Sir Anthony van Dyck is renowned as one of the greatest portrait painters of all time—and justly so—but we have the unfortunate tendency, today, to think of him almost exclusively in this capacity. To a frequent visitor to this Museum, what his name probably calls to mind most vividly are the splendid portrayals of the Marquesa Durazzo, the Earl of Warwick, and the Duke of Richmond. Our admiration for these highly refined and aristocratic portraits has led us to forget that more than a third of Van Dyck’s œuvre (that is, over three hundred pictures) is devoted to “history paintings,” historical and Biblical representations. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for that matter, Van Dyck was as celebrated for his religious paintings as for his portraits, a judgment that seems especially striking when we consider that history painting was then much more highly regarded than portrait painting. Sir Joshua Reynolds, for instance, wrote of Van Dyck’s Crucifixion in Mecheln, Belgium: “This picture, upon the whole, may be considered as one of the first pictures in the world, and gives the highest idea of Van Dyck’s power: it shews that he had truly a genius for history painting, if it had not been taken off by portraits.”

Like his great compatriot from Catholic Flanders, Peter Paul Rubens, like Guido Reni in Italy, like Murillo in Spain, Van Dyck was essentially a painter of the Counter Reformation. This movement became a dominant factor with the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which reaffirmed Catholic dogma in the face of Protestant challenges. The Council exerted considerable influence upon art, and used it as an important vehicle for the propagation of the newly reformed faith. Painting, made clear and intelligible, was to instruct and to move; rid of the fantasies of the Middle Ages, and adhering to the Scriptures, it was to stimulate emotional piety through convincing expression. This new attitude was strongly influenced by St. Ignatius Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises, published in the middle of the sixteenth century, in which Ignatius invited Christians to meditate upon the Gospel using all of their senses, precisely as an artist would. Along with the demand for greater realism in the depiction of sacred themes went a demand for greater respect: the Council proscribed nudes in religious subjects, and in 1559, while Michelangelo was still alive, Pope Paul IV ordered Daniele da Volterra to veil with painted garments the nude figures in the Sistine Last Judgment.
Although the Church controlled closely the works of art intended for its altars, and artists executed these only in fulfillment of specific commissions, it must not be concluded that they painted with detachment and indifference. Rubens and Van Dyck, the great exponents of the Counter Reformation in Flanders, were both wholly dedicated to the new spirit. Van Dyck, in fact, joined the Sodality for Bachelors in Antwerp, a lay order dependent upon the Jesuits, in 1628. The two artists, however, were poles apart in temperament, a difference reflected in their approach to religious themes. Rubens's powerful imagination found its most rewarding outlet in scenes of movement and violence; he was a master at grouping many figures into a cohesive whole, and consequently worked most successfully on a large scale. Van Dyck, on the other hand, lacking the older man's richness of invention and dramatic sense, so necessary for vast compositions, excelled in works with few figures. His mild temperament and extreme sensitivity is revealed in his choice of subjects. Themes such as the Last Judgment, so admirably painted by Rubens, are absent from his work, and the episodes of the Passion that he painted most were the Mocking of Christ, not the Flagellation; the Crucifixion, not the Nailing to the Cross; and the Pietà, not the Descent from the Cross. Van Dyck emphasizes the inner drama of these situations, and in the true spirit of the Counter Reformation the paintings move the onlooker to compassion. In addition to such scenes of pathos, he painted a great number of Madonnas and Holy Families, for the cult of the Virgin had been greatly increased by pious opposition to the Protestants' denial of her divinity and their systematic destruction of her images. In these pictures, as in his representations of saints, the emotional emphasis of the period is apparent, with tenderness, melancholy, and rapture the dominant moods. Iconographically, too, the artist adhered to the new precepts of the Church. In his Crucifixions, for example, he depicted the Virgin standing at the foot of the cross, not swooning as she had been shown in many earlier representations of the scene. The Council of Trent had pointed out that the words of the Bible were: "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus, his Mother,
and his Mother’s sister, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalen . . .” (John 19:25).

An underestimation of the spiritual climate of the seventeenth century may be partly responsible for the lack of real interest in Van Dyck’s religious works. Also, history painting finds little favor today for still another reason: often little or no importance is attached to the subject of a work of art. This attitude may have some validity in respect to contemporary art, but it is certainly inappropriate if applied to that of the seventeenth century. The artists of that time, of course, were not indifferent to the sensuous qualities of the paint surface itself, but we must remember that they valued highly the emotional and intellectual impact their works would produce. It is in the light of this background and with an eye for both form and content that we must approach the three religious works of Van Dyck in this Museum. Each dates from a different period in the artist’s career, thus affording a unique opportunity in America to observe Van Dyck’s development in this field.

3. Detail of the Frontispiece: the Child’s leg photographed under strong light to show the shallow grooves that outline the figures

The first in date is the Virgin and Child (Frontispiece). The painting remained in the Earl of Harrington’s collection until 1917, and according to family tradition was originally purchased from the artist himself. Another, less spontaneous version is in the Bob Jones University Collection in South Carolina (Figure 2).

The Metropolitan’s picture is undoubtedly one of Van Dyck’s most beautiful religious works. It is at the same time restrained and highly moving, tender and powerful. It displays a subtle mixture of realism and idealization: the attitude of the Child, his hand placed fondly on his mother’s breast, is wonderfully natural, while in the depiction of the Virgin we can already sense the mature Van Dyck’s
insistent pursuit of elegance. In accordance with the dictates of the Counter Reformation, there are no useless accessories to distract the observer’s attention, and because of the picture’s simplicity the Virgin and Child appeal in a direct, personal way. We are here very far removed indeed from the hieratic, almost forbidding Madonnas of Byzantium. Never again, perhaps, will Van Dyck be so objective, so realistic, and so warmly human as he was in this profoundly religious “maternity.”

The picture was evidently executed when Van Dyck was still under the spell of Rubens, with whom he worked from 1618 to 1620. Frank Jewett Mather once suggested that the Virgin in this picture was an idealized portrait of Isabella Brandt, Rubens’s first wife, and that the child was their son Nicholas, born in 1618; because of the age of the sitters, he placed the execution of the picture in 1621, just prior to Van Dyck’s departure for Italy. The resemblance between the Virgin and Isabella Brandt, however, is rather one of types than individuals, and the child’s twin, with the characteristic silky blond hair hanging low on the neck in bushy curls, may be found in early works of Rubens, long before the birth of Nicholas. But in view of the strong individuality and strikingly Flemish character of the work, we would agree with Mather’s dating of 1621, when Van Dyck had left Rubens’s studio and was working on his own, but had not yet left for Italy.

The Virgin and Child is a sketch carried almost to completion. It is executed on a wood panel in a manner derived from Rubens, with the flesh tones and the colors in the draperies built up upon a transparent brown base, perhaps Armenian bole. This preparation is brushed on thinly in the zones destined for the light tones of the flesh, and more thickly for the shadows and the background (Figure 4). Shade in the draperies is created by the pure local color applied in successive glazes; this transparency gives depth and richness to the painting.

While this basic technique is that of Rubens, much of the method of execution is already very characteristic of Van Dyck. Unlike Rubens, who usually drew directly on his panels with a brush, Van Dyck here used a blunt instrument that has left slight but discernible grooves in the wood (Figure 3); they seem to have served the artist only as general indications for the forms, since the final contours do not follow the engraved lines precisely.

Van Dyck generally uses warmer, deeper colors than Rubens; compare, for instance, the orange-red dress of the Virgin with the cold, almost clamorous cloak in the portrait of a Duke of Mantua by Rubens, lent to the Museum by the Putnam Foundation. Also significantly different from Rubens is Van Dyck’s more sparing use of white; he never achieves the characteristic Rubensian translucent, milky effects in the highlights, but rather renders these almost exclusively with the local color applied very thinly in transparency. What he loses in sharpness of detail, he gains in subtlety and warmth. Likewise, in the treatment of flesh tones, Van Dyck is more subdued, more delicate: the Child in this work is painted in a pale tone of pink, almost in monochrome, and the just barely rosier cheeks have none of the healthy red glow of those of Rubens’s putti.

Our sketch is vigorously brushed. The paint (thinner than Rubens’s) glides upon the surface with assurance; despite the softness of modeling, the silhouette of the figures is precisely defined; and the forms are solid and unhesitant—all this, indeed, very characteristic of Van Dyck’s early works. Unlike many artists whose manner becomes broader and stronger in their later years, Van Dyck became more sentimental as he grew older, and his brushwork gradually lost the vigorous simplicity it had in his youth.

Late in 1621 Van Dyck went to Italy, where he was to remain for seven years, traveling widely. In April of 1624 he sailed from Genoa to Palermo in Sicily at the invitation of the Viceroy, Philibert Emanuele of Savoy. A month later a violent epidemic of the plague broke out, and the city, with a death toll that quickly exceeded one hundred a day, was placed under strict quarantine. In mid-July

OPPOSITE:

5. St. Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-stricken of Palermo, by Van Dyck, Probably painted in 1624. Oil on canvas, 39½ x 29½ inches. Purchase, 71.41

6. Detail of Figure 5
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given way here to a primarily decorative, pictorial conception. The painting is "artificially" composed; the angels, for in-

stance, are organized in a light, playful man-

ner that is wholly Italian, and the angel on the saint's left (Cover) is an unmistakable echo of Raphael's putti. The drawing here is more precise, more linear, and the forms are more consciously graceful and elegant. As a result, St. Rosalie's supplicant expression, her uplifted eyes recalling the soulful gaze of Guido Reni's saints, appears a little superficial. Notwithstanding the indefinable Mediterranean grace of the saint, the North is sug-
gested in the white plumpness of her throat and the busy, crumpled draperies.

In this picture Van Dyck has all but aban-
doned the use of glazes; the colors, no longer applied in transparence upon a warm, brown background, vibrate on the surface of the canvas. The paint is thicker and more opaque, the colors highly saturated, their brightness keyed up. The general tone of the work, the color harmony, is Venetian; even the peculiar hatchings of white or bright yellow paint where the light hits the ridges of the drapery—notably in the copper-colored cloth on the saint's right arm (Figure 6)—are typical of the Venetians. The highlights, which were of the local color in his more Flemish works, are now rendered opaquely with pure white or a strong mixture of white with the local hue. Thus, whereas the deep, transparent shadows dict-
tated the tone of the Virgin and Child, the predominating note here is light.

In 1627 Anthony Van Dyck returned to his native Antwerp. A year later Rubens, then the dominant figure in Flemish art, left on a diplomatic mission to Spain, interrupting his prolific activity for the Church. As a result, for two years, until Rubens's return to Antwerp, Van Dyck was besieged with commis-
sions for large altarpieces and small votive pictures. These four years were to be his most productive of religious works, and to this period belongs the Museum's Virgin and Child with St. Catherine (Figure 7).

This painting, less realistic and less pro-

found perhaps than the Virgin and Child of 1621, is tender, touching, almost feminine in its languor. Upon the brightly lit form of the Child rests the gaze of both his mother and the saint, whose exalted and entranced look
contrasts with the grave, Correggesque tenderness of the Virgin. While Mary’s sadly pensive expression is an allusion to her foreknowledge of her son’s Passion, the hand she rests lightly upon his knee has the grace and distinction of those in the painter’s royal portraits. Each attitude, each expression, each contrast in mood is designed to strike a strong emotional chord. The work is truly an Andachtsbild, a devotional picture intended to excite religious fervor.

While the Virgin and Child with St. Catherine represents a synthesis of Van Dyck’s Flemish and Italian manners, it cannot simply be described in terms of the Virgin and Child of 1621 and the St. Rosalie: its spirit is as different from the one as it is from the other. The bright, dense Italian coloring of the St. Rosalie is here toned down, deepened; yet, while the tonality is warmer and the harmonies have the resonance of Van Dyck’s Flemish style, the silvery sheen of Veronese is still evident in the colors of the Virgin’s bodice, and Titian’s golden glow surrounds St. Catherine. Thinner and more fluid than in the St. Rosalie, the pigments are more opaque than in the early Virgin and Child and more sensuously applied, with an enjoyment in paint for its own sake as well as with an eye toward defining form. The highlights are again expressed in terms of the local color; a brownish-red underpaint again contributes to

8. Detail of Figure 7
the overall effect, coming through in the contours and shadows of the Child's body; and a Flemish, grayish sky has replaced the St. Rosalie's Roman blue. The painting has suffered through the years, and some of the glazes have been lost: the Virgin's face is now devoid of the soft, mellow surface still evident in St. Catherine's, and the cool blue of her mantle, so darkened at the sides of the painting, has lost the warmer glazes that added luminosity to the light areas. The soft, low harmonies of the picture are eminently characteristic of Van Dyck; his affinity for half tones in his religious works, in fact, has elicited the comment that they look like grisailles next to those of Rubens.

It has also been said that because of the number of commissions Van Dyck received at this time, he painted with "unpardonable" negligence. The Virgin and Child with St. Catherine was obviously swiftly painted, but the artist's haste cannot, in this instance, be termed negligence; the passages that display broad, loose handling have a force and pictorial appeal that delight our modern eye. The white blouse of St. Catherine, for example, is a wonderful piece of bravura painting; and, throughout, the colors are brushed on with a masterly sureness that culminates in the execution of the Child (Figure 8), the most exciting passage of paint in the picture.

Besides the picture in this Museum, two versions of the subject are known: one, a faithful but inferior copy, was in the Cremer collection in Dortmund, Germany, in 1914; the other, a variant with an architectural background, is in The Art Institute of Chicago, where it is catalogued as a work of the school of Van Dyck. Only the Metropolitan's version has ever been engraved, notably twice during Van Dyck's own lifetime, by Abraham Blooteling and by Shelte Adams Bolswert, the latter's plate bearing a dedication by the artist himself. The authenticity of our picture, therefore, cannot be doubted, but its early history is veiled in mystery and it may have been involved in an unusual intrigue. In 1631 Sir Balthazar Gerbier, agent of Charles I at the court of the Infanta Isabella at Brussels,
wrote to Richard Weston, then Lord Treasurer of England, that he was sending him a Madonna and St. Catherine by Van Dyck as a New Year’s gift to the king. This picture, according to Gerbier, had been intended for the private chapel of Marie de Médicis in Brussels but had later been withdrawn because of the cost. Hardly had the painting arrived in London than Van Dyck himself wrote from Brussels to his friend Georg Geldorp in London saying that the picture was a copy. Gerbier, hearing of the artist’s denials, thereupon sent to London an affidavit, made by the man who had bought the painting from Van Dyck and sold it to Gerbier, attesting to the picture’s authenticity. In this statement, taken down by a notary before witnesses, the dealer cites Rubens as having said that Van Dyck “could do no better.” By this time another version of the picture had been sent to Holland, and in the document Rubens is further quoted as saying that “the picture sent to London in many parts surpasses the one sent into Holland.”

Whether or not the Metropolitan’s painting was the one sent to England remains a matter of conjecture, for we have no real basis for putting more faith in either Gerbier’s or Van Dyck’s word. It appears from the correspondence that Gerbier was to introduce Van Dyck to the English court, but a note written by the artist makes it clear that he thought ill of being presented by such a minor official. Since Gerbier is known to have been an unscrupulous man, we may assume that he was capable of sending a copy to London; on the other hand, the tone of the correspondence suggests that Van Dyck might not have been above wishing to bring discredit to Gerbier by denying the painting. The most disinterested person in the affair seems to have been Rubens, and if he has been correctly quoted as saying that the London version was the superior one, we would be inclined to identify our painting with it; in this case, the version sent to Holland would have been one of the two replicas. The picture involved in this intrigue, however, never became part of Charles I’s famous collection. In 1775 the Metropolitan’s painting seems to have been in Flanders, for an inventory of that year lists a picture of similar description, “engraved by Bolswert,” as hanging in the church of the Recollets in Antwerp; by 1781, when Sir Joshua Reynolds visited this church, it had already been removed.

In tracing the later history of the painting we can replace hypothesis with fact. It appeared in England, where it was owned by Wilbore Agar-Ellis, first Duke of Mendip, until his death in 1802, and then belonged to the Westminster family until 1924; in 1959 it was bequeathed to the Museum by Lillian S. Timken. The picture has been very frequently exhibited in the past 150 years, and, as a coincidence, was reproduced side by side with the 1621 Virgin and Child in the catalogue of the New York World’s Fair in 1939, before either work came to the Metropolitan.

Today we see Van Dyck’s religious works out of context, in museums rather than in the churches for which they were intended. Much of the devotional value of the paintings is lost, of course, when they are hung in a secular building, but, on the other hand, their value as works of art is emphasized in this new environment. Modern criticism must be given credit for drawing our attention to their purely pictorial qualities: to composition, to color harmonies, to elegance of line. But we must also bear in mind that they were primarily votive pictures, illustrations of the Scriptures to serve the didactic ends of the Counter Reformation; to aesthetic appreciation we should add an understanding of their original purpose, in order to see these paintings as they were meant to be seen—and understood.