

The Heritage of Rogier van der Weyden. Painting in Brussels : 1450 – 1520

12.10 2013 > 26.01 2014



In the autumn of 2013 the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium stages an exhibition devoted to painting in Brussels in the period between the death of Rogier van der Weyden (1464) and the activity of Bernard van Orley (1515-1541).

At that moment Brussels was a thriving town. The Coudenberg Palace being the favourite residence of the dukes of Burgundy. It was surrounded by the palaces of courtiers and noble families like the Nassau or the Ravenstein. They were all important patrons of the arts.

It is difficult to identify the painters of this period. Among the painters active in Brussels at that moment, Colyn de Coter is the only one of whose signed work has come down to us.

Through a document we know that Aert van den Bossche painted a triptych for the Saint Nicolas church. Pieter van der Weyden, who inherited the famous workshop of his father Rogier, is mentioned in several documents, but no painting can be attributed with certainty to him. On the other hand, there are unsigned and undocumented paintings that show a strong influence of Rogier van der Weyden, or others with the inscription "te Bruesele" - made in Brussels - and some that prominently depict Brussels monuments, like the Saint Gudula Cathedral. These are attributed to masters with a provisional name: the Master of the View of Saint Gudula, the Master of the Princely Portraits, the Master of the Life of Joseph (also called the Master of Affligem), the Master of Orsoy, the Master of the Saint Barbara Legend, the Master of the Saint Catherine Legend, the Master of the Redemption of the Prado (the presumed Vrancke van der Stockt) and the Master of the Embroidered Foliage. These painters haven't been highly estimated in art history, they have been designated with the term "minor masters".

Research program

The exhibition is built on a four year research program carried out by Dr. Griet Steyaert who, as art historian has been focusing on the followers of Rogier van der Weyden. She wrote a PhD thesis on the Master of the Legend of Saint Catherine. She is also trained in technical examination and easel painting restoration. Recently she has restored the *Seven Sacraments* by Rogier van der Weyden.



Beside the Master of the Saint Catherine Legend, two other Brussels painters have been studied in detail: Colyn de Coter and the Master of the Embroidered Foliage¹. The other artistic personalities remain less known, although some of their works have been the subject of detailed studies. The Brussels school of the end of the 15th century has not benefited from any general study since the exhibition organised in 1953 at the Musée communal de Bruxelles². Most of the studies undertaken so far focused on problems of attributions. Stylistic the paintings have almost always been measured against the yardstick of Van der Weyden. The narrative aspect and the taste for decorative ornamentation has been stressed with little attempt to define the individual specificities of the Brussels “minor masters”.

With the three existing detailed studies as starting point, the research project concentrated on four important workshops, those of the Master of the Redemption of the Prado, the Master of the Saint Barbara Legend, the Master of the View of Saint Gudula and the Master of the Joseph Sequence, with reference also to the principal works of the other painters active in Brussels.



The exhibition

Building on the results of the recent research and the existing studies the exhibition presents an overall picture of painting in Brussels at the late 15th and first years of the 16th centuries, tackling the subject from various viewpoints, historical, iconographic, stylistic, technical, economic and in terms of work organisation and exact copying. The exhibition addresses the following questions:

- What happened with the famous workshop of Rogier van der Weyden after his death?
- Which other workshops can we distinguish?
- Can we estimate how important these workshops were?
- For whom and for which market - local or export - did these painters work?
- What was the impact of Hugo van der Goes who lived and worked his last years at the Roo convent near Brussels?
- What is the significance of mass production of certain paintings?
- And finally, what is particular about these "Brussels masters"?

¹ See the studies by C. Périer-D'leteren, *Colyn de Coter et la technique picturale des peintres flamands du XVe siècle*, Brussels, 1985 ; Griet Steyaert, *De Brusselse schildersschool na Rogier van der Weyden: de meester van de Sint-Catharina-legende*, unpublished thesis, Brussels, VUB, 2003; Exhibition catalogue F. Gombert, D. Martens, *Le Maître au feuillage brodé: Primitifs flamands. Secrets d'ateliers*, Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 10.05.2005 – 24.07.2005 and F. Gombert, D. Martens (under the direction of), *Le Maître au feuillage brodé. Démarches d'artistes et méthodes d'attribution d'œuvres à un peintre anonyme des anciens Pays-Bas du XVe siècle*, [symposium deeds], Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 23-24 June 2005, Lille 2007.

² Exhibition catalogue: *Bruxelles au XVe siècle*, Bruxelles, Musée communal, 9.10.1953 – 22.11.1953.



The Royal Museums possess a core group of paintings and key-works of this period. These are accompanied by loans from museums and some private collections worldwide. The National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne has sent the “*Triptych with the miracles of Christ*” (1491-1495), one of the most important works of art from Brussels of this period.

The exhibition is paralleled by a scientific publication, that contains the results of the research program and several essays by specialists.

Curators : **Dr. Véronique Bücken, head of department Ancient painting**
 Dr. Griet Steyaert, scientific collaborator

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1. Rogier van der Weyden, *Portrait of Antony of Bourgondy* ca. 1430 -1504 (1456 - 1464), Oak, 38,4 x 28 x 0,4 cm ©MRBAB/KMSKB
2. Master of the Prado Adoration, *The Presentation in the Temple*, oil on panel, 59 x 48,1 cm, ©National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.28
3. Master of the Saint Catherine Legend, Master of the Princely Portraits, Aert van den Bossche, *Triptych with the miracles of Christ*, Oil on wood, 112 x 162 cm, © National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1922
4. Master of the Prado Adoration, *Nativity*, Oil on panel, Creditline: artist, title ©Birmingham Museums Trust