



Museum
Schnütgen

**THE
SAMSON-MASTER
AND HIS AGE**

Romanesque sculpture
in the Rhineland

VISITOR
INFORMATION

Exhibition at the Museum Schnütgen, Cologne,
in cooperation with the Cologne Cathedral Treasury

6 June 2018–6 January 2019



Maria Laach, Benedictine Abbey



Romanesque Capitals from the Collection of the Museum Schnütgen

The capital held a special significance in the Romanesque period as an object of artistic design. The selection on exhibit here demonstrates the diversity and exceptional creativity of Rhenish capitals created before and around the year 1200. Decorative elements depicting figures and plants were already being used together in the 12th century: on the double capital inv. K 245, dragons with rooster heads face off, ready for battle, while a bird and a centaur are caught up in scrolling tendrils on the double capital inv. K 660. Around the year 1200, the decorative elements began to be arranged more spatially and the sculptural execution became even more virtuoso, as can be seen on the double capital inv. K 229 depicting opposing dragons in the midst of acanthus leaves. The plants and figures have taken on a strongly three-dimensional aspect and are interwoven with one another in a complex design. The ornamentation has been adapted to conform to the shape of the respective capital, as is demonstrated by the round capital inv. K 3 and the distinctly block-shaped capital inv. K 220 b. The level of expressiveness that can be achieved using only plant elements is demonstrated by the capital inv. K 4, which despite its monumentality is executed with the finest level of detail.



Part of a Tympanum with Dragons in Tendrils

Rhineland, c. 1200
Museum Schnütgen, inv. K 126

This relief, together with an upper element, once formed a tympanum, probably over the narrow door of a church. The stone slab is covered by a dense lattice of tendrils with dragons nibbling on grapes depicted on either side of the central stalk. Dragons in scrolling tendrils were an extremely popular motif in Romanesque stone sculpture. However, they can often be found in illuminated manuscripts and metalwork from this period as well, one example being the enamel panel inv. G 545 (on exhibit in the north gallery of the Church of St. Cecilia), which was created around 1200.



John the Baptist as Intercessor (?) from the Parish Church of St. Johann Baptist

Cologne, early 13th cent.
Museum Schnütgen, inv. K 261

This relief was discovered in 1947 in the war-damaged church of St. Johann Baptist in Cologne. Next to the sculpture of Samson, it is one of the highest quality Rhenish sculptures of the late Romanesque period. Traces of antiquity are still evident in this work, in particular in the close-fitting robes of the figure and the contraposto-like arrangement of the legs. Even though the figure does not have wings and is turned to the right, it has often been identified as the angel of the Annunciation. However, similar to the figure of St. John the Baptist on the left hand of the judging Christ in the earlier tympanum from St. Pantaleon in Cologne (on exhibit above this sculpture), the figure is probably the patron saint of the church, St. John the Baptist, portrayed in his role as intercessor with Christ.



Fiddler

Cologne,
late 12th cent./early 13th cent.
Museum Schnütgen, inv. K 163



Fragment of a Relief Figure

Rhineland (Cologne?),
late 12th cent./early 13th cent.
Museum Schnütgen, inv. K 162

These reliefs were once attributed to the Samson-Master; however, distinct stylistic differences distinguish them from the Samson from Maria Laach Abbey. The lasting influence of ancient Roman sculpture is clearly palpable in the fiddler wearing courtly robes through the arrangement of the figure in a box frame. The relief may stem from the former cathedral of Cologne, belonging to a cycle representing King David and his musicians that once adorned that church. It is possible that the somewhat larger, frameless relief fragment of a figure in an animated stance was once part of this cycle, for example as a dancer. However, this has not been conclusively established.



Head of a Knight (St. George?)

Cologne, c. 1200
Museum Schnütgen, inv. K 109

The head is covered by the towering helmet of a knight, which was once sumptuously adorned with precious stones or decorative metal trim. The knight probably represents St. George, patron saint of the former collegiate church of St. George in Cologne. The head fragment was discovered there around 1928 during restoration work on the church. It may once have belonged to a monumental statue of the saint in a suit of armour.



Samson

Samson-Master, c. 1220
Maria Laach, Benedictine Abbey

As their real names are unknown, the sculptor and the artists from his workshop have been named after this sculpture. The figure is made up of two fragments, head and torso, and depicts a youth with long hair who is forcing open the jaws of a (heavily damaged) lion with his bare hands. It is thought to be a portrayal of the youth-lion slayer from the Old Testament book of Judges (14:5-6). A console is attached to the back of the head, which is ornamented with large leaves and grapes. The head was once attached to the building by means of this load-bearing element with a horizontal surface. It is not known for which area of the abbey church or convent this sculpture of Samson, which was probably once a complete figure, was originally intended.



Writing Angel and Devil

Rhineland, c. 1210/20 with 20th-cent. alterations
Bonn, Münster

The two figures were designed to form an interrelated pair. The devil with the gaping mouth sitting on a dragon forms the counterpart to the dignified angel, whose feet are resting on a small, covering demon. The sculptures are carved almost fully in the round and can thus be viewed from the front and from either side. The curved shape of the back of the block gave rise to the assumption that they were originally choir stall ends. Thus, the angel and devil once waited, poised to take note of any good or bad conduct displayed by the canons sitting in the choir stalls.

The figures were modified extensively several times over the course of the 20th century. This can clearly be seen by comparing the figures with the photograph taken around 1900.



Capitals from the Portal of the Porch of the Abbey of Maria Laach

Samson-Master, c. 1220
Maria Laach, Benedictine Abbey

Although the capitals have been replaced by copies at the abbey itself, they were once part of the portal of the porch of Maria Laach. Known as the “paradise” and sumptuously ornamented, the porch formed a sort of cloister, leading to the west portal of the abbey church. At the main stepped portal, the capitals joined together to form a frieze, which is replicated here in the exhibition. The two figures tearing at their hair from the left side of the portal are composite creatures, half human and half dragon. They are depicted wrestling with one another – a similar capital is also on exhibit at the Cathedral Treasury. Next to them is a small devil who is shown writing down the “peccata populi”, the sins of the people, on a roll of parchment. On the other capitals, branching tendrils and foliage twine around mythical creatures and dragon figures. Figures and plants are blended together, as can clearly be seen on the capitals with the foliate masks from the right side of the portal.



Matthias Joseph De Noël (1782–1849),
Self-Portrait

Cologne, c. 1825
Kölnisches Stadtmuseum,
inv. HM 1930/559

In 1826, Matthias Joseph De Noël became the first curator of the Wallrafianum, the first municipal museum of Cologne, which was founded around the collection of Ferdinand Franz Wallraf. In this self-portrait, he portrays himself as a scholar: he is seated before an open book, in front of him appears a sphinx as a symbol of wisdom. The capital adorned with tendrils, shown upside down here, propping up his book, still exists today. It displays the typical style of Rhenish architectural decoration around 1200.



Fragment of a Capital
with Tendrils

Rhineland, c. 1200
Museum Schnütgen, inv. K 651



Oath Reliquary

Lower Saxony (?), early 13th cent., modification 17th/18th cent.
Museum Schnütgen, inv. G 16

As the vanquisher of evil and prominent Old Testament precursor of Christ, Samson enjoyed great popularity, even in the secular realm. The oath reliquary is an example of the blending of religious and secular, political life. Oaths, which played an important role in legal proceedings in the Middle Ages, were made with the invocation of God as a witness. In view of this functional interrelationship, it is plausible that the medallion depicting the battle between Samson and the lion would be accorded a prominent position at the centre of the long side of the base. The lion slayer was placed in typological juxtaposition to a depiction of Christ, which has since been lost. A bone relic in a rock crystal cylinder can be found on top of the three-tiered roof of the reliquary. It is assumed that the rock crystal cylinder was formed into a smooth dome so that the hand could be placed in the immediate vicinity of the relic to reinforce the declaration being made.



Exhibited in the Cologne
Cathedral Treasury

Six Double Capitals

Cologne, c. 1200
Cologne Cathedral Treasury

On exhibit at the Cathedral Treasury is a group of six double capitals that are closely related to those from the portal of the porch of Maria Laach Abbey. The figures, animals and mythical creatures are skilfully arranged on the double capitals as symmetrical counterparts. This is clearly demonstrated by the capital depicting a Blemmye, a mythical creature who lacked a head and bore its facial features on its chest. The creature crouches at centre with its hands on the napes of two dragons that are nibbling at its beard. Absolutely virtuoso is the three-dimensional execution of the stone carving on the capital with the two lions and corner figures. The corner figures are supporting themselves on the edge of the capital, bending forward acrobatically with one leg extended to the back. The capitals have been in the possession of Cologne Cathedral since the early 19th century; their provenance has yet to be determined.



A catalogue (German only) has been published:

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Skulptur der Romanik im Rheinland,**
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