



**IMAGES AND ALTAR STRUCTURES
IN ROMANESQUE CATALONIA:
A RESTORED VIRGIN AND CHILD SCULPTURE
IN THE MUSEU NACIONAL D'ART DE CATALUNYA**

IMÁGENES Y ESTRUCTURAS DE ALTAR
EN LA CATALUÑA DEL ROMÁNICO:
A PROPÓSITO DE UNA TALLA DE LA VIRGEN CON EL NIÑO
RESTAURADA EN EL MUSEU NACIONAL D'ART DE CATALUNYA

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Abstract

Medieval images that have survived to the present time are known to be decontextualised, and very often appear as isolated or free-standing objects, as is the case with statues of the Virgin and Child. Those still preserved in churches have been adapted to structures built subsequent to their creation, and quite often have been transferred to different locations, but many statues held in museums and collections lack their corresponding base or surrounding structure. In Catalonia, the example of Sant Martí d'Envalls (Angoustrine, Cerdanya, Pyrénées Orientales), which dates to the early 13th century, clearly shows that many sculptures were integrated into larger altar ensembles in combination with highly elaborate imagery. The restoration of a sculpture of the Virgin in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC 15926) carried out in 2018 has allowed us to review some of these issues. The position of the Child, leaning purposefully to his right, suggests that the carving was part of an ensemble that depicted the Adoration of the Magi and some other scene – similar to the ensemble from Sant Martí Sar-

roca, where the image was centred in an edicule, flanked by the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi. The image is also interesting from a museological perspective, since during the first half of the 20th century it was exhibited under a custom-made structure. We will discuss the relationship between the sculpture under study and other images of the Virgin dating from the 12th and 13th centuries in Catalonia that could have formed part of altar ensembles.

Keywords

Catalonia, medieval art, Romanesque art, tabernacle, altarpiece, Virgin and Child, Museology.

Resumen

Es bien sabido que las imágenes medievales han llegado a la actualidad descontextualizadas y muy a menudo como objetos aislados o totalmente exentos, tal como sucede con las tallas de la Virgen con el Niño. Mientras que las que todavía son objeto de culto han sido adaptadas a estructuras posteriores al momento de su creación y cambiadas de emplazamiento, hay una gran cantidad de piezas conservadas en museos y colecciones que no han preservado el soporte o la estructura correspondiente. En Cataluña, el ejemplo de Sant Martí d'Envalls (Angoustrine, Cerdaña francesa), fechable poco después del 1200, es la muestra más evidente de que muchas tallas se integraban en estructuras de altar más amplias, en combinación con representaciones historiadas. La restauración de una talla de la Virgen en el Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC 15926) llevada a cabo en 2018 ha permitido revisar algunas de estas cuestiones. La posición del Niño, inclinado y orientado explícitamente hacia su derecha, hace pensar que la talla se integraba en un conjunto donde se representaría la Adoración de los Magos y alguna otra escena, como sucedía en Sant Martí Sarroca, donde la imagen se situaba en el centro en un edículo flanqueado por la Anunciación y la Adoración de los Magos. La imagen también interesa desde la vertiente museográfica, ya que durante la primera mitad del siglo xx fue expuesta bajo una estructura construida expresamente. Partiendo de la talla del museo trataremos la relación de este y otros ejemplos de imágenes de la Virgen de los siglos XII y XIII en Cataluña con posibles estructuras de altar.

Palabras clave

Cataluña, arte medieval, arte románico, tabernáculo, retablo, Virgen con el Niño, Museología.

I. INTRODUCTION

As others have observed, it is difficult or well-nigh impossible to reconstruct the original context of sacred images dating from the Romanesque period. They hardly ever survive in the space for which they were created, and the vast majority of them only survive as isolated objects, decontextualised from the altar settings to which they belonged.

Romanesque sculptures of the Virgin and Child still venerated in churches have been relocated over time and housed in new spaces of worship built in the style of subsequent periods. A typical case in Catalonia is that of the statue of the Virgin in Girona Cathedral that dates to the second half of the 12th century, formerly coated in silver (Treasury, Girona Cathedral). At the time it was made it must have formed part of the altar with the 11th century altar frontal commissioned by a patron as significant as Countess Ermessenda (and later, apparently, by Guisla), which was subsequently adapted to accommodate later additions.¹ However, Romanesque sculptures have generally survived as free-standing single objects in altar constructions dating to the modern era or even to contemporary times. Countless sculptures now held in museums have been transformed over time, and in many cases their origins are unknown. Even so, using data from different sources, and studying their composition and iconographic elements, and their proportions and dimensions can help us form a hypothesis.

Between 2017 and 2018, the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya undertook the study and restoration of a wood sculpture assigned to the Romanesque art collection (MNAC 15926), in order to display it again in the exhibition galleries. It is a rather small figure of the Virgin and Child (66 x 32 x 24.5 cm), considered to be of unknown origin but associated, according to some sources, with the western Catalan Pyrenees, and dated to the first third of the 13th century. It was acquired from the antique dealer José Valenciano in 1920 (Fig. 1)² and displayed in the permanent exhibition galleries for decades, as it is mentioned in the catalogues and guidebooks published by the museum in 1926, 1936 and 1973.³ The sculpture was kept in storage when the museum's Romanesque art galleries were dismantled at the end of the 1980s during the refurbishment of the

¹ Español, 2005; Sureda, 2013, pp. 51–59.

² Boronat, 1999, p. 662 and note 324.

³ Folch i Torres, 1926, pp. 44–45, fig. 44, n. 2; *Catàleg...*, 1936, p. 62, n. 12; Ainaud, 1973, p. 142, fig. p. 140, top right. It was also on display in the great exhibition of Romanesque art held in 1961 in Barcelona and Santiago de Compostela. See *El arte románico...*, 1962, p. 186.

Palau Nacional (the museum's headquarters). It remained there until 2018, when it was re-installed in the galleries after the aforementioned restoration. From a museological point of view, the aim was to present a Virgin and Child that differs from the frontal depiction known as a *Sedes Sapientiae*, well represented by such images as those from Ger, All or Gósol, among others.⁴ We will discuss the interesting museological and museographical aspects of the history of the sculpture now under discussion further on, but for now we will focus on its compositional, iconographic, functional and stylistic components.

The sculpture MNAC 15926 does indeed differ from the conventional *Sedes Sapientiae* composition insofar it does not show the usual frontality found in so many examples from the 12th and 13th centuries. Mary is wearing a crown, and is dressed in a veil, tunic and cloak, with her body turned slightly to the right; the right hand, palm up, would have held or shown some kind of attribute, while the left hand makes the gesture of holding or resting on the figure of the Child. The Child, part of the same wood block, is sitting sideways, with his body facing to his right (to the left of the viewer). Even though the hands are missing – they were carved separately and attached to the arms – he is clearly gesturing towards a person or a group of people standing on his right. The back of image was partially hollowed out, and still shows the holes that must have served to attach it to a panel (Fig. 2).

The position and gesture of the Child, despite the losses, are the main features that set this figure apart from other similar carvings, and suggests that he was originally facing a person or a group of people, as would be the case in compositions showing the Adoration of the Magi. From the perspective of architectural sculpture, the obvious significant position and gesture of the Child bring to mind sculptures that are located as far apart as those found on a capital in Saint-Lazare in Autun, from the first third of the 12th century, or in Catalonia on a capital of the cloister of the cathedral of Tarragona, from the first third of the 13th century (Fig. 3), not to mention many other chronologically, stylistically or geographically unrelated examples.

Either way, the composition strongly suggests that the sculpture in question was part of a larger altar ensemble in which it would have been coordinated with other figures or scenes, one of which would most likely be the Adoration of the Magi. However, it is important to bear in mind that this association between

⁴ On the exhibition of this type of images, see Carbonell, dir., 1997, pp. 105–110; Camps, 2008a, pp. 140–145. On the restoration and new 2018 presentation of MNAC 15926, see Camps/Comella, 2018.

Mary and the Magi also occurs in other settings, such as altar frontals, vaulted apses or tympana, often involving frontality, and often centralised in the style of a *Maiestas Mariae*, where the Virgin and Child are displayed within a mandorla. In terms of liturgical furniture, there are also clear indications of the use of this association, which involved a mixture of techniques – sculpture, either free-standing or attached to a back panel, reliefs, and paintings on flat panels. Actually, the majority of the extant wood sculptures from Romanesque Catalonia combine Marian or Christological episodes with an image of the Virgin and Child as *Sedes Sapientiae*.

2. IN SEARCH OF THE TYPOLOGICAL AND ICONOGRAPHIC CONTEXT OF THE IMAGE

The most widely known example of this sort of combinations is probably the wooden altarpiece, sometimes called edicule or shrine, of Sant Martí d'Envalles (Angoustrine, Cerdanya, Pyrénées Orientales), currently in the Centre d'Art Sacré of Ille-sur-Têt (Roussillon, Pyrénées Orientales), following the robbery of the Virgin and Child in late 1975 (Fig. 4).⁵ It is a shrine-like structure attached to a panel that is supported by columns and topped with stepped crenellations. It originally housed the now lost figure of the Virgin and Child, which was flanked on both sides by paintings of the Annunciation and Visitation.⁶ The ensemble is usually dated to the first half of the 13th century, based on the style of the paintings, which is consistent with the Byzantinising trends of that period found in compositions in Cerdanya and in Roussillon.⁷ The Virgin and Child showed Mary in a full frontal pose with the Child sitting in her lap, both with crowns, depicted as *Sedes Sapientiae*. This is a good example of a tripartite altarpiece where the motifs are created using various techniques. The formula employed for the architectural structure has not been preserved in other examples. There was only one similar structure, narrower than that of Envalles, housing the Virgin and Child of Sant Climent de Taüll dated to the mid-13th century.⁸ However, all that remains of it is a collection of photographs taken in the early 20th century,

⁵ Folch i Torres, 1925; Delcor, 1970, pp. 92–93; Le Pogam/Viver-Peçlet, eds, 2009, pp. 60–62; Dalmau-Rogé-Bonneau, 2013, pp. 188–189; Kroesen, 2014, p.161, fig. 3.

⁶ It measures 72 x 102 x 33 cm.

⁷ Durliat, 1988, p. 363. On the impact of the 1200 trends on Catalan panel painting, see Castiñeiras, 2015.

⁸ Albert Sierra brought to my knowledge the photographs of this structure. On the sculpture, exhibited in the church of Sant Climent de Taüll, see Llarás, 1996, p. 255.

since the structure subsequently disappeared. For this reason, we cannot directly analyse the work or establish a date, even though it is morphologically typical of a medieval work. However, it could be a much more modern example, like that found in the church of Santa Maria de Oreilla (Conflent, Pyrénées Orientales).

A slightly later date than that of Envals has been suggested for the ensemble of Sant Martí Sarroca (Alt Penedès, Barcelona), which is the other widely known example of this sort of combinations (Fig. 5 and Figs 3–4 Velasco González, in this volume). It was housed in an important church belonging to a castle that was consecrated in 1204 and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It was published by Puig i Cadafalch in 1906 following the discovery of two panels and their association with the image of the Virgin and Child of the church, which disappeared in 1936.⁹ The image, of considerable size, is one of a series of examples noticeable for their frontality, monumentality, and large throne.¹⁰ The panels, now preserved in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC 15924–15925) are significant as they are decorated on both sides. The first panel shows the relief figure of a king on one side, which would have formed part of the Adoration of the Magi, and a painting of St Paul on the opposite face. The second panel shows the relief figure of Mary on one side, which is therefore thought to be part of a scene of the Annunciation, and a painting of St Peter on the other. Puig i Cadafalch, and later Folch i Torres, both believed the image and panels were related, and suggested they could be part of an altar ensemble, a hypothesis that was accepted by all the authors who subsequently studied the group.¹¹ Over time, following the contributions made by Joan Ainaud and particularly by Jaume Barrachina,¹² the notion of an altarpiece with hinged doors has gradually taken shape. We would add that the Virgin of Sarroca is very similar to that found in El Pla del Penedès (Alt Penedès, Barcelona), where there is, however, no evidence of a broader structure.¹³ Sarroca in Catalonia, in the early decades of the 13th century, is the only example of a tabernacle-altarpiece featuring a Virgin and Child in the middle flanked by depictions of the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi. This helps us establish our hypothesis surrounding the iconographic and structural context of the sculpture under study, even though the composition of Sarroca,

⁹ Puig i Cadafalch, 1906.

¹⁰ Cook/Gudiol Ricart, 1950, pp. 307 and 317, figs 309 and 315.

¹¹ Folch i Torres, 1956, p. 46, pl. XXI; Alcoy, 1992, pp. 181–183.

¹² Barrachina, 1997d, pp. 351–352.

¹³ Museu Episcopal de Vic (MEV 828). When compared with average Catalan sculptures of the 12th and 13th centuries, the image of El Pla del Penedès stands out for its considerable size (83 x 41 x 27 cm).

like the one from Sant Martí d'Envalles, shows the Virgin and Child in a frontal pose, with no movement by the Child towards the groups on either side.

While on the subject, we should mention the controversial Virgin of the Cloister of Santa Maria de Solsona, even though it is a stone sculpture.¹⁴ Aside from its style, which has caused it to be attributed to either Gilabertus of Toulouse or to another school, some consider it to be originally a cult image. Others, however, suggest it served an architectural purpose, as part of the colonnade of the cloister, and part of an Epiphany in this context. Another example of this in stone is the exceptional relief of the Virgin and Child from Notre-Dame de la Daurade in Toulouse, from the façade of the chapter house of this famous Marian priory, which was also alongside an Adoration of the Magi.¹⁵ Moreover, the group is framed by an architectural structure that can be considered a stone and relief equivalent of those wood examples discussed so far.

We believe the foregoing examples support our hypothesis that the sculpture of the Virgin and Child under study could have originated in a similar, though not identical, context to that of the groups found in Envalles and Sarroca. In both these groups, the Virgin and Child are frontal, with the Child looking at the viewer, with one hand making the gesture of blessing and the other holding a book, in stark contrast to the Child's gestures in the image under discussion. For this we can imagine a similar structure, where the Child leans towards the Magi, making a gesture of accepting or perhaps taking their offerings, but we cannot entirely rule out other possibilities. We should also bear in mind that, according to expert consensus, some apparently isolated figures of the Virgin and Child were in fact placed under a kind of canopy, as is known to have been the case of the figure in Clermont-Ferrand.¹⁶

Surviving material from the mid-12th century in other European countries, such as the stone altarpieces in Carrières-sur-Seine (France)¹⁷ and Oberpleis (Germany),¹⁸ or others made of wood, provide a framework for understanding the logic behind the sculpture under study, as they prove that such solutions were relatively frequent, despite, we repeat, the compositional differences regarding the

¹⁴ See, specially, Moralejo, 1988, pp. 104–119. More recently: Camps, 1994, pp. 63–71; Lorés i Otzet, 2006, p. 101.

¹⁵ Musée des Augustins, Toulouse, inv. 452A. On the ensemble, see Moralejo, 1983.

¹⁶ Forsyth, 1972, p. 99; Schmitt, 2002, pp. 182–188.

¹⁷ Musée du Louvre, Département des Sculptures, inv. RF 1612. See: Le Pogam, 2009; Le Pogam/Vivet-Pecllet, eds, 2009, pp. 34–37.

¹⁸ Illustration in Le Pogam/Vivet-Pecllet, eds, 2009, p. 27, fig. 11.

Barcelona Virgin and Child.¹⁹ Additional examples can be found in later, Gothic tabernacles. A typical example from a structural, though not iconographic, perspective is the tabernacle of Dädesjö (Sweden), which is not, however, centred around the Virgin and Child, but around St Olaf.²⁰ Representations of the Virgin and Child can be found in some tabernacles from Scandinavia, such as Múli (Iceland), now in the National Museum in Copenhagen, among others produced in Norway.²¹ This raises the question, therefore, of the extent to which statues of this and other types were placed in the centre of altar ensembles including reliefs and/or combining different techniques. In connection with this, certain shallow wood reliefs of the Virgin and Child that were intended to be applied to a panel, mainly from churches in the Eastern Pyrenees, have to be mentioned. These include *Nostra Senyora de Belloch* (Dorres, Cerdanya, Pyrénées Orientales),²² *Nostra Senyora de Pena* (Cases-de-Pène, Roussillon, Pyrénées Orientales)²³ and *Quadres* (Isòvol, Cerdanya, Girona), the latter lost in 1936 (Fig. 6).²⁴ While the Dorres image has sometimes been dated to the 11th century, we believe that all the foregoing images can be dated to the 13th century. These figures were housed in what were originally modest churches that undoubtedly could have imitated more prominent examples or models, and which would have reflected the typological and compositional diversity determined by the requirements and possibilities of each work, of each commission, and the importance of the church. Also interesting are the sculptures, also shallow in depth, from Santa Maria de Solsona²⁵ and Santa Maria la Rodona in the episcopal complex of Vic.²⁶ Both figures are extremely shallow, and exhibit the remains of the holes drilled on their backs for the purpose of attaching them to a panel. Elsewhere, we find several similar examples, such as from the church at Högsrum (Sweden), in which both the panel and plinth that held the statue (not a Marian statue in this instance) are preserved.²⁷ We cannot, of course, speculate on the context of these shallow

¹⁹ On this topic, beyond the essays gathered in this volume, those by Sureda and Kroesen in the catalogue of an exhibition held in 2019–20 in Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, and Vic, Museu Episcopal de Vic, are also relevant. See: Sureda, 2019b; Kroesen/Sureda, 2019.

²⁰ Tångeberg, 2009, p. 224, fig. 1, pl. 71.

²¹ Kuhn, 2019.

²² Dalmau/Rogé-Bonneau, 2013c, pp. 268–269.

²³ Dalmau/Rogé-Bonneau, 2013b, pp. 198–199.

²⁴ Delcor, 1970, pp. 83–84; Noguera, 1977, pp. 57–59.

²⁵ Museu Diocesà i Comarcal de Solsona (MDCS 275). See: Camps, 1989.

²⁶ Museu Episcopal de Vic (MEV 17143). It measures 75 x 27 x 12 cm. It was first published by Gros, 1991, pp. 88–89. More recently: Sureda 2019a.

²⁷ Tångeberg, 2009, p. 225, fig. 2, pl. 72.

carvings, as they could belong to either retables or altar frontals. It should be noted that similar compositions, with the Child in profile or facing the viewer, occur between the 12th and 13th centuries in Catalonia in altar frontals, where the Adoration of the Magi is sometimes one of the scenes flanking the central figure. This is why it is worth considering another sculpture of unknown provenance preserved in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya that shows the Child sitting sideways and facing his right (Fig. 7).²⁸ Some of these examples could well have been integrated into flatter altarpiece ensembles, with no tabernacle or movable wings, where the figure of the Virgin and Child could be the centre of two scenes containing figures in relief. An interesting example of this is an altarpiece of unknown origin, also in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, consisting of a panel on which all that remains is the Virgin and Child, the latter facing to one side, flanked on both sides by three arches that would have housed other relief figures.²⁹

Sculptures featuring the Child making a prominent gesture, though uncommon, are not exceptional, and should not always be associated with an iconographic context based on the Adoration of the Magi and other Marian or Christological episodes. In fact, in a Catalan milieu, one of the works that most closely resembles the sculpture under study is the Virgin and Child of Santa Coloma d'Andorra. This image has at times been used to draw a parallel with our sculpture, even though some details of the composition differ considerably.

3. MORE EXAMPLES OF EARLY ALTARPIECES WITH SCULPTURES IN CATALONIA

From the perspective of narrative ensembles with a free-standing (or applied) figure situated in their centre, it is important to mention the existence of several groups of statuettes in Catalonia that could be associated with altar ensembles arranged around a central sculpture, possibly framed by a canopy. All these groups are now decontextualised, incomplete, in varying states of conservation, and are of modest or unknown origin. They can be dated in the 13th century. It is also interesting to note that most of these groups originate from the region between Lleida and Solsona, from churches from the former bishopric of Urgell. The first

²⁸ MNAC 4397. Camps, 1994, p. 68, note 52.

²⁹ MNAC 22997. See: Camps, 2008b, p. 136, fig. 4 [1]. This work is under study, the same as an ensemble of panels with heads in relief representing Magi and a female figure (MNAC 66051–66054). The purpose is determining an accurate classification of each item.

of these groups, consisting of three figures measuring between 52 and 54 centimetres in height, comes from the church of Santa Maria de les Omedes (Vilanova de l'Aguda, Noguera, Lleida), and is now preserved in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC 3933 and 3938–3939) (Fig. 8).³⁰ Two of them undoubtedly depict the archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, whereas the third can be considered to depict St Joseph, all probably part of an Annunciation. Iconographically speaking, these figures correlate with those in Sant Martí Sarroca. In this case, moreover, the Gothic altarpiece that survived in the church up to the beginning of the 20th century was presided by an image of the Virgin and Child that could have formed the centre of the original ensemble, based on a stylistic comparison between the image and the statuettes, two of which were also in use at that time.³¹

A second group of statuettes comes from the church of Sant Jaume de Cas (Àger, Noguera, Lleida), a church near a castle that, according to historical records, belonged to the important monastery of Sant Pere d'Àger. In addition, records from 1190 describing a local pilgrimage place the building along a pilgrimage route. This group consists of three figures that were acquired long ago by the Lleida museum (Figs 9–10).³² Although the figures were thought to be of unknown origin, Francesc Fité and later Celina Llarás published studies that associated them with the aforementioned church.³³ The figures, which retain some traces of polychromy, measure about 60 centimetres in height, and are slender and show a frontal pose. Nowadays, only the head and part of the trunk are preserved in the first, which presented a gesture similar to that of Mary in the Annunciation, as indicated by Llarás. The second displays an inscription on a scroll identifying it as St Joseph. Judging by the position of his hand under his long beard, this could be the same figure sometimes depicted by the Annunciation. Although it is currently difficult to identify the third, beardless figure, the group as a whole can be considered similar to that found in Les Omedes, and could have been part of a larger altar display featuring a central figure.

³⁰ Ainaud, 1973, pp. 166 and 168; Llarás/Carabasa, 1994. There are no historical records about this church.

³¹ On the history of the Gothic altarpiece of Santa Maria de les Omedes, nowadays preserved in the Museu de Maricel, Sitges, inv. 92–94, as part of the works of art acquired by Dr Pérez-Rosales, see Costafreda, 2015.

³² Museu de Lleida. Diocèsà i Comarcal, inv. 1251–1253. In their present condition, they measure 28.5 x 10.5 x 7.5 cm (only its head and part of its trunk is preserved), 69 x 12.5 x 5.5 cm and 59.5 x 12 x 7 cm, respectively.

³³ Fité, 1985, pp. 388–390; Llarás, 1994a, pp. 156–158; 1994b, p. 102.

The Cas group, however, may have an additional element. The Lleida museum preserves two sculptures of the Virgin and Child thought to have come from the church of Sant Jaume de Cas or, according to other sources, from Àger, the town associated with this church.³⁴ The sculptures differ in terms of style and quality, and may date from different periods, between the first third of the 13th century and *c.* 1300. Either way, the existence of the statuettes and the sculptures of the Virgin and Child suggest the possibility of a canopy with movable wings with carved figures on them, such as those presented above. The reconstruction of this ensemble, however, requires a discussion of the dimensions of the panels of the wings, since the two sculptures of the Virgin and Child are smaller than the carved figures presumed to have occupied the wings.

We have recently been able to make a similar association with two statuettes of unknown origin in the Solsona museum measuring between 44 and 45 cm in height. One of them is traditionally identified as one of the Magi pointing to the star, namely, Gaspar or Balthasar, while the other is thought to be either a shepherd or Nicodemus.³⁵ However, the traces of slots on the back of the figure suggest that it might have had wings, and could therefore be the archangel Gabriel. As in the case of Sant Martí Sarroca, this suggests the presence of an Annunciation and an Adoration of the Magi. Finally, we can mention three statuettes published by Jaime Barrachina in Santa Maria de Palau de Rialb (La Baronia de Rialb, Noguera, Lleida), in the vicinity of some of the examples discussed above, as well as two statuettes from Santa Magdalena de l'Astor (Pujalt, Anoia, Barcelona) in the Museu Episcopal de Vic. The figures of Palau de Rialb were discovered buried in 1995. One has been identified as a Magus, another is possibly another Magus, and the third is St Joseph.³⁶ The figures from l'Astor, traditionally identified as SS Cosmas and Damian, could also be regarded as one of the Three Magi and, possibly, an apostle.³⁷

As discussed previously by various authors, this series of examples show the existence of small altarpieces with statuettes on either side, probably with a struc-

³⁴ Museu de Lleida. Diocèsà i Comarcal, inv. 327 and 1250. They measure 47 x 15 x 11 cm and 51 x 15 x 12 cm, respectively. My thanks to the Lleida museum, and especially to the curator Carmen Berlabé, for the information about these sculptures.

³⁵ Museu Diocèsà i Comarcal de Solsona (MDCS 293–294). See: Orriols, 1986a; 1986b; Terés, 1989a; 1989b; Camps, forthcoming. They measure 45 x 9.5 x 6.5 cm (Magus) and 44.5 x 9 x 6.5 cm (archangel Gabriel).

³⁶ Barrachina, 1997b, pp. 353–354.

³⁷ Barrachina, 1997b, p. 354, already suggested changes in the identification of the personages. A detailed study in Niñá, 2014.

ture similar to those found in Envalles or Sarroca in the centre. These ensembles would most likely have contained scenes of the Adoration of the Magi, with all three characters, and probably the Annunciation, which would have included Joseph in addition to the archangel Gabriel and Mary, figures that are widely represented in ensembles made using different materials and techniques. Barrachina mentions the important stone relief of the portal of Santa Maria de Agramunt, dated to 1287, as a parallel to these structures at an iconographic level. The figure of Joseph in the context of the Annunciation also appears in other stone ensembles, such as the colonnade of the cloister of Santa Maria de Solsona.³⁸

All of these examples provide sufficient evidence to defend the hypothesis that the sculpture of the Virgin and Child in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, the focus of this article, would have been part of a larger ensemble, which would therefore include the scene of the Adoration of the Magi on the left. The sculpture could also have been housed under some sort of canopy. It is harder to pinpoint the scene on the right, although there are sufficient examples of the presence, painted or carved, of the Annunciation. Little can be said about the origin of the figure. The relative compositional proximity with the Virgin of Santa Coloma d'Andorra is too weak an argument to place it in a Pyrenean context, although given the existence of other examples we cannot categorically rule out this possibility.³⁹ A stylistic analysis of the figure could place it in the early 13th century, considering the series of well-defined folds of the garments.

The classification of this sculpture is primarily based on the existence of comparable examples in Catalonia from the first decades of the 13th century. As we have no documentary evidence and are unable, at least for the moment, to ascertain the origin of the figure, only stylistic analysis provides further arguments. The way the folds of the garments are treated, especially around the shoulders of the figure of Mary, shows the repetitive trend consistent with a date in the first third of the 13th century. However, the rather schematised facial features, made up of planes and angles, could also be associated with earlier works, from the 12th century. The relative agility and fluidity of the gestures would again place the figure in an artistic context closer to the innovative trends of 1200. For all these reasons, we suggest that the statue could date, with a wide margin, to the first third of the 13th century.

³⁸ Moralejo, 1986, pp. 71–72.

³⁹ *El arte románico...*, 1962, p. 186. An origin in Andorra itself has been suggested, a fact we interpret as based on the supposed parallels between the two sculptures. See: Ainaud, 1973, p. 142.

This sculpture, together with the ensembles found in Envalls and Sarroca, shows the increasing presence of altar ensembles featuring free-standing figures and reliefs in Catalonia, at least starting in 1200. Obviously, these examples exhibit structural differences, and the panels from Sarroca are the only ones that retain clear signs of the presence of hinged wings around the central body.⁴⁰

Any future analysis of these groups must also include an in-depth study of their iconography and integration into the liturgical space, but these aspects are beyond the scope of this study. Generally speaking, it is important to bear in mind the theophanic significance of the Adoration of the Magi, or the allusion to the Incarnation present in scenes such as the Annunciation. On a separate issue, we also should consider the extent to which, these groups – or free-standing figures – could have been influenced by liturgical drama, featuring as participants in the dramatization of the *Officium Stellae* for the feast of the Epiphany, as discussed by several authors.⁴¹ These, however, are topics we hope to explore in another study.

4. THE SCULPTURE IN THE MUSEUM: AN EXAMPLE OF INTERACTION BETWEEN ART HISTORY AND MUSEOLOGY

From another perspective, in terms of Museology, it is interesting that in the 1920s and 1930s the sculpture here discussed was exhibited inside a custom-made shrine-like wooden structure that was inspired by a drawing of the Sant Martí d'Envalls ensemble made by the artist Sebastià Junyent (Fig. 11).⁴² Thus, digressing slightly from the aim of this study, our sculpture is also interesting from a museographical point of view, given that for some years the museum attempted to display it within what was presumed to be its original setting on the basis of an apparently similar work recently studied. For the moment, however, there was no indication that it might have belonged to a broader altarpiece ensemble. On the contrary, it was displayed in combination with altar frontals from other churches in an attempt to recreate for the viewers a possible original context, as

⁴⁰ The museum is committed with a thorough study of this ensemble in order to determine its date and its history in the material, structural and technical levels. A similar solution was adopted in two panels whose present-day whereabouts is unknown. See: Barrachina, 1997a, pp. 354–355.

⁴¹ Forsyth, 1968; 1972; Morandi, 2006.

⁴² Folch i Torres, 1925; 1926, pp. 44–45, fig. 44, n. 2. The importance conferred in this text to the sculpture under discussion is highly significant.

part of an altar decoration of the Romanesque period (Fig. 12).⁴³ The only parallel known to historiography was the image of Santa Coloma d'Andorra, where the figure of the Child also appears in a sideways pose, albeit with obvious gestural and stylistic differences with respect to the statue under study.

When the sculpture was acquired by the museum in 1920, it showed signs of deterioration due to woodworms, particularly in the hands. This distorted its shape. It also presented a surface layer of polychromy that is usually dated to the 18th century. It was treated at the museum by replacing volume losses with stucco and gesso, and by restoring part of the polychrome layer. It remained in this restored condition between the 1920s and the 1980s, during which time it was exhibited in the galleries, adapted to successive museological settings, and affected by the museum's own vicissitudes, including the transfer and protective measures implemented during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the subsequent return of the exhibits.

On this basis, the figure was examined and restored in 2018 by Àngels Comella, restorer of the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, under the supervision of Mireia Mestre, head of the museum's Restoration and Preventive Conservation Department. Chemical analysis of the pigments confirmed that the paints used for the surface layer of polychromy were oil-based. Some remains of previous polychromies were identified under this layer. Most consisted of oil-based paints, but some were vestiges of egg-tempera paints that could date to the time the statue was carved (specifically, in the Virgin's throne and under the tunic of the Child). Examination of a sample taken from the Virgin's crown showed the presence of tin foil under the visible layer of orpiment, suggesting that the crown could originally have been rendered in mecca-gilded tin, and that subsequently it was repainted yellow.

The statue was restored in several phases, following a radiographic examination. First, both the inpainting and part of the stucco and gesso restoration carried out in the first third of the 20th century were removed to return the statue to its original form; then the extant polychromy was cleaned and the surface was evened out with stucco where necessary. Finally, inpainting was performed to blend the white stucco into the surrounding colours, and *tratteggio* was used on extensive areas of stucco.⁴⁴

⁴³ First, together with the frontal from Farrera (Pallars Sobirà, Lleida), MNAC 15808. Later (1934), with the frontal from Planès (Ripollès, Girona), MNAC 15882.

⁴⁴ Camps/Comella, 2018.

In 2018, the statue was returned to the museum galleries after an absence of nearly forty years, and placed in the Romanesque art room dedicated to wood sculpture, where it enters into a dialogue with a series of statues of the *Sedes Sapientiae*, providing an example of a different approach to the iconography of the Virgin and Child.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing paragraphs we have presented an example of how research and museography, based on the state of the art at a particular point in history, in this case the first third of the 20th century, determined the presentation of an object in the museum galleries. Approximately one hundred years later, knowledge of other examples and the international context, together with historiographical contributions, enables us to show a much broader context. The sculpture in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya and the altar setting proposed for it in this study bring our attention to altar furniture comprising sculptures, not only due to the presence of a central image, but also because of the existence of lateral structures, either winged or not.

The sculpture under study is thus situated in the context of the evolution of altar structures, more specifically altarpieces, in Catalonia in the 12th and 13th centuries, and is also associated with the incorporation of sculptures in these ensembles, although it is difficult to establish signs of a linear evolution. In the case of carved altar frontals, some examples, such as the altar frontal from Sant Pere de Ripoll preserved in the Museu Episcopal de Vic, can be dated to shortly before 1150. In terms of composition, the similarities between carved altar frontals and painted altar frontals have been widely documented. When considering structures placed above the altar, diversity also becomes evident if we consider examples such as the panel retablo from Obarra (Ribagorza, Huesca),⁴⁵ now lost, or the aforementioned panel retablo of unknown origin once with applied bas-relief figures, now kept in Barcelona (MNAC 22997). We have also discussed the existence of numerous shallow carvings of the Virgin and Child that would have been attached or applied to a panel, although this does not always mean that the figure would have been covered by a canopy-like arrangement. Some of these carvings, moreover, come from important centres, such as Vic. To this we must add the

⁴⁵ Barrachina, 1997c, pp. 355–356.

difficulty of establishing criteria to date the examples, which are often based on stylistic grounds. Further detailed technical studies would clarify certain aspects of some works, particularly the Sant Martí Sarroca panels, which are striking for the stylistic contrast between the carved and the painted faces. One of the most reliable sources in this regard could be the Sant Martí d'Envalles ensemble, where the painted elements are consistent with the artistic trends prevalent in 1200.

In any event, evidence points to the emergence in the 13th century of solutions involving wood sculptures or reliefs attached to panels, forming scenes of the Annunciation or the Adoration of the Magi, arranged around an image, most likely as part of a winged altarpiece, such as that from Sarroca. Most of the examples mentioned are located in central and western Catalonia, in locations that were historically part of the bishoprics of Urgell and Vic. This, of course, is based on surviving examples. Apart from Sarroca, a number of statuettes can also be associated with an image of the Virgin and Child, as in the case of Sant Jaume de Cas and Santa Maria de les Omedes. We believe the sculpture under study can be situated in this context. Folch i Torres to some extent anticipated this when he had the statue displayed under an architectural structure. Of unknown origin, some say Pyrenean, the statue is striking for its composition, which can be best understood in the context of an Adoration of the Magi, as is the case with many stone examples.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ Obviously, the development of both Marian sculptures and this type of structures is a response to symbolic ideals and to the function of the altar, as is to the cult to Mary and to the broader liturgical frame. This has been widely commented in connection with numerous examples, e.g., regarding Catalonia, Sureda, 2012; 2013; 2019b. We hope to discuss all these issues in future occasions.

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Fig. 1. Virgin and Child (MNAC 15926),
condition at the time it entered the museum, before its first restoration.



Fig. 2. Virgin and Child (MNAC 15926),
condition after the 2017-18 restoration (front and back).



Fig. 3. Adoration of the Magi,
capital of the cloister of the cathedral of Tarragona.



Fig. 4. Altarpiece of Sant Martí d'Envalls
(Angoustrine, Cerdanya, Pyrénées Orientales), *in situ* condition before 1975.



Fig. 5. Virgin and Child of Sant Martí Sarroca (Alt Penedès, Barcelona).
Lost in 1936.



Fig. 6. Virgin and Child of Quadres (Isòvol, Cerdanya, Girona).
Lost in 1936.



Fig. 7. Virgin and Child (MNAC 4397).



Fig. 8. Archangel St Gabriel, St Mary and St Joseph from Santa Maria de les Omedes (MNAC 3933, 3938 and 3939).



Fig. 9. Figures from Sant Jaume de Cas, condition in 1918.



Fig. 10. Figures from Sant Jaume de Cas, present condition (Museu de Lleida. Diocesà i Comarcal).



Fig. II. Virgin and Child (MNAC 15926),
1934 display in the at the moment called Museu d'Art de Catalunya.



Fig. 12. Virgin and Child (MNAC 15926) at the back of the 1934 display in the at the moment called Museu d'Art de Catalunya, placed above the altar frontal from Planès.

