



1230-40

Limestone

13 9/16 x 70 5/16 x 23 inches  
(34.4 x 178.6 x 58.4 cm)

French

Purchased with Museum funds  
from the George Grey Barnard  
Collection, 1945, 1945-25-72

## LET'S LOOK

### Initial Observation:

Have students work as a group to create a list of everything they see in the sculpture. Encourage students to list patterns, textures, and shapes, as well as objects.

### Open Discussion:

Begin an open discussion about the sculpture by asking students to share their first impressions of the work. Encourage students to think further by asking them if they are responding to what they see in the sculpture or if they are inferring things based on what they already know. What visual information in the sculpture is leading them to certain conclusions or assumptions? What life experiences are informing their responses?

## TOMB EFFIGY OF A RECUMBENT KNIGHT FROM THE ABBEY OF SAINTE-MARIE, LA GENEVRAIE, LOWER NORMANDY

This poster shows a portion of a life-sized sculpture of a knight that once decorated the lid of a tomb in a church in medieval France. Such above-the-ground, stone tombs were common in medieval churches, sometimes standing in the main space, but more often occupying one of the side chapels that had furnishings and decoration paid for by noble families. Elaborately carved tombs were monuments not only to the person buried beneath them but also to the wealth, prominence, and religious devotion of the family of the deceased.

The identity of the man once buried beneath this sculpture is unknown, and the carving is probably not his likeness; such figures were commonly made without even a description of the dead person's face. Most important was that the figure's clothing and accessories convey the social position and accomplishments of the deceased, and that the figure's pose signify a life of piety and reverence.

## ABOUT THIS TOMB SCULPTURE'S ARMOR

The figure is depicted in armor to indicate that the man was a knight. The sculptor carved the armor to look like mail, a very heavy, fabric-like material made of interlinked metal rings that was typical for European military dress in the 1200s. A shirt of mail, called a *hauberk* (pronounced HAW-berk), weighed about 35 or 40 pounds. This knight's hauberk has a hood (draped from the back of his collar onto the pillow), which in an actual suit of armor would be laced up during battle to protect the face. A medieval knight outfitted in mail would also have worn a solid metal helmet, but it was not until the 1300s that plate armor was forged of solid steel and knights began to appear in the proverbial "shining armor."

## ABOUT THIS TOMB SCULPTURE'S COAT OF ARMS

Over his suit of mail, this knight wears a sleeveless robe called a surcoat, which may have been designed for knights at battle in arid lands, who needed to shade their armor from the desert sun. Emblazoned with symbols called a coat of arms, a knight's surcoat was essential for identification in the fever of battle, when his face was concealed by his helmet. Coats of arms also appeared on knights' shields. Carved in relief on this knight's shield are six small blackbirds, one of which is visible on the upper corner of the knight's shield. Popular for knights' coats of arms, such birds may have originally had some personal significance—perhaps as a reference to the knight's name or the place from which he came—or they may have had symbolic meaning that is unknown today.

## ABOUT THE TECHNIQUE

This tomb figure was carved from a single block of limestone. The sculptor chipped away with a hammer and chisel until the shape was nearly finished, and then used rasps and files to smooth its surface. Over the ensuing centuries, the figure's nose and the lower parts of the legs have been broken off, as have the hands, which were once held in prayer. It is likely that the sculpture was painted when it was first made, but no such decoration remains.

## ABOUT THE STYLE

This figure reflects the transition from highly stylized to more naturalistic representation that was occurring in European sculpture in the 1200s. The knight's beard is extremely simplified, merely suggested by a slightly raised area that begins at the hairline and descends along the cheek and jaw, with no carved patterns to represent whiskers. Other features of this sculpture are much more naturalistic and detailed. Unlike the beard, the hair is represented quite realistically, falling away from the knight's face into curls upon the pillow. The belt clasped over the knight's tunic appears soft and supple, and the effect of gravity is deliberately and convincingly portrayed in the drape of the hood onto the pillow beneath the knight's head.

## MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN KNIGHTS

In the Middle Ages, most knights pledged their loyalty to a king or a lord (landowner) in exchange for land. Training began at about seven years of age, when the boy became a page and his responsibilities might include serving meals to and running errands for a knight. At about fourteen

years of age, the page became a squire and his military training began in earnest. The squire was responsible for keeping his master's armor polished and his weapons sharp, and might also help the master get into his suit of armor. A squire usually became a knight when he reached the age of twenty-one.

Knights' behavior was dictated by chivalry—a code of ethics that fused Christian and military concepts of morality. Chivalrous knights were pious, honorable, brave, courteous, chaste, and loyal. Although it was not universally upheld, nor free of corruption, chivalry defined the values of the age.

The knight in this tomb sculpture is dressed as a crusader, a warrior in the military expeditions undertaken by the Christian powers between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries to win the Holy Lands from the Muslims. Jerusalem, as a city Jesus had once lived in, was the focus of repeated Crusades. Crusading knights brought back with them stories and objects from foreign cultures that had significant influence on European art and society.

## HOW THE SCULPTURE CAME TO THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

It is not known where in France this tomb sculpture was originally located. The Philadelphia Museum of Art purchased it in 1945 from George Grey Barnard, an American sculptor who formed the first collections of medieval French sculpture in this country. Barnard probably bought the figure from an art dealer in France in the 1920s.

## DIRECTED LOOKING

- What was this man's profession? How do you know?

*The figure is wearing armor, which indicates that he was a knight. His armor is mail, a material typical for thirteenth-century armor. He wears a surcoat and a belt for a sword; he also has a shield. We do not know who the knight was, but the blackbirds that appear on his shield were probably his coat of arms, which would have identified his family.*

- What words (adjectives!) would you use to describe knights? Looking at his expression and pose, what words would you use to describe this knight? How are your two lists different? What do they have in common?

Words often used to describe knights, such as “noble” and “brave,” may or may not describe the character of any individual knight. Students might enjoy writing a short story or drawing an imaginary scene from the life of this knight.

- What does the position of the knight’s body tell us about where this sculpture was and what it was used for?

*He is shown lying in repose, as if dead. The sculpture was carved for the lid of a tomb in a medieval French church. Tomb sculpture reminded later generations of the identity and achievements of the dead. From the position of the figure’s arms we can see that he once had hands held in prayer. This pose represented him as a pious soul and reinforced the medieval belief that all activity in this life should be focused on reaching heaven after death.*

- The artist who carved this sculpture thought very carefully about how the knight would look lying down. What creates the illusion of gravity?

*Look at the hair as it falls away from the face and piles up on the pillow. Notice also the hood lying on the pillow, and the ripple in the mail sleeve as it drapes down and forms a pile. Small children might enjoy mimicking the pose of the knight, looking for evidence of gravity on their own hair and clothes.*

## FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Ask students to find illustrations of military clothing from earlier and later periods in European history and from non-European cultures. How do they differ from this knight’s armor? How can these differences be accounted for? Do people wear armor today?
- Ask students to look at public monuments and statues in their neighborhoods. What is the purpose of these monuments? How do they differ from the knight’s tomb? How does the knight’s tomb differ from a modern tombstone?
- Are there still knights in Europe? What sort of people might become knights today? Do knights still have to be warriors?

## ACTIVITIES

- Knights made a coat of arms by combining symbols from both their parents’ coats of arms.

Have students create their own coats of arms, using symbols that stand for ideas important to their families.

- Carving is a subtractive process in which you remove what is not wanted and leave what is desired. Have students try carving. Young students may carve in soap with dull instruments. Older students may carve in stone with hammers and chisels.

## TIMELINE

- 1099** European knights on the First Crusade to the Holy Lands capture Jerusalem and establish a Christian state that lasts for two hundred years
- 1191** Priest returning from China brings Zen Buddhism to Japan
- 1194** France's Chartres Cathedral burns, rebuilding begins
- 1206** India's first Muslim empire is established in Delhi
- 1215** Barons compel King John to issue the Magna Carta, limiting royal power in England
- 1217–21** Fifth Crusade is led by Louis IX of France, later Saint Louis
- 1230–40** Unknown artist carves *Recumbent Knight from a Tomb Sculpture*
- c. 1240** First Thai kingdom is founded
- 1248** Construction begins on the Alhambra, Muslim palace and citadel in Granada, Spain
- 1250** Mamluks seize power in Egypt, beginning 250 years of rule by warrior sultans
- 1260** Kublai Khan founds the Yuan dynasty, beginning a century of Mongol rule in China
- 1267** Jacobus de Voragine compiles *The Golden Legend*, a popular book about the lives of Christian saints
- 1275** Marco Polo visits the court of Kublai Khan in China
- 1291** Muslim Mamluks capture Acre, ending Christian rule in Palestine

- c. 1300** Osman I founds the Ottoman Empire  
Gunpowder is introduced to Europe from China
- 1305** Giotto paints the Arena Chapel frescos in Padua, Italy

*This tomb sculpture is included in Images of the Middle Ages, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from the Lila Wallace—Reader’s Digest Fund.*