



DECEMBER 2011

Turning Stone into Cloth

Unknown 14th-century artist, French
Virgin and Child



VISIT THE BMA

and see the marks
left by the carver's
tools on the surface
of *Virgin and Child*.

Unknown Artist (French). Detail, *Virgin and Child*. c. 1330-1350. Limestone with traces of paint. 69½ x 21½ x 11¼ inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Saidie A. May, BMA 1942.46. Photo by Mitro Hood.

About 650 years ago, a sculptor carved *Virgin and Child* to adorn a column or niche inside a church in France. With an assortment of chisels, rasps, and files, he transformed a slab of limestone into a graceful Queen of Heaven. As if by magic, the rigid hard stone takes on the appearance of a soft cloak that is smoothed over the Virgin's shoulder, draped across her body, gathered together at her hip, and then allowed to fall freely in a cascade of folds.

The sculptor probably started with a shapeless block of stone. He wielded a heavy chisel to knock off large chunks, then "roughed out" the figures of *Virgin and Child* with the claw-like teeth of a different tool. Using even smaller chisels, he defined the ins and outs of the fabric, digging deep into the stone to produce pockets of shadow. Rasps and files allowed him to sharpen the cloak's hem and create a pattern of beautiful lines that twist and turn all the way from hip to ankle. With still finer tools, he made curly hair, a crown, and the feathered wings of the bird that the Christ Child holds in his hand.

While the folds of the Virgin's cloak are elaborate, her pose is quite simple and compact. A staff that originally extended outward from her right hand has broken off as has the tip of her right foot. But the rest of the sculpture has survived the years remarkably well. Traces of original blue and red paint on the cloak and gown suggest that they were once brightly painted to bring a spot of color into a darkened church.

CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

For many hundred years, artists have created full-length sculptures of the Virgin and Child out of stone or wood. (To see examples, Google "Virgin and Child sculpture" and click on the Images tab.) Observe and discuss the different ways that sculptors have used the folds of the Virgin's cloak and robe to demonstrate their skill as carvers. Experiment with various art materials to create a figure draped in cloth with multiple folds.

PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.



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