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Unnoticed Self-Representations of Romanesque Sculptors in Twelfth-Century France

OVERT statements by twelfth-century lay sculptors are confined to brief signatures in the stone which use the term *fecit*. These signatures tell us next to nothing about the sculptors' degree of literacy, social status, or artistic self-awareness.¹ However, in studies written in the 1930s and 1940s, Meyer Schapiro succeeded in deciphering, in the sculptures themselves, clues to the civic artistic self-consciousness of the anonymous lay sculptors.² Following Schapiro's reasoning I would like to contend that in the corbel series situated by the dozens on the facades, apses, and walls of Romanesque churches in Aquitaine, one may detect several self-representations of the sculptors. In most cases these are located next to representations of jongleurs, through which the sculptors conveyed their nascent artistic self-consciousness. These marginally located, at times scarcely discernible corbel series constitute an autonomous element of Romanesque sculpture, and express in their iconography and style lay popular trends³ which deviated from the official art of the Church.⁴

By eliminating most of the images of the official art and isolating others on the corbels, the sculptors conferred new and different meaning upon the major themes of the corbel series, including jongleurs, dice-players, fools, human heads expressing extreme emotions, and legendary giants and monsters, as well as isolated objects such as barrels and hammers and fantastic animals. However, in the eyes of the Church, the series contain depictions of various categories of sinners, who are represented as mortals being punished by having to uphold eternally architectural elements of the church charged with celestial connotations.

The Romanesque sculptors placed themselves squarely among these corbel images of mortal sinners, usually next to jongleurs and musicians. These depictions often assume the form of full-length figures, conspicuously displaying their tools. For example, the sculptor of St. Hilaire in Foussais carved his own image wearing a long robe and carrying a hammer next to a horn-playing jongleur (Fig. 1, two corbels on right). Both carry their instruments in their right hand and in a diagonal position which connects the two (Fig. 2). In Vouvant, the sculptor, wearing the same robe and carrying his hammer, is located between a horn-player on his left and on his right a jongleur playing a musical instrument and singing enthusiastically with his mouth wide open (Fig. 3). Again the similarity in dress and in the demonstrative way all three hold their instruments is emphasized.⁵ This is in contrast with contemporaneous renderings of sculptors and master-masons shown working with identical tools in scenes of the building of the tower of Babel or the temple of Solomon. Thus the sculptors of the corbel series singled themselves out as individuals, each holding an emblematic tool.⁶ Theirs are not personal portraits rendering the physical likenesses of individual sculptors, but portraits re-

vealing the identity of the sculptors through the emblems of their profession. In this regard they closely resemble contemporary portraits of celebrities such as Abbot Durand, Geoffrey Plantagenet, King Henry II, and Eleanore of Aquitaine, who, in memorial and tomb sculpture, are identifiable merely by the insignia of their respective offices.⁷ Just as these insignia identify their bearers to all comers, so the professional emblems mark the sculptor to the villagers or burghers among whom he lived.

I believe also that there appear in the corbel series bust-length stereotyped self-portraits of sculptors or master-masons, gazing down from their high, marginal locations. In twelve churches of Poitou and Saintonge there are corbels depicting male heads, some young and beardless, some with a short beard and mustache. They all have elongated faces and a penetrating yet aloof look, totally lacking in grimaces or attributes of evil. I consider these heads to be the products of the same artistic school. Furthermore, some of them seem to depend on an antique model, such as the head of Foussais (Fig. 4), which may be compared to a Roman philosopher's head. A tightly closed mouth is a prominent feature of the heads of St. Hilaire in Foussais, Rétaud, and Chauvigny. In Chauvigny the sculptor's portrait recurs three times: once in the church's choir and twice on the outer walls of the apses (Fig. 5).⁸

The heads in the twelfth-century Romanesque corbel series which I propose to identify as stereotyped self-portraits of the sculptors show similar degrees of self-consciousness and arrogance like the Cappenberg head of Frederick I Barbarossa, where the ideal features of a reliquary head perhaps mingle with personal likeness. At the same time they manifest features similar to those known from the tradition of self-representations of architects and sculptors which persisted in Germany between the end of the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries.⁹ In the corbel series, the sculptor introduced at least two modes of visual self-representation, the full-length statue carrying a tool¹⁰ and the bust-length self-portrait.

In my survey of forty Romanesque churches in Aquitaine,¹¹ there are three examples of the first mode, all situated next to corbels depicting jongleurs. Of the twelve examples of the second mode, five are located next to jongleurs. Thus four-fifths of all sculptor self-representations are situated next to jongleurs. The jongleurs, however, appear in all corbel series at least once, and often several times.

The recurrent linkage of sculptor and jongleur is one of the few instances in which a thematic relationship between two neighboring corbels can be established. In most series it is not possible to ascertain a readable narrative sequence. The sculptor-jongleur linkage probably derives from the pictorial tradition of Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts where various craftsmen appear as marginal images above canon tables, and from early Romanesque stone reliefs where jongleurs are depicted atop religious compositions.¹² By placing their embryonic self-representations next to images of jongleurs, the sculptors introduced a link between two formerly separated marginal images. The anonymous craftsmen of the manuscripts were transformed thereby into the sculptor's self-representations.

The depictions of the jongleurs in the corbel series reflect the sculptors' careful observation and knowledge of the jongleurs' professional repertory. The catalogue of their varied but standard acrobatic postures, the postures of the instrument-playing musicians, and their specific costumes are all repeated, even in corbel series differing widely in style and mode of execution. The jongleurs on the corbels are shown as performers whose work reflects painstaking, even painful efforts. Their facial expressions are severe, tortured, distorted, but not wild. Sometimes they look atrocious, weird, or pathetic. The rendering of the jongleurs in the corbel series reflects an artistic concept, and decipherable and well-defined codes of representation which I would term expressive "realism," despite the inadequacy of the term. However, the sculptors and jongleurs, so closely connected in the corbel series, are the subjects of widely different written documentation. The documentation on twelfth-century lay sculptors is scarce,¹³ as are contemporaneous writings describing or criticizing monumental stone sculpture.¹⁴ In the few relevant texts, subject matter such as monsters, fantastic animals, and images of anonymous men and women were vehemently attacked.¹⁵ The author of the pilgrim's guide to Santiago de Compostela, who does not attack them, hints at his awareness of their "essentiam et

qualitatem” but dispenses with their description on various pretexts.¹⁶ However, the lives and artistic consciousness of the jongleurs are quite extensively described in contemporary profane literature. The *vidas* of many troubadours tell how they were accompanied by jongleurs who chanted the songs they composed, and how many troubadours, both men and women, were themselves jongleurs. Presenting them as famous men, the *vidas* relate their social origins, obsessions, loves, travels, and professional qualifications.¹⁷

The troubadour-jongleurs themselves voice their critical attitudes toward their contemporaries. In their criticism of their colleagues and their literary controversies, bitter irony and witty mockery on the personal and literary levels are often expressed, though this hostile artistic criticism is sometimes tempered by sarcastic compassion.¹⁸

The sculptors and jongleurs so widely differing as far as written documentation is concerned were brought together by the unifying framework of the corbel series. But even here their representations differ in several respects. The sculptors appear less frequently than the jongleurs, their full-length images are emblematic, and their reserved and critical typological portraits often depend upon antique prototypes. The jongleurs, on the contrary, are depicted realistically and expressively. It is possible that the rising group of sculptors felt an affinity with the jongleurs—who were acknowledged artists and self-aware performers—and that they presented the jongleurs as their own alter-image of the grief-stricken and aggressive artist. Perhaps the sculptors expressed in their recurrent compassionate depiction of the jongleurs their own professional preoccupation with illusion, transformation display and disguise, whereas they represented themselves as static and remote.

Though the sculptors remain anonymous to us, their two modes of self-representation on the corbels, and probably also the accompanying depictions of the jongleurs, constitute an embryonic statement of their new attitudes toward their identity as artists.

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NOTES

1. Scholarship has not paid much attention to the question of artistic self-awareness in the twelfth century. It rather traced the stylistical characteristics of specific masters, or identified “hands” and workshops.

2. Meyer Schapiro dealt with the civic consciousness of Romanesque artists in his “From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos,” with the autonomy of artistic inventions in his “The Sculpture of St. Pierre in Moissac,” and with the taste of artists and their patrons in his “On the Aesthetic Attitudes in Romanesque Art,” all three articles reprinted in M. Schapiro, *Romanesque Art* (New York, 1977).

3. Lay trends are related to the high art of the church in approximately the same way as popular piety is related to institutionalized religion. Consequently, lay and high art use similar or even identical images and metaphors, but with divergent meanings. Aquitanian twelfth-century lay art of the corbels isolated the images from their didactic contexts, treated them with a greater degree of realism, drama, and humor, and introduced motifs derived from popular culture.

4. The official sculpture of Aquitanian facades—as was

shown by L. Seidel—reflects the pretensions and ideals of its secular knightly patrons and protectors. L. Seidel, *Songs of Glory* (Chicago, 1981).

5. In Échillais a corbel depicting a man holding a mechanic drill is located next to a corbel depicting a jongleur.

6. This assertive form of a self-representation is new, although it may have used Gallo-Roman sepulchral models, where the craftsman and his tools are depicted on gravestones.

7. C. Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (New York, 1973), 86–95.

8. The three heads from Chauvigny have short hair, short beards, and mustaches, and seem dependent upon a late antique model. They have a critical, almost bitter look emphasized by vehement, though minimal modeling of the firm mouth.

9. K. Gerstenberg, *Die deutschen Baumeisterbildnisse des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1966).

10. “Self-portraits” of the sculptors were already noticed by H. Kraus on both sides of archivolt of the tympanum of St. Pierre in Moissac. H. Kraus, *The Living Theatre of Medieval Art* (London, 1967), 183–186.

11. See my study "Les modillons de Saintonge et du Poitou comme manifestation de la culture laïque," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* XXIX (1986), 311-330.
12. M. Mutherich and J. E. Gaehde, *Carolingian Painting* (London, 1977), 13, 56, pl. 13; G. Swarzenski, "Die karolingische Malerei und Plastik in Reims," *Jahrbuch Preuss. Kunstsamm.* 23 (1902), 98, pl. 9; C. Nordenfalk, *Die spätantiken Kanonentafeln* (Göteborg, 1938), 2:195-209; A. Goldschmidt, *Die Deutsche Buchmalerei*, II: *Die Ottonische Buchmalerei* (Florence/Munich, 1928), 47; L. Grodecki, F. Mutherich, J. Taralon, F. Wormland, *Le siècle de l'an mil* (Paris, 1973), fig. 167; R. Kashnitz, *Das goldene Evangelienbuch von Echternach (Codex Aureus Epternensis)* (Stuttgart, 1982), 62-63, pls. 60-63; for the parallel evolution from the capitals painted in Carolingian manuscripts to Romanesque capitals, see T. Sauvel, "Les chapiteaux dans les manuscrits carolingiens," *Bull. Mon.* 106 (1948), 7-48; M. Schapiro, "From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos," in *Romanesque Art*, 44, figs. 14-15.
13. V. Mortet and P. Deschamps, *Recueil de textes relatifs à l'histoire de l'architecture et la condition des architectes en France au moyen-âge*, I, *XIe et XIIe siècle* (Paris, 1911); Mortet and Deschamps, *Recueil de textes* (Paris, 1939); M. Aubert, "La construction au moyen âge," *Bull. Mon.* 118 (1960), 241-258; *Bull. Mon.* 119 (1961), 7-42; R. Crozet, *Textes et documents relatifs à l'histoire des arts en Poitou* (Poitiers, 1942); W. Cahn, "The Artist as Outlaw and Apparatchick: Freedom and Constraint in the Interpretation of Medieval Art," in *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century: A Catalogue of the Rhode Island School of Design* (Providence, 1969), 10-14; E. Lefevre-Pontalis, "Repertoire des architectes, maçons, sculpteurs, charpentiers et ouvriers français au XIe et au XIIe siècle," *Bull. Mon.* 75 (1911), 423-468; P. Frankel, "The Secret of the Medieval Mason," *Art Bull.* 27 (1945); Favreau, Michaud, Labande, *Inscriptions*, vol. 3 (Charente-Maritime, Deux Sevres); R. E. Swartwout, *The Monastic Craftsman* (Cambridge, 1932), 121-127, 172-176.
14. Abbot Suger refers only once unequivocally to monumental sculpture in his abbey. See the commentary of E. Panofsky, *Abbot Suger, On The Abbey Church of St. Denis and Its Art Treasures* (Princeton, 1979), 161, 165.
15. See St. Bernard from Clairvaux's famous "Apologia" to William Abbot of St. Thierry, in G. G. Coulton, *Life in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1930), 4:72-76.
16. J. Viellard, *Le guide du pèlerin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle* (Macon, 1938), 98, 102, 104.
17. E. Faral, *Les jongleurs en France* (Paris, 1910; repr. 1964); J. Boutière and A. H. Shutz, *Biographies de troubadours (textes provençaux des XIIIe et XIVe siècles)* (Toulouse/Paris, 1950).
18. R. Nelli and R. Lavaud, *Les troubadours*, II (Bruges, 1966).

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FIG. 1. Foussais, St. Hilaire, west facade, the corbel series

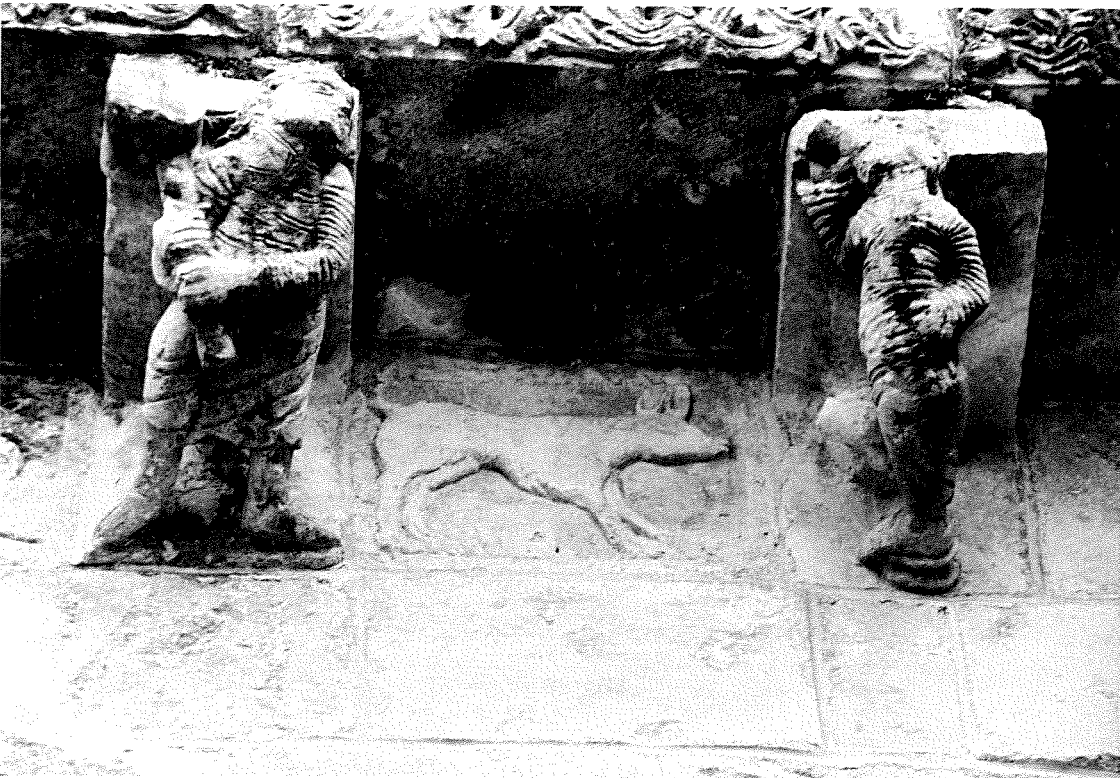


FIG. 2. Foussais, St. Hilaire, west facade, detail of left side: the sculptor carrying his tool and a jongleur blowing his horn

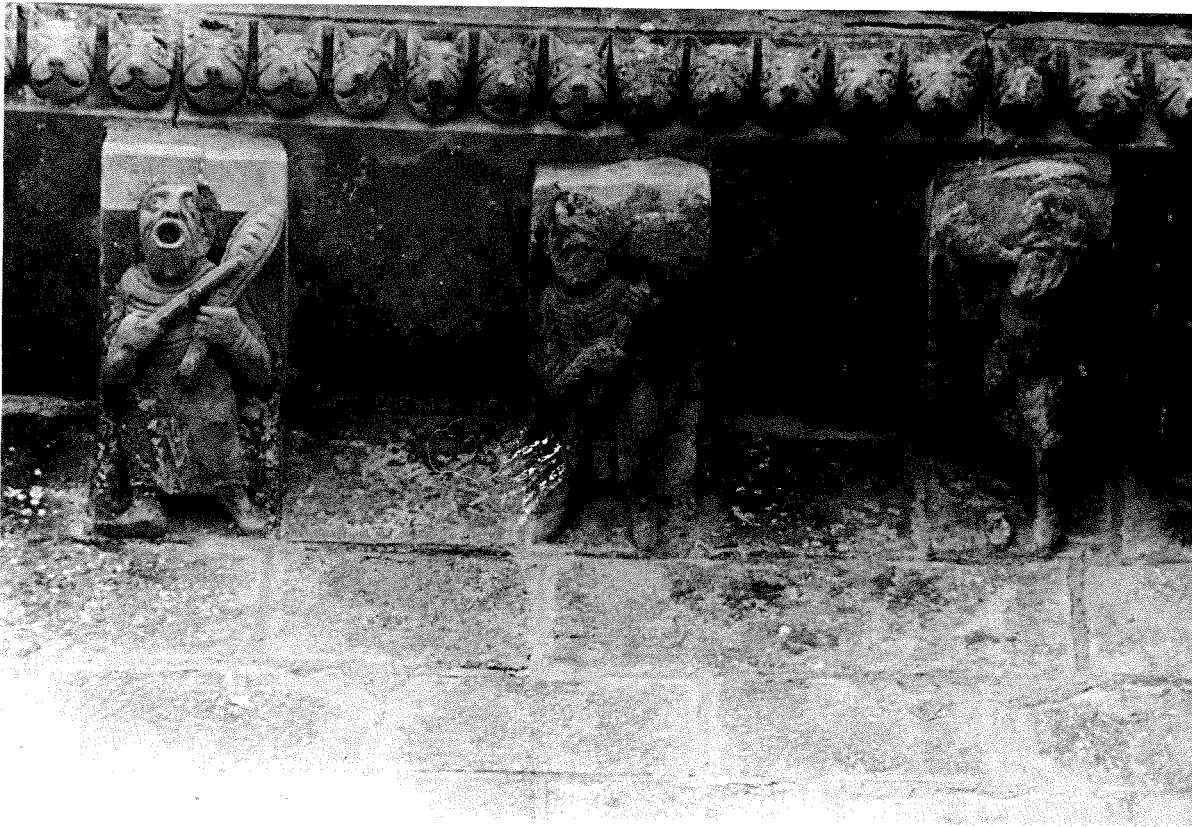


FIG. 3. Vouvant, Notre-Dame, wall of north nave: the sculptor carrying his hammer between five jongleurs



FIG. 4. Foussais, St. Hilaire, west facade: the "artist's" head



FIG. 5. Chauvigny, St. Pierre, choir: the "artist's head"