

Example of rogiier van der weyden, crucifixion triptych, c. 1445 essay

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The early Renaissance was a period of great artistic change and creation. The period of the individual artist, the person at the center of artistic creation, had just began, while art started becoming more and more realistic. Religious subjects were still dominant in the iconography of the Early Renaissance artists, but these were now endowed with a worldly quality. This was the result of intellectual achievement in other cultural fields which led to the creation of a new philosophy surrounding the arts. At the same time this was a period of great commercial activity among the European cities which led to the creation of a blossoming middle class. In Flanders, a region of the Netherlands, individual commercial cities emerged and the money gained from commerce gave great rise to the arts. It was in this environment that Rogier van der Weyden created his Crucifixion Triptych in the mid 15th century.

Rogier van der Weyden's work created in 1445 was part of this historical environment and expresses both the artistic and social circumstances of 15th century Flanders. It is constructed as a triptych, and is today exhibited as three pieces linked at the back, although originally it was in one piece. The subject matter is typically religious: the Crucifixion of Christ. Jesus is in the central panel presented on the cross; the Virgin Mary and St John are at the bottom. The left panel depicts Mary Magdalene and the right St Veronica, the woman who swept the face of Christ while he was carrying the cross and his face miraculously appeared on the piece of the cloth. Unlike earlier works however, this is a realistic depiction of the scene with the presence of clear emotions and a sense of drama. The Virgin Mary embraces the cross upon which Jesus is dying; her face bears the signs of a woman who mourns the

loss of her son. Her eyes are filled with tears, while next to her St John is trying to support her while at the same time looking up at Christ in despair. Interestingly, the patron of the work and his wife are included in the picture and as the matter of fact in the central panel. It looks as if they are participating in the holy drama, witnessing it and at the same time praying for the salvation of their souls. Even the background seems to be more of a representation of a 15th century Flemish city and not of Roman Jerusalem. With the Renaissance, patronage in Flanders stopped being the exclusive privilege of the Church and nobles but was extended to other wealthy citizens belonging to the growing middle class of merchants and craftsmen. The style and technique employed for the painting are also interesting and indicative of the taste of the period. Van der Weyden places his emphasis on the clarity of lines and forms, employing vivid colors like the blue of the sky, the red of St Veronica's dress and St John's robe and even the whites on the women's hoods and the cloth that covers part of Christ's body. There is great attention to detail both in the surrounding landscape which seems like a painting on its own and on the figures themselves: the decoration of the hood of the Virgin Mary, the tears in her eyes, the garment of the patrons, to mention just a few. Van der Weyden used the still relatively new oil technique (and applied it on wood as was usual for Flemish paintings) that added an extra supplement to the oil pigments in order to make the colors more intense and rich. The outcome on the Crucifixion Triptych is impressive.

It is safe to say at this point that Rogier van der Weyden's work is typical of Flemish paintings of the period in style, technique and subject matter.

Although this should never underestimate the individual achievement of the artist who managed to create a beautiful and artistically perfect ensemble, it is always useful to look at works of art in their social and historical contexts. The fact that the patrons are included in the picture and that they are civilians and not members of the church is indicative of the social change taking place in Flanders during the 15th century. Religion, like art, was probably open to more people than ever before.