

## **The Medieval Frame of Monumental Portal Sculpture: Pedestals, Canopies and Niches (12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries)**

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The main aim of the project is to carry out, for the first time, a study of the frame of medieval monumental sculptures. This project is based on the hypothesis that just like painted panels, monumental statues are placed within a frame which marks the boundaries of the representation, and which can intensify the physical presence of the saint sculpted. It can also serve the purpose of transmitting the experience of a holy or divine presence in the mind of the beholder, and define the status and understanding of the main subject. Concentrated from its origin on the portals of buildings, Gothic sculpture is dependent on the architectural wall; it is always designed in relation to the wall of the building behind it. It is endowed with very marked horizontally framing



elements which have never been studied. Each statue has a support (a pedestal) and an overhead cover (a canopy). The pedestal can take several forms, the most impressive being that of the marmoset, a small crouching figure directly supporting the statue, or nestled under a console. The canopy takes the form of micro-architectures with extremely varied typologies. Sometimes each statue of the same jamb is isolated, with a base, a canopy and a concavity (or niche) of its own. In other cases, the sculpted frame has a unifying function, with a frieze canopy or decorative motifs creating a continuous link between the statues. The forms and functions of these peripheral sculpted elements vary according to the period and the geographical area, but also according to the intentions of the commissioner and the power of communication sought with the beholder. In addition, pedestals and canopies could be an exceptional source of information on style, iconography and on the circulation of artists and the diffusion of formal and technical innovations.

To carry out this research, a corpus of monumental statues of the 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries will be gathered. Indeed, monumental statues associated to architecture (absent since the end of Antiquity) reappeared and has been involved from 1130 onwards in the portals of religious buildings. These represent symbolic and strategic locations, where the sculpted iconographic program is concentrated. At first in the form a column-statue, the

monumental statue then becomes in *ronde-bosse*, in contact with the background wall or placed within a niche as early as 1220. A true artistic and technical revolution, this major innovation will be described and its implications on the development of statue-making and its framing elements will be explained. Sculptors experimented several formulas to integrate the statue to the building until the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, after which the relationship between the statue and its surrounding architecture becomes more stable.

The Western sphere of penetration of so-called Gothic art will be considered, therefore essentially France, the lands of the former Germanic Roman Empire (Switzerland, Germany, Belgium), England, and the Iberian Peninsula. Italy will be excluded from the study because of the very specific character of its monumental sculpture during the period under consideration.



*Scope of sites to be considered*

The peripheral elements of monumental sculpture will thus be integrated into art history research, providing new results in three different but complementary fields. By considering a sufficiently long period, it will be possible to identify the genesis of several technical innovations, to monitor their diffusion accurately, and to identify and explain the moments of breaks. The diachronic analysis will also make it possible to give convincing results on the interactions between the statue and its frame, a field of research that is new and included in studies concerning the rhetoric of the frame and margins. Finally, the analysis of the devices (artifice strategy) implemented to give the statues an illusion of life and to create a strong communicative experience with the beholder would be proposed for the first time for the Middle Ages.

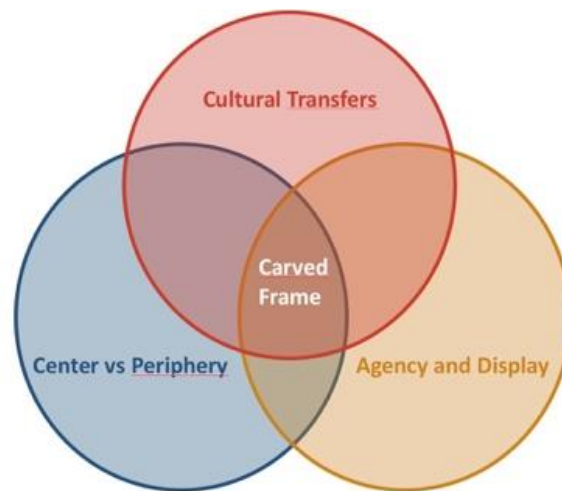
The research corpus will be analysed according to three fields:

**1. Cultural Transfers: artistic geography, technical and iconographic innovations and their impacts.** It will be possible to trace a history of the medieval pedestal and canopy, to target the places of technical and formal innovations, to visualise circulation networks, and to correlate the results obtained with those already established from the study of the central statue.

**2. Centre vs Periphery: Dialectic between the central statue and its frame.** Whenever a pedestal is included, the dynamics of its relationship with the statue will be investigated. Does the pedestal-marmoset take on the role previously attributed to the corbels of the Romanesque period, to highlight social marginality by moving from a non-visible location (several meters high) to an immediately accessible location (just above the head of the beholder) ? What additional information does the pedestal provide in terms of the saint represented, even when

the pedestal itself does not figure but takes the form of a polygonal or rounded base molded, decorated with ornamental motifs in relief or narrative scenes? The relationship it has with its statue must be questioned. Moreover, what are the roles and functions of the canopies? The project will investigate the manner in which the upper structure isolates the statues or unify them. As with recent research on the margins and frames of paintings, the level of interaction between the central image and its periphery will be questioned.

**3. Agency and Display: Interactions between the commissioner, the object with its carved frame, and the beholder.** The notion of Agency defines the network of interactions between the commissioner, the artist, the object and the beholder. The strategic artifices staged by the commissioner and the artist through the frame of the statue will be analysed. The evolution of sculpture in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries clearly indicates a move towards realism, in which the sculptors' aim would have been to create a living, vivid presence of the saint represented at the portal. Does the frame of the sculpture increase the impact of the real presence by reinforcing its emotional power with the beholder?



The study of the peripheral sculpture of the monumental statue is one of the greatest shortcomings in the history of the monumental sculpture of the Middle Ages. To take these elements into account will bring an impulse to research in the history of medieval art, and will be made possible through the three interdisciplinary fields of research described above. With a systematic approach, the elements of the medieval statue's frame will be considered as strategic artifices indispensable to the staging of the statue itself.

