In Search of a Rhenish Master

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Into an area only three feet high and two wide the sculptor of a late Gothic Crucifixion composed twenty-five figures—each no more than six inches high and six of them on horseback—in a work that is at once a technical tour de force and a masterpiece of dramatic expression (Frontispiece). Aside from Christ and the two thieves, projecting above the scene on their crosses, all figures have been carved out of three rectangular blocks of lindenwood; not a single arm or head has been cut separately and then attached. The undercutting is extremely deep: the carving is up to five inches in depth at the base, and many figures stand out almost fully in the round. In this pictorial, extraordinarily complex scene, we are presented with a spectacle of the young and the old, the sorrowful and the indifferent, the rich and the poor—an array of physiognomic types that seems deliberately to categorize a wide range of emotions and social variants. Differentiation of facial types and attention to details of clothing, armor, and harness amount to a near obsession. But the sculptor’s ability is such that we are not overwhelmed by details. He has brought together all elements into a legible and coherent unity that imparts a satisfying order and monumentality.

The stage for this Crucifixion, a recent purchase for The Cloisters, is crowned by a flat arch of vines cut from one piece of wood, so vital and organic in design that the vines appear to be still growing. Yet each tendril, leaf, and bunch of grapes has been placed with great care to avoid the impression of the haphazard. Behind this proscenium arch the scene is divided horizontally into two nearly equal halves. The upper zone is dominated by the figure of Christ (Figure 1), whose dignity in suffering is emphasized by his size, for he is larger than the flanking thieves. A fragment of an angel’s wing still clinging to the vines on the right side above his head indicates that a mourning angel once hovered on each side. Below on a series of steep ledges that grow into sharp rocks are the witnesses to the drama: on the left are the soldier with the lance, the fainting Virgin with St. John, and the holy women; on the right are the Roman legionaries; in the center are Mary Magdalene and the soldiers fighting over the tunic.

The firm structure of the composition comes not only from the sure placement of the figures

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but also from the subtle relationships between them. Each group is cunningly isolated, yet each bears an inevitable relationship to the rest. The action begins slowly from both sides and sweeps inward and upward toward Christ. The sculptor has emphasized the most compelling dramatic moment of each figural group, but at the same time he has injected elements that are somewhat detached; the emotion and activity of certain figures is heightened by contrast with the immobility and indifference of others.

Most medieval texts relating to the Crucifixion describe how the soldier who pierced Christ’s side, called Longinus, was blind, and that he miraculously regained his vision when the blood and water from Christ’s wound flowed down the lance into his eyes. Despite the fact that the figure of Christ is shown with the wound already in his side, the sculptor has evidently depicted the moment immediately before the miracle took place (see Figure 2): the blind Longinus, mounted on a mule (a docile beast for the sightless) points hesitantly upward, while a knight beside him leans forward out of the saddle to direct the path of his lance. The relationship of these two figures is one of great vitality. The action is not only true to life but creates a fine compositional motif, exploited to the utmost by the sculptor. The turning of the knight is balanced perfectly by the countermovement of his horse. It scrambles to keep footing on the steep terrain, whereas Longinus’s mule stands dumbly and tosses his head slowly to avoid the horse’s nervous prancing.

Behind Longinus stands a brooding foot soldier (Figure 3), an isolated figure with battle-scarred face half-concealed by the mail under his helmet, who acts as a foil to the dramatic moment; his presence balances the two active figures before him and halts the movement at the side of the panel.

This device is repeated directly below by another anecdotal figure, a young woman who nurses a child. Indifferent to the action, she is wholly removed from the sorrowful Virgin, St. John, and the holy women, and her very detachment heightens the emotional intensity of the grief-stricken group beside her.

The right side of the Calvary group (Figure 4) is filled with a press of soldiers, on foot and on horseback, placed on a plane that recedes steeply toward the rocky background. This is far from a disorganized mob. Each person and animal has been placed so that a strong geometric order emerges from seeming complexity. The movement proceeds from the outside toward the center; from those who ignore the event to those who devote their full attention to it—a movement reflected by the sharp upward thrust of the rocks. As usual the sculptor has made an effective contrast of types and emotions. The cavalier on the far right (Figure 8), arrogant and cruel, seems wholly absorbed in his own sour thoughts. His detachment is emphasized by his frontal position and by the tilt of his large hat. Next to him, however, a man of striking authority, with an elaborate “artichoke” hat and a heavy, flamelike beard (Figure 5), is directly involved in the action. He is obviously one of the soldiers—evident from the mail shirt under his robes—but he is the only one whose visage is sorrowful. His prominence, his gesture toward Christ would appear to make him the centurion of the Gospels who spoke the words “Truly this was the Son of God.”

At the center, in highly effective contrast to the quiet suffering of Christ and the grief of the Magdalene embracing the cross, is a scene of violence and extraordinary vulgarity (Figure 7): four soldiers are locked in a fierce struggle to gain possession of the great, seamless tunic of Christ that spreads on the barren rocks beneath their bodies. One of the fighters whose back is turned to us twists his head around sharply as the teeth of his adversary sink into his fingers; his anguish gesture is balanced by the elegant poise of the fashionable dandy on the other side. The twisted and angular tangle of this group in
1. The figure of Christ
turn contrasts with the flowing harmonious structure of the rest of the composition.

In the examination of any work of art there are bound to be surprises. One can look at a sculpture for weeks and be resigned to its appearance, despite a vague feeling that something is not quite right. Then the reason for this latent discontent becomes perfectly clear, and at once a new and exciting facet of the work is revealed.

At least since 1907, when the earliest photographic record of this Crucifixion was made, the thief on the right—the bad thief—was in a frontal position, his body partly hidden by the wood of the tree, his heavy face somewhat cruelly cut into a grotesque mask. It seemed very curious that the artist had taken the trouble to carve in far finer and more expressive detail the protruding shoulder blades and the hard knots of the spinal column—parts of the figure that no one would ever be able to see. The reason for this labor soon became evident: it was clearly from the back, and not from the front, that the bad thief was intended to be viewed. And indeed the grotesque face turned out to be a later addition, and once the figure and cross were removed and turned to a point where the most finished carving presented itself, the position of the body proved to be the original and, indeed much more satisfying one (see Figure 10). Not only is the figure far more sensitive as sculpture, but it becomes more effective in contrast with the good thief (Figure 9). For the sculptor did not express the difference between the thieves’ natures—good and evil, repentance and unrepentance—merely through the differentiation of facial types but by the more dramatic means of the positions of their bodies. The good thief on the left is tightly bound to the tree, but his body is placid and relaxed. His countenance is calm and meditative. It is as if after hearing Christ’s words, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise,” his physical suffering had ceased. The bad thief, on the other hand, is turned away; his face is hidden. His stretched and tortured body seems to express the eternal agony of impenitence.

The device of showing one thief from the front and the other turned away from the spectator

2. Longinus and a mounted soldier, from the left panel
is not unique in late medieval art, but it is uncommon. It is likely that this unusual arrangement of the two figures was born out of the sculptor’s curiosity about the nude figure. For these figures, both highly expressive in nature, amount almost to anatomical studies. They are none-theless distinctly medieval in style; the artist has rendered the human body as he believed and wanted it to look, not as he perceived it. The somewhat arbitrary separation between chest and waist belongs to a Gothic rather than a Renaissance viewpoint.

Close examination of the composition as a whole indicates that the left panel is slightly different in technique and style from the other two. The differences, by no means obvious at first glance, are visible in the shapes and the joining of the panels themselves, the varying crispness and finish of carving, the treatment of the rocks in the background, and the handling of draperies. These differences perhaps show that a second sculptor executed the center and right panels from a wax model that the master had made, or finished them after the master had blocked out his composition.

The left panel also differs from the others in that it possesses certain elements, such as the Virgin and St. John, that seem to be more traditional in feeling than the figure groups in the other panels. A prototype that reflects this more traditional iconography has in fact been discovered, and shows that there are more of these elements in the left panel than in the others. The nature of this model is reflected in several works of sculpture in widely separated places, chief among them an altarpiece (Figure 11) in the church of Münnerstadt, near Würzburg in lower Franconia. The similarities in composition and iconography between the Crucifixion and such works as the Münnerstadt altarpiece do not prove the Crucifixion was directly derived from them, but rather suggest a common, readily transportable model for them all—a print or a drawing.

It is important to note that these comparable pieces show far more resemblance to one another than our piece shows to any of them, and that they are far less imaginative. The sculptor of our piece has not slavishly copied the model. Certain elements have been used and others rejected; the model was employed as an armature around which the artist has molded his own ideas, resulting from an acute observation of life. Among the figures the sculptor has kept are Longinus, the foot soldier behind him, the soldier who aids him, and the centurion with the “artichoke” hat. He has changed the position of the Magdalene, achieving a greater dramatic effect. He has added two Marys to the group of the Virgin and St. John, as well as the nursing mother. By this means the composition has been strengthened and the anecdotal flavor heightened. His foot soldier is not merely a space-filler but a story in himself. The transformation of the model is particularly revealing in the Longinus and the mounted knight. He was not content to let these figures blend with the others, but has made vital and human something that was but the routine expression of a traditional theme.

3. A Roman foot soldier, from the left panel
4. The centurion and a group of soldiers, from the right panel
Although the general condition of the sculpture is very good, it has changed from its original appearance. Whether or not the figures were once painted remains an unsolved question. The only traces of color that remain are red for some of the lips and blue-black for some of the eyes; the red paint, indicating blood, on Christ and the thieves has a rather chalky texture and appears to be modern.

At some point in its history the Crucifixion was covered with a dark stain, and this, rather than paint, may have been its original surface. The stain was perhaps applied to simulate the rich color of boxwood, a technique that is not unique in sculpture of this period. The dark stain on our sculpture was at some time overcleaned, with a caustic solution and by scraping, so that the surface of the sculpture is less sharp than it once was, and certain small details have disappeared. Major restorations include the cross from a point above the Magdalene’s left hand, the flying draperies and the left arm of Christ, the panel with the inscription INRI, and Longinus’s lance. The altarpiece wings, perhaps painted, that must originally have protected the sculpture are missing. So is the background, possibly painted with a landscape of the city of Jerusalem as was not uncommon in works of this kind.

To name the artist who produced this small masterpiece of such technical finesse and expressive content might seem to be a relatively easy task. But it is not. The sculpture is neither signed nor dated, we have no idea where it originally came from, and its history goes back only to the year 1907. At this time it was sold from the estate of the French collector Edouard Chappée to the Paris dealer Henri Daguerre, who in the following year sold the piece to the American collector Ambrose Monell. When Monell’s collection was put at auction in New York in 1930, Oscar B. Cintas purchased the sculpture, and kept it until 1960. Nothing else is known.

This is not to say that its style does not present ample clues as to its origin. The sculpture is German, despite its similarity to a number of small-scale wooden altarpieces made in the Netherlands in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The Crucifixion has a German characterization of faces and costume types,
combined with a lightness of touch and a taut elegance in its figures that removes it from the style of the Low Countries. Furthermore, the Crucifixion is carved in lindenwood, a soft, tight-grained wood used commonly in the middle and south of Germany and rarely in the north of Europe.

The Crucifixion, like any work of art of high quality, is an expression of the viewpoint of its time and its creator. The late Gothic period in Germany—from the end of the fifteenth to the early sixteenth century—was a moment of transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, excitingly rich in its fusion of the traditions of the past with the new ideas of the "modern" epoch. The unifying characteristic of late Gothic German art is realism, based on a humanistic outlook. This realism is expressed in a number of styles, ranging from the last vestiges of Gothic to a quasi-baroque exuberance. The Crucifixion falls between these polarities. At once severe, realistic, and idyllic, it is a work of profoundly religious, almost hieratic symbolism, which at the same time captures the behavior of real people in suffering, grief, awe, and boredom.

We can at least date the sculpture closely. The unity of the composition, the vitality and naturalism of certain figures, and details of clothes and armor place the work in the period around 1495-1510. The search for its place of origin has narrowed in scope to sculptures produced in one of the most fertile artistic regions of late Gothic Germany, the narrow strip of territory bordering both sides of the Rhine River from Basel in the south through Strasbourg and up to Mainz.

A figure of a man on a horse, no more than three inches high overall, has produced the first hint of who the artist might be. This horse and rider appear in the upper right-hand corner of a small lindenwood sculpture representing the Mount of Olives (Figures 12, 13), a fine piece purchased in 1891 for the Berlin Museum in the rather unlikely art market of New Orleans. The rider is practically the same as the centurion in the Crucifixion and has a similar "artichoke" hat and flamelike beard. Other similarities also reveal themselves. The woman behind this figure is the twin to the nursing mother in the Crucifixion. The soldier who propels Judas to his act of betrayal is first cousin to the animated knight who aids the blind Longinus. Figures, faces, draperies, even hands are similar in both sculptures.

8. A Roman soldier, from the right panel

The Mount of Olives is usually described as upper Rhenish, around 1485-1495. Its sculptor has been given the rather ponderous title Master of the Monogram H, owing to the presence of that letter on a soldier's hat.

Could it be that the Crucifixion is by the anonymous Master H? A curious coincidence be-
tween the sizes of the Master H panel and the Crucifixion adds to the temptation of this possibility. The height of the Berlin panel is exactly that of the panels in the Crucifixion, up to the level of the rocks. Its width is just half of the Cloisters sculpture. The question arises: could this fascinating little piece have been a wing that once adorned the Crucifixion?

Doubts then begin to creep in to dampen the ardor of discovery. The style of the Mount of Olives, although very close, is somewhat more crisp; the draperies, although possessing many of the same wrinkles and folds, are harder, more nervous. They break into sharp angles instead of flowing smoothly. Most important of all, the composition of the Mount of Olives lacks the sweep and organic unity so characteristic of the Crucifixion; the details are stronger than the whole. There is a certain awkwardness and tentative quality in its over-all structure that suggests that if it is by the same artist as the Crucifixion, it was executed earlier than the latter. The more the Mount of Olives is studied, the more it draws away from direct association with the Crucifixion. At least one is discouraged from the conclusion that both sculptures are part of a single piece, executed at the same time, by a single artist.

9. The good thief

10. The bad thief
It is nevertheless clear that a strong relationship exists between them. The precise nature of the relationship is perhaps revealed through a number of parallels between the Crucifixion and another small lindenwood sculpture in the Berlin-Dahlem Museum. This second carving, representing the Annunciation (Figure 14), measures ten inches high and was carved around the first decade of the sixteenth century. It comes from the cloister of St. Clara in the town of Heilbronn, on the eastern periphery of the upper Rhine region.

This sensitive sculpture has the soft grace and elegance of the Crucifixion—particularly apparent in the group of the Virgin and St. John (see Cover). The juxtaposition of the two reveals such a number of similarities that there is little doubt that both were executed by one man or, at the very least, two closely related artists. In both groups there is an emphasis on the triangular composition, the draperies are soft and flowing and cling to the limbs of the figures to reveal their roundness. In both, these draperies fall straight and then splash out on the ground into a series of angular folds, deeply undercut. The small irregular scribbles of folds in one sculpture reflect the same patterns in the other. In both, the oval, slightly squared faces have a gentleness of expression, a dreamy distant gaze produced by small eyes and pursed lips. In both one sees characteristically fleshy hands with long tubular fingers pressed tightly together.

In an article of 1929 the German historian Clemens Sommer presented a number of strong arguments for the attribution of the Annunciation to one of the greatest sculptors of the late Gothic period in the upper Rhine. His name is Hans Wydyz, and his known works are of a surpassing technical mastery and refinement. These known works, four in number, have the strongest possible foundation for their attribution: they are all either signed or documented, and two of them are dated. There is a shrine of the Three Kings in Freiburg Cathedral, dated 1503; three wooden rosettes in Freiburg Cathedral, dated by cathedral documents around 1510; an initialed statuette of St. Agnes in the Augustinermuseum in Freiburg, thought to have been carved around 1510; and an initialed six-inch-high sculpture of boxwood and stained lindenwood, representing Adam and Eve, in the Historisches Museum, Basel.

The exciting thought then arises that the Crucifixion at The Cloisters may be a lost work of the master Hans Wydyz, since it so closely resembles the Annunciation attributed to him. Certain similarities with Wydyz’s signed pieces seem at first to strengthen this supposition. In the treatment of some faces and draperies the Crucifixion recalls the Three Kings shrine; one mourning woman in the Crucifixion is very similar to the statuette of St. Agnes; the twisting, organic vines
appear to be carved like the tree trunk of the Adam and Eve in Basel.

But there are, at the same time, a sufficient number of stylistic differences to prevent such an absolute attribution of the Crucifixion to Hans Wydyz. Furthermore, these differences tend also to emphasize the differences between the Berlin Annunciation and the four sculptures that we know are by Wydyz. We are therefore confronted with the problem of whether or not the Annunciation is truly by his hand.

There is no room here to discuss all the complex facets of this enigma, but one point is especially striking. The signed works of Hans Wydyz, while they convey a sense of sculptural solidity, have a strong, linear style typical of the engravings of Albrecht Dürer. That is, they follow the more “modern” conventions of the sixteenth century rather than the gentler ones of the fifteenth, evident in the style of Nicholas van Leyden, the great late Gothic sculptor who worked in Strasbourg around 1465-1470 and who died in Vienna in 1473. And the known Wydyz pieces are all more crisp, more linear than either the Crucifixion or the Annunciation. The Crucifixion and the Annunciation give more of an impression of softness; the faces are rounder, more fleshy, and gentler in expression. The draperies are more fluid than the angular folds in Wydyz’s sculptures and hug the figures more tightly to reveal the roundness of the limbs.

It is here that the unique qualities of the Mount of Olives, which resembles the Crucifixion in many details yet seems to be by another hand, become especially relevant. For the very characteristics differentiating the four known products of Hans Wydyz from the Crucifixion are common to the Mount of Olives. The facial types of the Mount of Olives, while very close to those in the Crucifixion, appear to be even closer to Wydyz’s known works. The draperies show the same hard, rather nervous style. Indeed they are very close to the draperies in Wydyz’s Three Kings altar of 1505, as is the treatment of the rocks and the foliage. The Mount of Olives even has a dog similar to the one in the Three Kings shrine.

Taking into account the rather tentative character of its composition and other marks of artistic youth, it is perhaps possible that the Mount of Olives can be considered an early work of Hans Wydyz, created when his style was still forming. After all, we know only about five years of his activity—from 1505 until 1510—and nothing about the period of the 1490s. The small H initial might possibly signify the young “Meister Hansen der Bildhauer” (“Master Hansen the Sculptor”), as Wydyz was referred to in a document of 1510.

Who then carved the Crucifixion? In the harmony of the elements and the perfection of the composition, it appears to be a work of a mature, confident artist—not a follower. It has more than one echo of the calm humanism of Nicholas van Leyden. It is hard to believe that it is a product of the workshop of Hans Wydyz: all deriva-
tive pieces emphasize the linearity implicit in the sculptures of the master. Therefore it could be that the Cloisters sculpture is the creation of an artist of exceeding skill, who influenced rather than followed Hans Wydyz—an influence that can possibly be seen in the Mount of Olives.

At any rate it is clear that the Crucifixion, the Mount of Olives, the Annunciation, and the known works of Hans Wydyz are associated with one another and were made by artists familiar with one another’s works. Beyond this, one can only establish a range of probabilities. What seems most probable is that the Crucifixion and the Annunciation are by the same artist. If the Annunciation is by Hans Wydyz, then so is the Crucifixion, and both exemplify a facet of his style at variance with his known works. If on the other hand the Mount of Olives is an early work by Wydyz, then the Annunciation and the Crucifixion are not. In this case both works would be the product of a sculptor of great ability from the upper Rhine, who had some contact with Wydyz, possibly before his first dated work of 1505.

REFERENCES


For the works of Hans Wydyz see:


Clemens Sommer “Beiträge zum Werke des Bildschnitzers Hans Wydyz” in Oberrheinische Kunst, III (1928) pp. 94-104.

See also J. A. Schmoll, called Eisenwerk “Die Sammlung Hermann Schwartz” in Kunstchronik, XIV (1961) Heft 7, pp. 181-82, which confirms Hubert Wiln’s previous attribution of a Mother and Child in the Hermann Schwartz Collection as an early work of Hans Wydyz, about 1490-1500.

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14. Annunciation, lindenwood high relief, attributed to Hans Wydyz, German (upper Rhine), about 1500-1510

Berlin-Dahlem Museum