

**The head of the Christ Child, from a Sedes Sapientiae group
Meuse Valley
c. 1220**



7.2 x 6.4 x 6.2 cm; Carved timber (walnut?) with silver and gilt-silver attachments. Some traces of fixatives or ground layer on the crown of the head. Losses to the tip of the nose. Some minor woodworm and cracking.

Provenance

By repute, collection of Julien Bessonneau (1842-1916), and by descent until the 1980s;
Collection of Yvette and Jacques Deschamps, Angers

A diminutively proportioned head of the infant Christ carved with wide, almond-shaped eyes, a strong nasal ridge, and a subtle smile with delicately separated lips. The child's hair covers the ears and falls in curling ringlets to the level of his neck. He wears the remnants of a diadem or circlet, fashioned from gilded silver metal sheets and coiled wire. Nestled between two parallel borders of twisted wire, the diadem's design consists of a series of regularly spaced cabochon settings (now devoid of their gemstones) encircling the head and interspersed with tight whirls of coiled wire resembling scrolling rinceaux or vine-like stems. Each vine spray sprouts a series of small radiating branches and spirals inwards to culminate in a six-petalled flower head or berry cluster.

Function and Iconography

This intimately scaled carving once formed part of a seated figural group showing the Virgin and Child, an important devotional image type developed early in the Middle Ages and often described by the term *Sedes Sapientiae* or Throne of Wisdom. Such figures, almost always diminutive in scale, were key focal points within the space of the church, and were processed during liturgical celebrations. As with our head, they were often covered with silver or gold sheet and filigree decoration, as can be seen still on the late 10th-century *Golden Madonna* in Essen (fig. 1), and a similar group in Hildesheim, created before 1022.¹ Along with a Virgin from a German *Sedes* group formerly in the Rüttschi collection, which also retains large remnants of the same type of decoration (fig. 2), these help to elucidate the context in which our head would have functioned and been seen.² As with those examples, the sculpture from which our head comes was clearly intended to be a *Golden Madonna*.

Localisation and Dating

The head's carving style, with its robust, rounded features, is evocative of wood sculptures carved in the early decades of the thirteenth century, including a Rhenish Golden Madonna in the Schnütgen Museum in Cologne (fig. 3). Such a dating is further affirmed by the figure's ornate gilt-silver sheet and pearled or beaded wire decoration, survival of which is nothing short of miraculous, not least since it would have been easy for looters, iconoclasts, or impoverished later owners to strip such delicate decoration from the wooden core beneath and melt it down for its precious metals. Its shapely beaded wire adornments are a refined example of a type of goldsmiths' work that became widespread in northern Europe by the 700s, evolving into the form exemplified by the banded coronet on our head in the following century (including on the binding of the mid ninth-century Samuhel Gospel at Quedlinburg Abbey). The move away from what had been an initially sparse, spaced-out language of linear decoration and towards denser whirls of wire ornamented by berry clusters or flower heads in the arrangement seen on our object, came during the latter part of the twelfth century, as can be seen on a small handful of surviving examples including an ornate morse in the Aachen domschatz, dated to c. 1180.³ These forms became largely superseded in the second quarter of the thirteenth century by more elaborate arrangements, as typified most notably by the masterful work of Hugo d'Oignies and his workshop (for which, see in particular Robert Didier et al., *Autor de Hugo d'oignies*, Exh. Cat., Namur, 2003). Our figure's decoration is in fact very close in style to that developed by d'Oignies in the later 1220s, and in particular a monumental cross reliquary preserved in the Musée des Arts anciens du Namurois-Trésor d'Oignies (fig. 4).⁴ It lacks that artist's defining use of applied leaf fronds and foliate sprays, suggesting perhaps that our figure's decoration was created at some point in the 1210s or early 1220s, right on the cusp of d'Oignies' expanded lexicon but still extremely ambitious in its elaborate and densely-worked approach.⁵ Closely comparable objects surviving from this date

¹ For the Hildesheim group see P. Barnet, M. Brandt, and G. Lutz eds, *Medieval Treasures from Hildesheim*, Exh. Cat., New York, 2013, no. 7, pp. 42-3.

² Otto von Falke, *Alte Goldschmiedewerke im Zürcher Kunsthaus*, Zürich and Leipzig, 1928, no. 192, plate 37.

³ *Grosse Kunst aus Tausend Jahren: Kirchenschatze aus dem Bistum Aachen*, Exh. Cat., Aachen, 1968, no. 7, p. 26 and 111.

⁴ For more on the reliquary cross in the Musée des Arts anciens du Namurois-Trésor d'Oignies, see Robert Didier et al., *Autor de Hugo d'oignies*, Exh. Cat., Namur, 2003, pp. 211-6.

⁵ See also the more fully developed rinceaux of the Prudentia-Schrein in the Church of Saints Stephanus and Sebastian, Beckum, illustrated in *Goldene Pracht: Mittelalterliche Schatzkunst in Westfalen*, Exh. Cat., Münster,

include the cover of the Berthold Sacramentary now in the Morgan Library in New York (fig. 5a-b) and a reliquary casket in the musée de Cluny, Paris (fig. 6).

What is only now beginning to be more fully studied is how the decoration pioneered by northern European goldsmiths at this age could be seen to presage the fully three-dimensional cast decorative formulae developed during the early thirteenth century on more monumental objects, including chasses and candlesticks (even as far as the 5 meter Trivulzio Candelabrum in Milan Cathedral), as well as carved ornament on Romanesque churches and cathedrals.⁶

Both the applied decoration and the choice of timber used for our figure's core, which appears to be walnut, help to suggest a localization to one of the workshops of the Mosan or Meuse Valley, a region spanning the intersections between present-day France, the Netherlands and Belgium. Given that our head is a fragment of what must have been an extremely important example of an early thirteenth-century *Golden Madonna*, it may even represent an as-yet unidentified early work produced by the circle of goldsmiths around Hugo d'Oignies in what was without a doubt the most febrile and innovative moment in the evolution of late-Romanesque goldsmiths' work.

2012, pp. 91 and 165-6; see also a paten dated c. 1230-50 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, illustrated in Martina Bagnoli ed., *A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe*, Baltimore, 2016. no. 23, pp. 156-57; Both of these examples would seem without doubt to be of a later date than our head's decoration.

⁶ See Peter Lasko, *Ars Sacra 800-1200*, Yale, 1994 ed., p. 269.



Fig. 1
The so-called Golden Madonna of Essen
c. 980
Essen, Cathedral treasury

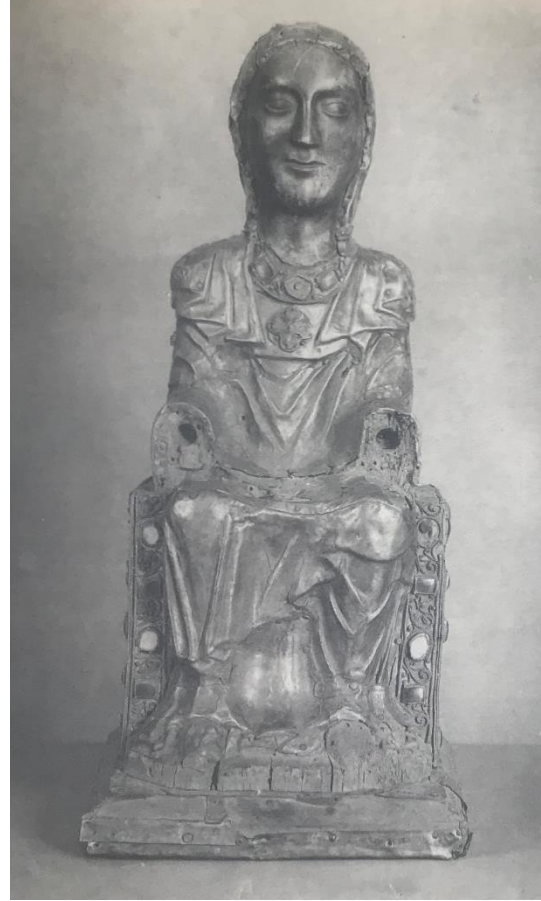


Fig. 2a-b
Sedes figure of the Virgin
12th century
Formerly Rüttschi collection



Fig. 3
The Virgin and Child
Cologne
c. 1230, with 14th century polychromy
57.6 x 28 x 23.5 cm; Oak and walnut with gilding, rock crystal, amethyst, paste gems and polychromy
Cologne, Schnütgen Museum, inv. A 14



Fig. 4a-b
Hugo d'Oignies
Reliquary Cross, with a detail of its pearled wire decoration
c. 1228-30
64 x 47 cm; silver-gilt with niello and precious gemstones
Musée des Arts anciens du Namurois-Trésor d'Oignies, inv. TOSND 6

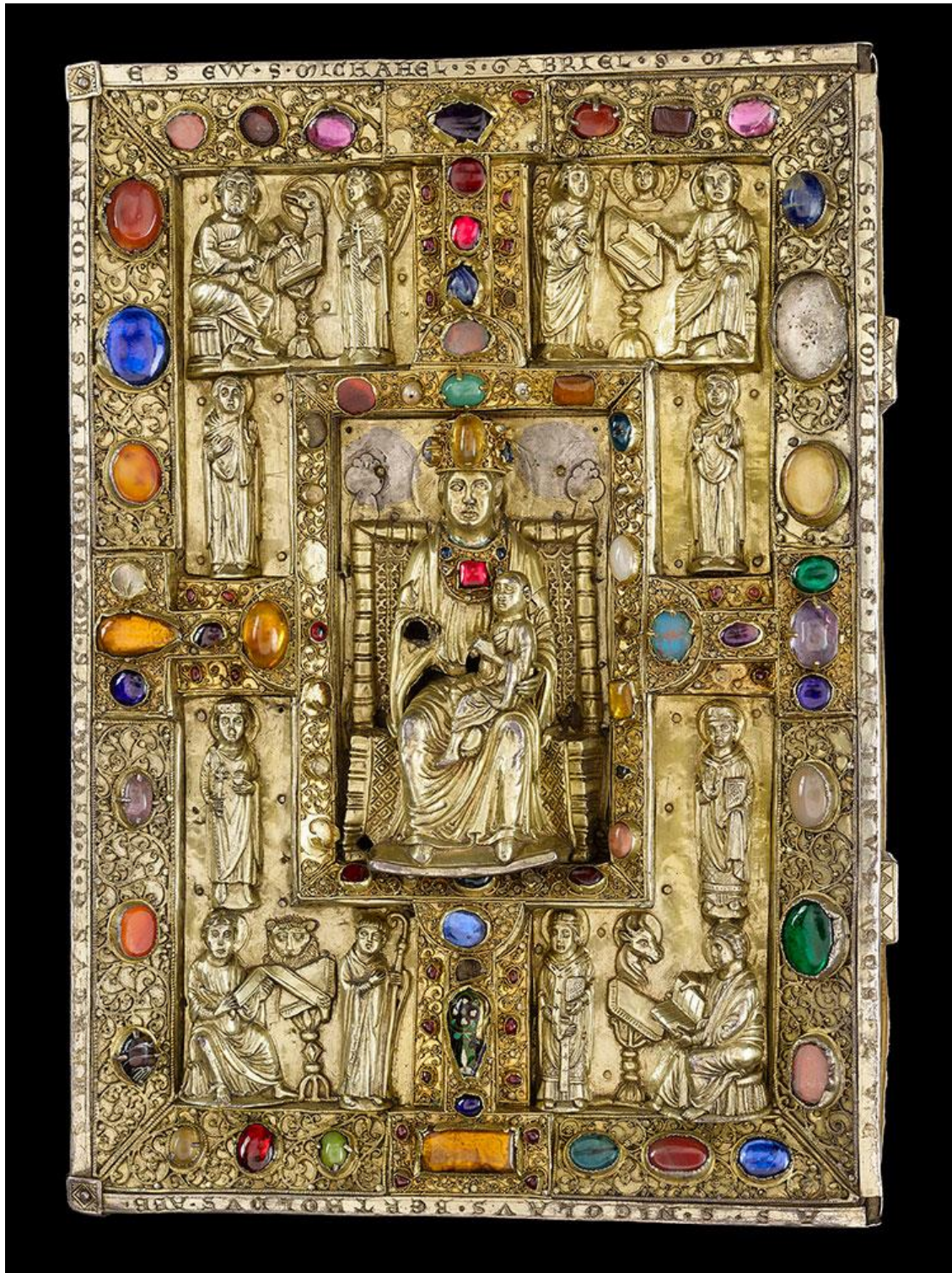


Fig. 5a
Berthold Sacramentary, front cover
Germany, Weingarten Abbey
c. 1215-1217
New York, Morgan Library, MS M.710



Fig. 5b
Detail of the filigree work on the Berthold Sacramentary cover
Germany, Weingarten Abbey
c. 1215-1217
New York, Morgan Library, MS M.710



Fig. 6
Reliquary casket with coiled wire and cabochon decoration
Northern France(?)
c. 1200, with Fatimid rock crystal adornments
11.3 x 14.8 x 9.7 cm; silver-gilt, gemstones, and rock crystal over a wooden core
Paris, musée de Cluny, inv. CL11661