THE PERUSSIS ALTARPIECE

BY THEODORE ROUSSEAU, JR.

Curator of Paintings

During the fifteenth century the artists of Provence created some of the most beautiful paintings of all time. Only a few have survived; and although they have been studied during the last fifty years, comparatively little is known about them, the great majority still presenting problems of authorship, style, and provenance that have not been solved. The painting illustrated on the opposite page, recently acquired by the Museum, is one of these. Usually called the retable of the Péru, it has been known to scholars for many years; but in spite of this there are still curious and baffling questions concerned with it for which no satisfactory answers have been found.

It is a large altarpiece divided by its frame into five sections. In the central panel stands a tall, simple wooden cross which dominates the picture. On it are only the inscription at the top and three nails marking the position of the absent body of Christ. At its foot lie the skull of Golgotha and a jawbone and shin bone. On either side kneel two men looking up at the cross, their hands clasped in prayer. Represented in contemporary clothes, they are clearly portraits, and the artist has gone to great pains to bring out the character of their personalities. Behind each man stands a saint, who presents him to the cross: on the left Saint John the Baptist in his goatskin tunic and a red cloak, holding a cross; on the right Saint Francis in the habit of his order, holding a small crucifix. Both saints have a quiet, tender expression, and the artist seems to have wanted to emphasize their connection with the kneeling figures by grouping them very closely together. Hanging on tree stumps at either extremity of the picture, are shields with armorial bearings, surmounted in each case by a crested helm with mantle and, above, a scroll with the device DATUM EST DE SUPER. The shields are identical, both bearing three golden pears with leaves and stems on a blue background. The crests of the helms are naked putti with wings standing above the torses.

Behind the cross and the figures, stretching to the horizon, is a wide plain in which there is a city, easily identifiable as Avignon. The view is taken from the hills on the western bank of the river Rhone, where the old Carthusian monastery of Villeneuve still stands. A winding road leads us down to the bank of the river and the fortified tower of Philippe le Bel, from which the bridge of Saint Benet, famous throughout the world because of the charming song about it, spans the Rhone. On the opposite bank lies the old city, which once rivaled Rome as the seat of the papacy. It is surrounded by the ramparts and battlements, which can still be seen today, and dominated by its cathedral, Notre-Damedes-Doms, and the fortresslike Palace of the Popes with its huge towers. To the left is the rock with the little chapel of Saint Martin and, far away on the horizon, looking over the whole countryside, the Mont Ventoux, which played such a fateful role in the life of the young poet Petrarch when he climbed it accompanied by his brother on a spring day in 1356. Every detail of this landscape is brought out with loving care, the small figures on the road going down to the river, the little boats, and the details of the buildings; and the whole is blended together in a harmony of cool, soft blues and greens that give a most convincing impression of atmosphere and distance.

The history of the picture is interesting. We do not know where it was placed when it was completed in 1480. It may have been painted for the little Carthusian monastery of Bonpas on the banks of the Durance, south of Avignon, on one of the main roads leading to Italy, as was stated in 1743 in a history of the noble families of Avignon. The author of this book definitely records it as located in the monastery at that time. After the Revolution it is known to have been in the chapel of the Penitent Brotherhood at Vedènes in a suburb of Avignon, where Mari
The Péruissis altarpiece, by a French painter of the school of Avignon, 1480. Saint John the Baptist and Saint Francis present the kneeling donors to the cross. The arms at left and right are those of the Péruissis family. Purchased with funds bequeathed by Mary Wetmore Shively in memory of her husband, Henry L. Shively, 1955.

The author of a life of Froment, saw it at the beginning of this century. Louis Fournier, a well-known collector of French painting, is said to have purchased it there in 1913. At the sale of his collection it was bought by the Dutch auctioneer A. W. M. Mensing, whose heirs subsequently sold it at Sotheby's in London on February 28, 1951.

By good fortune a drawing has come down to us, made in the eighteenth century when the altarpiece was in the monastery of Bonpas. This shows the picture in its original frame, and the artist has copied an inscription then on it which stated: Aloisius Rudolphi de Péruissis hanc tabellam fieri fecit anno domini MCCCCLXXX (Aloisius, or Louis, the son of Rudolph of Péruissis, had this panel made in the year 1480). The inscription and the armorial bearings definitely identify the two kneeling figures in the picture as belonging to the family of Péruissis. This is the French form of the Italian Peruzzi, the name of the famous Florentine banking family who had branches in many of the great cities of Europe and are said to have been ruined when Edward III, who had borrowed a huge sum from them for his war against the French, failed to meet his obligations after the battle of Crécy in 1346. The Rudolph referred to in the inscription must be Ridolfo Peruzzi, who was exiled from Florence in 1434, when Cosimo de’ Medici returned from banishment and cleared the city of his enemies, the Albizzi and their party. Ridolfo’s descendants remained in Avignon for many generations, playing a prominent part in the affairs of the com-
The two donors, who are members of the Péruiss family of Avignon, have not yet been positively identified.

munity and taking on the titles of Lords of Caumont, Baron, Barles, and Mondeverges and Barons of Lauris. The city archives tell us of the positions they occupied—provost, consul, and president of the Parliament—and of their activity as patrons of the arts. The problem that must be solved here is the identity of the two kneeling men. The saints might indicate that their names were John and Francis, but not necessarily, because people did not always bear the name of their patron saint, and as the inscription on the drawing tells us that Louis commissioned the picture we would expect him to be one of the donors represented. To date, however, no evidence has come to light on which a definite identification could be based.

There are several exceptional features in the picture: first, the subject, the adoration of the naked cross on Golgotha by two kneeling donor figures, is unusual. Although the cross does appear frequently in connection with the mourning over the dead body of the Saviour, this disposition seems to be almost unique among the paintings of this school that have survived. Another eighteenth-century drawing of a painting, by the same hand as that connected with our altarpiece, may give us some help in this respect. The painting has disappeared, but the drawing records that it also bore an inscription telling us that the commission was given by Ludovicus of Péruiss in the same year, 1480. It also showed a tall, empty cross; and at its foot there knelt a man in flowing robes who embraced it with his arms and pressed his head against it. At the top of this picture were other small scenes, among them the risen Christ surrounded by angels; and connected with these scenes were scrolls bearing Latin inscriptions all concerned with the story of the True Cross. Thus we have convincing evidence that two pictures with empty crosses were commissioned by Louis of Péruiss, suggesting that Louis, and doubtless his family, had some particular devotion to the cross as a symbol. Perhaps they owned a fragment of the True
Between them, behind the cross, is a distant view of the city of Avignon, with Mont Ventoux on the horizon.

Cross, one of the most highly prized relics of the time. Further study of the inscriptions and of the history of the family in Avignon should reveal more details about this.

Another unusual feature of the picture is the gold background that stretches from the top down to the blue sky above the horizon. In most paintings of this period the gold background comes right down to the outline of the horizon. It is very rare indeed to find a background that leaves a strip of sky. In this case it is most effective, since somehow it increases the impression of distance and atmospheric effect. It may also play a symbolical role, since in the picture everything celestial is represented against the gold background, whereas the figures of this earth are all shown against the landscape and the sky. For us today it can be even more significant, for in a picture presenting so many elements that are a mixture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, this golden background seems like a half-lifted curtain which allows the new interest in man and nature to assert itself as the Middle Ages gradually recede into the realm of spiritual memories.

The division of the picture by the frame into five vertical sections is interesting. In reality it is composed of three panels only: one with the cross in the center and the other two for the donors with their saints and armorial bearings. It was clearly not intended to have folding shutters. A likely possibility is that the divisions corresponded to some architectural arrangement in the chapel for which it was originally intended. As we look at the picture, we see it as if through the frame. Parts of the hats that lie on the ground before the kneeling figures are hidden by this frame, and it also cuts through the feet of the two donors. It is as if we were looking through a window, and the picture may well provide an interesting connection between oil painting and stained-glass windows. Indeed it is quite possible that there was a window of almost the same shape as the picture immediately
Head of Saint John the Baptist, detail of the Pérussel altarpiece
above the altar on which it originally was placed.

The scholars who have studied the picture have attributed it almost unanimously to Nicolas Froment or to his school. There is certainly a relationship to the art of King René of Provence's court painter, who was living in Avignon at the time it was painted. However, if we compare our picture with the two works known through documentary evidence to have been painted by Froment, the Resurrection of Lazarus in the Uffizi, Florence (1461), and The Burning Bush in the cathedral of Saint Sauveur, Aix-en-Provence (1476), we find stylistic differences that make it most unlikely that our picture was painted by the master himself. In both of his known pictures Froment shows a strong interest in richness of surface detail, in the trees, in the draperies, in the delineation of the features of the faces. One of the most striking aspects of both the pictures referred to, although they were painted sixteen years apart, is the exaggerated way in which he paints faces so that they are almost caricatures. Also, both pictures are painted in what may be called a warm, rich color harmony.

It is probably the very marked characterization of the features in the head of the donor on the right that has made people think of Froment in connection with our picture. However, it seems to me that if we look at this head more closely we see a fundamental difference in conception. Here, although the features are realistically drawn and bring out the ugliness of the model, there is a sort of cool objectivity in the way they have been rendered, a simplicity that is the contrary of caricature; and, what is even more significant, there is no trace of the grimace often found in heads by Froment. Throughout our picture this cool, objective, simple approach is visible. There is here definitely a conscious desire to eliminate detail that is in strong contrast to Froment's interest in richness of surface. The most interesting confirmation of this difference between the two artists can be seen by comparing our landscape with that in the altarpiece of The Burning Bush. The pale, cool colors and the over-all impression of clear, evenly diffused light are also quite foreign to Froment.

Avignon at this time was a meeting place for all of Europe. As one would expect from a picture painted there, ours has elements recalling both Italy and the Netherlands. The realism in the portraits and the color point to a northern training for our artist, whereas the two saints certainly suggest Italian models. It has been rightly said that the landscape recalls illuminated manuscripts made in northern France and the Netherlands. Indeed, the somewhat awkward way in which the donors and saints are placed together, and the arbitrary elongation of the saints in order to make them fit in their places, might well hint that the artist was not accustomed to working on so large a scale.

The frame divisions like those of a stained-glass window may also be evidence of a northern origin. At the time the picture was painted, the second half of the fifteenth century, many of the painters in Avignon were referred to as both painters and workers in stained glass. This was true of Nicolas Froment. In the north the tradition was a long one, including, as we know, Jan van Eyck himself.

Considerably more study of the archives of Avignon, of the Pérussis family, and of the Carthusian monastery of Bonpas will be required before we can come any closer to the identity of our artist. However, as one looks through the records of artists working in Avignon in 1480, one's attention is drawn to the name of Tomas Grabuset, who collaborated in 1481 with Nicolas Froment. A native Burgundian, he was a painter and worker in stained glass and in 1461 had taken over the studio of the Dombet brothers, who had previously worked for Louis of Pérussis. Another possible candidate for the authorship of our painting is Philippe Gascin of Geneva, likewise a painter and stained-glass worker, who in June I500 received payment for sixty-two stained-glass panels that he had made for Louis's house at Caumont.

Whoever the painter was, he has left us a picture that is fascinating not only because of its very individual beauty as a work of art but also because of the many allusions, some of them still problematical, that link it with the life and culture of Avignon during the second half of the fifteenth century.