

Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 9

Article 9

Fall 2008

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Recommended Citation

Harrington, C. (2008). The Sainte-Chapelle Ivory Virgin & Child: Rayonnant Style and Private Devotion. *Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal*, 9(1). Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/inquiry/vol9/iss1/9>

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THE SAINTE-CHAPELLE IVORY VIRGIN & CHILD: RAYONNANT STYLE AND PRIVATE DEVOTION

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Abstract

This paper examines a major shift in French Gothic sculpture of the second half of the thirteenth century, as exemplified by the Sainte-Chapelle Virgin and Child. During this period there was a new emphasis on elegance in art works, giving rise to a new style called Rayonnant, a style paralleled by a new emphasis on the humanity of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The scale and patronage of the Sainte-Chapelle Virgin and Child demonstrate the changing purpose of sculpture from a ceremonial role in church life to a private devotional object for the French elite, in particular king of France Louis IX, for whom the work was made. The changing style and function of this sculpture is explored in light of earlier treatments of the Virgin and Child in Byzantine and Romanesque art and in the context of the rise of the cult of the Virgin and of a new emphasis on internal (as opposed to external) religious experiences. In this way, the paper provides a case study of the intersection of style and iconography with patronage and function.

The Sainte-Chapelle Ivory Virgin & Child

In the second half of the thirteenth century, French Gothic sculpture underwent a major shift in style. At this time there was a new emphasis on elegance in art, paralleled by a new emphasis on the humanity of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The ivory *Virgin and Child* statue from Sainte-Chapelle displays this novel approach of late thirteenth century France. Rayonnant (from the French word radiating) is the name given to the style of this time, a style which is characterized by soft features, swaying postures, decorative drapery, and precious materials. The Sainte-Chapelle *Virgin and Child's* small scale exemplifies the changing purpose of sculpture from serving ritual functions in the church to functioning in the realm of solitary private devotion. In addition, the work's patronage reflects the growing importance of private devotion within the French elite of the later thirteenth century.

Today, the *Virgin and Child* of Sainte-Chapelle, which is made of ivory with traces of gold and polychrome, resides in Paris' Louvre.¹ It came from the Sainte-Chapelle treasury and dates from around 1260 to 1270. Standing at about 16 inches (41 centimeters), this charming statue was made for King Louis IX for use in his private chapel, the Sainte-Chapelle.

The Sainte-Chapelle *Virgin and Child* displays the elegant qualities of the Rayonnant style. The Virgin's face is composed with grace and beauty; she has almond eyes, which convey an

Published by ScholarWorks@UARK, 2008

emotion and a passion that empowers her warm, curved smile. Her pointed chin and dainty, heart-shaped face are sheltered by delicate curls. All of these gentle features produce a quality of a pleasant refinement in the face of Mary (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Virgin and child. From the treasury of the Sainte-Chapelle, Paris. French. 1250-60. Ivory H. 41 cm. Location: Louvre, Paris, France. Photo Credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY Image reference: ART123372

The pose, anatomy, and scale of the ivory *Virgin and Child* are also very sophisticated. Mary is standing – an innovation first developed within *Virgin and Child* statues of the Rayonnant period. The swaying “S” curve of her body

gives the Virgin an element of poise. She is also holding Jesus, who appears to have weight rather than being suspended over her lap. Mary holds him on her hip and leans back slightly, compensating for his heaviness. Although Jesus' head is slightly too small for his body, he is still recognizable as a baby, rather than as an oddly sized man. Mary appears to be proportional, especially to her baby, eradicating the age old use of hierarchy of scale to distinguish the most important figure in a work. Paul Williamson described the statue as having a "gentle contrapposto... [that would] permeate many other Virgin and Child works."² This stance became the standard for Rayonnant works. Although standing in this relaxed, contrapposto pose, Mary's posture demands respect through its dignity.

The flowing, elegant drapery of the *Virgin and Child* is another trait of the French Rayonnant. Although their bodies have weight, Mary and Jesus' clothing is less grounded to the earth and more ethereally floating. The deep, long folds work both to give the work a realistic quality and also to give the fabric an otherworldly richness. The gathered material exhibits a graceful and dainty quality. The sculptor worked with the natural curve in the ivory to create a curving, moving sensation throughout the work, especially in the drapery. Rather than looking like stiff, solid ivory, the material is transformed into soft, pliable cloth. Also notable are the actual garments of Mary and Jesus. They are clad not rather in peasants' garbs, but capes and gowns of royalty. Their clothing could easily be made of silk or another precious material from the "large 'beak' folds" that convey "power and harmony"³ – as described in the Grove Dictionary of Art. These qualities appear in another, more monumental, Rayonnant sculpture, the *Vierge Dorée* of Amiens dating from the mid to late thirteenth century. Although made of stone rather than ivory, the drapery of the *Vierge Dorée* (see Figure 2) has a similar composition and similar drapery to the Sainte-Chapelle *Virgin and Child*. The large pleats of stone trick the viewer into believing they are a gentle fabric flowing down the bodies of the majestic duo. The *Vierge Dorée* and the ivory *Virgin and Child* are fundamental examples of the sophisticated, polished Rayonnant design.

Even the base of the Sainte-Chapelle statue displays Rayonnant refinement. Mary stands on a polygonally shaped base surrounded by diamonds and elaborate foliage. To have a statue of such elegance and sophistication on a plain base would be insulting and inappropriate, especially for work produced for a French king. Diamonds were and still are a symbol that references royalty, and Louis Grodecki explains the natural elements were used to "glorify God."⁴ So, the detailed base harmonizes with the richness of the statuette, while also sending a message of piety about the patron.

Also notable is the gilded ivory composing the statue. Ivory was a rare material not native to Europe; it experienced an increase in use around the late thirteenth century. Indeed, as Peter Barnett notes, the rising desire for ivory in Western Europe at this time resulted in the establishment of trade routes with the Mozambique in Southern Africa.⁵ However, only

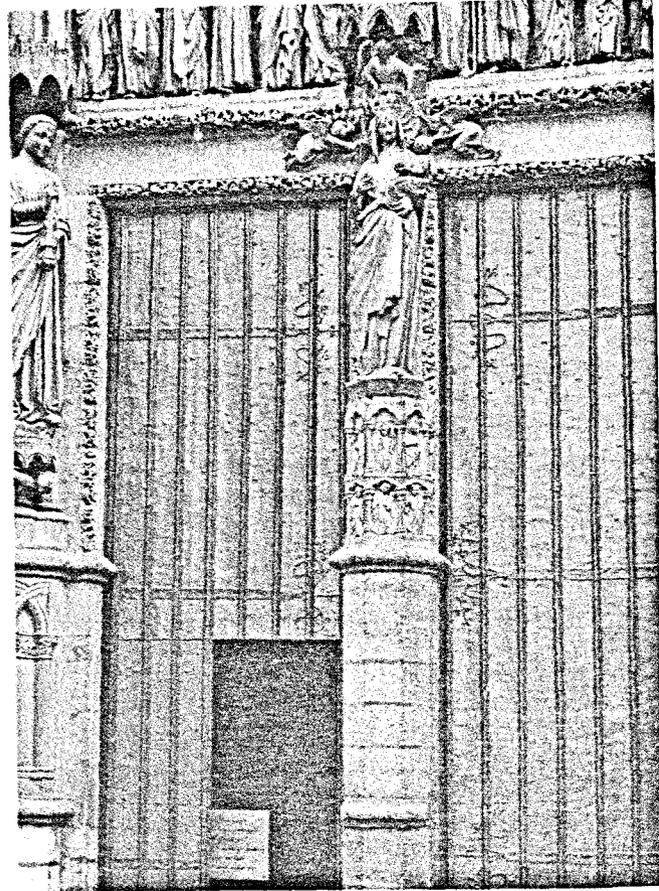


Figure 2. The Vierge Dorée, south portal. Photo: Bulloz
Location: Cathedral, Amiens, France.
Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY
Image reference: ART123372

the nobility and others with great wealth could afford such a luxurious material. The *Virgin and Child* statue is adorned with gold in addition to the ivory, thus making it all the more extravagant. Evidently, the French nobility were willing to spare no expense for their lavish taste in precious, religious devotional objects. Their willingness to pay for such art works is a sign not only of their love of luxury, but also of the importance of private devotion in the life of the elite at this time.

The Sainte-Chapelle *Virgin and Child* statuette is a key example within a new genre of small-scale sculptures that marked a shift in religious focus among the French aristocracy away from public worship in churches, and more toward personal devotion within private chambers.⁶ This statue, as Williamson noted, was intended specifically for the private worship of the king of France, Louis IX. This shift toward private worship arose out of the later medieval concern for more internal religious experiences. To foster such experiences, small statues like this developed between the eleventh and thirteenth century. The smaller proportions emphasized the humanity of the religious figures, therefore fostering personal engagement with them – The Sainte-Chapelle *Virgin and Child*

exemplifies this new category of image designed to facilitate the experience of private devotion by portraying a “tender relationship between the mother and her child.”

The work is not only representational of a correlation between a new stylistic movement in sculpture and a different approach to religious worship, but it also displays the personal taste of Louis IX that would influence the French elite and even the common people of this time. King Louis’ religious decisions – displayed through his aesthetic choices – to participate in private devotion took hold with most people who sought out personal and private religious relationships. He was pious, and considered a saint by his people before he was ever canonized. Upon his death, “nearly 400 witnesses gathered...to testify his sanctity.” Under his forty-four year reign, Louis IX was renowned not only for making Paris a reputable “artistic and intellectual center” but also for the many churches and religious houses he established. He built the Sainte-Chapelle, his personal chapel, to enshrine the relics he had collected from Christ’s Passion. He was truly a virtuous king, full of religious fervor.⁸ For Louis IX, the Sainte-Chapelle with its *Virgin and Child* was his own safe haven for reflection and prayer, which ultimately permeated the late thirteenth century society.

The humanity of the *Virgin and Child* was the focal point for most private devotion. Christ’s image changed from the third century “Good Shepherd,” to a “God King,” and finally in the 1200s to a “God born of a human.” As the focus changed from his divinity to his mortality, a cult dedicated to the Virgin developed.⁹ Willibald Sauerländer revealed how the increasing veneration for the Virgin grew into a cult following and, as a result, Marian themes even occasionally replaced the Last Judgment on cathedral portals. In such portals Mary was a living vessel of all virtues and therefore a role model to all young women.¹⁰ It was not until the Rayonnant period, however, that Mary was shown standing and holding the Christ Child. Penny Schine Gold argued for the necessity of the transition from the seated Virgin, as the throne of wisdom, to the standing Virgin. The standing Virgin suggests a gentle, caring mother unlike the hieratic, metaphysical majesty of the throne of wisdom. When Mary stands, she no longer serves as a seat for Jesus. She is more dominant than passive. She is less of a “God-bearer” and more a human mother.¹¹ The Sainte-Chapelle *Virgin and Child* presents a particularly effective image of the humanity of Christ and the Virgin.

In this statue, Mary and Jesus display naturalistic behavior through their interactions and appear to be full of life and emotion. They are playing with an apple, perhaps an allusion to the original sin Adam and Eve brought into the world – a sin for which Jesus, brought into this world by Mary, would ultimately die. Another ivory statue of a similar date, the *Virgin and Child* of Saint-Denis, also highlights the humanity of Christ through naturalistic behavior between him and Mary. The Virgin is depicted actively engaging with her son who is reaching for a rose in her hand (<http://www.taftmuseum.org/collectionT.php?pieceid=250>). While the rose here may be a Marian symbol, the key issue nonetheless is the humanity

of Christ. Thus, both of these small, ivory, Rayonnant statues represent the human qualities – compassionate, forgiving, loving – attributed to Mary and Jesus.

The naturalism and human character of the Sainte-Chapelle *Virgin and Child* stands in stark contrast to the Byzantine images of the Virgin and Child from the sixth through the fifteenth century. Throughout Byzantine art, Jesus is usually shown with distinction and occasionally as royalty, even when on the cross. Christ was considered pure divinity and Mary was depicted as merely the human vessel used to transport Jesus to Earth. When shown as a child, there was little interaction between the two. In some instances, as in *Virgin and Child Enthroned* (Figure 3), Mary even looks solemn as if contemplating the fate of her first born. Additionally, the Christ child is usually depicted more like a small god sitting on Mary’s lap rather than a happy, playful baby ignorant of the future. In the Rayonnant period, this focus on Christ’s divinity shifts. Mary’s role becomes more than merely a vessel or a lamenting mother, but rather more of a real person with real human experiences.

The Sainte-Chapelle *Virgin and Child* is also dramatically different from the Romanesque (tenth to twelfth century) images of the Virgin and Child. Throughout this time, Mary

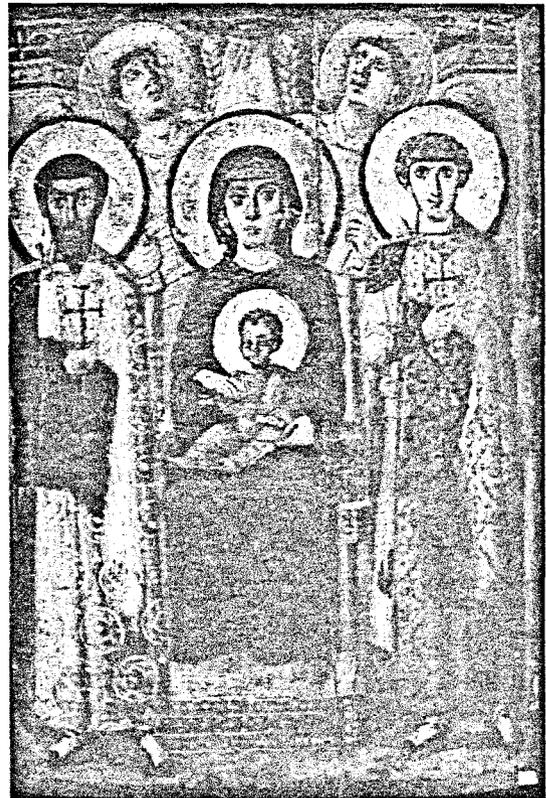


Figure 3. Byzantine (c.395-1453)

Virgin and Child Enthroned. Byzantine icon.

Location: St. Catherine Monastery, Mount Sinai, Sinai Desert, Egypt

Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Image reference: ART112978

gained esteem as the 'Throne of Wisdom' (seen in the wooden sculpture in Figure 4) on which Christ sat. Daniel H. Weiss interprets the 'Throne of Wisdom' imagery as communicating the "[i]ncarnation, God's living appearance on earth,"¹² in other words, communicating that Mary was just a physical representation of Jesus' life on earth. Although Christ is smaller in scale to his mother, Mary's frontal pose highlights Jesus as the focal point of the statue, reducing the sentimental affection found in the later Virgin and Child works.



Figure 4. *Virgin and Child in Majesty*. 1159-1200. Oak, polychromy, gesso, linen
Overall: 31 5/16 x 12 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (79.5 x 31.7 x 29.2 cm).
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916 (16.32.194).
Location: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, U.S.A.
Photo Credit: Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/NY
Image reference: ART324224

During this Romanesque period, art served more as part of public, rather than private devotion, often within liturgical ritual. With the shift from Romanesque to Gothic, and the shift in sculpture production from Southern to Northern France, the stiff, wooden, seated Virgin was replaced by the triumphant Virgin, Mary seated next to Christ in heaven in scenes of the Coronation of the Virgin. The popularity of the Coronation of the Virgin then led to the widespread trend of the standing Virgin.¹³ Throughout this evolution, Mary developed her own standing and developed a more interactive relationship with her infant son.

The ivory *Sainte-Chapelle Virgin and Child* is thus more than just an example of Rayonnant style. It is a work that demonstrates the intersection of style and iconography with patronage and function. The elegance and refinement of the style displays the aesthetics of its aristocratic owner, Louis IX. The work's iconography, (i.e., its fresh view of Christ as human) and its depiction of the warmth and love between Christ and his mother served as a stimulus for empathic response from Louis when he contemplated the work as part of his private devotions. This exquisite work thus gives the viewer a glimpse into an extremely private world, the personal religious experience of the king of France himself.

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¹²Daniel H. Weiss, "Architectural Symbolism and the Decoration of the Ste.-Chapelle," *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 2, June., 1995. < <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0004-3079%28199506%2977%3A2%3C308%3AASATDO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Z> > (19 November 2007).

¹³Penny Schine Gold, "The Iconography of the Virgin Mary," *The lady & the Virgin: image, attitude, and experience in twelfth-century France*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 45-50.

Mentor Comments

Dr. Lynn Jacobs endorses Caroline Harrington's work enthusiastically, drawing particular attention to its blend of observation, research, and contextual analysis.

Caroline Harrington's paper, The Sainte-Chapelle Ivory Virgin and Child: Rayonnant Style and Private Devotion, represents a reworking of a research paper she presented in my medieval art history class in the Fall of 2007. This paper is of significance in that it provides an in-depth analysis of this small-scale ivory statue. Though miniature art, or kleinkunst, was probably the art-form held in highest esteem in the middle ages, current scholarship has tended to focus on more monumental forms of medieval sculpture, and hence this statue, though quite well known, has not been a major focus of study. Ms. Harrington's paper shows the work to be a key example of Rayonnant style, through a careful and sensitive analysis of the works' remarkable blend of naturalism and elegance, so typical of Rayonnant art.

The paper also makes an important contribution to the field of art history in its consideration of how the function of the work – its use to stimulate the private prayers of its owner, Louis IX of France – relates both to its elegant style (preferred by the French elite) and its iconography, in which the Virgin and Child are depicted in very human ways, designed to stimulate empathic response within the experience of personal devotion. As such, the paper embodies current methodologies within art history, which have moved away from independent assessment of style and iconography, to a more nuanced sense of how both these features of an art work are embedded within issues of patronage and function. Harrington's paper also engages with other contemporary issues relating to this statue, notably issues of gender associated with the rise of the cult of the Virgin, and issues in the relation between art and its audience.

Ms. Harrington's study of the Sainte-Chapelle Virgin and Child thus forms an example of a paper that blends careful observation with thorough research, and object-oriented analysis with an understanding of the full cultural context in which that object is embedded. It not only gives us a better understanding of the work under consideration, but also a better understanding of the societal role played by the object. These accomplishments represent art history at its best.