

**The Virgin Annunciate**  
**Northern or Central Italy**  
**Early 13<sup>th</sup> century**



*54.4 x 23.8 x 6 cm: limestone*

*Provenance*

Collection Altounian-Rousset

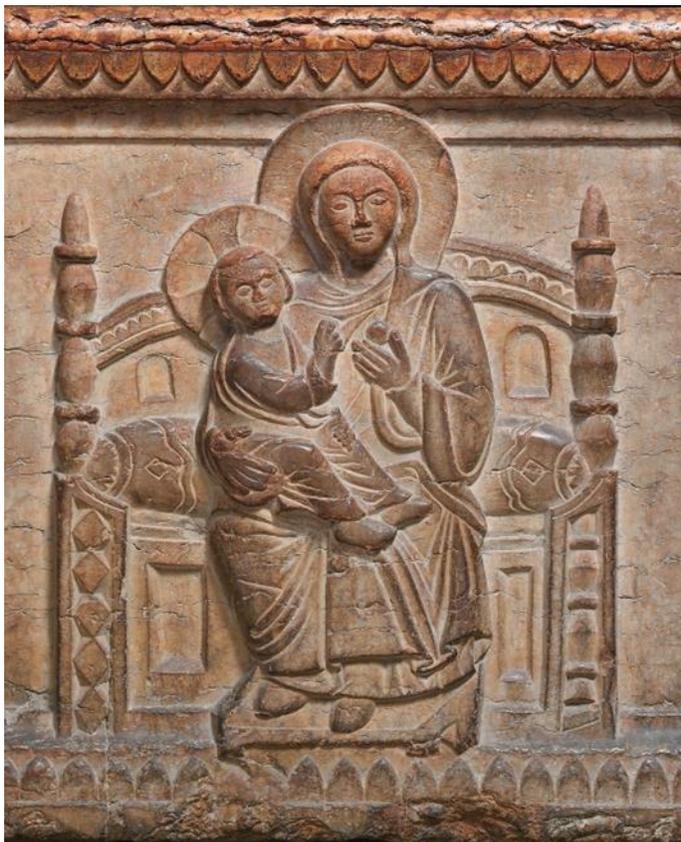
A low relief carving of a standing female saint, depicted with a large halo and wearing a long mantle of stylised drapery that covers the figure from head to foot, forming sharp v-shaped folds at the knees. Within a shallow space defined by a frame on three sides, the figure is depicted standing before a low throne, her head turned towards the left. With one hand raised in front of her chest in a gesture of modesty, the other holds a roll of wool. These attributes identify this figure as the Virgin Mary from a scene of the Annunciation, where she would have originally been accompanied the Archangel Gabriel, towards whom she looks and who was almost certainly contained within the same framing device.

Originally, this panel would have decorated the interior of a church, perhaps on a pulpit or altar screen, forming part of a narrative cycle of the Infancy of Christ. Examples of such narrative church furnishings can be found in Tuscany and Central Italy, such as a relief of the Annunciation from the now relocated pulpit from San Piero Scheraggio in Florence, now in the collection of the MET Cloisters. (Fig. 1) Another early narrative pulpit to note is the pulpit by Guido Bigarelli from c. 1250 in St Bartholomew's Church, Pistoia, Italy. Although a church furnishing is the most likely context for this relief, its presence on a church façade also cannot be ruled out.

The Annunciation relief from the MET Cloisters also offers some general stylistic analogies to our panel, such as the composition of the panel as well as the Virgin's stance and dress. However, a marked difference exists between the two panels. There is a departure in our Annunciate Virgin from the overtly decorative character of the MET panel, and its stocky figures. Our sculpture finds closer parallels with 13<sup>th</sup> century works such as the Virgin and Child from the Sanguinacci Family sarcophagus (fig. 2). The stylised drapery, which is reminiscent of the traditional Romanesque damp-fold type, however, suggests an earlier date than the Sanguinacci sarcophagus— a date rather closer to the MET Relief.



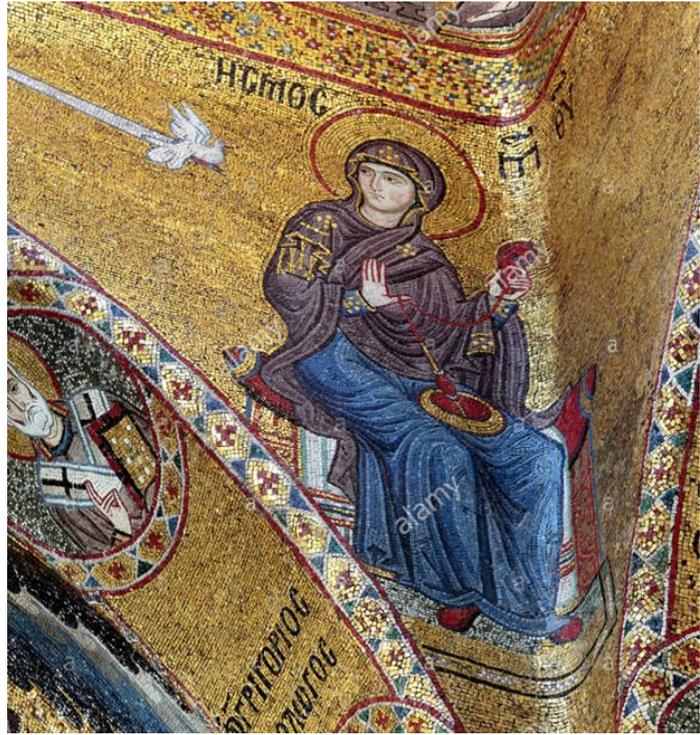
**Fig. 1**  
**Relief with the Annunciation, from a pulpit**  
**Italy, Florence, San Piero Scheraggio**  
**c. 1180-1200**  
**MET Cloisters 60.140**



More so than Romanesque examples in Italy, the panel displays a clear influence of Byzantine style and iconography. The motif of the low cushioned throne is a Byzantine trope, and the iconography, which includes the Virgin holding a roll of wool, corresponds to the Byzantine tradition of depicting the Virgin spinning the veil for the temple at the time of the Annunciation. According to the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (Chapter 9), the Virgin helped spin a veil for the temple using a quantity of purple wool she had been assigned for the purpose.

**Fig. 2**  
**Sarcophagus with Virgin and Child and the**  
**Arms of the Sanguinacci Family (detail)**  
**late 13th century—early 14th century**  
**North Italy (probably Veneto)**  
**The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 18.109**

It was during this moment, as she worked at her task, that the angel Gabriel appeared and brought the news of her conception of the Christ Child.<sup>1</sup> A vivid example of this iconography is present in mosaic form on the spandrels of Santa Maria dell Ammiraglio in Palermo (fig. 3). Here, the Virgin holds on to a roll of wool in her left hand, as she turns in shock to her right.



**Fig. 2**  
**Virgin of the Annunciation**  
 Italy, Palermo, Santa Maria dell Ammiraglio  
 Mid-12<sup>th</sup> century

The linear drapery which clings to the Virgin's elongated body, the veil that covers her hair, and her large halo further reflect this link with Byzantine art and form an analogy between this sculpture and those



very few Byzantine stone reliefs that survive. One example is a relief of the Virgin Hagiosoritissa, from the Dumbarton Oaks museum which shares not only the style of our relief but also a similar format and frame (fig. 4). It is important to note here that Middle Byzantine art had a strong presence in Italy during the 12th and 13th centuries. This time of the Crusades created a constant influx of foreign objects and foreign artists, who were imported by crusaders, merchants and diplomats from east to west. In 1185, Frederick Barbarossa is even recorded to have given a Byzantine icon of the Virgin to the Cathedral of Spoleto. Apart from small luxury objects, such as ivories and metalwork, Middle Byzantine mosaics also started to become extremely desirable at this time, resulting in Greek mosaicists being employed in Venice, Montecassino and Sicily.<sup>2</sup>

**Fig. 4**  
**Virgin Hagiosoritissa Relief**  
 Middle Byzantine, mid-eleventh century  
 Dumbarton Oaks Museum BZ.1938.62

The sudden presence of such large scale artworks allowed for a much wider audience of this foreign Byzantine style. Hence the Italian masons who worked on the monument that this relief comes from would have thus had plenty of opportunity to come into direct contact

<sup>1</sup> L. S. Miles, 'The Origins and Development of the Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation,' in *Speculum*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (July 2014), pp. 632-669, p. 637.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Kitzinger, 'The Byzantine Contribution to Western Art of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,' in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* Vol. 20 (1966), pp. 37-38.

with Greek artists at this time and to absorb a style that was considered extremely fashionable. The relief is thus not only a testament to the cross-cultural nature of artistic styles but also to the way that artists were able to learn from one another during a particularly turbulent time.

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