

Adam's Two Wives

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The two sculptured figures of a hexagonal boxwood statue base at The Cloisters (Figure 4), sometimes mistaken for Adam and Eve, but usually referred to as Eve and the serpent, are actually a late fifteenth-century Flemish manifestation of a long and complex exegetical tradition concerned with what is basically a divorce, Biblical style. Close examination reveals that the figure to the observer's left of the Tree of Paradise, who not only dares to eat the forbidden fruit but keeps two apples in reserve as well, is certainly human and is indeed the disobedient Eve; she seems to lie prone merely to comply with the sculptor's composition. Her companion, however, peering at her through human eyes, has no limbs, the vertebrae of a reptile, and the uncanny undulations of a serpent. That this half-human creature is the first wife of Adam – Lilith – so frequently represented during the Middle Ages, is what I hope to demonstrate.

It is an unfortunate misconception of some modern observers that both the clergy and laity of the Middle Ages had an unsearching and rarely critical approach to the Bible. On the contrary, most of what remains to us of the theological writings of the Middle Ages are attempts to comment upon or to interpret the Bible: attempts to lift the veil of often ambiguous language in order to reveal the hidden meanings of the authors. Some of the resulting commentaries or exegeses were often used as ancillaries to the reading of the Holy Scriptures, while others were themselves frequently elevated to the stature of sacred literature, as were the writings of the Church fathers. For the historian of medieval art, such texts often provide the solutions to seemingly inexplicable representations or to complete iconographic programs. Such is the case with the subject of the Cloisters pedestal, which is the plastic expression of a *midrash*, or Jewish commentary on the Old Testament adopted by Christian authors.

What perplexed the commentators was what appeared to be an account in Genesis of a creation of woman that preceded the creation of Eve:

And God created man to his own image: to the image of God he created him: male and female he created them. And God blessed them, saying: Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth. (Genesis 1:27-28)

For the commentators, a literal reading of the passage revealed that the creation of

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1. *The Temptation. Detail of a Moralized Bible, French, XIII century. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Cod. 2554, f. 2*





4. *Eve and the female-headed serpent by the Tree of Paradise. Statue base, Flemish, late XV century. Boxwood, height 3½ inches. The Cloisters Collection, 55.116.2*

woman was, in fact, coincident with that of man, and that she was presumably created from the same substance, earth, and was to rule with man over the creatures of the earth. This was inconsistent with the account later in Genesis (2:21-22) of the creation of Eve: that she had been created after Adam, out of his rib, and as a “help meet” for him.

By the beginning of the third century A.D. interpretations of the Scriptures and rules of conduct, many of which were already centuries old, were compiled and edited and became part of the sacred law of the Jews in the form of the *Mishnah*, comprising a portion of the Talmud. In the six books of the *Mishnah* many aspects of life and of the doctrines of the faith came under the scrutiny of the Jewish scholars; among these was the nature of impurities and uncleanness. It is here, in the chapter *Niddah* (“menstruous woman”), that we find mentioned the half-human female creature Lilith, described as a winged demoness of whom women must beware. The appear-

ance of Lilith in a chapter on impurities is not without scriptural justification, although the description of her physiognomy does not occur in Isaiah’s prophecy of the devastation of Edom, to which the author of *Niddah* may have been responding:

And the martens shall meet with the jackals, and one goat shall call to his fellow; only the screech-owl shall rest there, and find for herself a place to repose. (Isaiah 34:14)

In the Hebrew version the word for screech-owl is *lilit*, which appears as “Lamia” in the commentaries of St. Jerome, as “screech-owl” in the King James version of the Bible, as “night hag” in the Revised Standard Version, and as “sibyl” in other translations. Because the *Mishnah* is merely the compilation of ancient anonymous teachings, we can presume that this interpretation of Lilith predates the third century A.D. The name *lilit* was often confused with the Hebrew word for night, *layelah* (lai’la). But in addition to this semantic confusion, there are other reasons for her



association with creatures of the night, such as the owl, because in *Niddah* she is described as winged; there is said to be a fragment of a Canaanite plaque of the eighth century B.C. that refers to her as the “flying one”; and several of the earliest representations of her (for example, Figure 1) during the Middle Ages picture her with wings. As a nocturnal demoness Lilith came to be associated with the temptation of men who slept alone, and with harming infants and pregnant women.

By the tenth century (and the oral tradition was probably much older) the legend of this harpy-like demoness of the night was fused with the double account of the creation of woman in Genesis to produce the figure of Adam’s first wife, Lilith. This conflation occurs in the *Alphabet of ben Sira*. (Ben Sira was one of a great number of Jewish mystics, called Kabbalists, who tried to achieve a more intimate and personal relationship with God, especially through a better understanding of the circumstances of creation.) According to

the *Alphabet*, Lilith was the first wife of Adam, created from the earth at the same time as he, and designated by God as the coruler of the creatures of the earth. In time Lilith demanded that she be more than Adam’s companion, but her pleas for more rights and less subservience were unanswered by the Lord and ignored by Adam. Unyielding in her requests, the plaintive Lilith pronounced a magical incantation, and disappeared from Paradise. The companionless Adam asked God to bring her back; God sent three angels – Senoi, Sansenoi, and Samengeloph – after her, instructing them to tell the disobedient Lilith that one hundred of her wicked children would be destroyed each day until her return. But Lilith refused to come back. She did not take lightly the destruction of her young, and avenged their death by becoming a predator of infants and pregnant women. Thus, the creation legend had been neatly embroidered to incorporate Lilith’s former associations with evil deeds of the night.



5. *Virgin and Child, above a scene of Eve and the female-headed serpent by the Tree of Paradise. Northern French, early xv century. Boxwood, height 15 inches. Victoria and Albert Museum*

When, prompted by the loneliness of Adam, God created Eve, as related in Genesis, Lilith became filled with jealousy and desired to further avenge her fate. She consorted with the devil and took on the form of a serpent, with the features and long hair of a female (fulfilling her earlier reputation as a seducer). It was in this form that she became the serpent in the Garden of Eden, associated with the fall of man in Genesis.

The legend of Lilith was not merely the preoccupation of scholarly Jewish mystics, but was widely disseminated by Christian writers in the form of Latin commentaries on the Bible (such as those written by Petrus Comestor in the second half of the twelfth century). These inspired innumerable representations of her, from the Middle Ages on, as the temptress-serpent. There is also evidence of her popularity among the masses, in the form of amulets, or charms to protect the bearer from witchcraft or mischief. Several amulets designed to ward off the evil Lilith appear in the printed edition (Amsterdam, 1701) of an eleventh-century Kabbalistic writing, the *Book of Raziel*. One of the amulets is illustrated in Figure 2 to indicate how literally the legend of Lilith could be taken. The two portions of text are the names of seventy angels (above the diagram) and incantations to Lilith (below the diagram); the bold lettering above the lower inscription tells how the mother and infant will, by the name of God, be protected from the dangers described in the text. The hieroglyphic-like rectangular diagram between the inscriptions is the most curious part of the charm. In the compartment on the right we first read the inscription *Adam, Eve, Chatz Lilit* (“Adam, Eve, away from Lilith”). Below this admonishment are three symbols, labeled, from right to left, *Senoi, Sansenoi, and Samengeloph*, with several magical words, such as *chai*, the Hebrew word for the number eighteen as well as for the word “life” (the *Book of Raziel* was well known as a source for numerology during the Middle Ages). In the other compartment the warning also appears, with three different symbols, again identified as the three angels sent

by God. Such a diagram, in addition to appearing in a book, may also have been painted on a wall or doorway near the chamber of a mother and her newborn child.

There was, to be sure, a certain amount of resistance to the legend of Lilith as Adam's first wife, and this resistance may help to explain some of the representations of the temptation that do not depict the serpent as half-human. One such denial of the Lilith story occurs in a famous book of the Kabbalah, the *Zohar*, or "Book of Splendor," a work of the early thirteenth century in the form of conversations between rabbis, not unlike Plato's *Symposium*. In a section on the creation of man, Rabbi Simeon says the following:

Moreover, we may regard the words "Let us make man" as conveying this: to the lower beings who derived from the side of the lower world God disclosed the secret of how to form the divine name Adam, in which is encompassed the upper and the lower, in the force of its three letters *alef*, *dalet*, and *mem* final. When the three letters had come down below, there was perceived in their form, the name Adam, to comprehend male and female. The female was fastened to the side of the male, and God cast the male into a deep slumber, and he lay on the site of the Temple. God then cut the female from him and decked her as a bride and led her to him, as it is written, "And he took one of his sides, and closed up the place with flesh" [Genesis 2:2]. In the ancient books [such as the *Alphabet*], I have seen it said that here the word "one" means "one woman," that is, the original Lilith, who lay with him and from him conceived. But up to that time, she was no help to him, as it is said. "but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him" [Genesis 2:20]. Adam, then, was the very last, for it was right that he should find the world complete when he made his appearance.

It would be instructive to examine the content of one instance of Lilith's appearance that is approximately contemporary in date with the Cloisters statue base. It is a fresco of about 1420 by Giovanni da Modena in San Petronio, in Bologna (Figure 3). Here the Crucifixion divides the picture into two parts. Christ is crucified on a tree that is at once the Tree of Life, *lignum vitae*, from which the cross was



ABOVE, LEFT:

6. *Virgin and Child, with the female-headed serpent beneath.* French, XIV century. Marble. Musée du Louvre. Photograph: Les Archives Photographiques d' Art et d' Histoire



ABOVE, RIGHT:

7. *Virgin and Child, with Eve (?) beneath.* French, XIV century. Musée du Louvre. Photograph: Marburg



8. *Virgin from the choir screen of Strasbourg Cathedral. French, 1247-1252. Sandstone, height 58½ inches. The Cloisters Collection, 47.101.11*



made, and the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise – a connection made in the legends of the True Cross, which traced the history of the tree from the Garden of Eden to the Crucifixion. To the right of the tree are Adam and Eve tempted by a female-headed serpent, which is coiled around the trunk. And together with these three Old Testament figures are the prophets of the Old Law, including Moses with the tablets. To the left are the apostles and ecclesiastical figures of the New Law with Mary who, catching the blood of Christ in the chalice, represents both the Mother of God and the Church. Thus the iconographic program of the fresco is a sophisticated and harmonious one, centering on the visual and theological connection of the Old Testament with the New: the parallel between the Garden of Eden and the site of the Crucifixion and, more important, between Eve-Synagogue (*synagoga*) and Mary-Church (*ecclesia*).

The sculptor of the Cloisters base was dealing with a similar program on the pedestal and the statue that once surmounted it. Although only impressions in the wood and a hole on the top of the base indicate where the missing statue was originally mounted, we can speak with confidence about the nature of the lost piece because a similar carving with the statuette intact is preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figure 5). This sculpture, said to be of the early fifteenth century from northern France, less sensitively executed than the Cloisters piece, reveals by analogy the subject matter of our statue. It too contains on its base a half-human serpent confronting Eve at the Tree of Knowledge, here surmounted by a New Testament theme, the Madonna and Child. The two components of the sculpture are not disparate in subject matter but, as was often the case with Gothic consoles and the statues above them, they are intimately related and dependent on one another for the realization of the theme. The placement of the Madonna and Child above the temptation indicates how the fall of man is the literal foundation of the Incarnation, for without original sin there would have been no need for Christ's life on earth. The superposition of the Virgin and Child is also a tri-

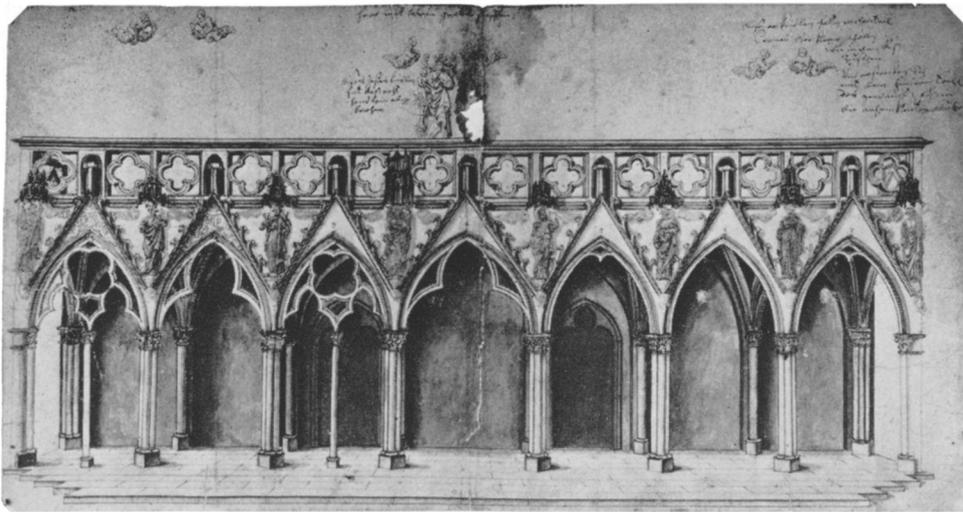
umphant attitude: it symbolizes the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New, and the triumph of the Virgin and Child over the forces of evil, best represented by man's original sin. And it is a symbol of the redemption.

These carvings, however, represent a much broader spectrum of relationships, which are not at first obvious to us. It is not inappropriate, for example, that the Virgin and Child are associated with the key agent of the temptation, the serpent, for there is scriptural justification for the antagonism between serpents and woman and her progeny. Speaking to the serpent after Eve has succumbed to its advice, God says:

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. (Genesis 3:15)

In addition to suggesting Lilith's predisposition for harming infants and pregnant women, this passage also provides the prophecy of a conflict between the Virgin and the serpent, literally represented since the Middle Ages by the Madonna (usually holding the Child) with her foot on a serpent's head.

Two instances of this iconography during the fourteenth century are especially relevant to the Cloisters and Victoria and Albert objects. The first (Figure 6) is a marble statuette in the Louvre that shows the serpent Lilith trampled under the feet of the Virgin. In the second example (Figure 7), the Virgin and Child surmount an almost embryonic, tadpole-like Eve. Certain sinister details, such as her teeth and the sinuousness of her body, which seems to lack feet and taper like a serpent, are more suggestive of Lilith, or of an extremely unusual – if not unique – conflation of the two figures. It is likely, however, that this apparent duality is a highly individualistic interpretation of writings referring to the Virgin as the “new Eve,” for here, eating an apple and not having her head bruised by the Virgin, the figure may be symbolic of Eve. In the Victoria and Albert sculpture the relationship is similarly fulfilled, as it probably originally was in the Cloisters pedestal and its missing statue, by the position of the Virgin above the serpent Lilith.



9. Choir screen of Strasbourg Cathedral. Drawing by J. J. Arhardt, about 1660. Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart

The Virgin has also been frequently associated with trees. Often she is represented, with Christ, seated by the Tree of Life, or between the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life; at other times the *arbore della vergine*, or fruitbearing tree, itself symbolizes the virgin mother, even in her absence. It is indeed ironic that a tree having so many inauspicious associations should become the symbol of Mary's fecundity, but many writers, St. Bernard (1091-1153) among them, expressed the difference between the two trees as the *radix amaritudinis Eva* ("the tree of the bitterness of Eve") and the *radix aeternae dulcedinis Maria* ("the tree of the eternal sweetness of Mary"). The original state of another object in the Cloisters collection (Figure 8), known from a seventeenth-century drawing (Figures 9, 10), indicates that the Virgin and Child from the choir screen of Strasbourg Cathedral was associated with a rosebush, the scent of which was symbolic of the sweetness of the Virgin, while the redness of the roses was likened to the blood of Christ.

The medieval mind would have made still another conceptual connection between the tree on the Cloisters pedestal and the statue of the Virgin and Child above: that of the tree of Jesse and its culmination in Christ. The twelfth-century cross attributed to the Eng-

10. Detail of Figure 9



11. *Joran Rex and Eliachim. Fragment of an orphrey. English, XIV century. Embroidery, silk and metal threads, height 25 inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Martin, L50.11*



lish abbey of Bury St. Edmunds (Figure 13) makes an explicit visual play not only on the story that the cross was raised on Adam's burial place, Calvary, but on a passage from Isaiah:

And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall be the root of Jesse, whom standeth for an ensign of the people. (Isaiah 11:1,10)

In interpretations of the Latin text of the first verse, *Et egreditur virga de radice Jesse et flos de radice eius ascendet*, *virga* was frequently taken to mean Virgin, *radix* to mean tree, and *flos* to be Christ. The medieval iconographer interpreted the prophecy literally, and composed what was, in essence, a genealogical tree, starting with Jesse (the genealogy being drawn from Matthew 1:1-16). Examples of this iconography may be seen in the original setting of the Strasbourg Virgin, as well as in other objects in The Cloisters. The first (Figure 11) is part of an ecclesiastical vestment, an orphrey, depicting two members of Christ's family tree, Joran Rex and Eliachim. The other (Figure 12) is the high back of a chair, representing twelve crowned figures who are surmounted by their descendants, the Madonna and Child.

Eve, the last component of the composition of the pedestal, offers the most interesting visual relations with the statue above. In medieval commentaries on the Bible, comparisons between Eve and Mary are innumerable. Often the comparisons are so fundamental as to call the Virgin the "new Eve," as St. Bernard did, or to note that the salutation *ave* ("hail," as in *Ave Maria* . . .) is *Eva* spelled backward, symbolic of how the Virgin reversed the course set by Eve in the Garden of Eden. And, as we observed in the Bolognese fresco, Eve often symbolizes the Old Testament and the Synagogue, while Mary represents the New Testament and the Church.

One aspect of the connection between Eve and the Virgin seems to predominate. It was not uncommon, even in the art of the earlier Middle Ages, to draw visual parallels between Eve offering Adam the forbidden fruit and the Virgin offering the infant Jesus a comparable attribute, especially an apple. In an at-

12. *Chair decorated with the Tree of Jesse. French or Flemish, XV century. Oak, height 82 inches. The Cloisters Collection, 47.101.67*

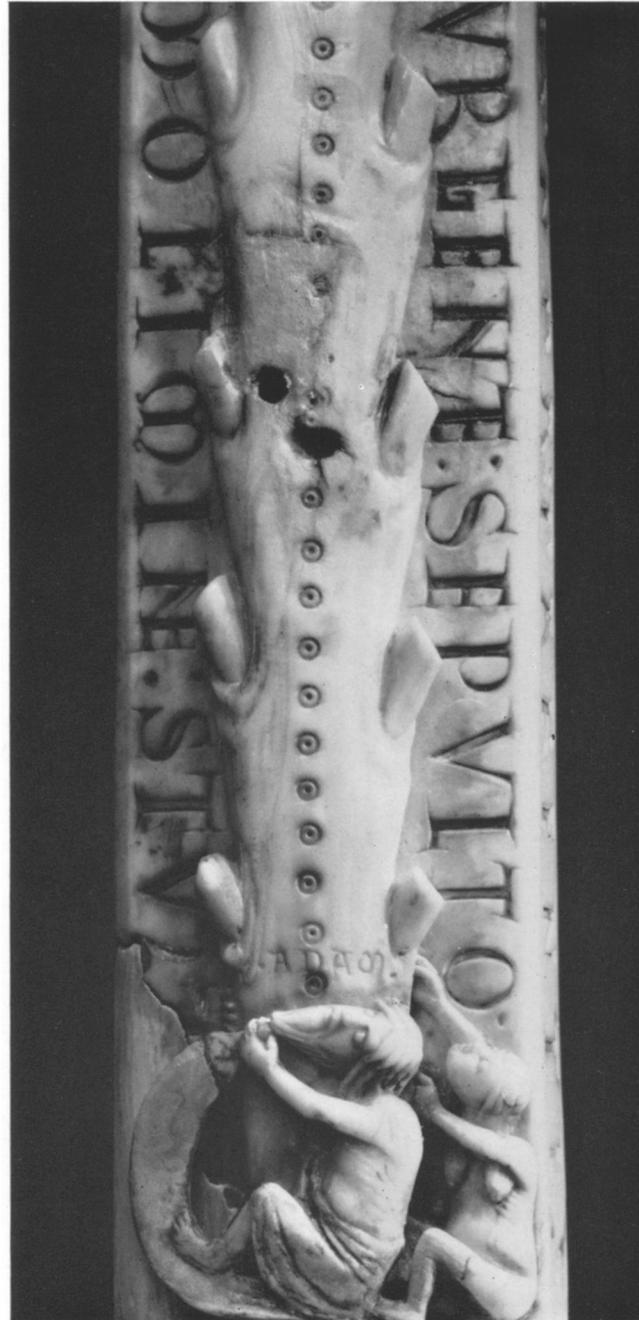


tempt to humanize the representation of the Mother and Child, the Virgin is often pictured offering her breast to the Child, as is the case in the Victoria and Albert carving, and thus probably in the original Cloisters statue. This more domestic motif is reminiscent of the temptation in the garden. Indeed, the sculptor of the Cloisters pedestal has realized the analogy in the form of a visual pun, which imbues the object with a character that is not present in the Victoria and Albert sculpture. For it is not merely fortuitous that when we look at the Cloisters pedestal it is difficult to distinguish the apples that Eve holds in her left hand from her breasts. Although Eve's breasts are visible from the side of the sculpture, the orientation of the object is most certainly from the front, and the confusion of the spherical forms again draws our attention to the analogy between the Virgin and Eve in an imaginative fashion.

Christ, too, had counterparts in the Old Testament, where there are prefigurations of the events of his life as well. Among the many types for Christ, Adam was a popular figure during the Middle Ages. Christ is often called the *Adam novus*, or "new Adam" (as in the works of Gerohus Reicherspergiensis, 1093?-1169), and such parallels were built into the New Testament, for example in St. Paul's comparison: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:22). While in the Cloisters statue base only the confrontation of Eve and Lilith is represented, Adam's presence may be implied, especially through Eve's holding the apples as if waiting for him. The parallels between the Virgin and Child, and Eve and Adam are thus realized.

There are still other themes of redemption and souvenirs of man's fallen state. For instance, the alternating four- and six-petaled flowers that decorate, as in precious metalwork, the upper and lower perimeters of the base may not be merely decorative, but may be part of the imagery chosen to remind us of the Virgin, and of the vivid comparison made by St. Bernard and others between Eve the thorn and Mary the rose, reflecting the belief that Eve and the Virgin were indeed of

13. Detail of the cross shown in Figure 1 on page 411



the same substance, but that the nature of the one was prickly and irritating, and perhaps an accident of nature, while that of the other was soft, soothing, and a deliberate creation.

The apples are a more obvious mnemonic device. Only the word "fruit" occurs in the Genesis account of the temptation; the forbidden fruit was taken to be an apple only in interpretations of scripture. Latin commentators not only tried to select a deliciously sensuous fruit that would warrant the adjective "forbidden," but they also indulged in a play on words, because the Latin for apple is *malum* – the same word as for evil. And if we view the base in the light of medieval numerology, it is revealed that the seven apples carved on the front of the base (four in the tree, and three held by Eve) may well refer to the writings of some fifteenth-century authors, such as John Gerson (1363-1429), who enumerated seven sins stemming from the Tree of Knowledge: pride, envy, wrath, avarice, sloth, unchastity, and drunkenness.

For medieval man, redemption was real and imminent, and in the Cloisters carving he could visualize the original sin, understand man's fallen state, and read the signs of the coming salvation. For modern man, these levels of interpretation are more difficult to discern. But in our effort to peel back each layer

of meaning and examine it both independently of the whole composition and in relation to it we have, to some extent, had a "medieval experience." In allowing each element of the Cloisters pedestal to trigger any number of responses in us, be they visceral or cerebral, we have undergone reactions that are similar to those experienced by the pious of the fifteenth century.

Too often we underestimate the sophistication with which the medieval artist approached the demands of his subject. Content, which was usually prescribed to him, presents the artist with a problem that he resolves by bringing the fullness of his talent as a sculptor or painter to bear on the extra-artistic concerns of iconography. Such is particularly the case with the sculptor of the Cloisters statue base, who in his understanding of the intimate relationship of style, composition, and subject matter meant to engender free associations in the mind of the beholder. Such an approach is not peculiar to this object: it is a commonplace in the art of the Middle Ages. Although the coalition of conceptual and visual phenomena reaches an exceptional degree of perfection in the Cloisters statue base, the appreciation of this object may be used as a touchstone for understanding similar works of medieval art.

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