribution of alms but also preached to the people with fervor and logic of the new religion. And God helped with great wonders and signs.

But Stephen ran afoul of the members of the synagogue, who claimed that he had spoken words of blasphemy against Moses and God. He was dragged before the Sanhedrin for trial, but “all that sat in the council . . . saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.” And Stephen preached a long sermon recounting the mercies of God toward Israel through the centuries and the ungratefulness with which Israel had repaid these mercies. He concluded with an indictment against those who had betrayed the Christ whose coming the prophets had foretold. The council of Jews was infuriated. But Stephen, looking up “steadfastly into heaven,” said, “Behold, I see the heavens
Reliquary of Saint Stephen. OPPOSITE: Silver-gilt statuette of the saint on the face of the reliquary. ABOVE: Copper-gilt back engraved with the stoning of Saint Stephen and Stephen’s vision of Christ. Made about 1220 in the region of the Meuse. Height 17 inches
opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.” This was enough evidence for his enemies. They “ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him.” And Stephen called “upon God... saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he said this, he fell asleep.”

The story as told in our plaque is one of the most dramatic and poignant representations of the stoning of Saint Stephen that the Middle Ages ever produced. Two executioners with Jewish hats, exaggerated noses, unshaven chins, and bared teeth hurl stones at Stephen from a supply of rocks held in slings around their necks. The upward swing of one and the downward thrust of the other create a mood and a motion of violence. In many another medieval representation of this scene, the arms of all the stoners are raised, and the resulting picture suggests a ballet with directed and concerted movement to music. The executioners in our reliquary fling their stones with considerable force, and these stones happily only enhance the halo of the saint, emphasize his tonsured head, and make a circular pattern on his cheek which does not mar his beauty.

At the left, seated nonchalantly with his legs crossed, his left hand in the gesture of command, his right hand holding a sword, and his balding head crowned with a halo, is Saul, later to be named the apostle Paul, one of the great saints of the Christian Church. At the time of the stoning of Stephen, however, the executioners “laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul... And Saul was consenting unto his death.” Paul was later put to death with a sword, and for that reason he is usually represented with a sword in his hands. In the scene where he consented to the stoning of Saint Stephen he is not yet a Christian and not yet a saint, but he is shown with a halo nevertheless. And this is typical of medieval art. The past, the
present, and anticipation of the future are often combined in one scene to show three dimensions in time and one fundamental idea.

So the upper section of our plaque represents the vision of Saint Stephen, who, while he was defending his faith, saw Jesus “the Son of man,” and then later, when he was dying, called upon the Lord, saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Stephen’s spirit, crowned with the crown of martyrdom, is being presented to Christ by an angel with covered hands while his companion angel holds an incense boat and swings a censer. This representation of the offering of the crowned soul of Stephen to Christ is unusual. To be sure, the little soul is often shown being carried to heaven by angels, and sometimes Stephen is presented with a crown.

Since the deacon saint on the face of our reliquary is undoubtedly Stephen, we may more accurately guess at the object which he once held in his hands. The Saint Stephens at Sens and at Chartres hold a book—the gospels which he preached so ardently. He frequently carries not only a book but a palm, reward of those who died for their faith. Sometimes, as at Bamberg, he is shown with a stone or a pile of stones, instruments of his death. In the thirteenth century, however, the period of our statuette, craftsmen preferred to represent Saint Stephen with a book, thus emphasizing his ministry rather than his martyrdom. So we can best imagine our saint with an elaborately decorated book in his hands similar to the reliquary of Saint Stephen in Leningrad. The relic was probably enshrined within the book or incorporated in the design of the cover protected by a crystal for all to see.

When our reliquary figure was exhibited in Bruges in 1902 it was catalogued as a “precious monument of Mosan goldsmith’s work” of the first quarter of the thirteenth century. There

*Apostle from the shrine of the Three Kings in Cologne, attributed to Nicholas of Verdun, about 1190; and the Annunciation from the shrine of Our Lady in Tournai by Nicholas, dated 1205. There are similarities in the drapery, filigree, and leaf border of these works and our reliquary, but the facial types and postures are different.*
seems to be no reason now, fifty-odd years later, to change this evaluation or the attribution.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the country of the Meuse valley in the medieval duchy of Lorraine produced goldsmith’s work of such high quality that it has seldom if ever been surpassed. Abbots and bishops of many lands called upon Mosan craftsmen in precious metals and enamelwork to create their richly gleaming altars, crosses, pulpits, book covers, and especially reliquary shrines, peopled with figures of saints and angels. The great Suger, Abbot of Saint-Denis, outside of Paris, called to his employ “several goldsmiths from Lorraine—at times five, at other times seven” to work on his altar cross, which was completed “barely within two years.” Pope Eugenius himself “solemnly consecrated the... crucifix... and publicly, in the presence of all,... anathematized by the sword of the blessed Peter... whosoever would steal anything therefrom and whosoever would raise his hand against it in reckless temerity.” The community of the abbey of Klosterneuburg near Vienna employed the Mosan goldsmith Nicholas of Verdun to decorate their pulpit with plaques of engraved and enameled copper-gilt. The bishop of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Tournai engaged the same Nicholas of Verdun to fashion the shrine of Our Lady, which the artist inscribed as follows: “This work containing 109 marks of silver and 6 marks of gold was made by Master Nicholas of Verdun. This goldsmith’s work [opus aurifabrum] was finished in the year of Our Lord 1205.”

In spite of the Pope’s anathema Suger’s cross has disappeared, but the Klosterneuburg plaques remain, converted into an altarpiece, and the shrine at Tournai, though restored, is still a cherished possession of the cathedral. Shrines still existing in the cathedral of Cologne, notably that great monument of the goldsmith’s art of the Middle Ages, the shrine of the Three Kings, have been attributed by scholars to Mosan artists, in part to Nicholas of Verdun. These are only a few of the great examples of surviving works by Mosan craftsmen. In many a church treasury and museum in Europe and America one may still stand in awe before book covers and crosses and reliquary plaques and shrines made

Wing of a copper-gilt reliquary triptych (reverse) by a follower of Nicholas of Verdun, about 1220. In the parish church of Mettlach. The engraving is similar to that on the Cloisters reliquary but less vigorous.
by the expert goldsmiths of the Meuse valley.

Our little reliquary statuette of Saint Stephen ranks among the best of the group; it is indeed a "precious monument of Mosan goldsmith's work." Characteristic of Mosan design is the setting of the figure against a patterned background in the form of a triple arch. Mosan too are the intricate fluid folds of the drapery, suggesting thin, soft, clinging material like silk. The engraved story of the stoning of Saint Stephen reflects the style of Nicholas of Verdun in the Klosterneuburg enameled plaques. Here is the same dynamic movement, the same sure drawing with sharp, jagged, lightning-like lines. The contours of the faces are similar, the eyes close-set and the beards bushy. The drapery emphasizes the bulges of the body, and the two executioners wear Jewish hats of exactly the same style as some of the Old Testament figures in the Klosterneuburg work. But our scene in heaven reflects more Byzantine influence and the heads and figures of Christ and the angels seem less distinguished in drawing. The faces of the villains in the lower scene are more fiercely evil than those in Nicholas's work. The engraver has also chosen to emphasize silhouettes and certain details by rocking his burin to create wavy lines. This technique serves beautifully to catch and reflect the light but also has a tendency to flatten some of the figures more than Nicholas probably would have cared to do. And the patterning of Stephen's dalmatic denies the body underneath. One may at least conclude, however, that our engraving is from the Meuse region and very close in style to Nicholas of Verdun. Indeed it seems closer to the work of this master than to any of his followers, one of whom was Brother Hugo of Oignies—he who fashioned with intricate detail the gospel covers in Namur, which he inscribed as follows: "Let others praise Christ with their voices. I Hugo praise him by my goldsmith's art."

Many of the decorative details of our piece are characteristic of Mosan goldsmith's art: the filigree set with jewels, the pattern in the diapered background, the foliate borders, and especially the strongly modeled acanthus-like leaves which accent the corners of the base and reinforce the spandrels of the arches, framing Saint Stephen's head more beautifully than his halo.
of the Duke of Arenberg. Several other magnificent objects of art from this famous collection are now in this country; one of them, an enamelled reliquary triptych attributed to the Mosan goldsmith Godefroid le Claire, is to be seen in the treasury at The Cloisters, on loan from Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Martin.

The Bruges catalogue states further that our Saint Stephen came from “near Namur.” There are several abbeys near Namur, Belgium, for which our reliquary may have been made, but so far it has not been possible to find in the existing records any mention of our piece. M. Ferdinand Courtoy, Curator of the Musée Archéologique of Namur, an authority on the work of Hugo of Oignies, at one time considered it “highly probable” that it came from the abbey

The figure of Saint Stephen, though Mosan in workmanship, has more of a French flavor than the saints and prophets of Nicholas of Verdun. Nicholas seems to have preferred ample, seated older men recalling in face and form the philosophers and statesmen of Greek and Roman times. And all of his figures, young or old, seated or upright, are shown in action. Our Stephen, on the other hand, stands as straight and still as a trumeau statue on a French cathedral doorway. And in his young face is the mystic idealism of thirteenth-century French sculpture at its best. French influence began to penetrate the region of the Meuse shortly after the turn of the century. Because of the presence of French characteristics in our figure we would be inclined to date the piece about 1220.

The Bruges catalogue of 1902 states that our Saint Stephen at that time was in the collection
of Marche-les-Dames. Prince Antoine of Arenberg owned a château at Marche-les-Dames and acquired from neighborhood churches many treasures for himself and his relative the duke.

The abbey of Marche-les-Dames had its origin in the twelfth century as a retreat for 139 noble ladies whose husbands went off to fight in the crusade for the Holy Land. Many of the knights did not return, and so their widows remained in their peaceful retiring place. It is pleasant to think that perhaps one of the knights who finally came safely home brought with him a relic which he presented to the bereaved group of women and that later our little statuette was fashioned to contain the relic. Since Saint Stephen was originally appointed by the apostles to care for widows this choice of saints would seem to be appropriate.

M. Courtoy has checked the unpublished archives of Marche-les-Dames and unfortunately has found no record of our reliquary. In a recent conference with this eminent art historian in Namur, however, another possibility for the provenance of our piece was suggested. Near Marche-les-Dames was a Benedictine abbey dedicated to Saint Stephen, the abbey of Saint-Étienne of Namèche. Founded in the eleventh century, it became a priory of Cluny in the twelfth century and was thus brought into close contact with the great abbey in Burgundy. Toward the middle of the thirteenth century the priory fell upon hard times but was restored about 1263. In the sixteenth century it was suppressed, and its possessions turned over to the parish church of Namèche.

Our Saint Stephen may well have been made for this monastery, the only one in the region dedicated to Saint Stephen. The French influence shown in the statuette could have resulted from the association of the monastery with Cluny. Such an undoubtedly expensive piece of goldsmith’s work would have been commissioned before the middle of the thirteenth century, when the priory was in financial straits, or after 1263, when it recovered. Because of the style of the engraving on the back of the reliquary, the superb modeling of the face, hands, and drapery of the figure itself, the design of the filigree and other decorative details, all of which are related to works of art of the region dating from the first quarter of the thirteenth century, we would choose the earlier date.

But whether our reliquary came from Marche-les-Dames or Saint-Étienne of Namèche or one of the other religious establishments near Namur, it is now a precious treasure for The Cloisters, beautiful in the manner of material things, shining with an inner spiritual grace.

The lower photograph on page 244 is taken from Ferdinand Courtoy’s Tresor du Prieuré d’Oignies, Brussels, 1953.