

Rogier van der weyden, the crucifixion in the philadelphia museum of art case stu...

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The Northern Renaissance is an interesting period in the history of art and artists like Rogier Van der Weyden have produced works that are still admired today. One of his paintings, the Crucifixion, will be examined in this short essay.

The painting was created with oil colors on oak panels and the technique of dendrochronology dates it to c. 1460. It consists of two rectangular panels joined together to form one entity. In the 1990's it was reconstructed and X rays showed dowel holes that suggest that it was probably part of a bigger sculptural structure, perhaps an altarpiece (Stokstad and Cotheren, XXXVI). Its formal structure is considered exceptional mainly because of the choice of the artist to separate the picture into two panels. Unity is achieved by the continuous dark blue sky, the wall that separates the scene from the rest of the world, the sloppy ground and the part of the Virgin Mary's dress that continues to the second panel. At the same time however, the artist emphasizes the isolation of the figures by placing them in front of red pieces of cloth (Stokstad and Cotheren, XXXVII). Accordingly, the position of the figures in their respective panels is different: Christ is at the center of the panel placed higher almost reaching the sky in a symmetrical and balanced composition (Stokstad and Cotheren, XXXVII). The Virgin Mary and St John on the other hand are in a half circular composition, their respective postures seeming unstable (Stokstad and Cotheren, XXXVIII). In terms of iconography, the painting appears to focus on a particular moment in the story of the Crucifixion, after Jesus has asked his favorite disciple to take care of the Virgin Mary. This is the time that St John has to honor his promise. There are, at the same time, some iconographical conventions like the skull and the

bone at the bottom of the Cross which are symbolic of the bones of Adam from whose original sin the humans were saved by Christ's sacrifice. Furthermore, the suffering of the Virgin Mary along with her son emphasized by their common facial characteristics, the same bending of the knee and the tilting of their heads, refers to the notion of co-passio which is important in Christian faith (Stokstad and Cotheren, XXXIX). There are two theories concerning the cultural circumstances surrounding the creation of the painting. Art historian Penny Howell Jolly has proposed that the painting was influenced by the frescoes the Italian artist Fra Angelico had painted at the monastery of St Marco in Florence and seen by Rogier during his pilgrimage in Italy in 1450 (Stokstad and Cotheren, XL). Jolly also proposed that the Crucifixion was created for the Carthusian monastery of Herrines in Flanders in which Rogier's only son became a monk and where it is known that the artist donated one of his works around the period he created the painting (Stokstad and Cotheren, XLI).

The painting is exhibited in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The experience of seeing the actual work of art is radically different than studying it in the classroom via projected material or at home from book illustrations or the internet. One can see the work of art in its actual dimensions and from below as it would probably be enjoyed by Rogier's contemporaries. The colors look different, more vivid and the figures seem more alive. The various formal and stylistic elements can be better appreciated, as well as the artist's choice to split the painting into two rectangular panels. Particular details can be fully appreciated, like the facial expressions of the Virgin Mary and St John. One also gains a better understanding of the material the artist

employed as the properties of wood are not always shown in illustrations. Equally important is the knowledge of the purposes and characteristics of Northern Renaissance art when looking at the painting. Religious themes were still preferred but these were depicted more and more realistically. Symbols were used widely and attention to detail was paid by the individual artists (Smith, 12). Patronage came not only from the church but also from cities and wealthy individuals as commerce increased the importance of individual towns and merchants (Smith, 65). It is in this environment that Rogier's work is best understood.

Although created by the same artist, the Deposition has many and significant differences from the Crucifixion. The shape of the first is rectangular but irregular as the center upper part projects upwards. Unlike the Crucifixion, this is just one panel and also unlike the Crucifixion this is an overcrowded painting. Overall, ten people are depicted crowded symmetrically around the cross and the dead body of the Christ. The Cross is placed at the center of the painting, the place where one would expect to find it unlike its unusual placement in the Crucifixion (Stokstad and Cothren, XXXVIII). Still, there are similarities: the religious theme, the treatment of the figures and the garments, the vitality of colors and even the faces and expressions look similar in both paintings. Both engage the viewer emotionally with Virgin Mary's collapse, Christ's dead body and St John's expression as he tries to support the Virgin Mary. However, pain is more pronounced in the Deposition, something that is achieved by the women who weep at the two corners of the paintings, the pale white color on the face of the Virgin Mary which matches her headpiece but contrasts sharply with her royal blue

garment and the red robes of St John right next to her. Pain is more silent but equally if not more powerful in the Crucifixion. The Deposition was created as an altarpiece and was expected to attract the viewer even when seen from a distance (Smith, 172). It is also an earlier work, created in c 1435-1440 some twenty years before the Crucifixion (Smith, 171). If Jolly's interpretation about the function of the Crucifixion is correct, then it was also an altarpiece, located however not in a common church but a Carthusian monastery and particularly in their chapel of St Catherine (Stokstad and Cotheren, XLI). It would be seen primarily by monks, a limited number of people and because of that it could be a devotional image, intended for prayer. This is better emphasized by the sense the two panel division of the painting gives us. A sense of looking at the scene from a window.

Accordingly, the clear representation of co-passio, the suffering of the Virgin Mary along with her son, which was part of the initiation rites of the Carthusian monks (Stokstad and Cotheren, XLI), adds to the possibility that this was a devotional image.

It is interesting to look at another Crucifixion also made in the area of the Netherlands approximately ten years after Rogier's work. The painting is attributed to Simon Marmion, dates from the 1470's and is part of the same collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art ("The Crucifixion"). Significantly smaller than Rogier's Crucifixion, the work is created on a single square panel. Marmion chose to compose a traditional painting, placing the Crucifix at the center of the composition and placing at his right the mourning Virgin Mary, St John and another woman who is probably Mary Magdalene. On the left side, he adds another group of people absent from Rogier's painting:

they are three soldiers that serve as a symmetrical yet contrasting element with the group of Christ's followers on the right. The scene is placed outdoors and there is no wall to separate it from the world around unlike Rogier's version of the event. A town can be clearly seen in the background with a surrounding landscape of rocks and trees. Unlike Rogier whose sky is a line of dark blue, the sky in Marmion's work denotes a sunny day with only two clouds appearing on the two sides. The painting however was inspired by Rogier ("The Crucifixion") and there are evident similarities if one looks at the painting more closely. To begin with, the posture of the Christ on the Cross, his tilted head and his facial expression are almost identical in both pictures, while the presence of a skull and a bone at the bottom has its roots in the same religious tradition. The garments of the Virgin Mary and St John are also similar although their coloring is different and there are striking similarities in the way their folding is treated. Equally similar is the Virgin Mary's facial expression and the way St John looks up to Jesus, although in Marmion's painting his hands are raised in a sign of prayer. Interestingly, probably the most striking similarity among the two painting is the rocky ground on which the Cross and the figures stand. It is obvious that stylistically the two paintings belong to the same artistic tradition, although undoubtedly the end result of Rogier's Crucifixion is more powerful. This comparison shows the influence Rogier Van der Weyden had on his contemporaries and places his work in the wider context of Northern Renaissance art. In this respect, the viewer can have a better understanding not only of the two paintings but of the period as a whole.

The Crucifixion is an interesting and in many ways unique example of the

Northern Renaissance. It demonstrates the greatness of Rogier Van der Weyden as an artist and a thorough examination of the work along with a visit to the Philadelphia Museum of art where it is exhibited gives the viewer a sense of the period during which it was created.

WORKS CITED

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