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German, Rhenish Artist

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- 9 *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1500
polychromed wood
30¾ × 12½ × 7¾ in.

GIVEN IN MEMORY OF JULIA C. MORSMAN BY
HER FAMILY AND FRIENDS, 1974.2

Images of saints adorned a wide range of objects in the late medieval period, including stained glass windows, church architecture, altarpieces, and ecclesiastical vestments. For the viewer, these saints served as role models, intercessors, and protectors. A depiction of one of the most significant saints in Christendom, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* emphasizes her role as spiritual authority and preacher. Especially popular in the Rhine region of Germany, polychromed wood was an ideal medium for sculpture, and here it lends Saint Catherine a lifelike presence.

From the Middle Ages onward saints were portrayed with the attributes that related to a specific episode in their legendary life or martyrdom, often based on stories in the *Golden Legend*, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine in the thirteenth century. In this sculpture, Catherine is shown glancing down at her open book and trampling a small male figure. He is the Roman emperor Maxentius, whom she bested in a legendary debate on Christianity. Unable to defeat her, Maxentius summoned philosophers from all corners of his empire, but her skills were such that she simultaneously converted them all, as well as the emperor's soldiers and his wife, to Christianity. Catherine became a role model for powerful religious institutions that promoted teaching

and preaching. She also held great appeal for religious and aristocratic women, and became the patron saint of students. She may once have held a sword, the weapon of her martyrdom, in her right hand.

Several features of *Saint Catherine* identify it as a product of Northern Europe and the lower Rhine. Described as the daughter of a king, Catherine appears as a princess wearing a crown. Her sumptuous gown and mantle reflect contemporary dress, not that of her time, making her more approachable to beholders. Although Catherine appears with a book in Italian art, the inclusion of Maxentius as an attribute only occurs in Northern European art. Stylistically, *Saint Catherine* resembles sculptures produced in the Rhine region. The S pose and angular drapery folds, and her heavy-lidded eyes, full cheeks, and small mouth, are typical of Rhenish sculpture.

The original context for the artwork is unknown, but its unfinished back indicates that it was not meant to be seen from all sides. It may have been intended for a shrine altar, which could house several standing saints attached to a back wall; such shrines were popular in Germany. Shrine statues were frequently polychromed to enhance visibility of the sculptures from a distance and to make the figures appear more lifelike. **AMM**

