

Saint Eloy
France, Champagne, Aube
c. 1525



109 x 41 x 33 cm; cream-coloured oolitic limestone with traces of polychromy. Some minor chips to the lower edge of the base, the anvil, and the knuckles of the figure's proper left hand, as well as a larger loss to the nose. The front tip of the hat restored.

Provenance

William Randolph Hearst, his sale, Hammer Galleries, New York, 1941, lot. 1381-8;
 The John Woodman Higgins Armory, Worcester Massachusetts, Inv. 2648, deaccessioned in 2014

Born around 588 A.D. in a town six miles north of Limoges, Saint Eloy (also Eloi) was popular throughout the Middle Ages as the patron saint of Goldsmiths, metalworkers, blacksmiths and craftsmen, as well as of horses and those who work with them. He is depicted here clothed in a leather apron, a large doublet with slit sleeves, and a cloth baret cap. He stands at a blacksmith's anvil applying an iron shoe to a horse's hoof, which he steadies with his left hand while raising a square-headed hammer in his right. Strapped to the front of the anvil base are the tools of his profession, pincers, gouge, hammer and shoe, while the 'ground' beneath displays the saint's name 'S / Eloy' in delicately worked embossed lettering. Traces of original polychromy on the surface of the stone indicate that the whole statue was originally richly pigmented, with the saint wearing vivid green sleeves and a dark brown apron tied across the waist by a red ribbon. Various elements of the design were

reinforced by gilding, some traces of which have survived on the clothing and the lettering below his feet.

Eloy's life and work was popularised by an early hagiographic text, the *Vita Eligii*, composed by Audoinus, bishop of Angers, before the middle of the 7th century and later reworked by Frankish scholars and preachers throughout the Carolingian period.¹ It records parts of his teachings and sermons, as well as the miraculous events surrounding his career. According to the text, he found favour at the court of King Chlothar II, crafting two thrones using the material provided to make only one², and was first appointed master of the mint at Marseilles, and then bishop of Noyon-Tournai three years after the king's death in 642, where he worked for twenty years to convert the pagan population of Flanders to Christianity. His feast day falls on 1st December each year.

The iconography chosen by our sculptor evokes a particular legend by which Eloy's miraculous ability to intervene on behalf of the wronged came to be celebrated and recognised. He is said to have exorcized a possessed horse by removing its leg and drawing out the demon through the wound, before restoring the horse unharmed. However, this narrative is left out of most accounts of the saint's life, and the depiction of the hoof might also recall the story of a priest at the monastery of Noyon who had inherited Eloy's horse. When the animal was taken away from him by the bishop, who had wanted it for himself, it suddenly became ill and was of no use. When the bishop finally restored the horse to the priest it recovered, a miracle attributed to Eloy and representative of his watchful guardianship over his inheritors. This knowledge of narratives from the saint's life may indicate that our artist was working alongside the patron in the creation of the piece. Such a reading is strengthened by the manner with which the saint's face is carved, with strong masculine features and a solemn expression that accord well with the description of the saint found in the *Vita Eligii*; 'his hands were shapely and long-fingered, his face ... grave and unaffected'.

Localisation and Context

While Eloy remained especially popular in both England and France throughout the later Middle Ages, few statues depicting him survive from this date. Nevertheless, related figures and groups carved with a similar sensibility can still be found in the Aube region of Champagne, an area immediately surrounding the city of Troyes. The strong, square-set jaw and robust upper body shape can be found on a group showing the arrest of Saint Crispian, carved in the late c. 1530 for the church of Saint-Pantaléon in Troyes (Fig. 1). The same stance, with one foot placed at an oblique angle and the other positioned straight on to the figure, can be seen on a statue of Saint Vincent in the village church of Montmorency-Beaufort, north east of Troyes (Fig. 2) which also incorporates the same mannerisms of costume, with carefully delineated tassels, hems, and thick folds to the cloth. See also a figure

¹ Y. Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul; A.D. 481-751*, Leiden, 1995, pp. 195-7

² M. Walsh Ed., *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, Tunbridge Wells, 1987 ed., p. 145

of Saint Pantaléon in the church of the Nativity, Villy-le-Marechal (illustrated in P-E. Leroy, *Sculptures en Champagne au XVIe siècle*, Dijon, 2009, p. 199), and related figures in Bergères and Ravières (illustrated in J. Baudoin, *La sculpture flamboyante en Champagne Lorraine*, Nonette, 1992, pp. 138-9).

The closest comparison can be drawn to a comparably sized figure of Eloy in the church of Saint Nicholas, La Villeneuve-au-Chene (Figs. 3a-d). Although carved from wood rather than stone, it depicts the saint wearing a comparable broad doublet and metalworker's apron, standing in an almost identical pose; the horse's shod hoof is held in the left hand, and the hammer in the right, while a display of the same tools is presented across the base of the chamfered anvil. The correlation between the two figures is so marked that they must be taken from a single compositional source, which can also be seen modified and reinterpreted on another figure in the church of Saint John the Baptist, Chaource, and elsewhere. However, the use of stone for the present example over the more modest wood, suggests that our figure is the most authoritative version of this particular composition, and may itself have been used as a model for further groups including these. Moreover, certain details set our figure apart from the wider group, such as the carved lettering across the base, which being left embossed rather than incised is seemingly exceptional (compare with a figure of Saint Marcou in Lignieres, illustrated in Leroy, p. 194, for example). As a result then, it is clear that our sculpture is a work of individual character, carved in one of the foremost stone-carving workshops of Troyes or its immediate environs, which dominated the production of late-Medieval sculpture in the Champagne region. It was most probably made, as with the majority of the wider corpus to which it belongs, for a large ecclesiastical context. In this respect, the churches of the southern Aube, perhaps especially that of the early Medieval church of Saint Eloi de Racines south-west of Troyes (based on the identity of the saint and the finesse of the carving), come forward as the most plausible candidates for the patronage of the present figure.



Fig. 1
The Arrest of Saint Crépin
France, Champagne, Troyes
c. 1525 – 1530
155 cm; limestone with polychromy
Troyes, Church of Saint-Pantaléon



Fig. 2
Saint Vincent
France, Champagne, Aube
c. 1525 - 1530
95 cm; limestone with polychromy
Montmorency-Beaufort, church of the Assumption of the Virgin



Fig. 3a-d
Saint Eloy
France, Champagne, Aube
c. 1525
93 cm (without base); hardwood with polychromy
La Villeneuve-au-Chene, church of Saint Nicholas

