

The Moissac School

A double capital from the pilgrimage route to Santiago da Compostela

South-West France

c. 1100 – 20

36 x 31 x 25 cm; limestone



Provenance:

With Georges Joseph Demotte (1877-1923), Paris and New York, 1920s / 1930s [by repute];

With Joseph Brummer (1883-1947), New York [by repute];

Baron Jean German Léon Cassel van Doorn (1882-1952) and Baroness Marie Cassel van Doorn, Brussels, Paris and Cannes and Englewood, New Jersey;

Collection of Paul W. Doll, Jr. (1926-2020)

Carved with tightly woven foliate shoots that create a distinctive pattern on the surface, these two capitals are rare early Romanesque survivals from the pilgrimage road to Santiago da Compostela. Originally a double capital, the two fragments almost certainly come from a cloister setting, where they would have been an integral part of the arcade that separated the garden from the cloister walk. This is supported by the fact that they fit perfectly together when placed back-to-back, suggesting that they were split from one another at some later point in history – possibly to act as engaged capitals. The original double capital took the shape of a simple Corinthian capital, which is formed by thick foliate wedges that softly curl over two levels. Rather than being naturalistically carved as large acanthus leaves, the surface of the capitals is covered with a lace-like pattern of vine circlets that surround leaves. The foliate patterns are carved in deep relief and vary in size. Springing out of the foliage and crowing the piece are large volutes, their stems decorated by several delicate rows of chevron.

The capital belongs to a celebrated group carved by the stone masons from Saint-Sernin in Toulouse and Moissac Abbey, two of the most important sites on the pilgrimage route to Santiago da Compostela (fig. 1 – 4). The work on the two sites is dated to about 1100 and the masons responsible for the architectural sculpture have long been connected in scholarship –

some are thought to have worked at both sites. The carving of our capitals is closest in style to the work from the Abbey of Moissac, where the cloister is composed of seventy-six capitals, of which thirty are decorated with foliate patterns. Those similar to our capitals can be divided into two types – those that are carved as an inverted pyramid, their surfaces covered in a flat lace-like pattern (fig. 3), and those with the double row of leaves to which our capitals belong (fig. 1 – 2). The unusual way that the surfaces of all these capitals are treated have been credited by some scholars to Mozarabic influences, which may have arrived here during the Christian reconquest of Northern Spain.¹

Even within this small group of capitals, the hands of different masons can be identified, resulting in an abundant variety and suggesting the number of carvers that were involved (fig. 5). Thus, there must have been a strong desire and enough finances for the work on these monuments to progress quickly because while the journey to the shrine of Saint James was dangerous, it was enormously popular. The master carvers therefore had the ability to constantly work, which meant that their style also had the capacity to grow and evolve – those with great skill being able to break away as specialists, probably for the very first time. Some of the masons that trained in Toulouse and Moissac are even thought to have gone on to work on more distant sites along the route to Santiago because a similar style of capitals emerged at Saint-Pierre in Loarre or in Santiago da Compostela – testifying to the international nature of the sculptors working along this route (fig. 5-6).

It is obvious that within the first two decades of the 12th century, this region experienced one of the most stimulating periods for the development of the Romanesque style in Europe. Still, it is difficult to trace the way that masons moved between these key monuments because the work seems to have progressed extremely fast. Those sculptural fragments that have lost their context, such as these two fragments, are thus difficult to localise precisely. Still, they speak a language that clearly communicates the spirit of this exciting era.

Literature:

- Durliat, M. *La Sculpture Romane de la Route de Saint-Jacques*. Mont-de-Marsan, 1990.
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¹ Thomas Dale, 'Review: Romanesque Architectural Sculpture: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures by Meyer Schapiro, Linda Seidel' in *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 90, No. 1 (Mar., 2008), pp. 126-130.



Fig. 1
Moissac Abbey Cloister
France, Moissac
c. 1100



Fig. 2
Moissac Abbey Cloister
France, Moissac
c. 1100



Fig. 3
Moissac Abbey Cloister
France, Moissac
c. 1100



Fig. 4
Saint Sernin in Toulouse
France, Toulouse
c. 1100



Fig. 5
Capital
South-west France
1100-1120
University of Michigan Museum 1982/1.273



Fig. 6
San Pedro in Loarre
Spain, Loarre
c. 1100 - 30