

Who made decisions in the Grégoire team?

The issue of freedom within the template.

One major discussion in the *All Things Stone* Colloquium in 2011 was this issue: Where does the authority of the master carver end and the freedom of design offered to the various carvers begin? And what then distinguishes one master carver from another? This attempt to resolve the issue was made possible because I was given permission to photograph the Chartres west portal from within the scaffolding by the Architect en chef, Patrice Calvel. It has resulted in the exquisite photos that has made this study possible.

Three colonnettes between the figure sculpture in the west portal can illuminate the degree of control the gang master had over his men, and establish the importance of the initial template in identifying him.

The evidence in these three stones is that the gang master put his imprint on the stone by incising his pattern or template onto the outer surface, and required that those under his authority populate the spaces in between with figures rather than foliage. This allowed associates and junior carvers to devise their own arrangements within these guidelines.

The amount of information that could be displayed on the original block of stone in the rough-hewn stage was the work of the master. In those instances where he did not carve the details himself, his assistants were able to determine how the next level would look, including the choice of figures, the arrangement of foliage and most of the detailing. We have met this process in this *Master Carvers Series* in Gripple (page 5) and Jérôme (pages 6-7).

I have chosen to allocate the finest piece on the left embrasure of the north door to the master I call Grégoire [r3], the equally long piece on the opposite embrasure to his assistant whom I have called Greg-A [r2] and the third smaller stone on the left embrasure of the central door to Greg-X [r1].



Colonnettes, west portal of Chartres cathedral, attributed to Greg-X, Greg-A and Grégoire

The lengths of the stones are 1,520mm for Grégoire, 1,460mm for Greg-A and a truncated 550mm for Greg-X, all with the same diameter of 14*mm. ^{Stoddard, Olsen}

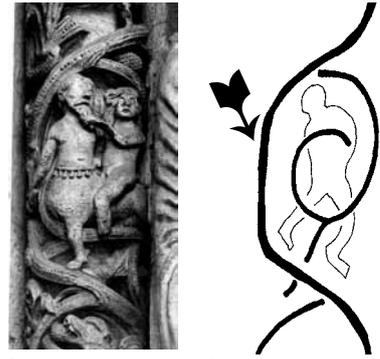
All three pieces of stone have similar arrangements of vines framing or enfolding figures. This would have been the ‘template’ issued by the master carver. Because the stone was carved only on the visible face (the back being left plain), the major tendril was elongated into a meander rather than being wrapped as a spiral all around the column [r arrow].

The branches emerge from the main tendril of the vine through sockets defined by wrinkles [r2]. The minor branch always emerges from the major, as is usual in the rinceau group of carvers. There are small differences in the way the wrinkles are handled by each carver, or even left out altogether by Greg-X. There are also marked differences in the way the curves have been handled, Grégoire’s being more sumptuous than Greg-A’s, and Greg-X’s junctions being less fluid than the others.

The decoration on the vines of all three columns consists of small teeth set along the outer edge, with a flat strip on either side flanked by a larger plane that joins the underside of the vine with a groove next to a sharp edge [r3]. The whole complex arrangement could have been cut with a flat-ended chisel.

The spaces between the figures and the vines are uncluttered with foliage in Greg-A, and in the shortest piece they are more confused and disordered. The figures by Greg-A seem to have been designed as standardised units that could be inserted into any arrangement wherever most useful, more like assembling pre-designed elements that he knew well rather than designing each item and each group afresh each time. His foliage is either small fronds or more complex posies. The latter look like they too were standard units inserted into the open spaces on the periphery, especially to the left of the harpy [b]. Typically, berries fill the other spaces, a much easier task than designing new leaves each time.

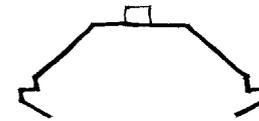
On the other hand, Grégoire’s more intricate foliage is integrated into the design, illustrated on the next page. His leaves are complex with tightly curved fronds that double back across the stalk. Both men used a berry on a stalk cradled in a leaf, like a lily, but Greg-A’s has a tall pair of fronds on each side of a central stalk with points that meet over the berry [b1]. He also used a *fleur-de-lis* posy, tied at the base with four fronds, two vertical and two thrust out on each side [b2]. Both are symmetrical though this meant the template for the latter had to be angled to fit into the space available.



Pattern on colonnette and in outline.



Socket in major tendril for emerging branch.



Section through vine



Leaf enfolding a berry by Greg-A



Fleur-de-lis by Greg-A

The Grégoire foliage is curved and bent to suit the setting. They have to be examined with attention, for it is too easy to gloss over the superb control and mellifluousness that ensured that everything would fit so well together.

Compare the fronds that cover the berry on the right with the one on the previous page by Greg-A: notice Grégoire's daring undercutting, the delicate edges and the fine striations on the berry.

In [b1] the pair is divided so that one frond rears up and the other is curled and twisted down. It is alive, and ready to grow. In the next, examine the various ways in which the stalks support the frond [b2]. We can feel the curved movement of the master's chisel as he worked into the stone.

These examples show how Grégoire filled his spaces so that the deeper undercutting would create strong shadows and greatly energise the whole design. Greg-A, no matter how competent a carver or how careful his detailing, did not possess the same artistic acumen.



Leaf and berry by Grégoire



Split foliage by Grégoire



Group of fronds by Grégoire

Also the fronds relate to the figures in a rather special way. They wrap around them, resting lightly on heads and limbs. They fold against the man's calf while another gentles the knee [b1]. Another lightly touches the man's head, softening the effort as he climbs [b2], while lower down another larger leaf encloses the woman's thigh and buttocks like a loving hand [b3].

There is none of this in Greg-A, though Greg-X does allow the tip of one leaf to brush the hair of his figure [r1]. There is a possibility that this column was carved by both men, with Grégoire on the figure with its richly delineated torso and finely carved hands and Greg-A on the stilted bird on the top. The fractured top shows the column was originally longer, and may have been cut down to fill the space between the lower shaft and the underside of the historiated capitals.



Tip of frond on head by Greg-X



Fronde against the calf of twisted man by Grégoire



Fronde gentling the head of a climber by Grégoire



Fronde holding the thigh of he woman by Grégoire

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Greg-A's choice of figures are mainly mythological (mythic birds, a centaur and a harpy [r]), whereas Grégoire solely carved people, with an enduring emphasis on ribs, muscles and gender. His realism in the detailing of the body is quite unusual for the period. The crease under the buttocks, the navel in a protruding belly and the penis and scrotum are all part of the larger musculature that moves with intent and agility [b]. You can feel the movement of the muscles and the inner vigour that makes for the aliveness of a person.

None of these characteristics are apparent in his two associates. Even the bodies of the centaur and his young rider are wooden, and though correctly proportioned, lack an inner vitality [b+1]. Even the navel is just a hole. These people merely sit and look out, they do not *participate*.



Male centaur with boy by Greg-A



Strong legs and buttocks by Grégoire



Swelling tummy and navel by Grégoire



Genitals and defined junction to legs by Grégoire

It is the same with all the elements in Greg-A's carving, they are like pre-determined objects that are set in place with little response to their setting. This may be why he carved more birds and beasts than human figures.

The differences in the two carvers is most clearly shown by comparing the uppermost figures in the two shafts, of men with their backs to the viewer climbing through the tendrils. Grégoire's figure is reversed to make the comparison easier [b2].

Both have strong buttocks and rounded shoulder blades, and in both one leg is raised in climbing and one hand stretched up to grasp a support. But the differences are clear to see. Greg-A's man's head is too large for the



Topmost climbing figure by Greg-A



Topmost climbing figure by Grégoire

body. His delineation is cumbersome, and unaware of the full niceties of a body in motion. Grégoire's man is fully alive in stretching upwards, on his toes about to grip and, most significant, is looking where he is going.

The shoulder muscles stand out, and the spinal cord is lightly, rather than heavily, indicated, and the extended muscle of the calf is accentuated, all as it would have been in reality. I would expect him to have sketched from a model to have achieved such realism.

The hands in Grégoire hold firmly. The woman grips fronds on each side, the climber threads his arms under one vine to grip another, and where limbs do not grip the fronds are turned to hang on instead [b]. Neither of these gestures (hands or leaves) are found in Greg-A, nor Greg-X. In the latter all the man holds on to is what appears to be his own penis, though there is a single lip of a frond just touching his head. This latter is a far cry from the sensitive enfoldment in Grégoire's leaves.



Man at base of shaft by Greg-X



Hand holding vine by Grégoire



Arm passes under vine to hold on, by Grégoire

In the uppermost figure in Greg-A the hand slips behind the vine, but does not grip it [b previous page]. It just disappears. The buttocks and spine show he has his back to us, yet his shoulders are not muscled, but are hidden behind the vine.

His feet sit on the top of the vines, whereas Grégoire's fold into them, so they bend into the support. Indeed, all Grégoire's work is more intricate and more natural than either Greg-A or Greg-X. Theirs is less integrated, less mellifluous.

Grégoire's heads are carved in detail with strong characterization. Each reflects an individual with their own moods and dreams - all illustrated over the page. We must not forget the size of these marvellous works. The shafts are about 140mm in diameter and the heads seldom as much as 25mm in height, which is about half their size in the photos. Consider the curve of the nostrils, the wistfulness in the woman and the confident certainty in the men. His heads are particularly individual. They have personal expressions, whereas those by Greg-A tend to be wooden facsimiles [bottom row]. Though well-executed, they are stereotypes without the subtlety in cheeks and eyebrows, in hairline and posture that enliven Grégoire's work

We have two men here, perhaps three. It is clear that the conceptual design of vines encircling figures was determined by one master, and in this I presume he was the best, the man I call Grégoire. The other men, also skilled though not equal in artistry, worked within this layout and contributed each according to his own capacity.

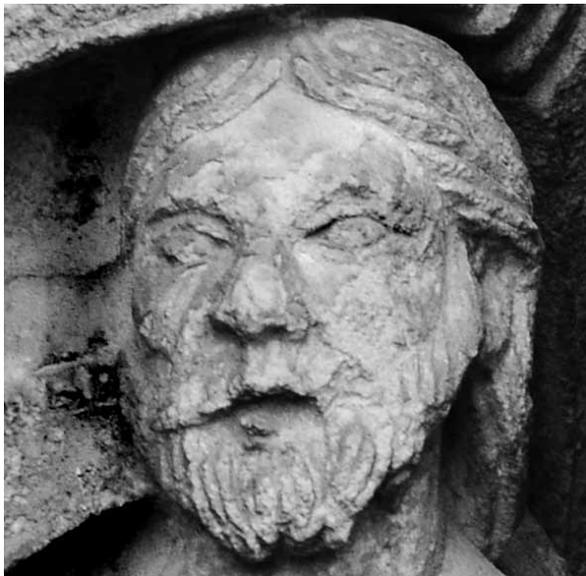
The coherence of the work is maintained through the structure of vines that were applied to the blocked-in stone, even where the finishing was by another. This helps to confirm the basis for the attributions in the *Master Carvers Series*, which has been that **the template distinguishes the leader, not the detailing.**



Head of woman by Grégoire (middle figure)



Head of twisted man by Grégoire (second from bottom)



Head of naked man by Grégoire (top figure)



Head of climber by Grégoire (second from top)



Head of climber by Greg-A (top figure)



Heads of centaur and rider by Greg-A (middle figure)

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