

A CATALAN WOODEN ALTAR FRONTAL FROM BENAVENT

The majority of the Romanesque wooden altar frontals of Catalonia are now preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts at Barcelona or in the Episcopal Museum at Vic. Single examples exist, such as that in the Biblioteca-Museu-Balaguer at Vilanova i la Geltrú, which may have been executed in Castile, the lost frontal from Sant Cugat del Vallès, and a fragment of a frontal, from which all figures are missing, in the Church at Sant Joan de les Abadesses. Of those preserved one of the most interesting, especially from the point of view of technique, is the frontal from Benavent,¹ now in the Museum of Fine Arts at Barcelona.

The Benavent antependium (Pl. I) has an interesting genealogy. Like the Farrera frontal² the frontal appears to have been found and brought to Barcelona by the antique art dealer, Dupont, who sold it to a local artist of Barcelona, Sr. Oleguer Junyent, from whom it was obtained in 1924 by the art collector Sr. Lluís Plandiura, who was then assembling a large and important collection of mediaeval Catalan art. In 1932 it passed, together with the remainder of the Plandiura collection to the Museum of Fine Arts in Barcelona (no. 3914). When the panel was first brought to Barcelona, it was covered with many coats of repaint (Pl. II), but these were removed by Sr. Junyent and most

1. Benavent (also called Benavent de Tremp) is a small hamlet in the mountains near the river Sant Salvador, about 25 kilometers southeast of Tremp. It lies on the road which goes from Artesa de Segre to Tremp by way of Isona, and belongs to the district of Tremp, county of Conca de Tremp, province of Lleida, and to the diocese of Seu d'Urgell. The parish church is dedicated to St. Margarita (ROCAFORT, *Lleyda*, 785-786; MADOZ, *Dic.*, IV, 184).

2. COOK, *A Catalan Wooden Altar Frontal from Farrera*, «Mediaeval Studies in memory of A. Kingsley Porter» (Cambridge Mass. 1939), 293-300.

of the original polychromy was found underneath, so that its present appearance is much as it was in the Romanesque period (Pl. 1).

Christ in Majesty is enthroned in the central compartment, flanked by four compartments containing twelve figures of Apostles and Evangelists. The Saviour with a cruciform nimbus is seated on a red rainbow arch. The dark green hair is tinged with red, and the large eyes have black pupils (Pl. III). The beard and mustache are not carved, but are painted in black. He is clothed in a red tunic and light brown mantle which falls over both knees. His right hand is raised in benediction and with the left He holds a yellow book, the open pages of which contain the following inscription in uncial letters: *IH(ESU)S AUTEM TRANSIENS PER MEDIUM ILLORUM³ ET DIXIT EIS: PAX VOBIS: EGO SUM DEUS (?) DIXIT (or DICIT).*⁴ The dark blue-green background is no doubt a later addition, since traces of light blue underpainting are still visible at the inner edge of the mandorla. The outer bevel of the mandorla is also blue.

A peculiar feature is the manner in which the Evangelist symbols are represented. In most of the Catalan frontals, the angel of St. Matthew appears outside the mandorla in the upper left spandrel and the eagle of St. John in the upper right. The symbols of Mark and Luke are placed below. Here, however, the symbol of St. John (Pl. iv, a), resembling a duck more than an eagle, with dark green feathers tinged with red, is placed in the upper left spandrel and is held by a kneeling figure, probably St. John. The lion with red head and body and green wings in the right spandrel (Pl. iv, b) is likewise held by a kneeling figure, supposedly St. Mark. The ox of St. Luke, with red body, is shown in the lower left, and the angel of St. Matthew, arrayed in green tunic, red mantle and green wings, crouches in the lower right but the two latter symbols are not held by the Evangelists.

The arrangement of the Apostles in the lateral compartments is no less unusual. Generally St. Peter appears in the upper register, immediately on the right of the Saviour while St. Paul is on His left.

3. LUKE, 4, 30: «*Ipse autem transiens per medium illorum, ibat.*»

4. LUKE, 24, 6: «*Dum autem haec loquuntur, stetit Jesus in medio eorum, et dicit eis; Pax vobis; Ego sum; nolite timere.*» Dr. E. A. Lowe has called my attention to the above lines from the Gospel of St. Luke, and on palaeographical grounds he dates this inscription in the thirteenth century. Josep Gudiol i Cunill reads the last line: *Ego sum alpha omega venite ad*, but it is impossible to decipher the last letters with absolute certainty.

But in this altar frontal St. Peter, with the double keys, black beard, green tunic and red mantle, is placed inconspicuously in the lower register and on Christ's left. St. Paul, in the extreme lower left corner of the panel, is even further removed from the Saviour. He holds a sword in the right hand and a book in the left and is represented with nimbus, red hair and beard, red tunic and blue-green mantle. Aside from SS. Peter, Paul, John and Mark, none of the remaining figures can be identified by means of attributes. They are shown with a nimbus and book and clothed either in a red tunic and blue-green mantle or a blue-green tunic and red mantle. There is little modeling about the eyes and mouth; the eyebrows, the almond-shaped eyes with large pupils, as well as mustache and beard, are indicated by color and are not carved. Three of the Apostles are beardless and the remainder have either red or black beards. All have light red hair and a spot of color on each cheek. Traces of paint here and there indicate that originally the background behind the figures was a dark red, but this is now almost white.

The mandorla and the narrow bands that divide the lateral compartments horizontally are decorated with lozenges and roundels carved in low relief. The same design, bordered by a twisted rope pattern, is repeated on the upper surface of the frame. Practically all of the original application of stucco has now disappeared. Faint traces of color show that the lozenges and roundels were once painted red and green.

From a technical standpoint, this antependium is unique since it is the only preserved Spanish frontal in which the figures are carved from a single plank of wood. In the wooden antependium at Vilanova i la Geltrú, the figures are also sunk below the level of the surrounding frame, but that frontal is comprised of three panels joined together. That this technique was not an original creation of a provincial Catalan artist is proved by the earlier Romanesque stone altar frontal at Avenas, in southern France,⁵ where the *Majestas Domini* and twelve seated

5. Cf. ECKART VON SYDOW, *Die Entwicklung des figuralen Schmucks der christlichen Altar-antependia* (Strassburg 1917), 37; A. KINGSLEY PORTER, *Romanesque sculpture of the pilgrim roads* (Boston 1923), 118, Pls. 11-13, who dates this around 1100; R. DE LASTEYRIE, *L'architecture religieuse en France à l'époque romane*, 2nd éd. by Marcel Aubert (Paris 1929), 684-5, Fig. 696; PIJOAN, *Summa Artis: Historia general del arte*, IX: *El románico, siglos XI y XII* (Madrid 1944), 180-82, Figs. 265, 266.

Apostles are also carved out of the background. The similarities in composition and technique between the wooden and stone examples are so close that one is forced to conclude that the use of sunk relief in the Catalan antependium was suggested by such a French model as the Avenas altar.

The curious iconographic feature, of the Evangelist holding his symbol, is rare in Romanesque art, but occasional instances may be cited in Catalan mural painting in which the symbol is held by an angel. On the frescoed ceiling of the small chapel of Sant Martí de Fenollar in Roussillon,⁶ the angel of Matthew has only a book but three other angels hold busts of the symbols in their arms as well as a book. An almost identical arrangement is followed in the semidome of the apse from Sant Climent, Taüll,⁷ where the angel of Matthew is shown with only a book and St. John clasps the eagle in his arms, half covered by the folds of his mantle. Below the figure of Christ, the bust figures of angels and the symbols of Mark and Luke are depicted within circular medallions. The angel on the left holds the lion of Mark by the hind legs and the angel on the right places one hand on the rump of the ox of St. Luke.⁸ In the semidome from Sant Miquel, Engolasters (Andorra),⁹ the angel of Matthew is omitted, but beneath the Pantocrator diminutive symbols of Mark and Luke, enclosed within medallions, are held by angels. The motive appears also in sculpture, four fragmentary reliefs supporting the tomb of St. Ramon in the crypt of the ex-cathedral of Roda de Isábena (Huesca)¹⁰ and in southern France on the sculptured tympanum of the south portal of the church of St. Aventin (Haute-Garonne),¹¹ where each of the

6. PIJOAN, *Pint. mur. cat.*, II, 15-16, fig. 11; GUDIOL I CUNILL, *Primitius*, I, 318, figs. 112, 113; KUHN, *Rom. Mural Painting*, 37, Pl. XXVIII.

7. PIJOAN, *Pint. mur. cat.*, III, 28, Pl. XI; GUDIOL I CUNILL, *Primitius*, I, 169, Figs. 33, 36, 37; POST, *Spanish Painting*, I, 94-95; KUHN, *Rom. Mural Painting*, 19, Pls. IV, V.

8. PIJOAN (*Pint. mur. cat.*, *loc. cit.*) states that the angel holds the ox of Luke by the tail, an error followed by Professor POST (*Spanish Painting*, I, 95), who believes that this represents an attempt on the part of the artist to sound a popular note of rustic humor. As a matter of fact, the angel places his hand on the rump of the animal and there is no evidence of *genre*.

9. GUDIOL I CUNILL, *Primitius*, I, 306, figs. 105, 106; POST, *Spanish Painting*, I, 107-108; KUHN, *Rom. Mural Painting*, 31, Pl. XX.

10. R. DEL ARCO, *La ex-catedral de Roda*, «*Bol. Soc. Esp. Ex.*», XXXI (1923), 35-36, reproduction; PUIG I CADAFALCH, *Arq. rom.*, II, 197; R. DE HURSCA, *Teatro histórico de las iglesias de Aragón IX* (1897), 153.

11. PORTER, *Rom. Sculp.*, IV, Pl. 508.



Pl. I. — Antependium from Benavent.
(Barcelona. Museum of Fine Arts.)



Pl. II. — Antependium from Benavent before restoration.
(Barcelona, Museum of Fine Arts.)



Pl. III. — Antependium from Benavent. Christ in Majesty. Detail.



PL. IV. — Antependium from Benavent. Detail.
a) St. John and symbols of Evangelists. b) St. Mark and symbols of Evangelists.

four angels holds the head of an Evangelist symbol. The fairly frequent appearance of this formula in the Romanesque art of Catalonia would indicate that it is a local iconographic feature which the artist of this antependium may have copied from mural painting, but it is impossible to determine whether the eagle and lion are held by Apostles or by the Evangelists SS. John and Mark.

Stylistically this is one of the most thoroughly Spanish of all the carved wooden altar frontals. Much of the local flavor is undoubtedly due to the use of polychromy and stucco, the abnormally short stature of the bodies and large feet. The elongated, egg-shaped heads with heavy black beards and narrow eyes are almost Moorish in type. Such features, as well as the mediocre quality of the carving, the arbitrary arrangement of the Apostles and the unusual iconography of the Evangelist symbols, show this to be by a provincial artist working from inferior models. As for the date, the uncial inscription on the Book held by the Saviour could not have been executed earlier than the thirteenth century. Although the composition follows the older Romanesque scheme, the figure and drapery style are so provincial and *retardataire* that this work might easily be considered a product of the late thirteenth century.

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