The Lives and Afterlives of Shrine Madonnas

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A decade ago, a well-known statue of the Virgin and Child stood in the Parish Church of San Martino at Antagnod in the Valle d'Aosta (Piedmont, Italy). It was feverishly revered; it wrought miracles. Dressed in sumptuous vestments of white and gold, each wearing a silk triregnum, Mary and Child were enthroned in the niche of one of the lateral altars. The statue derived its efficacy from being a simulacrum: burnished black, it was a copy of another, and quite famous, Black Virgin from the nearby sanctuary of Oropa, in Biella, Piedmont.

Fig.1. The Shrine Madonna, Antagnod, Ayas, Valle d'Aosta, wood, mid-14th century, now at the Museo parrochiale di San Martino, Piedmont, Italy.
Photo: Fulci Alessandro.

Below the opulent garments, however, the statue was discovered to be partially a dressmaker's dummy: a much smaller sculpture of the Virgin and Child affixed to a wooden base of about 27 cm in height. The discovery was made in 2005 by Rosella Obert and Alina Piazza, who pointed out hinges in the back of the sculpture and what seemed to be a crack running down from Mary's chest to her feet.[1] The Virgin's body opened like a cupboard, revealing carved and painted images within (fig. 1). At the center, directly below the chest, is the Throne of Mercy: God the Father, the dove of the Holy Spirit issuing from his mouth, holds a cross with the crucified Christ. Flanking the Trinity, on the sides of Mary's body, are two angels holding censers. It is a stunning interior, perfectly preserved, its colors luminescent. Silver, gold, red, and green predominate: the drops of blood that dot Christ's body are echoed in the red cloaks of the angels, as well as in the halo and cloak of God the Father; the green of the cross picks up the green of the throne and the angels' wings. The Antagnod sculpture revealed itself for what it really was: the *Madonna scrigno*, or Shrine Madonna.

Very few medieval examples of such unfolding statues are extant, all produced beginning in the late thirteenth century.[2] Almost all are made of wood, although some Spanish examples are carved of ivory, and inventories suggest that some may have been made from precious metals.[3] Several are diminutive, with the smallest just over 26 cm in height; but others, meant for public display, are much larger, some nearly life-sized. The vertical split usually bisects the Virgin's body from her neck down to her feet, and within, she encloses a rich array of Christological and/or Mariological images.[4] Some Shrine Madonnas contain pure narrative scenes, although the majority include the carved Throne of Mercy in the middle, much like the one at Antagnod. The lateral scenes at Antagnod, however, are somewhat unusual: most commonly, the sides of Mary's body are painted with worshippers or with stories from Christ's life (fig. 2).[5]

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[1] On the discovery, see Rosella Obert and Alina Piazza, "La Vergine di Oropa salva una Madonna Medioevale," *La rivista Biellese* 10 (2006): 5–13; Obert and Piazza, "La 'Vierge Ouvrante' di Antagnod," *L'écho de nos montagnes. La voce dei campanili–Paroisse d'Ayas* 7–8 (2005): 12–13; Obert and Piazza, "Notre Dame d'Antagnod, une Vierge Ouvrante," *Lo Flambò* 195, no. 3 (2005): 64–88. See further Vittorio Natale, *Arti figurative a Biella e a Vercelli: il Duecento e il Trecento* (Biella: Eventi & progetti, 2007), 119.

[2] See Elina Gertsman, *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2015); the book contains an up-to-date bibliography on the statue. The end of the 13th century is the earliest date for the fully authenticated Shrine Madonnas. The statue in the collections of the Walters Museum of Art, which has initially been dated to the early 1200s, does not appear to be a genuine article, although the ivory has been carbon-dated to the 13th century. A subject of lively debate (see, e.g., Kelly Holbert, "The Vindication of a Controversial Early Thirteenth-Century *Vierge Ouvrante* at the Walters Art Gallery," *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 55/56 [1997/98]: 101–121), it was identified as forgery in Richard H. Randall's entry, "Vierge Ouvrante," in *Images in Ivory: Precious Objects of the Gothic Age*, ed. Peter Barnet (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1997), 285–89.

[3] There may have been gold *vierges ouvrantes* in the collections of Burgundian dukes and of Charles V Valois. The treasury of the dukes, for example, appears to have possessed a small golden image of the Virgin, decorated with a ruby and pearls, whose belly opened to reveal the Trinity ("[u]ng petit ymage d'or de nostre dame, ouvrant par le ventre, ouquel est la Trinité dedans, garni en la poitrine d'un petit ruby, séant sur ung petit pié d'or, garni de deux balaiz et de iiii perles et la couronne de vi petites perles, pesant. iiii o. ii e." See Léon de Laborde, *Les ducs de Bourgogne, études sur les lettres, les arts et l'industrie pendant le XVe siècle et plus particulièrement dans les Pays-Bas et le duché de Bourgogne*, 2 vols. [Paris: Plonfrères, 1851], 2:264, entry 4238).

[4] In several cases only the Virgin's chest opens or, as we will see in the Maubuisson example discussed below, the head is split open as well; in one surviving example, Mary's pregnant belly can be removed to reveal the Trinity within a uterine cavity.

[5] Instead of multiple narrative scenes, several statues feature the single painted Annunciation scene split by the Throne of Mercy; at least one, in Durham, had the Trinity surrounded by a gilded interior covered in flowers; some held the Trinity joined by saints. Those sculptures that were closely linked to the Teutonic order figured crowds of

Fig. 2. The Shrine Madonna, Misterhult, Sweden, wood, c.1430–50,
now at the Misterhult Kyrka, Sweden. Photo: author.

Shrine Madonnas have received quite a bit of attention in the last decade, after spending a long time on the periphery of art historical scholarship. They have been theorized as potent metaphors for image-making by Marius Rimmele and considered through the lens of Marian

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the pious gathered on either side of the Trinity: this kind of image, in which Mary's body doubles as her cloak, is closely related to the *Schutzmantelmadonna*, or Madonna of Mercy, type.

doctrine by Melissa Katz, while my own work—the recent book and a handful of articles—treats these sculptures as anatomical, devotional, mnemonic, and performative bodies, whose visceral corporeality forms a predicate of their function.[6] What remains to be written is their reception history, for the afterlives of these sculptures were often more turbulent than the first centuries of their existence. The statues have been characterized as abhorrent and erroneous by such luminaries as the 15th-century chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson (d. 1429), and the Flemish Catholic theologian and King's Censor Johannes Molanus (d. 1585). In a 1402 sermon on the Nativity, Gerson expressed dismay at the sight of a Trinitarian Shrine Madonna he encountered in a Parisian Carmelite monastery, which had "the Trinity within its womb, as if the entire Trinity took flesh in the Virgin Mary." Such a statue, he said, has "neither beauty nor pious sentiment, and can be a cause of error and lack of devotion."[7] The sentiment was repeated nearly verbatim by Molanus, and it is through his *De picturis et imaginibus sacris* that Pope Benedict XIV likely knew about Gerson's original injunction.[8] In 1745, Benedict XIV outlawed Trinitarian Shrine Madonnas, referencing Gerson in his papal bull.[9]

Gerson, Molanus, and Benedict XIV often feature as a villainous trio in the histories of Shrine Madonnas, their intolerance punctuating and finally bringing the devotional lives of unfolding Virgins to an end. The afterlives of these statues, however, are equally vibrant, and shed light on an entire host of socio-cultural phenomena that caused the Shrine Madonnas to be transformed, mutilated, hidden, and stolen. There is a palpable anxiety here about divine images, and an equally palpable questioning of their power; there is a surprising frivolity in the handling of Mary's inviolable body and a pointed insight into the motivations of those who altered and revised this body at will. Opened and closed, broken and reconstituted, the shifting bodies of the Shrine Madonnas acquired shifting identities, which both reflected and shaped the devotional

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[6] See Marius Rimmele, *Das Triptychon als Metapher, Körper, und Ort: Semantisierungen eines Bildträges* (Munich: Fink, 2010), 107–193; Melissa R. Katz, "Behind Closed Doors: Distributed Bodies, Hidden Interiors, and 11 Corporeal Erasure in Vierge Ouvrante Sculpture," *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 55/56 (2009): 194–221; Gertsman, *Worlds Within*; Gertsman, "Performing Birth Enacting Death: Unstable Bodies in Late Medieval Devotion," in *Visualizing Medieval Performance: Perspectives, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Elina Gertsman (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 83–104; Gertsman, "The Pilgrim's Progress: The Devotional Journey through the Holy Womb," in *Push Me, Pull You. Physical and Spatial Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, ed. Sarah Blick and Laura Gelfand, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 2:231–60; Gertsman, "Image as Word: Visual Openings, Verbal Imaginings," *Studies in Iconography* 32 (2011): 51–80. Rimmele similarly insists on the sculptures' corporeality—see, e.g.,"Die Schreinmadonna: Bild-Körper-Matrix," in *Bild und Körper im Mittelalter*, ed. Kristin Marek, et al. (Munich: Fink, 2006), 41–59—while Katz rejects this very notion. See Katz, "Interior Motives: The Vierge Ouvrante/Triptych Virgin in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2010). Full bibliography on Shrine Madonnas is found in Gertsman, *Worlds Within*.

[7] Jean Gerson, "Sermo de nativitate Domini," in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Louis Ellis Du Pin, 5 vols. (Antwerp: George Olms Verlag, 1987), vol. 3, col. 947.On the discussion of Gerson's sermon vis-à-vis the sculptures see, in addition to Gertsman, *Worlds Within*; Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 283–84; and Jean Wirth, "Jean Gerson condamne les Vierges ouvantes," in *Iconoclasme: Vie et mort de l'image médiévale*, ed. Cécile Dupeux, Peter Jezler, and Jean Wirth (Zurich: Somogy, 2001), 282–83.

[8] Johannes Molanus, *De Picturis et imaginibus sacris*: *Liber unus, tractans de vitandis circa eas abusibus ac de earundem significationibus* (Louvain, 1570). On Molanus's comments,see David Freedberg, "Johannes Molanus on Provocative Paintings: *De Historia Sanctarum Imaginum et Picturarum*, Book 2, Chapter 42," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 34 (1971): 229–245; and Freedberg, "The Hidden God: Image and Interdiction in the Netherlands in the Sixteenth Century," *Art History* 5 (1982): 133–53.

[9] "Sollicitudini Nostrae," in *Sanctissimi Domini nostri Benedicti Papae XIV Bullarium, I.345, Romae*, October 1, 1745, par. 27; cited and discussed in François Boefsplug, *Dieu dans l'art: "Sollicitudini Nostrae" de Benoît XIV (1745) et l'affaire Crescence de Kaufbeuren* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), 42–43, 279–85.

communities that coalesced around them: communities that spanned the breadth and width of Europe, and, at the close of the Middle Ages, extended well beyond it.

Fig.3. The Shrine Madonna, Upper Rhine, c.1330. Now at the Bode-Museum, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany. Photo: author.

Indeed, Shrine Madonnas clearly held great appeal, and could be found in parish and monastic churches throughout Europe, from Finland to Spain. But Italy seemed to have very few, and the discovery of the Antagnod statue was momentous. Likely produced around 1340–50 and imported to Piedmont from Rhineland, it bears certain similarities to other statues of this type, particularly the Mary and Child now in Berlin (fig. 3). When the layers of garments and overpainting were removed from the Antagnod pair, mother and son turned out to be pale-skinned, their cheeks rosy; the Child was discovered to wear a silver tunic, while Mary, dressed

in gold, appeared to have a white veil. She used to be crowned, but the crown remains only in fragments, probably hacked to bits in order to affix the new headgear centuries later. In 1416, the *Madonna scrigno* still stood on one of the small altars dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, likely within a tabernacle, along with a sculpture of Mary Magdalene. In the following centuries, the statue gained fame as a miracle-worker; it was in particular known for momentarily breathing life into stillborn infants, so that they could be baptized. In the middle of the 17th century, a new altar, dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, was consecrated by Bishop Bailly, and it is likely that the Shrine Madonna was moved into its niche, and probably dressed, at that time.[10] Any further interventions to her body are undated, but it is safe to assume that the statue was shut for good and refashioned into a more orthodox Mary-and-Child unit in the wake of the papal ban.

Whether or not the papal ban was an impetus for the refashioning of the Shrine Madonna, we do know that, in 1831, some unspecified work was completed on the Antagnod statue. Since the priest at the time, Dandrès, was particularly devoted to the original Madonna d'Oropa, he may have been the one to transform the medieval *Madonna scrigno* into what amounted to a repainted dress dummy, her right hand changed in imitation of the original Oropa.[11] Further alterations were made by Dandrès's successor Auguste Clos, who claimed not to know the origins of the statue but noted its resemblance to the one at Oropa.[12] Since the statue was moved to the museum, a plaster copy was commissioned for the niche where the original stood: a gesture of respect for the community that continues to venerate the sculpture to this day.

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The Antagnod Mary and Child underwent not only visual but ideological transformation: from the miracle-working cult image to the museum-worthy object, to be displayed not for its efficacy but for its rarity. With the change of identity, came a change of agency: from an active—living—participant in the lives of the devout, the statue was transformed into an inert object, an art historical curiosity. Still, it is extant, restored, and on display: a fortunate fate for an object class that caused immeasurable strife and discomfort throughout the many centuries of its existence. Countless statues were irreparably damaged or destroyed; many were moved from their original locations, hidden, and maimed in the process. Several were stolen in the 20th-century, and are now extant only in contemporary copies or photographs. Among them is the Shrine Madonna formerly from the parish church of Saint-Ours in Yvonand (Switzerland)—a contemporary of the one in Antagnod—that was purloined in 1978.[13]

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[10] Lorenzo Appolonia et al., "La Madonna scrigno della chiesa parrocchiale di Antagnod," *Bollettino Ufficiale della Regione Autonoma Valle d'Aosta* 4 (2007): 36–45. On the religious life of the community, see Elfrida Roullet,"Vita religiosa nella diocesi di Aosta tra il 1444 e il 1525" (Ph.D. diss., Università degli Studi di Torino, 1981–82); and Joseph-Auguste Duc, *Histoire de l'église d'Aoste*, vol. 7(Chatel-Saint-Denis: Imprimerie moderne, 1912).

[11] *Livre de la Paroisse* (Archivio parrocchiale di Antagnod), cited in Obert and Piazza, *La Vergine di Oropa*, 10–11.

[12] Auguste Clos, *Mémoire de la paroisse d'Ayas (1889)*, ed. Saverio Favre (Aoste: Duc, 1997), 57–58.

[13] Gertsman, *Worlds Within*, see chapter 3, esp. 126–30; Gudrun Radler, *Die Schreinmadonna "Vierge Ouvrante": von den bernhardinischen Anfängen bis zur Frauenmystik im Deutschordensland: mit beschreibendem Katalog* (Frankfurt am Main: Kunstgeschichtliches Institut der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, 1990), 63–65, 229–34; Walter Fries, "Die Schreinmadonna," *Anzeiger des Germanischen National museums* (1928–29): 5–69, at 35; Alfred Schmid, "Die Schreinmadonna von Cheyres,"*Lebendiges Mittelalter, Festgabefür Wolfgang Stammler* (Freiburg, Switz.: Universitätsverlag, 1958), 130–62; and Daniel Märki, "Ce que fut la Vierge ouvrante de Cheyres," in *Notre-Dame de Grâce: Vierge ouvrante de Cheyres* (Cheyres: Paroisse de Cheyres, 2002), 18–23. See also a brief notice in Apollinaire Dellion, *Dictionnaire historique des paroisses catholiques du canton de Fribourg* (1885; repr. Genève:

The Yvonand statue stood 107 centimeters tall.[14] Mary held the Christ Child in her left arm and supported his foot with her right hand; both gazed straight ahead (fig. 4). The Child held a dove with both hands, clutching it tightly. At the base of the Virgin's head, restorers discovered a small empty enclosure that once held relics.[15] The statue opened just below the Virgin's neck; as her head remained whole and her hands remained visible, it appeared that Mary flung open the folds of her very body to reveal the several scenes carved within. The remaining scenes figure the Kiss of Judas, the Flagellation, the Carrying of the Cross, the Crucifixion, the Deposition, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Harrowing of Hell; the missing narrative in the upper register likely featured the Arrest of Christ or Christ before Pilate. Judging from stylistic traits— long and narrow eyes, dramatically arched eyebrows, and a very particular hairstyle—the Yvonand Shrine Madonna was made in Rhineland, like the Antagnod sculpture, and can perhaps be localized to Cologne.
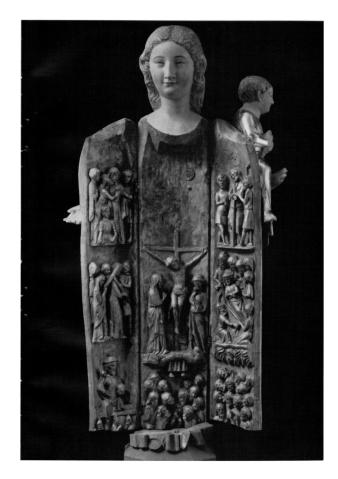

Fig. 4. The Shrine Madonna, Yvonand, Switzerland, wood, c.1330–40.
Photo: Benedict Rast, public domain.

Slatkine Reprints, 1994), 1:426, as well as the highly problematic Max De Diesbach, "Statues de la Vierge (Cheyres et Marly)," *Fribourg artistique* 3 (1892): np.

[14] The right wing is carved from a different, much darker type of wood, which was never precisely identified.
[15] Schmid, "Die Schreinmadonna von Cheyres," 131.

Originally fully gilded, save for their faces and hands, dressed in sumptuous clothing (the custom of dressing the statue was retained in Cheyres until the night of the theft), the Virgin and Child must have radiated a formidable presence in the small parish church. This presence would have been further enhanced by the complex possibilities of corporeal activation and enlivening performed by the Shrine Madonna's flexible corpus. Animated by the flicker of candles, Mary's body—a conduit for the holy relics sequestered inside—would unfold to reveal some sixty diminutive figures moving, gesturing, and lamenting within. The performative potential of the Shrine Madonna's wooden flesh was brought to the fore by the opening mechanism of the sculpture and by the movability of the Christ Child who could be removed from his mother's arms.[16] It is likely that this performative body would have been activated not only during Marian feasts but also during liturgical and vernacular drama, when the wooden pair would take the place of living actors.[17] The participation of sculpted protagonists amidst real performers was not uncommon, and extant documents suggest, for example, that the Shrine Madonna at Durham—now lost—participated in the rituals of *depositio* and *adoratio crucis* when Christ would be removed from the enclosure of the Virgin's body, subsequently adored, buried, and re-hung within his mother's sculpted womb.[18] Because the Yvonand Child could be removed from his mother's arms, the Yvonand Madonna could be effectively used in a particularly difficult segment of the Christmas cycle—the Nativity plays in which Mary labors and gives birth. Contemporaneous plays tend to omit this act, as do most images that figure the Nativity as a post-factum occurrence, with the clean and swaddled babe lying safely in the manger. Again and again, the birth is staged as a discursive rather than corporeal experience. In the *Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnage*s, for example, the Child is meant to appear between the two replicas of the midwife Zebel, as she agrees to help Mary and then immediately exclaims in astonishment at the miraculous baby she now holds in her arms.[19] The Shrine Madonna's unfolding body would circumvent the unperformable act, staging birth through the opening of her sculpted womb, while her modular Child could be used as an effective prop in the manger.[20]

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[16] Schmid suggests that the Child was so made so as not to have him turn his back to the congregation when the statue was opened; or, perhaps, that the Child was made so as to facilitate the dressing of the sculpture (for such a case, see Peter Tångeberg, "The Enthroned Virgin of Stora Malm, Sodermanland, Sweden," in *Medieval Painting in Northern Europe: Techniques, Analysis, Art History*, ed. Jilleen Naldony [London: Archetype Publications, 2006], 70).

[17] For instance, several late medieval texts detail the *Officium Pastorum* performances (the Shepherds Play) in which images of Virgin and Child were unveiled by midwives at the approach of the shepherds (see Beth A. Mulvaney, "The Beholder as Witness: The 'Crib of Greccio' from the Upper Church of San Francesco, Assisi, and Franciscan Influence on Late Medieval Art in Italy," in *The Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, ed. William Robert Cook [Leiden: Brill, 2005], 177; and Dunbar Ogden, *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church* [Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2002], 72–73). On the movable church sculpture that took the place of real performers, see Pamela Sheingorn, "Medieval Drama Studies and the New Art History," *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995): 143–162, esp. 153.

[18] *A description or breife declaration of all the ancient monuments, rites, and customes belonginge or beinge within the monastical church of Durham before the suppression. Written in 1593*, ed. James Raine (London: J. B. Nichols and Son, 1842). Other Shrine Madonnas bear traces of similar use: the 14th-century sculpture now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, originally from Rhineland, seems to have contained a removable crucifix.

[19] "La Nativité Nostre Seigneur Jhesu Christ," in *Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnages*, ed. Gaston Paris and Ulysse Robert, 7 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1883), 1:211, lines 97–102.

[20] Gertsman, *Worlds Within*, 126–30; Radler also suggests the use of the Yvonand sculpture in Nativity plays in *Die Schreinmadonna*, 40. In discussing a 14th-century Christ Child sculpture from Tuscany, Ursula Schlegel suggests just this kind of dual use: a devotional image venerated in a church, which doubled as a prop during Nativity

The Shrine Madonna could also have been used in the Purification play, where the Virgin is supposed to pass her child to Simeon.[21] The category confusion that ensued from such use of wooden sculpture—the liminal status of puppets performing people—was not only welcomed but also embraced. When the 14th-century German visionary Henry Suso attended the celebration of the *Purificatio Mariae* feast, and saw a statue of the Virgin and Child carried in the procession, he approached the sculpted Mary and asked her, on his knees, to show him her son. The Virgin responded, surrendering the Child and allowing Suso to hold and kiss him.[22] Late medieval involvement with effigies was intimate and had the potential to transcend the sculptures' inert materiality, as evidenced by scores of miracle stories that survive from the period.[23] Cult images, in particular, existed in complex relationships with their divine prototypes, at times channeling their grace and, at times, acquiring their agency.[24] The Yvonand Shrine Madonna was one of these images.

The special place of this sculpture is witnessed by countless donations in her name, some of which are related to church festivals. Most gifts, between six and twelve deniers in amount, were arranged to be given annually and in perpetuity.[25] Similar gifts are recorded through the early 16th century. Two different indulgences, dated 1509 and 1512, were attached to the pilgrimage

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celebrations. Schlegel, "The Christchild as Devotional Image in Medieval Italian Sculpture: A Contribution to Ambrogio Lorenzetti Studies," *The Art Bulletin* 52, no. 1 (1970): 1–10.

[21] In the N-Town Cycle's Play 19, for example, the Child would be passed to Simeon, as stage directions suggest ("Et accipiet Jhesum") between Mary's words "My sone desyryth for to be, / And þerffore haue hym here" and Simeon's "Welcome, prynce withowte pere! / Welcome, Goddys owyn sone!" (http://ummutility.umm.maine.edu/necastro/drama/ntown/19_purification.txt, accessed 30 June, 2016).

[22] Henry Suso, *The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons,* trans. and ed. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 80–81. The similarity is also discussed by Johannes Tripps, *Das handelnde Bildwerk in der Gotik: Forschungenzu den Bedeutungsschichten und der Funktion des Kirchengebäudes und seiner Ausstattung in der Hoch-und Spätgotik* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2000), 62–63, who, however, suggests that the Christ Child figures made for cradle scenes are an independent genre.

[23] The literature on medieval *miracula* is vast, and narratives of animation particular to the statues of the Virgin form a considerable part of the corpus. For a spectacular 13th-century collection, see Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum. Textum ad quatuor codicum manuscriptorum editionisque principis fidem*, ed. Joseph Strange (1851; repr. Cologne: Heberle, 1966). Translated by Henry von Essen Scott and C.C. Swinton Bland as *The Dialogues on Miracles* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929). Alexa Sand discusses Caesarius's stories of animate statues of Mary in "Vindictive Virgins: Animate Images and Theories of Art in Some Thirteenth-Century Miracle Stories," *Word and Image* 26 (2010): 150–59. These stores survive in scores of different versions, retold throughout the later Middle Ages. No less spectacular is the chronicle from the St. Katharinenthal convent, whose nuns seemed to have particular affinity for visionary experiences, including those that involved image animations; see *Das "St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch": Untersuchung, Edition, Kommentar*, ed. Ruth Meyer (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995). Barbara Newman aptly describes this phenomenon as "a radical democratization of grace," in "The Visionary Texts and Visual Worlds of Religious Women," in *Crown and Veil: The Art of Female Monasticism in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Hamburger and Susan Marti, trans. Dietlinde Hamburger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 151–71, at 163; on this phenomenon see essays in Jeffrey Hamburger's *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998). On performative objects, some of which were implicated in miraculous animations, see Johannes Tripps, *Das handelnde Bildwerk*. For a lucid discussion of late medieval and early modern miraculous images in Italy, see Fredrika H. Jacobs, "Images, Efficacy & Ritual in the Renaissance: Burning the Devil and Dusting the Madonna," in Blick and Gelfand, *Push Me, Pull You*, vol. 2, 147–75.

[24] See the foundational considerations of such agency in David Freedberg, *Power of Images: Studies in the Theory and History of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

[25] See, e.g., Archives communales d'Yvonand, K b 1.

to the Yvonand church and to the regular attendance of the chapel dedicated to the Virgin on feast days, respectively.[26] The statue was thought to work miracles: the latest, in 1839, when she changed the direction of the wind, saving a local inn from destruction by fire.[27]

This last miracle, however, was performed not from Yvonand but from the Shrine Madonna's new place in the small church of nearby Cheyres. About three hundred years before the Virgin's successful intervention with inclement weather, the parish of Yvonand changed religious allegiance and embraced the Reformation. In 1531, despite the Protestant defeat in the second Kappel Wars, Yvonand rejected Catholicism.[28] In the following year, the residents of Yvonand, at the urging and with the participation of the preacher Guillaume Farel, destroyed church altars and images in the municipality of Grandson.[29] Their reformatory zeal was further spurred on by Antoine Froment, the first reformed minister of Yvonand, who fled there from Geneva, and under whose guidance the celebration of the Mass was abolished.[30] It was around that time that the Shrine Madonna was hastily removed from Yvonand to the nearby village of Cheyres, which was allied with Fribourg and remained Catholic. The statue bears certain physical signs of a hurried, clandestine campaign: interior images on the lowest register were damaged by an uneven line left by a saw, and the Virgin lost her feet in the process. The statue, which continued to work miracles at Cheyres, nonetheless became something else as well: an ideological symbol for the local Catholics, the constant reminder of physical and theological damage being wrought by their immediate neighbors.

In the 17th century, three altars in the church were dedicated to the Virgin, and in the following century, the statue was moved to the new church. Between 1955 and 1956 it was stripped of layers of varnish, cleaned, and restored. The restoration did not sit well with all the inhabitants of Yvonand, some of whom preferred the overpainted, "pretty" statue to its original appearance.[31] But their displeasure is directed at what is, essentially, a phantom: the statue, which survived the turbulent years of the Reformation, is no longer *in situ* if in existence at all. On the night of July 22, 1978, it was stolen, and on the following morning, on Sunday, a priest named Joseph Grête celebrated the *Missalecta* (or the Low Mass) to acknowledge the symbolic enormity of the theft.[32] It took more than twenty years for the community to have a copy of the sculpture created based on post-restoration photos by the local sculptor Djemal Charni and installed on the altar (fig. 5).[33] It was dedicated on August 15, 2002, on the feast of the Assumption.

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[26] Archives cantonales vaudoises, C III a 70 bis and C III a 70 ter.

[27] Märki, "Ce que fut la Vierge ouvrante," 23.

[28] Michael W. Bruening, *Calvinism's First Battleground: Conflict and Reform in the Pays de Vaud, 1528–1559* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2005), 11–12, 33–34.

[29] Aimé-Louis Herminjard, *Correspondance des réformateurs dans les pays de langue française: recueillie et publiée, avec d'autres lettres relatives à la Réforme et des notes historiques et biographiques*, vol. 3, *1533–1536* (Geneva: H. Georg, 1870), 79.

[30] David Martignier and Aymon de Crousaz, *Dictionnaire historique, géographique et statistique de canton de Vaud* (Lausanne: Corbaz, 1867).

[31] For instance, one of the Yvonand residents, who was extremely helpful in procuring and photographing pertinent documents from the local archives for me, became extremely upset when I published, in a recent book, the post-restoration photos, which he deemed inaccurate and not as attractive.

[32] Märki, "Ce que fut la Vierge ouvrante," 23.

[33] Jean-Pierre Uldry, "Vie religieuse," in *Chronique fribourgeoise 2002* (Fribourg: Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire, 2003), 56.
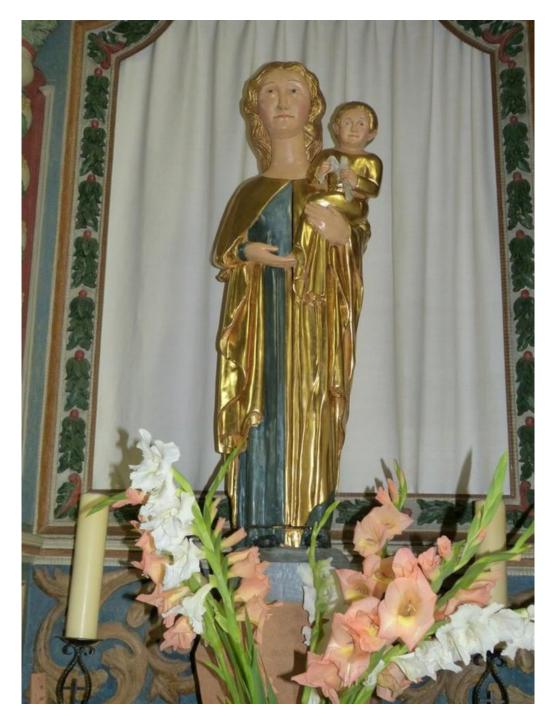
Fig. 5. Djemal Charni, The Shrine Madonna, Cheyres, Switzerland, wood, 2001. Photo: author.

Charni's statue, along with its prototype, figures prominently in the tourist literature of Cheyres, a town of some thirteen hundred inhabitants. If the Shrine Madonna's theft from Yvonand was piously—and ideologically—motivated, the reason for the more recent robbery was never discovered, although it may have been equally rooted in religious conviction. It is, perhaps, the same reason that guided the thieves who stole a crucifix from the interior of the Shrine Madonna in the Breton town of Morlaix, in 1993. The Morlaix statue, which escaped a

variety of disasters—including the destruction wrought by the revolutionaries at the end of the eighteenth century—had to be raised high on the wall and protected by glass in 2004. A town decree explained this as an attempt to shield the Shrine Madonna from damages inflicted because of the statue's "particularité"—in other words, its theologically anomalous originality.[34]

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

If the damages visited upon the Yvonand and Morlaix statues were rooted in their theologically vexing iconographies, the mutilation sustained by another 14th-century Shrine Madonna derived, it would seem, from its aesthetically displeasing exterior. Originally from the Cistercian Abbey of Notre-Dame-la Royale in Maubuisson, France, this sculpture offers an exceptionally interesting case of post-medieval reception of Shrine Madonnas.[35] At 140 cm, it is one of the largest such sculptures, and it opens in an unusual way by splitting along its entire length, from (and including) the Virgin's head all the way down to the hem of her cloak (fig. 6). Mary sits on the backless throne, the half-nude child on her left knee raising his hand in blessing. The original scenes from the interior have been lost for centuries. Nothing is known about the circumstances of this Shrine Madonna's creation and use, except that the statue must have been highly regarded until the 16th century: it was associated with the main altar, and in 1517, on the order of the abbess Antoinette de Dinteville, a Parisian master came to Maubuisson to paint it with azure and gold.[36] Shortly thereafter, the image of the Shrine Madonna appeared on one of the abbey seals.[37]

But in the 17th century, the Shrine Madonna transformed from an object of pride to one of embarrassment, loudly voiced by the abbess Marie des Anges Suireau, who oversaw the convent between 1626 and 1648. The abbess was not fond of religious sculpture in general, and, according to the chronicle by one of the Maubuisson nuns, Sister Candide, reserved special animosity for the sculpted grotesques around the choir and the Shrine Madonna. At that point, the statue stood behind the main altar, and was opened in times of drought. How closely Sister Candide studied the sculpture is not clear, as her description is questionable: she reports the interior as containing "the entire world" and the realms beyond: "it housed heaven, purgatory and hell, along with all the mysteries of the Old and the New Testaments, since the beginning of the world until the Last Judgment."[38]

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[35] On the history of the abbey, see, among others, Armelle Bonis, *Abbaye cistercienne de Maubuisson (Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône, Val-d'Oise): la formation du temporel (1236 à 1356)* (Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône: Conseil général du Val-d'Oise, Service départemental d'archéologie du Val-d'Oise, 1990); Sylvie Dechavanne, Monique Wabont, and Philippe Soulier, *Histoire et archéologie à l'Abbaye royale et cistercienne de Maubuisson: Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône, Val d'Oise* (Cergy-Pontoise: Conseil général du Val d'Oise, 1988); Odile Vergé du Taillis-Bürglin, *Chroniques de l'Abbaye royale de Maubuisson 1236–1798: la vie religieuse au temps de la vieille France* (Paris: Perrin, 1947); and Adolphe Dutilleux and Louis Joseph Depoin, *L'abbaye de Maubuisson (Notre-Dame-la-Royale): histoire et cartulaire* (Pontoise: Amedée Paris, 1882–1885).

[36] Cited in Louis Joseph Depoin, "La vierge ouvrante de Maubuisson. Notice historique," *Mémoires de la Société historique et archéologique de Pontoise et du Vexin* 4 (1882): 5–15, at 12. The Parisian master was also paid to paint sculptures of Saint Nicholas in the cemetery chapel and of Saint Christopher in the church. See further Édouard Didron, "Les images ouvrantes," *Annales archéologiques* 26 (1869): 414–15; and Dutilleux and Depoin, *L'abbaye de Maubuisson*, esp. part I.

[37] Solenne Théaud, "Les sceaux du chartrier de l'abbaye cistercienne de Maubuisson au XIIIe siècle," *Cîteaux commentarii cistercienses* 54, no. 1–2 (2003): 85–170, at 102.

[38] "Quand elle estoit ainsi ouverte, ce n'estoit une Vierge, mais un monde et plus qu'un monde, puisque le paradis, le purgatoire et l'enfer y estoient avec tous les mystères du vieux et du nouveau Testament, depuis la création du monde jusqu'au jugement universel, et tout cela représenté par de petites figures en bosse grandes comme un doigt

St-OUEN-L'AUMONE. - Eglise
Vierge ouvrante, formant triptyque en bois sculpté polychromé,
travail espagnol du XIIIᵉ siécle, donnée à l'Abbaye de Maubuisson
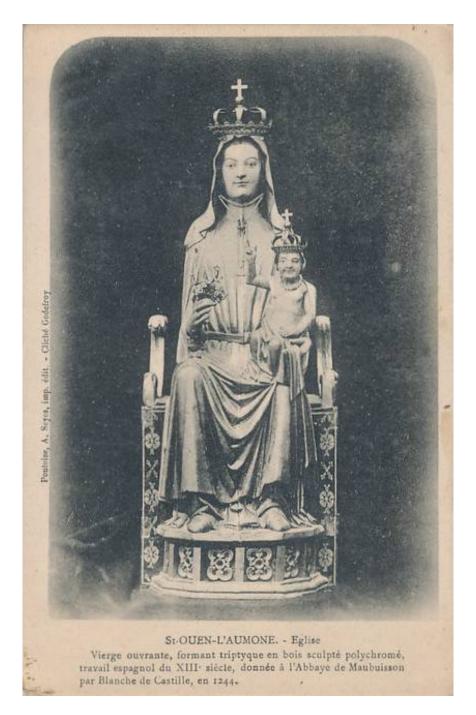par Blanche de Castille, en 1244.

Fig. 6. 1906 postcard of the Shrine Madonna, from the Cistercian Abbey of Notre-Dame-la Royale, Maubuisson, France, wood, 14th century, interior 19th century, stolen in 1973, erroneously dated to 1244 on the postcard.

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tout au plus, arrangées sur des tablettes, qui faisoient les séparations des lieux, et d'histoires si différentes, le tout le mieux fait et le plus joly du monde. Ce grand édifice estoit porté par des hermites qui chantoient et jouoient d'instruments de musqiue, et qui avoient de grandes bouches ouvertes comme un four, surtout celui qui battoit la mesure, qui faisoit rire à voir." The entire testimony is preserved in Bibl. Mazarine, formerly Ms. 2983a, now Ms. 3369, titled "Relations de la conduite particulière de chaque abbé et religieux qui ont eu part à celle de Maubuisson, et des traverses qu'ils ont faites à la Mère des Anges pendant 22 ans, dans lesquelles on voit la vertu, la sagesse et la grande humilité de cette mère," with relevant parts reproduced in Depoin, "La vierge ouvrante," 9–12, here 9.

The statue—or what she tellingly calls "an edifice"—was held by figures, which Candide variously calls "hermits" and "monks," who played music and sang, and whose mouths were consequently open. Children from Pontoise thought the figures were hilarious, and so every time they encountered the statue, they put all sorts of edible treats into the hermits' mouths, an act that led, Candide says, to "insufferable laughter and cackling" ("des ris et des caquets insupportables"). The abbess wanted to get rid of this "colossus," which she deemed to be old, ugly, dangerously heavy, crumbly, and downright indecent; her male superiors, including the abbot M. de la Charité, wished, conversely, for the statue to be restored. Awaiting an opportune moment, when the abbot was taken ill, Marie des Anges ordered the local mason, Fleuret, to quickly mutilate both the grotesques and the Shrine Madonna. The mason followed the orders reluctantly, particularly when it came to the destruction of the "hermits" and, especially, when he was asked to pull the statue down to the ground; he had to be "threatened by the authority of Madame [the abbess]" to do so, which he finally did "grumbling and muttering."[39] The disgruntled mason alerted the abbot who became extremely angry, screamed at the mason who blamed the abbess and her accomplices, and the entire affair dissolved into a melodrama, at least as reported by Sister Candide. A compromise was reached when the statue was moved to a side chapel of the convent church, for the amusement of those who wanted to explore "the small worlds enclosed in the body of the monstrous figure."[40]

Presumably, it stayed there until the Revolution, when the foundation was essentially destroyed.[41] At that point, the statue was entrusted to and hidden by a former abbey gardener Guillaume Chennevière, and kept by his family. In 1839, one of Chennevière's grandchildren told the priest Brétinière about the statue's existence, and it was promptly moved to the Church of Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône. The following week it was unveiled before a great number of people, who discovered the interior of the sculpture to be empty.[42] The characteristically imprecise authenticating account, the local *procès-verbal*, concluded that the interior must have held scenes wrought in precious metal; that the central scene must have been that of a Crucifixion; and that "several artists" who were shown the sculpture thought that it dated to the thirteenth century and came from Spain.[43] Why they thought so is a function of nationalist sentiment more than any connoisseurial expertise: the abbey of Maubuisson was founded in 1240 by the mother of Louis IX, Blanche of Castille, and the temptation to associate this statue, deemed to be "unique in France," with the great Capetian dynasty, must have been overwhelming.[44] In order to

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[39] "Le maçon fut donc encor décoller les hermits; mais lorsque la soeur Candide luy dit qu'il falloit descender la grande Vierge et la passer dedans… il fit de grandes difficultez… et il fallut le menacer de l'autorité de Madame, pour le résoudre à le faire descender ce grand colosse; encore ne le fit-il qu'en grondant et marmottant." Ibid., 11.

[40] "Mais la Mère les appaisa bien tost en le leur faisant porter dans une chappelle où elles la prioient tant qu'elles vouloient, et où elle savoient plus de liberté à se divertir à considérer les petits mondes enfermez dans le corps de cette monstrueuse figure." Ibid., 12.

[41] On the destruction of the abbey and the obliteration of the church along with its furnishings that were not yet sold, see Vergé du Taillis-Bürglin, *Chroniques de l'Abbaye*, 233ff.

[42] It is unclear whether the interior sculptures decayed or were broken out; ostensibly, the horseshoe that kept the statue closed all that time was originally affixed by Chennevière.

[43] Depoin, "La vierge ouvrante," 7.

[44] Since then, several scholars have introduced more errors in an attempt to date the statue, relying on poor photographic evidence and (often dubious) existing scholarship. Maurice Vloberg ("Vierges ouvrantes: Caractères et classification," *Sanctuaires et pèlerinages, Bulletin du Centre de documentation* 30 [1963]: 26, 32) thought the statue was made in the fifteenth century; Fries ("Die Schreinmadonna.", 33–34), goes back to 1240, and Radler repeats that information (*Die Schreinmadonna*, 221–3, at 221); Melissa Katz returns to the 15th century as the likely date. See Katz, "Non-Gendered Appeal of *Vierge Ouvrante* Sculpture: Audience, Patronage, and Purpose in

reconstruct the interior, Brétinière contacted two women who, after much denial, assented to have been former Maubuisson nuns, although their age indicated fairly certainly that they were too young to be who they claimed to be. This comedy of errors resulted in a restoration that was fairly deplorable, although it could have been worse: at least the restorers did not act on the conjectures that the statue's interior was originally encrusted with gemstones.[45] Be that as it may, the statue was transported to the church of Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône and was promptly blessed and indulgenced by the Bishop of Versaille Blanquart de Bailleul. It was stolen in 1973, on the night of August 12, directly from the church.[46]

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All three sculpted protagonists of this essay have elusory histories, scattered and uncertain. But they persist as narratives, which develop, become lost, and are then rediscovered, again and again. The narrative power of these Shrine Madonnas lies in the unfixedness of their identities, which loosen over time. Their character is as flexible as their unfolding bodies, and the function of their agency is socially determined. All three started out as cult statues, as miracle-producing devotional machines, as discursively and physically ruptured bodies of their prototype. All three became suspect at one point or another after the 16th century; all, ostensibly, inspired clerical distrust. The Shrine Madonna of Maubuisson transformed first from a phenomenal thaumaturgical image that had pride of place in the royal abbey into a mutilated puppet in the theater of politico-religious struggle, and then from a forgotten curiosity gathering dust in a gardener's house into an agent of cultural authority, made to perform its national identity as a unique masterwork, variously adorned with gems, precious metals, and myths. The Yvonand Madonna shifted, too, and its geographical shift reflected denominational change: from a Christian image, she became an emphatically Catholic image, from an indulgenced performance object showered with annual gifts to a symbol of community, its ideology and its values—only to develop, finally, into a visually ambiguous memory, a conspicuous gap necessarily and inadequately filled by a copy. And the Piedmont *Madonna scrigno*, though it stayed roughly in the same place for centuries, transformed outwardly: masked and unmasked, glued shut and dressed, undressed and undone, it nonetheless retained its perceived agency with hardly any change—a conduit for grace, a devotional instrument—until, that is, it was removed from the church. The Virgin now stands in a museum, bereft of the smells and sounds of its church: a wooden doll in a sterile environment, permanently and unceremoniously flung open.

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[45] "L'Ermite du Vallon," *Échopontoisien*, October 14, 1880.

[46] "Theft of Cultural Property: A Report by the INTERPOL General Secretariat to the Organization's Forty-Second General Assembly, 2–9 October 1973," *Museum International* 26, no. 1 (1974): 4–9, images on p. 5, report reproduced at p. 9.

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