



Corpus

Bronze with remnants of the gilding
North - Italy, ca. 1200
h: 14,5 cm

During the Romanesque period, the depiction of the Last Judgement dominated the tympanum above the main entrances to churches. The many pilgrims visiting the cathedrals were deterred by the strict threatening Judge and the terrifying creatures of the Apocalypse (for instance Autun, Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne, Conques). Apart from monstrous animal figures, they depicted the most enigmatic creatures. Their origins can be traced back to antiquity. Through the continuing Christianisation and the increasing number of monasteries and convents, this imagery was taken over from various other cultures. This heathen and magical imagery acquired another meaning before it was expressed in a three-dimensional manner.

The major pilgrimages of the Romanesque era resulted in a large stream of pilgrims. Anywhere a pilgrim entered a church, who came face to face with Satan and his henchmen. Medieval man had to imbue the fear of inexplicable forces. This fear for the terrible torments which were awaiting him had to keep him from sinning.

At the end of the 11th century, Romanesque art rediscovered the art of antiquity. This so-called '1st Renaissance of the Gothic style' spread from Santiago de Compostella to Southern France and all of Spain. It was mainly expressed in architecture, whereby Corinthian motives and structures were used once again. Important examples are, among others, the Church of Santiago de Compostella, the Church of Saint Martin in Fromista, the Cathedrals of Pamplona and Jaca, the Saint Sernin Church in Toulouse and the Saint Peter Church in Moissac.

At about 1200, the so-called '2nd Renaissance of the Gothic style' manifested itself. This had radical consequences for sculptural art. It was the period of the construction of the great Cathedrals.

But there was more, the spirit of the times had also changed. In the Cathedral of Chartres, no trace can be found of the terrors of the end of the world. The monsters have moved to the edge of the portal, and are barely visible. Christ no longer appears as the terrifying Saviour, but as the Redeemer. The figures we see are serene and of an expressionless beauty. Astrological signs and calendar images, symbols of the free arts, made an entrance.

Around the change of the 12th century to the 13th, the statuary in Northern France was in the grip of an

'antiquation' tendency (back to antiquity). The figures which were portrayed were swathed in antique garments with flowing folds under which their body shapes are visible. They moved away from the pillars and obtained individual human characteristics, mobility and emotional expressions.

The famous portals of Cathedrals such as the Notre-Dame in Paris, Senlis, St.-Denis and Chartres are deemed to be the starting point of Gothic sculpture.

A new awareness was growing. People no longer felt as dominated by the mercilessness of God and the Church. The heretic movements which flooded through Europe caused a total reversal of the European mentality. The spectres of the tympanums no longer gripped the observers, who were nearly all illiterate. They preferred to turn to the heretics. The Church authorities, the constructors and sculptors inevitably had to yield to this new longing for humanity. The more 'human' message which they wanted to disseminate through their sculptures had to be clear and recognisable. Hellish scenes were banished to the smallest corner. Forgiveness for those who repent had to be depicted, so the average medieval person returned to the embrace of the Church. Nobody was able to reverse this state of affairs in human thought, although the Church would later in the 13th century soon return to a more 'exalted' and 'divine' style.

A spirit of division

During the Romanesque era, Italy was indeed a part of Europe through the Christian faith, but in reality, medieval Italy was fragmented in a great number of small areas: free town, manors, villages, and federations of various valleys. Western Europe also was fragmented. This spirit of division was reflected on all levels, both politically as ecclesiastically. This period was to last for about two centuries.

With the death of the mighty Emperor Frederick II of Swabia in 1250, all of the imperial power disappeared in Western Europe. The French monarchy became the dominant political force. The Roman Catholic popes were convinced that they would be able to continue exercising their imperial powers. But this hegemony came to an abrupt end when Pope Boniface VIII was captured and mistreated by the envoy of Philip the Handsome, Guillaume de Nogaret. From then on, the pope's successors were forced to reside in Avignon. Italy was consumed by hatred. After the papal authority disappeared, it was each for himself. Every independent town tried to expand outside the boundaries of its own walls, whereby neighbouring towns and captured and destroyed.

Contrasts

It is during these difficult years – when there was not yet any intimation of the Renaissance – the Italian personality woke up, in the modern sense of the word. Through the attraction or push to opposing directions, a character emerged which was formed by contradictory tendencies. The Italian Gothic period differed in all aspects from the Romanesque one. It was the products of its times. All extremes were united in it: devotion or sacrilege, believers or atheists, talented or devoid of ideals.

The contrasts between the two periods can be clearly seen in the sculptures. The sculptures of the Romanesque period were dominated by an exalted feeling of happiness and adversity. Everything denoted an ideal far removed from reality. This idealism counterweighed the tragic times which started with the fall of the Hohenstaufen (1268) and ended at the liberation of the country and the eventual return of the popes to Rome (after the Council of Constance in 1418). However, in Italy, this was the time of the heyday of Italian Gothic.

Political and spiritual history

Gothic art was totally defined by the political and spiritual history. It is essential to take this into account in order to be able to assess its full reach. Italian Gothic was not a purely creative process of the Italian mind, but the result of the foreign occupation which lasted for so long that it left behind an artistic influence. Italy long considered the Gothic style as an alien artistic language with was designated 'French architecture'. Not surprisingly, they called the architecture north of the Alps 'gotico', after the barbarian predecessors of the Northern Europeans, specifically the Goths. This duel between Latin characteristics and French impulses finally did result in a gradual comingling which would eventually become characteristic of the Italian Gothic style.

The Italian Romanesque art disappeared at the peak of its splendour but continued to linger amongst

the nobility. Initially, the Gothic style was based on Italian style characteristic of complemented by French Gothic elements. A good example of this is the Castle of Prato, which remains unequalled as a work of art from this period.

When the French Anjou Kings grabbed Southern Italy, they brought along a large number of artists from the Provence, their region of origin. In this way, centres of French influence appeared in the North-Western border regions and in the Kingdom of Naples.

Austerity

With the introduction of an austere architecture, as recommended by the Cistercian Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the development of various branches of pictorial art came to an end. The time of great creations was over. The joy of exuberant decorations was subordinated to the commitment to the ascetic. Ornaments disappeared, elaborate capitals were replaced by sober representations of plant decorations.

But the Gothic style also offered new possibilities: the free-standing sculptures, figurative monumental masonry, statues, marble retables and tabernacles. By allowing human emotions, the Italian Gothic style also offered woodcarvers new possibilities for refinement.

Human emotions

At the start of the 13th century, woodcarvers were an independent professional group which artistically distinguished itself from architects or artisan who always worked serving architecture. In this manner, woodcarving developed an Italian Gothic style which expressed the main tendencies, in which zest for life and youth dominated. At the end of the 14th century, their style had evolved into a very refined plasticity, allowing even the smallest nuances of intimacy to be expressed. The vulnerable emotions are revered, and the 'blissful smile' appeared in sculptural art for the first time. In this century, Italy seems to have discovered the art of expressing the deepest human feelings. In this manner, an international style emerged, inspired by Avignon and Siena.

Sometimes the French influences can clearly be seen. For instance, the statues in the façade of the Abbey of Vezzolano (near Torino) remind us of the statues in Chartres and Paris. The famous statuary decorating the Duomo of Orvieto was influenced by Reims. But in contrast to France, where the most beautiful sculptures were incorporated in the portals, in Italy, the chancels – important elements in a liturgy focussing on the homily – were the locations of rich representations. The most famous Italian sculptors of the Gothic period are Nicolò and Giovanni Pisano, Arnolfo di Cambio and Jacopo della Quercia.

In the course of the 14th century, the revaluation of perceptible reality also penetrated in Italian sculpture. The lifelike Roman reliefs which were still ubiquitous on sarcophagi and triumphal arches. These Gothic sculptors were to include characteristics of classical sculpture in their own work, which eventually led to the Renaissance.

Goldsmith's art

In the Romanesque era, the goldsmith's art was the applied art par excellence. The old centre was located in Central France with, among others, large workshops in Clermont and Limoges, where reliquaries were decorated with chiselled gold plates, Byzantine 'email cloisonné' enamel, glass and precious stones.

But the Romanesque goldsmith's art reached the height of its glory in Germany and Lorraine with the renowned School of Cologne. The gold altar antependium of Basel, produced in the Abbey of Fulda in about 1020 (now in the Cluny museum in Paris) is one of the major works of art of the German goldsmith's art.

Three other centres became clearly recognisable in the course of the 12th century: Aachen and the Meuse valley with Liège, Cologne at the lower Rhine, and Saxony with Hildesheim, Magdeburg and Braunschweig. New techniques were now preferred. Less pure gold was used in favour of copper or

silver.

The goldsmiths started to apply the so-called 'email champlevé' enamel. They cut out grooves or sunken areas in a thick yellow copper plate, in which they melted coloured enamel. By using this technique the drawings and colours became clearer.

In the Low Countries, the art of the goldsmiths developed in line with the emergence and growth of the towns. At around 1300, some of these towns were large enough to be able to offer goldsmiths a living within their walls, which is why we only have the first documents mentioning this craft from that date. Here in the Low Countries, it took until the 16th century before a guild of silversmiths was established.

Initially, the patrons tended to be mainly churches and monasteries. After 1500, private persons also started to buy silver, and the archers' guilds increasingly ordered silver items such as birds and small shields.

Medieval gold and silversmiths in Italy

In about the 12th century, the Italian ecclesiastic silversmiths were at the very top of the various branches of artists. This was also the period during which the major church treasures which we still know now, were produced. Some of these objects were brought to Venice, Halberstadt, Limburg an der Lahn, Maastricht and other important European towns in 1204 by Crusaders.

During the 13th century, the production shifted from the monasteries to workshops in the towns. In 1223, the Venetian silversmiths already obtained their own legal status. They worked with precious metals such as gold and silver, but also with copper and bronze. The flourishing of the silversmiths' art in Italy is related to the supply of precious metals such as gold and silver. Large amounts of precious metals were imported from the mines in Bohemia and Hungary through Venice and later through Florence. At that time, the Italians, together with the Germans, owned the monopoly on the trade of precious metals in all of Western Europe.

Most of the medieval gold and silver objects are of a religious nature. It was only from the Renaissance that the silversmiths' art was also used for profane objects.

Description

This Corpus Christi has somewhat compact proportions. It appeals because of its very restrained but still powerful impact.

The head of Christ is markedly inclined towards the right shoulder, while simultaneously dropping forward, a phenomenon first seen in Romanesque Corpora. The long hair falls to the shoulders in strands, but leaves the forehead free (the first reference to Italy). The eyes are closed and heavily accentuated. They are sculpted in a single curved line.

The Christ is not wearing a crown of thorns, but we do see the protrusion of a small rod to which, most probably, a nimbus was attached, a phenomenon which was only customary in Italy at that time. The legs are not straight but are slightly bent to the left. Both legs and feet are close together and do not leave any opening. The Corpus Christi was originally attached to something by means of the large holes in its hands, usually on a cross.

We cannot state that the characteristic Gothic S-shape is already present here. The chest is broad and the nipples have been rendered in a reasonably pronounced manner. The ribs are not rendered, and the stab wound of the Lance is equally missing. Above the perizonium, a slightly undulating abdomen is visible.

The perizonium or loincloth, which falls to just above the knees, is very unusual. It is tied on the left by means of a tie knot. From that point, three beautiful supple curved folds develop, which cover the entire front. The end of the cloth hangs loosely below the knot. To the right we see a small pointed overlap

originating from the other side of the cloth.
At both sides, folds are suggested by obliquely drawn lines.

The face is elaborated in simple, strong but restrained features; eyebrows and nose form a single line. The bridge of the nose is narrow, but the nostrils are wide and strikingly pronounced. The corners of the mouth are downturned, and the mouth is only rendered by means of a deep groove. The hairs of the moustache and the roots of the forked beard seem to have been engraved. All these powerful details endow the face with its serene expression.

The arms are hardly bent, but are obliquely pointing upwards; they are jointed at the level of the elbows. The hands are spread open, apart from the thumb, and the palms are facing the observer.

This Corpus Christi is crafted in bronze. We do still see traces of earlier gilding. At the back, we see the hollow which appeared after the casting.

The length of the perizonium, the draping of the folds, the absence of the Gothic S-shape, are characteristics which immediately make clear that this Corpus Christi can be classified as Romanesque.

This Corpus Christi has a serene resigned appearance. It is not a triumphant or suffering Christ, we are seeing him at the moment he has already passed away.

The perizonium is determining for the dating. The length, just above the knee, brings us to sometime in the early 12th century. Later, the perizonium was increasingly shortened. In view of the lack of reference material, it is difficult to assign this Corpus Christi to a defined region, but various stylistic characteristics do refer to an Italian origin. For instance, in the pleating and the play of lines of the perizonium, we can discover a distant memory of the classic garments, such as the togas of classical antiquity. The powerful, almost drawn facial features on the other hand, make us think of the Byzantine inheritance. The austerity could possibly result from the influence of Germanics or Normans...?

This was only possible in Italy, where just about all occupiers, from the Ostrogoth, the Lombard, the Ottomans, and up to the Normans, all left their traces, which mixed with the Italian style characteristics.

All these elements, the almost stylised perizonium, the nimbus, the undulating abdomen, the drawn face, the inclined head, the engraved hairs... all point at an artist who worked in Italy with (although there is no material evidence or reference material) a slight preference for Southern Italy due to the squatness of the figure.

Origin
Bronze with traces of gilding
Italy, 12th century
Metal analysis XRF and Pb test by the R.E.M. Mannheim

Dimensions
Height: 14.5 cm

Damage
Visible wear

Restorations
None

Provenance
Private collection, France

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Private collection France