

## Opening Virgin (Vierge Ouvrante)

Shira Brisman



Fig. 1 Vierge Ouvrante, ca. 1300 (opened)

This object is an example of a type of small-scale Christian moveable-part medieval sculpture called a *Vierge Ouvrante* (“Opening Virgin”). This particular sculpture is 14.5 inches (36.8 cm) high, carved from oak, and dates from the early fourteenth century. It is today in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its exterior depicts the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, holding her son. The sculpture can be opened along the center of the Virgin Mary’s body to reveal six painted scenes flanking a Christian Trinity. In the scene of the Trinity, an enthroned God the Father holds at his knees a cross

on which would have hung Christ's body topped by the dove of the Holy Spirit (these elements are now missing).

Gold-painted wooden statues of the Virgin were often displayed on altars within monasteries or were used in private devotional contexts in the homes of the wealthy. In some cases a *Vierge Ouvrante* may have operated as a tabernacle or container for the actual Host. Even when the object did not literally contain the Eucharist, it visually—and mechanically—demonstrated the way in which the believer gained access to the Christian God by means of his incarnation in Jesus and through the observant person's ingestion of Jesus in the Host, understood to be the body of Christ. Appealing to lay beholders, the *Vierge Ouvrante* offers an image of the cycle of creation and redemption and the cohabitation of male and female within a single form.

The exterior of the sculpture, depicting the Christ child sitting on his mother's lap, gives visual expression to a wide range of metaphors associated with the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. The breastfeeding Virgin gives life to her divine Son through the milk flowing from her body. Because Mary also symbolically represented the Christian Church, or "Ecclesia," the dwelling of Christ within her body signified the availability of the divine to the human world through the offices of the Church. The image predicts the consumption of Christ's blood and body in the Eucharist and symbolizes the spiritual nourishment of all who profit from the offerings of the Church.

The inward turning of the Mother and Child to one another introduces another context in which their rapport may be understood: that of a bridegroom to his bride. The Virgin and her Son are the connubial fulfillment of the relationship described in the Song of Songs where the birth of Christ is likened to a groom coming forth from his bridal chamber. The slit down the center of the object's body refers to Mary's role as *porta mundi*, the gateway through which Christ passed into the world, and as *porta coeli*, the gate through which the elect will pass into heaven.

When opened, the Madonna offers the consummation of "the Beatific Vision," the intuitive knowledge of God in the form of the Trinity. The Trinity is presented here as the Throne of Mercy. God the Father is seated on a throne and offers forth his sacrificed Son for humanity's redemption. Christ is in the foreground and thus most available to the viewer. He is placed at the level of his Father's knees, a spatial reference to his descent into the flesh in which he "lowered" himself so as to take on human form. Christ is figured doubly in the *Vierge Ouvrante*: on the exterior he sits elevated on his mother's lap; inside he is brought down, resting on a lower register of the sculpture on the lap of God the Father. The availability of the crucified Christ alludes to his redemptive gift of his body for the nourishment of all believers.

The painted scenes flanking the Trinity emphasize the aspects of Christ's life that are intoned in the sculptural iconography: his coming into the world, his sacrifice, and his epiphany or revelation to humankind. The upper register pairs the iconography of the Annunciation with the Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth.<sup>1</sup> In the middle register, scenes of the Nativity (representing Christ's birth in a manger surrounded



Fig. 2 Vierge Ouvrante (closed)

by his parents and livestock) and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple place the divine child on an altar-like surface in allusion to Christ's eventual sacrifice and to the elevation of the Host. In the bottom register, both the Adoration of the Kings and the Annunciation to the Shepherds democratize human knowledge of Christ's Incarnation. In the scene of the Adoration, the three Kings, coming from throughout the globe, worship the Christ child in his manger. In the Annunciation to the Shepherds, angels appear to humble shepherds to announce Jesus' birth. Both stories demonstrate convictions about the "universal" availability of the message of Christian salvation.

The tactile process of opening the Virgin's body dramatizes a qualitative sequence of knowledge acquisition, both by revealing that the Trinity dwells within the Virgin, and by offering the devout practitioner an object that can be touched, opened, and held—making concrete the invisible and heavenly realms. The Trinity within emerges as the *Vierge Ouvrante* is opened. This invites the beholder to bring God closer and in doing so to recognize the potential for intimate physical union between believer and divinity. The sculpture represents the cognitive and bodily processes of accepting God and being received by God that constituted Christian religious experience in this medieval European material context.

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## Citation Guide

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## Notes

1. In the scene of the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her the good news: she is to be the mother of Christ. In scene of the Visitation, Mary visits her older cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth's child leaps in her womb, recognizing that the child in Mary's womb is the Jesus.