Relief - Virgin and Child

Object: Relief

Place of origin: Lombardy (made)

Date: ca. 1160-1180 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Orange-red <i>Verona</i> marble

Museum number: A.6-1913

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 8, The William and Eileen Ruddock Gallery, case WN

Public access description

The image of the enthroned Virgin supporting the infant Christ was central to Christian art. It can, however, be traced back to ancient times, to Roman and Egyptian depictions of goddesses, empresses and ordinary mortals. This example was formerly positioned on the staircase between the cathedral and the episcopal palace in Cremona in northern Italy.

Descriptive line

Marble relief of the Virgin and Child, North Italy (Cremona) ca. 1170

Physical description

The Virgin is seated on a low throne, holding the child on her left arm and pointing to him with her right. The Child, with a cruciform nimbus, holds a book in his left hand and blesses with his right. The mouldings enclosing the relief bear a partially erased inscription.

Dimensions

Height: 93.5 cm, Width: 59 cm, Weight: 169 kg, Depth: 14.5 cm

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Object history note

Bought from Durlacher in London in 1913, the relief had reportedly been removed from Auer (Ora), a small town between Bolzano and Trento in the Adige Valley in Northern Italy. This provenance was subsequently proved to be false (or at best to concern only the relief's most recent resting place before London) when a photograph was discovered in the archives of the cathedral in Cremona showing that prior to 1880, the relief had been on the stair-case between the cathedral and the Episcopal Palace in Cremona.

Pope-Hennessy, unaware of the the relief's Cremonese provenance, related it to two works in the Adige region, the tympanum in the Stadisches Museum in Salzburg and the so-called Madonna degli Annegati in the Duomo at Trento. He considered the relief to be a later manifestation of the style found in these sculptures, and dated it to the middle of the thirteenth century.

Puerari hypothesised that the relief had originally decorated the high altar at Cremona cathedral: the cathedral was founded in 1107 and suffered an earthquake in 1117. Puerari therefore dated the relief to before 1117: for stylistic reasons, this must be too early.

Williamson states that a Lombard origin is confirmed by the works close similarity to a number of other sculptures still in situ, such as a relief of the Virgin and Child in Piacenza Cathedral and tympana at Castellarquato, Cadeo and Lodi. The relationship of the Madonna to the Child, the rendering of the drapery, the proportions of the Virgin and the treatment of the faces are similar in these cases.

Historical context note

It is not possible to identify the original context of the relief. Williamson suggests that the relief may have functioned as a three-dimensional icon, or alternatively may have been set into a larger ensemble, such as a choir screen or pulpit. The full rhyming inscription on the upper and lower borders, extolling the virtues of the Virgin suggests a devotional context.

A similar relief still in situ, is built into the chapel of St Zeno, San Marco in Venice. It bears a strong similarity to the present example, with rounded drapery, a comparable throne structure and a similar composition set inside a frame. It is however dated to the thirteenth century despite the excessive folds recalling earlier work. It is possible that the present relief formed a prototype for the San Marco relief, (which benefits from more realistic proportions), corroborating a devotional context.

The Virgin and Child are arranged on the relief in a variant of the well established pose of the Hodegetria, an iconographical variant of the Virgin and Child in which the Child is depicted on the Virgin's left arm while she indicates him with her right hand as 'hodegetria' (the meaning of the Greek word). The composition was frequently copied in Italy, the Byzantine world, and Russia. Sometimes, in the process of copying, the Child was transferred from the Virgin's left arm to the right and she indicates him with her left hand.

A line of descent for the enthroned Virgin supporting the infant on her arm can be traced back to representations of goddesses, empresses and ordinary mortals in antique art - Alexandrian coins depict the seated Isis holding Harpocrates on her lap and a sarcophagus in the Hermitage dating from the end of the first century, decorated with a representation of a seated woman with an infant. The earliest depictions of
a seated Virgin and Child do not occur as a separate iconic image, but as an integral part of an historical composition - The Adoration of the Magi. These depictions are to be found in Roman catacomb frescoes. One such painting, that in the Domitilla catacomb from the first half of the fourth century, offers a particularly close approximation to the seated Hodegetria: the infant sits on the left knee of the Virgin, who supports him with her left arm and gestures with her right to welcome the Magi.

Victor Lasareff has proposed that these images were not the source of the seated Hodegetria as an iconic image in its own right, but rather that it was devised from similar images in the east - most probably from Egypt where the worship of the Virgin was especially widely extended, as the ground had been prepared by the popular cult of Isis.

One of the earliest forms of the separated, enthroned Hodegetria cited by Lasareff, is to be found on a seventh-century Coptic textile in the collection of the V&A. Two ivory diptychs with depictions of the seated Hodegetria from seventh century Syria help demonstrate an eastward spread of the type that reached Georgia and Armenia. Very few examples of the seated Hodegetria can be found in Byzantine art, however depictions of this type do exist on two seals of Constantinople's patriarch and three surviving manuscripts from the metropolitan school. Other non-metropolitan Byzantine examples include two ivory carvings one eleventh and the other twelfth-century, examples which show a strong Syro-Palestine influence denoting transition of the type from the east.

The most ancient western representations of the seated Hodegetria in ninth-century ivories also trace their descent from eastern, probably Syrian originals. These include a book cover in the V&A which shows the close connection between this Virgin and Child type and the Adoration of the Magi. A comparatively rare occurrence in the eleventh century the seated Hodegetria became a favourite of artists from the twelfth-century onwards when it appears in cathedral tympanums, statues and miniatures across western Europe.

The enthroned Hodegetria was one of the most popular iconographic types among twelfth century Italian artists and often appears in representations of the Adoration of the Magi. The child almost always sits in a rigid posture, with right hand raised in blessing. Exceptions to this representation can be seen in reliefs in Trani and Ravello. Lasareff notes a twelfth-century metal relief of Neapolitan origin as an Italian imitation of a Byzantine ivory and goes on to note other examples of Italian seated Virgins which demonstrate the assimilation of the Byzantine arrangement of the Child on the Virgin's right knee.

The most famous example of this iconographic type is the icon of the Virgin and Child between Archangels and accompanied by two Saints, from the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Siani. (See Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art, Cat no. 1 p.262).

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O96292/virgin-and-child-relief-unknown/