MEDIAEVAL WOODEN FIGURE SCULPTURES IN IRELAND

Mediaeval Madonnas in the West

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RESEARCH into the history of religious wood sculpture in Ireland, as in other fields of archaeological study, arouses an interest not only in the specific results but in the light it throws upon the history of our people. In the remnants of our statuary we find evidence of the active interest in current Christian ideas and later of the conflict and struggle for existence for those very ideas. We are also led to examine certain specialised aspects of European culture and craft expression ; in this we find further evidence of what we already know from other aspects of Irish history of the vital rôle we have played in European thought and civilization.

It is claimed that in pre-Christian times the Celts were opposed to the representational in the plastic arts in spite of their close Continental associations with the traditions of Greece and Rome. In Christian times, however, we may conclude that the Irish Church was wholeheartedly on the side of orthodoxy in the great Iconoclastic controversy that agitated Europe and Asia Minor in the 8th and 9th centuries. Dungal, an Irishman and a monk of St. Denis, was the principal opponent of Claudius, the Iconoclast Bishop of Turin. His *Responsa contra Perversas Claudii Taurensis Episcopi Sententias*, written in 827 A.D., is one of the most important Scholastic arguments against the fanaticism.[1] If Dungal is representative of the opinion of the Irish Church we can be sure that the orthodox attitude on the use of images defined at Nicea in 787 A.D. was unquestioned by the faithful in Ireland. The oft-quoted passage from Cogitosus indicating the presence of this tradition already in the 7th century should be mentioned. Referring to St. Brigid's monastery at Kildare he describes paintings on a partition in the church: " in qua unus paries decoratus et imaginibus depictus."[2] At a later period Giraldus Cambrensis, relating the legend concerning the tenderness of St. Kevin in allowing a blackbird to hatch its egg in his outstretched hand, adds significantly " in hujus autem signi perpetuam memoriam omnes imagines sancti Keivini per Hiberniam in manu extensa merulam habent."[3] From this we may conclude that images of the saints were common in 12th century Ireland. Otherwise such a close observer in remarking the presence of, to him, a relatively obscure saint, would not have neglected to note the absence of the more widely known figures.

Since no wooden figures which might be said to spring from a native tradition are extant from this period we do not know whether they had that

1 Fitzpatrick, *Ireland and the Foundations of Europe*, 129 ff.

2 Henry, *La Sculpture Irlandaise, Vol.* I, 174.

3 Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera*, Vol. V, in Rolls Series, *Topographica Hibernica*, Dist. II, Cap. xxviii.

character of decoration attributed to Celtic art or whether they showed a tendency to realism. We do know, however, that the illuminators of the earlier Irish manuscripts expressed that character. Their treatment of the human figure is a combination of the symbolical and the decorative. In the Book of Kells one has only to observe the figure of the enthroned Madonna or that of the Evangelist at the opening of the Gospel of St. John[4] to note this combination of symbolism and decoration which was the keynote of Irish art in the 8th century. The same spirit appears on the High Crosses ; a good example is that at Monasterboice where Christ is portrayed bound by ropes which form themselves a very intricate pattern.

After the Norman invasion and the assumption of Church privilege by a Norman episcopacy, church art in Ireland would naturally tend to follow Norman and therefore Continental models. The earliest examples of this foreign influence in wood sculpture are the Kilcorban Madonna and, a little later, the Athlone and Clonfert Madonnas. At a still later period, when England had developed a native tradition in sculpture, its influence soon became apparent here, as for instance in some of the wooden statues from the Holy Ghost Hospital, Waterford, and in practically all the stone sculpture after the 15th century. Nevertheless here and there we may detect the hand of the native craftsman. It may be noticed in the rigid formalism of all the Kilcorban Calvary figures. It is also clearly shown in stone sculpture. Good examples are the figure of Christ surrounded by the emblems of the Passion in the Franciscan Abbey at Ennis, and in the panel representing the Trinity on the Fitzgerald tomb, now in St. Werburgh's church, Dublin. In this latter case the absence of realism in the proportions of the figures, the stress on decoration in the composition, culminating in the curious sculptural conceit that turns the beard of God the Father into a descending dove, are the elements that seem typical of a peculiarly Celtic genius. I would stress the fact that such lack of realism is based on a particular attitude to art and its function and does not arise from an inability to depict the object " as it really is."

After the 17th century, when the Catholics of Ireland struggled for the barest continuity under the crushing onus of the Penal Laws, it will be obvious that all plastic art hitherto fostered by the Church could no longer survive with any professional status or organisation. The purely native work such as that of the Penal Crosses is obviously the production of devout but unskilled hands supplying the needs of those who desired a symbol of the Redemption rather than a work of art. In these crosses there is no choice between realism and symbolism, for, even did their creators desire realistic representations they had not the necessary craftsmanship to produce them. Most of these figures are crude and of unfinished workmanship. Sometimes, however, the native genius breaks through the lack of technical skill and we get symbolical figures that have not lost all connection with the Celtic tradition.

During the last half century much has been written on early Irish archi-

[4] Illustrated in Sullivan, *Book of Kells*.

tectural remains, on the High Crosses, on sepulchral slabs and on such church furniture as crosiers, metal book- and bell-shrines. So far Irish mediaeval statuary in wood has been neglected, largely owing to the scarcity of existing specimens. This scarcity is not to be wondered at in view of the successive waves of iconoclasm to which the Irish Church was subjected in the course of centuries at the hands of Norse, Norman, Tudor, Cromwellian and Williamite. Unlike the sculpture in stone, which is most plentiful in the Anglo-Norman cities, the wooden figures survived mainly in such remote and poor districts as Ballyvourney, Inishmurray and East Galway, where no doubt inaccessibility and the devotion of the people saved them from destruction. Being widely distributed and fragmentary they are insufficient to give evidence of continuous development. They indicate, however, that such an art was practised in Ireland until its arrest in the 16th century. Obviously it was associated with the religious houses of the great monastic orders and with popular centres of devotion, witness St. Gobnat at Ballyvourney, St. Maolruan at Wexford and St. Molaise on Inishmurray.

In the course of this study I have done little more than assemble in one place as much information as I could collect regarding the history and origin of a number of these Irish sculptures in wood. Most of them are the revered objects of local cults, and I think deserve to be better known to the Irish people. As in the case of sculpture in stone we find that certain districts produce local types of work in wood. The earliest statues here all belong to regions west of the Shannon. They occur in districts fairly close to one another and seem to have been produced under a common art influence. It seems appropriate to begin our survey with those figures.

The Kilcorban Madonna.

Kilcorban chapel stands on a low rise off the main road between Loughrea and Portumna in Co. Galway. Some of its architectural features may date to the 15th century when the Dominicans of Athenry took it over and built a monastery on the site.[5] The original foundation goes back, however, to the 7th century.

From this chapel, according to tradition and circumstantial evidence, come an important group of wood sculptures. There are in all six figures. These vary in quality and in date from early mediaeval to perhaps the late 16th century. At present they are preserved in the presbytery of St. Lawrence's parish church at Tynagh, about two miles north of Kilcorban.

The earliest represents the Enthroned Madonna (Pl. XXXIII). This type of statue was first adopted in Christian art in order to portray Our Lady as Mother of the divine as well as of the human nature of Christ. Its origin derives from the doctrine formulated at the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D.[6] There the Church condemned Nestorius as a heretic and publicly approved the title *Deipara*—Mother of God—for the Blessed Virgin, attacked by the heresy.[7]

5 Archdall, *Monasticon Hibernicum*, 289.

6 Vloberg, *La Vièrge et l'enfant dans l'Art francais*, Vol. I, 100.

7 MacCaffrey, *History of the Catholic Church*, 44.

Early representations of the Enthroned Madonna are rare. But among some famous mosaics in Ravenna executed during the first golden age of Byzantine art there is a well known Deipara. There and in the Haghia Sophia, Constantinople, the Virgin is shown nimbed and clad in sacerdotal dalmatic seated upon a richly cushioned throne.[8] From her lap the Holy Child points to her with raised fingers, thus symbolising the theological doctrine of the divine motherhood of Our Lady, the divine and human nature of her son. This conception made a strong appeal to the eastern mosaic workers and inspired a magnificent interpretation in art which is shown by the craftsman's concentration on the richly decorated throne and its setting of glittering gold tesserae.

During the following centuries the influence of eastern artists, moving westwards through Rome, may still be traced in Madonnas frescoed on the crypt walls of San Clemente or carved on ivory plaques now preserved in European museums.[9]

Otherwise figure sculpture, that highly developed art form of pagan Greece and Rome, had declined with the Empire and found little place in early Christian decoration.[10] In this respect Ireland with her figured High Crosses from the 9th century onwards presented an unusual phenomenon.[11] For centuries before that time the Irish Church offered the Blessed Virgin particular veneration in the liturgy in prayers, litanies and hymns.[12]

Therefore it is strange to find in Irish art of that period representations of the Deipara confined to calligraphic decoration as in the Book of Kells. There she is shown seated upon a meticulously carved and painted throne, robed in royal purple and staring like the conventional Eastern Empress.[13] In the west of Scotland, at Islay and Iona where Northumbrian and Irish influences met, the Enthroned Madonna appears on several high crosses, attended by winged angels.[14] But in Irish contemporary sculpture the nearest iconography seems to be that of the Visit of the Magi, shown on the cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice and on crosses at Duleek, Kinitty, and Clones.[15]

The earliest record of a Madonna carved in the round comes from France, from the central province of Auvergne. There invading tribes from north and east had less deeply penetrated the mountain barriers. There, also, " barbarian " prejudices against an art associated with pagan gods and rites had less influence. In the thickly wooded mountains and isolated valleys

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8 Benigni, ' Ravenna ' in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VII, 663.

9 Maskell, *Ivories*, 96 ; Longhurst, *English Ivories*, Pls. 4, 24, 25.

10 Michel, *La Sculpture en France*, Vol. I, Part 2, p. 592.

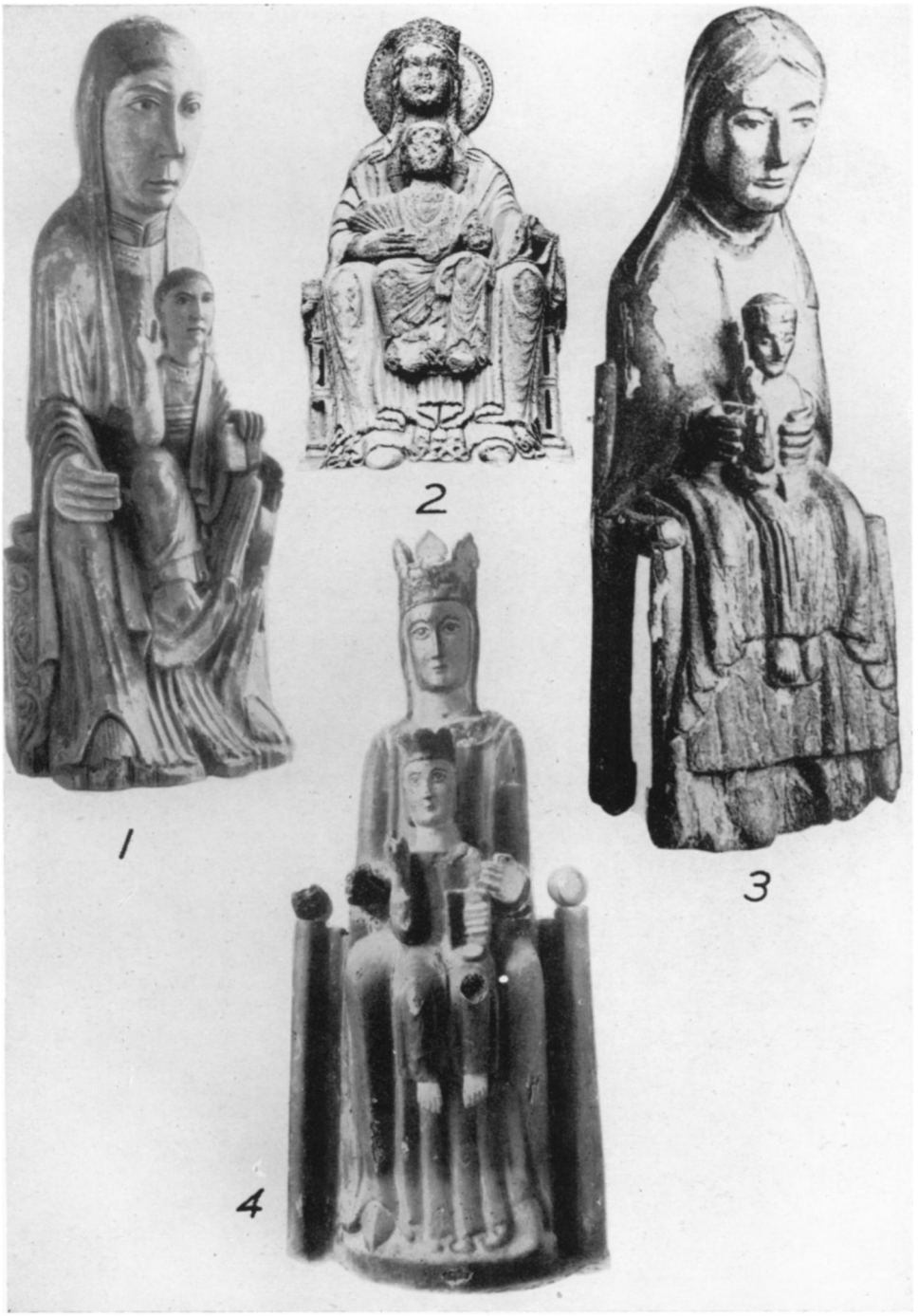
11 Henry, *La Sculpture Irlandaise*, Vol. I, 2.

12 Moran, ' Devotion to the B.V.M. in the Early Irish Church,' in *Selections from Publications of the C.T.S. of Ireland*, pp. 1-36.

13 Illustrated in Sullivan, *The Book of Kells*, Pl. 2.

14 Henry, *La Sculpture Irlandaise*, Vol. I, 20; Romilly-Allen, *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, pp. 382, 392.

15 Henry, *La Sculpture Irlandaise*, Vol. I, 150-1.



12*th CENTURY MADONNAS.*

FIG. 1.—*Wood, Catalonia ;* FIG. 2.—*Notre Dame de Chartres, Portail Royal ;* FIG. 3.—*Wood, Flemish ;* FIG. 4.—*Wood, Catalonia*

THE KILCORBAN MADONNA.

Preserved in St. Lawrence's, Tynagh, Loughrea, Co. Galway.

traditions of classical sculpture lingered.[16] From Clermont-Ferrand in Auvergne, comes the record of the first statue of the Madonna.

The story goes that Etienne II, Bishop of Clermont (937-970), commissioned one of his clerics, Aleaume, a celebrated architect, goldsmith and imagier to design and execute a shrine for a relic of Our Lady. Aleaume, inspired perhaps by some Roman ivory leaf or Byzantine textile in the cathedral treasury, fashioned a marvellous reliquary. It was a statue of the Deipara carved in wood, covered with plates of gold. Unfortunately, this famous reliquary no longer survives but a drawing in the Codex Claromontanus (preserved in Clermont-Ferrand library) illustrates the enthroned Deipara swathed in Roman robes, aureoled and veiled. In the cathedral inventory the image is significantly entitled " Majestas Sanctae Mariae."[17]

News of Aleaume's reliquary spread. Pilgrims coming northward from Bourbonnais, or tramping southward over the rough mountain roads of Velay, where filled with wonder at the golden Madonna seated on her gem-studded throne. Through a large rock crystal set in the Romanesque ciborium above her head they could even glimpse the relics, a fragment of Our Lady's dress and a morsel of the pallium which she had woven for the saintly Bishop Bonnet, whose fame had drawn their footsteps to Clermont. Artists from the neighbouring districts found inspiration in the novel art form. Soon there appeared on the altars of local churches copies of the statue. These were carved in wood plated with gold, silver or base metal, and venerated for the relics they contained.[18] Through Aleaume's reliquary the Byzantine ' Majesty of Mary,' became the basic type of the romanesque Enthroned Madonna.

With the renaissance of monumental sculpture the 12th century architects took the Deipara as a model. To the Mother they gradually ceded the place of honour on the church facades hitherto reserved to her Son. There, to-day, we see her, enthroned in stone above the porches of the great cathedrals which mark out the pilgrim routes through France to the tomb of St. James in Spain. Witness, among many others, the Madonna enthroned above the Royal Portal at Chartres. This statue is believed to have been the gift of Archdeacon Richer who died in 1150 A.D. (Pl. XXXIII: 2).

Although no contemporary copy of Aleaume's Madonna survives there are still preservd some 12th century versions of the old statue. In Salamanca Cathedral there is the famous Virgen de la Vega whose plated silver and bronze robes glittered with enamels of the type made in Limoges in the late 12th century.[19] In the Romanesque church of Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne there is another richly gemmed and crowned Madonna whose silver cloak is fastened by a great cameo of Trajan's time.[20] At Velay and Thuir (Roussillon) are more humble virgins clad in pewter and lead.[21] In Berlin Museum there

16 Michel, *La Sculpture en France*, Vol. I, Pt. 2, 559-600.
17 Vloberg, *La Vièrge et l'Enfant dans l'Art francais*, Vol. I, 101-3.
18 Mâle, *L'Art Religieux du XII^e Siècle en France*, 286.
19 de Lozoya, *Historia del Arte Hispanico*, Tomo I, 443, Fig. 542.
20 Vloberg, *La Vièrge et l'Enfant dans l'Art francais*, Vol. I, 104.
21 *Ibidem.*

is a famous Madonna made in 1139 by the priest Martino.[22] But the Auvergne Madonna proper, of which some dozen examples remain in central and southern France, was carved for country people from the wood of their own forests.[23] It was essentially a rustic, solemn-faced Madonna, whose chief decoration was bright paint.

Most European countries to-day still preserve in museums or old churches Enthroned Madonnas of native workmanship dating from the 12th or 13th century. In the treatment of the drapery and design of the chair some of these display a classical influence. Others represent a homely, country Madonna and appear to be creations of independent, self-taught artists. But wherever these statues were made the early impetus from France is uncontested.[24]

In Ireland mediaeval church burnings and especially repeated waves of iconaclastic persecution since the 16th century systematically destroyed nearly every wooden statue in the country. Yet there have come to light within the last few years three Enthroned Madonnas carved in wood and originally polychromed.

Of these the Kilcorban Madonna appears to be the earliest (Pl. XXXIV). It is of oak and measures three feet high. The back of the wood is hollowed out from the shoulders to the worm-eaten base. The head is flat behind as though the figure were designed to be placed against a wall. On her high-backed chair, humble souvenir of the Byzantine throne, the Madonna sits up stiffly. Her large head, set on a thick wide neck, leans slightly forward from the much-too-narrow shoulders and short, sunk chest. The arms, disproportionately short above the elbows—another characteristic of Romanesque sculpture—are tightly sleeved to the wrist. The left hand is pressed flatly against the cloak whose curved folds drop over the low sides of the seat. Between her widely parted and sharply defined knees—a classical borrowing and a sign of early work — the Holy Child sits forward almost eagerly. His arms are unfortunately missing, and the circlet crown and the back of the head are much damaged. But part of the hair behind the right ear and along the nape of the neck remains to show the treatment of fluted ripples which once covered the head like a tight fitting skull cap. (Fig. 1.) It is an early technique popular in manuscripts,[25] on ivories,[26] bronzes,[27] and stone sculptures[28] of the 11th and 12th centuries. The most significant feature of the face with its little nose almost rubbed flat is the charming smile. This smile is unusual in Romanesque groups where the Child, in appearance nearly always old beyond His years, resembles the mature and serious Madonna.

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22 Maskell, *Wood Sculpture*, 229.

23 Mâle, *L'Art Religieux du XII^e Siècle en France*, 287.

24 Maskell, *Wood Sculpture*, 214, 230.

25 Zimmerman, *Vorkarolingische Miniaturen*, Pl. 246.

26 Longhurst, *English Ivories*, 31, 147.

27 Heads on crooks of 11th century **Inisfallen** and **Lismore Crosiers.**

28 Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*, Vol. VIII, plates 1196, 1198.

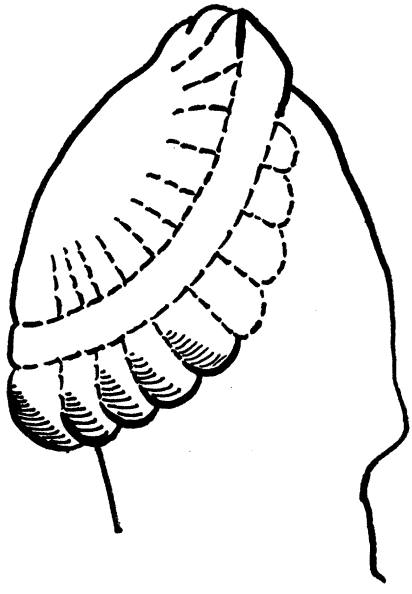

FIG. 1.—*Head of Kilcorban Holy Child showing treatment of hair.*

Unfortunately the statue has been coated over with many layers of modern paint. Where the paint is thin or has flaked away traces of gold glitter on the Madonna's hair and crown. Under the brown paint of the robe there is black or very dark blue laid on a gesso base.[29] Beneath the muddy yellow colour that mars both faces, traces of a fine matt flesh tint appear, while on the lips touches of bright carmine show through the modern dull red.

Viewed from the front as well as from the side the Kilcorban Madonna is very much a block of wood (Pl. XXXIV). From head to shoulders and from arms to side the carving is close and compact. The folds of the drapery are sculptured in shallow relief. These features, in addition to the large head, narrow shoulders, and sharply defined knees already noticed, are characteristic of 12th century Madonnas. They are all clearly illustrated in statues of this period from Switzerland, Flanders (Pl. XXXIII: 3), and Catalonia (Pl. XXXIII: 4).

While possessing in common with these dated statues certain acknowledged features of Romanesque art the Kilcorban Madonna has at the same time its own individuality. The man who made it had a fine selective sense; hence his arrangement of the forms in an almost abstract way lifts this figure above the commonplace. The form itself is not a means of expression, as in the classical world, but it is here a strength or order on which the sure, clear lines as of hair and drapery exist almost on their own value as pure decoration. The features and expression suggest that the artist was at least inspired by a chosen model. The soft contour of the face, contrasting with the usually mature visage of the continental Romanesque Madonna, is that of a young girl. The wide, archaic eyes are serious, but the lips unfold in a smile, noticeable especially from the side. From this aspect also the curving lines of neck, arm and cloak bind the forms together into a united design (Pl. XXXIV, left).

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[29] I am indebted to Dr. F. Henry for, amongst other things, pointing out that old blue paints often tend to darken considerably and to be sometimes indistinguishable from true black.

At a time when the Kilcorban Madonna might have been made there was a great resurgence of spiritual and artistic forces in Ireland. This movement, under the leadership of native churchmen and especially of St. Malachy, enormously increased church discipline, stimulated devotion and inevitably led to a widespread enthusiasm for church building. Connaught, during the reign of Turlough Mor O'Connor, also High King of Ireland, stirred with the same religious and artistic fervour and a tremendous movement of native creative art developed in the West, one, however, which was to be so swiftly eclipsed by the advancing tide of Norman invasion.

Meanwhile St. Malachy, the great reformer, had brought Ireland into contact with St. Bernard and the Cistercian monks of France. From Mellifont in County Louth the Cistercians spread throughout Ireland. Wherever they went they brought with them their efficient drainage systems, their new building methods and advanced agricultural schemes.[30] In addition, they also brought a great devotion to Our Lady, inculcated in their Order by St. Bernard, whom Dante called the chevalier of the Blessed Virgin—"Il suo fedel Bernardo."[31] From Citeaux and through St. Bernard's famous sermons on the union of Mother and Son, devotion to the Virgin Mother spread.[32] In accordance with the early austerity of the Order sculptures and images were at first forbidden in Cistercian churches: 'Cruces tamen pictas quae sunt lignae habemus.'[33] Thus the Cistercians had no Madonna sculpture in their own early churches but it is claimed that the fervour inspired by St. Bernard's teaching indirectly influenced the artist-builders and explains the popularity and persistence of the Enthroned Madonna in monumental sculpture during all the 12th and early 13th centuries.[34]

The Premonstratensians, a branch of the Augustinians from Prémontre, near Laon, who came to Ireland in the wake of the Norman invasion, also popularised the Cultus Marianus. This devotion was laid down by their founder, St. Norbert, as one of the five particular ends of their Order. In 1215, the Premonstratensians built a monastery on Loch Cé, County Roscommon, through the generosity of Archdeacon MacMoylin O'Moilchonry of Elphin.[35] In a window of that monastery ruin there stood, until the last century, a stone slab on which was sculptured in clear relief an Enthroned Madonna and Ghild (Fig. 2).[36] Now, unfortunately, only a drawing remains but the Madonna's pose, the voluminous drapery, the flowering rod of Jesse in her right hand, as well as the ringed pillars of the throne[37] and the Holy Child's toga-like attire indicate the influence of Romanesque Continental art.

30 Gilbert, *Chartularies of St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin*, Vol. I, p. xxiv.
31 Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXI, I, 102.
32 Mâle, *L'Art Religieux du XII^e Siècle en France*, 426.
33 Sharpe, *The Architecture of the Cistercians*, 13.
34 Vloberg, *op. cit.* 101.
35 Weld, *Statistical Survey of County Roscommon*, 236.
36 Grose, *The Irish Penny Magazine*, 1833, p. 357.
37 *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*, Vol. VI, Pl. 741; Vol. X, Pl. 1486.

FIG. 2.—*Carved stone once in the Abbey of the Holy Trinity, Loch Cé, Roscommon.*

The Dominicans had a special claim on the Blessed Virgin. To her intercession St. Dominic attributed the victory over Albigenses at Muret in 1213, and the triumph of the Faith attacked by that heresy.[38] In 1224, the first members of their Order reached Ireland.[39] Unfortunately almost nothing is known of their early history here. The fact that a 13th century Waterford friar, "jofroi de Watreford de l'ordene as freres prechors lemendre," was a master of Greek, Arabic, Latin and French indicates that highly educated men were chosen for the Irish mission.[40] Before the middle of the century the Dominicans reached the West where they founded a convent in 1214 at Athenry, whence they spread through the province. Eventually, in 1445, they reached Kilcorban. There they may have found the Romanesque Madonna—the work of a local artist, familiar with outside ideas through native monastic schools. On the other hand, the statue may be the creation of a 13th century Dominican in Ireland influenced by Romanesque traditions from the Continent.

In the history of European art the Dominicans hold an important place. Like the Cistercians and Franciscans they gradually set aside their first stern rule prohibiting rich churches and sculptured images. By the middle of the 13th century they too built splendid churches ; and soon their convents offered an incentive field to contemporary artists. Many of the preachers

38 La Cordaire, *Vie de St. Dominique*, 118.
39 Coleman, in *Appendix* to O'Hayne's *Irish Dominicans of the 17th Century*, 22
40 Coleman, *op. cit.*, 43.

themselves executed works of art. Brother Pascal of Rome made a paschal candlestick for Santa Maria in Cosmedin and sculptured a sphinx at Viterbo which is signed and dated 1286 A.D. A generation earlier friar Hugh Ripelin of Strasbourg (†1268) was renowned as a painter. But their greatest mediaeval glory in this realm is Fra Angelico, whose work is still regarded as the highest embodiment of Christian inspiration in art.[41]

As educated men coming to Ireland on a special mission it is likely that, in order to promote a cult so popular from the 12th century among religious communities abroad, they would introduce statues of a type with which they were already familiar. The ravages of the invasion and the destruction of monastic schools left the new monks much to do in the restoration and decoration of churches.

Kilcorban was a poor chapel in the beginning of the 14th century.[42] If it lacked an image when the Dominicans took possession, they may have brought the Enthroned Madonna, already old and perhaps already venerated, from one of their older foundations. The chapel became known later as "capella Beatissimae Deiparae sacra."[43]

The Kilcorban Madonna is important because of its quality and early date. It is also especially interesting because of its resemblance to another Enthroned Madonna which came from Athlone, some thirty miles north of Kilcorban. Because of this geographic and artistic relation between the two statues and in order to show that the second Madonna did come from an adjacent district it is necessary to give some account of its background in the 17th century, when it is first mentioned in history.

The Athlone Madonna.

Once again in 1630 the religious houses in Dublin had been closed by order of the government. Among these was the newly-founded Poor Clare Convent on Merchant's Quay. So in January of that year Sister Cisly Dillon, the young Abbess, resolved to make a new home for her disbanded community. From Dunkirk to Nieuport and thence to Dublin her efforts to found a house for Poor Clares, exclusively Irish, had hitherto met with ill luck and finally suppression.[44]

She and her sister, Mary Joseph, were daughters of Sir Christopher and granddaughters of Sir Theobald Dillon, the first Viscount, whose vast estates spread through Mayo, Sligo, Galway and Roscommon.[45] Down to the Dillon country by the shores of Loch Ree above Athlone now came the young nuns. There, " on a solitary neck of land without inhabitants " six miles above the town, " a poor house was built for their habitation."

In its quietness and isolation they believed that they had at last found a

41 Mandonnet, 'Order of Preachers' in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XII, 367-8.
42 *C.D.I.*, Vol. V, 1302-7, p. 223.
43 De Burgo, *Hibernia Dominicana*, 234.
44 *The Poor Clares in Irish History*, pp. 7-10. A lecture by Rev. Brendan Jennings, O.F.M. Typescript in Franciscan Convent, Galway.
45 Burke, *Peerage*, p. 809.

[Facing p. 176.

THE ATHLONE MADONNA.

FIG. 1.—*Frontal view.*

FIG. 2.—*Side view.*

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THE CLONFERT MADONNA.

FIG. 3.—*Side view.*

FIG. 4.—*Frontal view.*

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refuge from the world and persecution. Their strict observance of St. Clare's Rule, their manual labour and continual prayer, their silence and their mutual charity inspired many postulants to join them. The fame of their heroic lives drew such distinguished visitors as Lady Wentworth and the Duchess of Buckingham from Dublin, sixty miles distant, " to see them and to hear their delightful conversation."[46]

All went well for ten years. Then in 1641 the protest by arms for civil and religious liberty broke out and soon the Dillon country was involved in the war. Just before the soldiers, many of them gaol-birds, arrived the nuns escaped to an island in the lake. The troopers remained for three days and nights in the convent and there passed the time " devouring all the provisions of ye poor sisters and making their sport and laughter of the altars, pictures, ornaments and sacred things which were therein . . . they lastly set fire to the convent and burnt it with all that was therein, onely that God preserved miraculously the tabernacle in which the most Blessed Sacrament was when they prayed before it . . . and likewise an old *image* of Our Lady, both made of wood."[47]

Here one wonders how these 17th century religious had in their possession an early Gothic Madonna and how they saved it from the flames. Did they carry the statue and the tabernacle with them in their flight from the convent down to the boats a short distance away? Or did their rescuer, Sir James Dillon, uncle of the mother abbess, also save these treasures from the wreckage a few days later?[48]

The Poor Clares ultimately reached Galway where some of them formed the nucleus of the present house on Nuns' Island in whose cloister the statue of Our Lady of Bethlehem is now preserved. It is of oak and measures three feet high (Pl. XXXV: 1, 2). Like the Kilcorban Madonna this figure is also very much 'in the block'; but the carving is freer and the decoration more stressed. Curves are less emphasised and there is instead an insistence on vertical lines which gives the statue a sense of weight and shows at the same time a distinct Gothic tendency.

The head of the statue resembles the long head of the Kilcorban Madonna and it is set on the same type of thick wide neck ; but at the sides the hair and veil knit gracefully with the main mass of the head and achieve a better line. The shoulders are broader, more upright and show no sign of that Romanesque stoop, noticed on the Kilcorban Madonna. The figure is longer to the waist and the modelling is more natural. The hair falls in loose strands. The nose, unfortunately, is damaged. The eyes, eye-brows and lips are spoiled by uninformed repainting and therefore the whole expression is distorted. Yet the contour of both faces is similar and there is a definite

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[46] Annals of the Convent, Poor Clares, Galway. MS. in the Convent, Nun's Island, Galway.

[47] Annals of the Convent, Poor Clares, Galway, p. 9.

[48] Burke, op. cit., p. 809 ; Gilbert, *History of the Irish Confederation and War in Ireland*, 1641-3, Vol. I, 85.

FIG. 3.—*Head of Athlone Holy Child showing treatment of hair.*

resemblance especially about the lower part. About the lips lingers the very same smile.

The artist of the Athlone Madonna also uses the form—in what seems a peculiarly Celtic way—as a structure for the free play of design. Over strong knees the drapery falls in graceful plastic folds. This type of fold, borrowed from classical sculpture, was popularised through the art fostered at Cluny, the great Benedictine monastery in Burgundy. Cluny possessed many priories along the pilgrimage route to Compostella[49] and during the 12th century it ranked second only to Rome as a centre of Christian culture. In the Athlone Madonna the treatment of the Cluny fold has become a work of conscious design especially at the sides where the deeply hollowed curves and crisp zig-zag drapery, edging over the side of the seat, lose their character of folds and become pure decoration.

The Holy Child is supported by the Madonna's left hand—so stylised as to surrender realism to design. The Infant resembles His Mother in features and expression and the folds of His tunic repeat the pattern of her dress. Both arms are missing. The hair is treated in the same very decorative technique of fluted ripples, already noticed on the Kilcorban Child (Fig. 3). The face has the same softly modelled contour of cheek and chin (Fig. 4). In it the little nose is also rubbed almost flat, perhaps by the reverent touching of the faithful. Like the Kilcorban Child its most striking feature is the smile. Here, the resemblance is so marked as to suggest that the artist of the Athlone statue must have seen the earlier figure or else he must have been familiar with a very similar type of statue possessing these affinities of pose, features, and expression.

The original polychrome of the Athlone statue appears to be worn away and the whole figure has been repainted in recent years. Beneath the dark green surface paint of the Madonna's drapery traces of blue appear. The

[49] Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*, Vol. I, note to pp. 72, 175.

flesh tints have also been retouched and there are different shades of red on nostrils and lips. The smooth texture of the Child's face suggests a gesso base to the paint but elsewhere the grain of the wood is fibrous and streaky, as though it had been exposed to the weather or even immersed in water. The Poor Clare religious in Galway, who pass on the tradition of the statue, say that at the time of the destruction of the convent in the 17th century, the statue " was in the lake." But of its origin they know nothing.

FIG. 4.—*Head of Athlone Holy Child.*

During their stay at ' Bethlehem ' the Poor Clares were in touch with the Athlone Franciscans whose convent, first built by Sir Henry Dillon in A.D. 1241, had been re-established in 1626 at Killinure some miles further down Loch Ree. There, Father George Dillon, uncle of Sister Cisly, the Poor Clare Abbess, was Guardian.[50] After the Dissolution it came into the possession of Sir Lucas Dillon, chief baron.[51] In the early part of the following century the site was held by Sir James Dillon.[52] This close connection of the Dillons with the Athlone Franciscans and with their neighbours, the Bethlehem Poor Clares, may account for the fact that these 17th century religious obtained possession of such an old statue, when Sister Cisly Dillon came to build the convent on her grandfather's estate by Loch Ree.

The Athlone statue must have been carved by someone who had seen the Kilcorban Madonna or who was familiar with a very similar type. Athlone is only thirty miles distant from Kilcorban. Therefore it would seem that there was a distinct type of carved wood Madonna in that region. The Athlone Madonna is later than the Kilcorban figure. From this it would seem that the type persisted and developed from Romanesque to early Gothic times.

The Clonfert Madonna.

In addition to these two Madonnas, belonging to the same school, there is a third figure resembling them both in several ways. It is now preserved in Eyrecourt chapel and is said to have come from the old Cathedral of Clonfert, a few hundred yards away, and midway between Kilcorban and Athlone.

[50] Jennings, *The Four Masters*, 102 ; Gilbert, *A Contemporary History of Affairs in Ireland*, Vol. I, 135.

[51] *Appendix to 13th Report, D.K.P.R.I.* (Fiant Elizabeth), No. 4206.

[52] Jennings, Brussels MSS. 3947, *Analecta Hibernica*, Vol. 6, 101.

The Clonfert Madonna is not shown in solemn distant majesty representing a theological doctrine. Here the Mother of God has become also Mother of the Human Race. She has left her remote throne and stands, as it were, within reach of all, like the living Virgin of Nazareth clasping her Child who turns to caress her with his hand (Pl. XXXV: 3, 4).

The change of sentiment, the tenderness here displayed reflect that humanism which was introduced to art through the influence of St. Francis. By reconciling nature and religion, by finding in passing things an image of the eternal, by indicating the beauties of nature, of love and of life as manifestations of Divine grace, St. Francis stands as the forerunner of the Renaissance.[53] By contemplating Christ's humanity men came to know His Mother, not as the distant Majesty but as the merciful mother of mankind. Then the artists, faithful exponents of the people's sentiments, conceived those charming, lifelike Madonnas which, from the 13th century, stood gracious and smiling at the portals of Western Europe's greatest churches.

The Clonfert Madonna was carved under such an early Gothic influence. Made of oak, it measures four feet high and the back is deeply hollowed. The pose, a firm balancing on both feet, the clasp of the Child in sharply bent wrist, the elongated fingers, the deeply-curved drapery folds at the side and the zig-zag edge down the front, are all signs of early Gothic work. Were the statue carved in the full 14th century it should be less narrow in outline and the drapery should be treated in a broader, freer way. We should also expect to find in the figure some suggestion of the affected pose called the 'Gothic twist,' or 'Ivory bend,' an attitude of studied grace that was the chief characteristic of the 14th century Madonna. The Clonfert Madonna, on the contrary, is quite erect and 'frontal.' Beneath the robe there is no hint of movement, which is another early sign. The narrow form, erect carriage, shallow, pleated robe and mantle folds curving deeply at the side are characteristics of late 13th or very early 14th century figures. The pose and general style of the drapery may be compared, for want of a better example, with a stone Madonna at York Minster which is dated to c. 1300.[54] But there the form has movement from side to side and the drapery is so deeply cut as almost to violate the understructure. The Clonfert Madonna has a static quality. It gives the impression of being one underlying block and no attempt has been made to suggest movement. The form itself has no plastic eloquence ; it is rather, as in the Kilcorban and Athlone Madonnas, a scaffolding upon which the artist's innate love of design plays in the rich treatment of the drapery's shallow vertical lines and deep horizontal curves.

The Holy Child is fully draped as was customary in the early 14th century. Unfortunately most of the face and the top of the head have been restored with plaster. The right arm is broken off and the two feet are worn

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53 Thode, *St. Francois d'Assise et Les Origines de L'Art de la Renaissance en Italie*, Vol. I, 68-69.

54 Prior-Gardner, *Medieval Figure Sculpture in England*, 330.

away. The Madonna's arm has been sawn off. Other parts are decayed and the appearance of the whole figure has been spoiled by recent repainting. On this statue there are at least ten coats of paint. Beneath the surface blue of the robe there are yellow, white, dark red, white, vermillion, brown, white, pink, and lastly yellow upon a gesso base. The flesh tints have also been retouched. Through the modern dull pink on the cheeks appears a hint of rose ; and under the dark red of the lips shine specks of bright vermillion. Two black patches blot out the eyes and the broad forehead is now mostly covered with paint to simulate hair.

In spite of these disadvantages the fine quality of the head is still apparent. By concentrating upon it all the skill and knowledge of his craft the artist has achieved a naturalism which he disregarded in the figure. The head is long and very similarily shaped to that of the Athlone Madonna. It also is set on the same type of thick wide neck that comes straight down into the chest. The arrangement of the veil and circlet crown are treated in similar manner. This resemblance is best seen from a side view (Pl. XXXV: 3). The prominent eyes, the straight forehead, but especially the soft contour of cheek and chin recall the Kilcorban Madonna. About the mouth (now spoiled by paint which does not follow the natural line) there is the same expression noticed on both other Madonnas (Pl. XXXV: 4).

Conclusion.

Even to a casual observer, there is between these three statues, coming from districts not many miles apart, a definite facial likeness comparable to a family likeness. These faces which resemble each other bear no resemblance to any statues so far found in other parts of Ireland. They therefore seem to represent a distinctly local type of statuary. The fact that no other similar examples survive is easily accounted for. For more than three hundred years the churches, abbeys and convents which might have given them shelter, have no longer existed. Such material does not long survive the rigours of a damp climate. Wood, unlike bronze or stone, is inflammable ; and we may be certain that numbers of such statues which escaped the destruction of images in the 16th century, suffered, like the Virgin of Trim, the same fate as did the interior church furnishings at the hands of Cromwellian soldiers in the following century. But from these few resembling Madonnas we are induced to conclude that there was during the early Gothic period a school of religious wood carving in western Ireland. The faces of our Madonnas show the artists to have had a refined and spiritual conception. From their treatment of form, rigid but strong, and their flair for decoration it is possible to conceive of them as the inheritors of the manuscript and High-Cross tradition.

During that early period we know that Irish artists, whether working on vellum or stone, readily embraced and adapted Byzantine and Carolingian ideas.[55] Later, from the work of the 12th century characterised by technical

[55] Henry, *La Sculpture Irlandaise*, Vol. I, 195.

skill such as is shown on the sculptured portal of Dysert O'Dea church and on the bronze-gilt reliquary Cross of Cong, it is clear that contemporary artists endowed with manual dexterity of a high order were also ready to receive and adapt new influences from outside. These influences came in, it would seem, and as our statues testify, with the religious Orders whose monasteries were to replace the native schools, shattered by the Norman invasion.

With regard to the survival of the Clonfert Madonna it is interesting to find that during the suppression of the monasteries the Augustinian Abbey, De Porto Puro, united to the Bishopric of Clonfert, never surrendered to the King.[56]

In this way images at Clonfert may have been spared during the first wave of iconoclasm. Local tradition says that later, during Cromwell's campaign, the cathedral church was pillaged and the statue partly mutilated. The hacked-off arm of the Madonna may bear out this oral testimony. After that its history remains a blank.[57]

Other examples of the Madonna are known in Ireland, and a wealth of similar religious statuary must once have existed in the country. This is clearly shown by the comprehensive iconographical nature of the extant representations of Christ and the saints. These it is proposed to treat of in later articles.

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[56] Blake, "Exchequer Inquisition of 1607," in *J.G.A.H.S.*, Vol. 4, p. 231.

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