

SCENES OF THE PASSION OF CHRIST BY  
AN ANONYMOUS HAARLEM PAINTER FROM AROUND 1470-75

The Esztergom panel of Christ on the Gold Stone surrounded by the Instruments of the Passion, is analysed here in the context of woodcuts from the circle of the Haarlem painter Jacob Bellaert, and dated between 1465-1470.

**Keywords:** Christian Museum, Esztergom, Haarlem, Passion iconography, Jacob Bellaert, *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*.

In 1990 an exhibition of Medieval Dutch art from Hungarian museums was held in the Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, where I was director at the time. More than 50 works of art, paintings and sculptures, from the Museum of Fine Art in Budapest and the Museum of Christian Art in Esztergom, returned for a few months to their place of origin – the Low Countries. Dutch visitors were thus able to see and admire works that were virtually unknown to them. The exhibition represented a valuable supplement to the collection of medieval art at the Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent, which is the largest of its kind in the Netherlands. That such a show could be realised was due to the cordial and long-standing contact between Susanne Urbach and myself. We met at the Art History Conference in Budapest in 1969 – when I was a curator at the Aartsbisschoppelijk Museum, which later merged with several other ecclesiastical collections to form the Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent in 1976. Our friendship grew in subsequent years. Susanne Urbach frequently travelled to the west, and never failed to visit Utrecht whenever she was in the Netherlands.

One of the most impressive works in that exhibition was a 15th-century Haarlem panel from the museum in Esztergom with scenes of the Passion of Christ (*Fig. 1*).<sup>1</sup> In the middle is a monumental, virtually nude figure of Christ

surrounded by the Instruments of the Passion. His hands are bound and He is seated on a large rock. The scene depicts a so-called Christ on the Gold Stone, Christ sitting on Golgotha, sorrowful and forsaken awaiting His crucifixion. At the left and right in the middle ground we see Christ carrying the cross and being stripped of His garments, and in the distant background His crucifixion. Several Passion scenes on a single panel represented as many meditative moments for the faithful, allowing them to contemplate the redemptive suffering of the Son of God. The various Instruments of the Passion arranged around the seated Christ, such as the pail with vinegar, the hammer, the nails, the cross and His seamless tunic also served this function and refer to the various moments of His Passion. To use computer language, they are pictograms that can be mentally clicked on in order to conjure up a particular Passion scene. In her description of the panel, Susanne Urbach referred to a painting – likewise of Haarlem origin – with scenes of the Passion of Christ in the Catharijneconvent (*Fig. 2*).<sup>2</sup> In the foreground of this panel is the procession with the cross-bearing Christ who has just left Jerusalem, here depicted as a medieval city. Mary, John and the two lamenting women are just coming through the gate. A tormentor walking behind Christ with three nails in his hand sticks his tongue out at them, while kicking back at Mary. Two women, one of whom is Veronica with the veil, stand somewhat further back. Christ carries the cross with the long, spiked vertical end pointing

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Fig. 1. Christ on the Cold Stone. Haarlem 15th century. Esztergom, Museum of Christian Art

forward. A soldier drags Him along by the cord tied around His waist. Another soldier makes a deriding grimace. Ahead of Christ, the rest of the procession has turned the corner and disappeared between two hills. Riding up front are soldiers and dignitaries, including the high priest dressed as a bishop. Behind them on foot are the two thieves who will be crucified together with Christ. In the left middle ground Christ's tormentors are nailing Him to the cross. Further to the right we see Christ hanging on the cross, while the blind Longinus thrusts his lance into the dead Saviour's side. The good thief to Christ's right dies and a little angel receives his soul as it leaves his lifeless body. The bad thief on Christ's other side breathes his last breath and a devil comes to collect his soul, which vainly tries to flee. A few horsemen linger about. Somewhat more in the foreground is a group of women and John, who catches the fainting Mary; at the right two soldiers fight after having cast lots with dice for Christ's tunic.

Judging from the traces of hinges still visible on the sides of the frame this painting was once the central panel of a triptych. The subjects of



Fig. 2. Scenes of the Passion of Christ. Haarlem around 1470-1475. Utrecht Museum Catharijneconvent

the wings are not known, though they may have been other scenes from the life of Christ. Equally unknown is whether this triptych served as an altarpiece or a commemorative image, or both. In any case, it is clear that it also fulfilled a devotional function and was intended to help the beholder contemplate the suffering of Christ. Deeply influenced by the *Devotio Moderna*, the act of meditating on the Lord's sufferings for the sins of mankind became very popular, and was widely practiced even beyond the circle of the Sisters and Brethren of the Common Life. Numerous books and treatises, both handwritten and printed, dating from the end of the Middle Ages have been preserved, the vast majority of which were written in the vernacular and therefore were accessible to the common, lettered layman. They contain riveting descriptions of the horrendous physical tortures and mental agony Christ had to endure to save mankind. These writings were based on passages in the New Testament enriched with Apocryphal sto-

ries. New gruesome details were introduced in the course of centuries to move the hearts of the pious to tears. Filled with compassion and contrition, aware of all that Jesus had had to endure for them, the faithful would then vow to mend their ways and follow their Saviour's example in thought and deed to the best of their ability. In short, believers would achieve a true 'imitatio Christi'.<sup>5</sup> Like the Passion scene from Esztergom, a painting such as ours, with its great diversity of Passion scenes – each with its specific grievous details – was ideally suited for anyone wishing to deeply apprehend the Passion of the Lord, and emotionally experience every faced of His suffering and death. As noted, one could concentrate on each separate aspect making it the object of meditation. Many of the depicted Passion scenes are also found in the texts of prayer books and other devotional works. They demonstrate just how close the bond between devotional literature and the visual arts was at the time.

Some of the Medieval additions to the Passion had their roots in the Old Testament which, according to the interpretation of the church fathers, referred to the life and suffering of the future Messiah, namely Christ. Such meaning was traditionally attached to the verses of Psalm 21 (22 according to the reformational count) in particular.

In our panel, just as in many other Passion scenes, the soldiers accompanying Christ on the Road to Calvary, are portrayed as exceptionally coarse and cruel ruffians. In Psalm 21 the psalmist laments that Christ is terrorised by lions, dogs and other fierce animals and in various Medieval treatises Christ's tormentors are compared to these beasts. This left its mark on the pictorial tradition. In some 13th-century miniatures, the executioners are shown with vicious lion's heads. While later Passion scenes no longer contain such direct references, the executioners are nevertheless portrayed with malicious and crude countenances which reminded people in the Middle Ages of the lions and dogs in Psalm 21.<sup>6</sup> Many Passion scenes include the soldiers casting lots for Jesus' garments. This is also described in three of the Gospels and refers to verse 19 of Psalm 21: 'They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.' Sometimes, such as

in this case, the soldiers have already begun fighting while casting their lots, once again proving that Jesus was delivered into the hands of extraordinarily violent brutes.

Traditionally, verse 18 of this psalm: 'They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all My bones' was associated with the nailing to the cross. Contemplation of this psalm fueled the imagination and had repercussions in both the devotional literature and art. Relevant in this respect are scenes of the nailing to the cross in which the tormentors stretch Christ's limbs with a rope, as in our panel. Religious treatises and books on the life of Jesus recount that the holes into which the nails had to be driven were drilled into the cross in advance. However, the distance between the holes had been measured incorrectly and they were too far apart, so that the unfortunate Jesus' arms and legs had to be stretched with force. A book by Henrick Eckert van Homberch published in Antwerp shortly after 1500 entitled: *Boeckken van devocien gheheten die Neghen couden* contains the following meditative passage: 'Open the eyes of your heart and see how unworthily and mercilessly, without pity and charity, your beloved Jesus was cast upon the cross, so that almost all of His limbs could have been broken, and how He was fastened to it with hard, blunt nails, and how with sturdy rope His holy hands and feet were hoisted up to the holes that they had made in advance, but which were set too far apart because they had not measured His length. Thus, He was tethered and stretched like a drawn bow so that one could actually see and count all of His veins and bones individually, just as He had said: They have counted all my bones. Oh people, you must be here in spirit and you must see it with your own eyes and hear the resonance and sound of the hammers with which they drive the nails through the hands and feet of our beloved Jesus, who is being put to death like an innocent lamb. Oh, understand the unusual sweet song and melody, when the hammers pounded and Jesus called out in a loud voice: Father forgive them, those who are torturing me so grievously, for they know not what they do.'<sup>7</sup> This passage is a good illustration of the way in which one was meant to envisage and contemplate the suffering of Christ. Scenes in which one tormentor dislocates Christ's left arm with a



Fig. 3. The Nailing to the cross, Jubal and Tubalcain, Woodcut in 'Speculum Humanae Salvationis'. Northern Netherlands, 1471 or earlier



Fig. 4. The Nailing to the cross, Master of the Banderols, end of the 15th Century, Vienna Albertinum



Fig. 5. The Crucifixion, Woodcut in 'Speculum Humanae Salvationis'. Northern Netherlands, 1471 or earlier

rope, while the other drives a nail through His hand, such as in our panel, could support meditation. The crucifixion scene in our panel also includes a bald smith forging the nails. At first sight this would appear to be a simple genre-like detail without any deeper significance. However, this is not the case, for the hammering smith refers to the Old-Testament figures of Jubal and Tubalcain,<sup>6</sup> as well as Christ's plea to His Father, in which He asks forgiveness for His executioners. This connotation is clear in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* first published in 1471 or earlier, of which several editions are known. In it, every two facing pages present a woodcut with a scene from the life of Christ and the Virgin followed by three other scenes, which are prefigurations of the first scene.<sup>7</sup> Each image is accompanied by an explanatory text in Latin. The first prefiguration of the nailing to the cross presents the brothers Jubal and Tubalcain in the act of forging (Fig. 3). The accompanying text reads (in translation): '... This prayer which Christ spoke in His crucifixion was prefigured by Jubal, the brother of Tubalcain. Jubal and Tubalcain were the sons of Lamech, and said to be the inventors of the arts of smithery and of music. When Tubalcain made sounds with his hammer, Jubal discovered melody from the sound of the hammering. To that melody and to the sound of the hammering we compare Christ's prayer and the hammering of the soldiers, for while the crucifiers nailed Jesus to the cross, He sang a sweet melody to His Father: 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do...''<sup>8</sup>

Although the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* was published in the Northern Netherlands, the depiction of a smith forging the nails on Calvary is extremely rare in this region. A number of examples are known in Germany, including a copper engraving from the third quarter of the 15th century by the Master of the Banderoles (Fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> The painter of our panel must have known this engraving, for he copied it fairly faithfully.

While most of the details with which Christ's Passion was enriched in the Middle Ages have biblical roots, there is one specific instrument of torture to which this does not apply: the so-called spikeblock, a square block studded with spikes or nails. The tormentors were alleged to



Fig. 6. The Baptism of Christ and scenes of the Old testament. Woodcut in 'Der Sonderen Troest'. Haarlem, Jacob Bellaert 1484

have hung such a block on the front and back of Christ's belt so that His shins and calves would be severely wounded and bleed during the carrying of the cross. In our panel, Christ, indeed, bears such a spikeblock. The oldest representations of this block are found in miniatures by the Master of the Morgan Infancy Cycle, who was active in the Northern Netherlands, probably in Delft, around 1415.<sup>10</sup> From that time on, it is often encountered in miniatures, panels or carved sculptural groups in the Netherlands and beyond. It gradually disappeared from the visual repertory after 1530, probably primarily because of the theological criticism aimed at this invention based neither on the Bible nor patology. Late Medieval religious treatises also describe the spikeblock with all of its painful consequences for the suffering Saviour. Sometimes they contain a reference to the decorated, square patches or embroideries attached to the front and back of the lower part of the priest's alb at

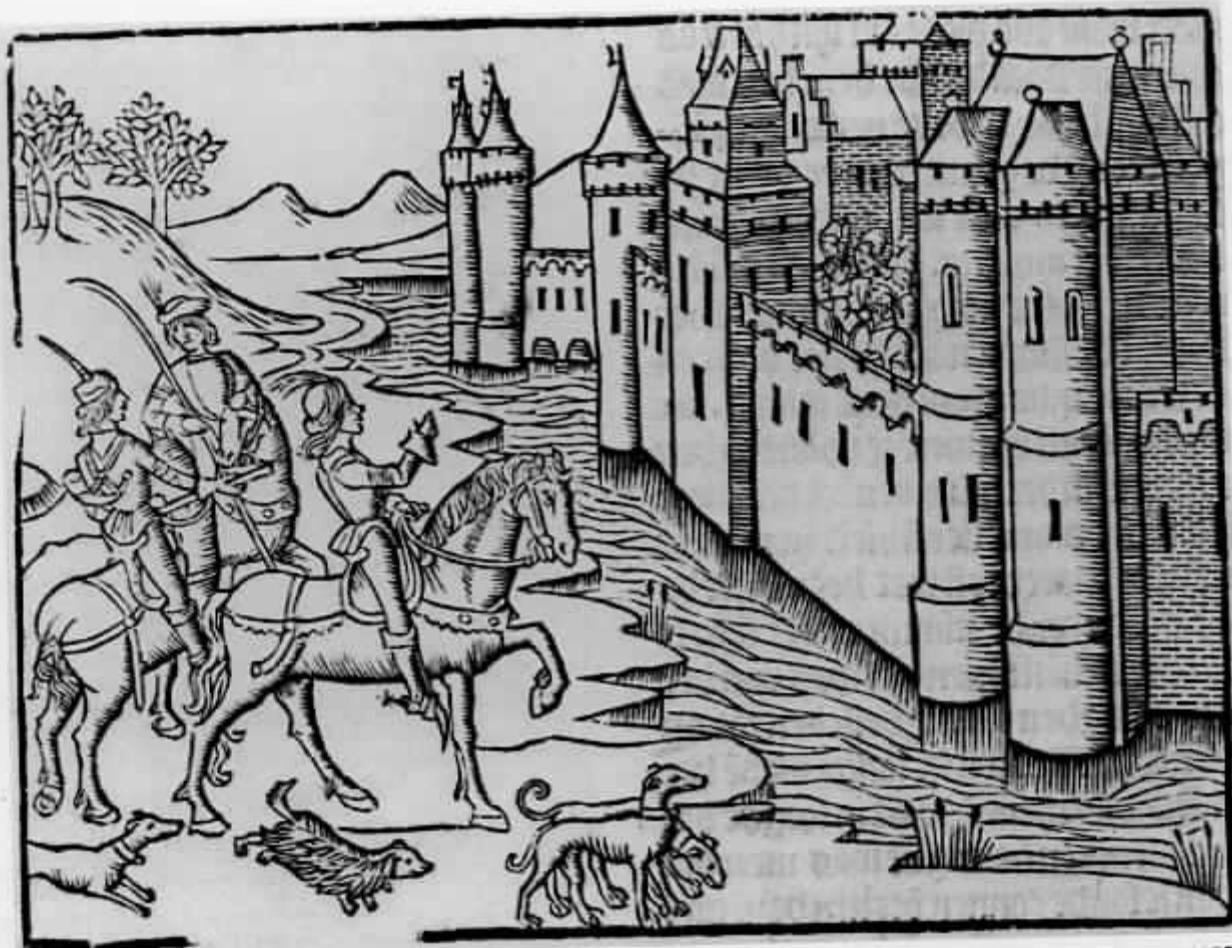


Fig. 7. Hercules and the King of Laomedon. Woodcut in 'Le Recueil des histoires de Troyes' Haarlem, Jacob Bellaert, 1485

the time. As of the end of the 13th century it became common practice to link the ecclesiastical robes worn by the priest during mass to the Passion of Christ. Hence, the priest's cincture referred to the ropes used to bind Jesus to the column; the chasuble to the purple toga the mocking soldiers forced Him to wear; and the white alb to the robe Herod had Him don. The square decorations along the lower border of the alb were meant to represent the spikeblock.<sup>11</sup>

As noted above, the painter relied on a print for the smith. He did this in the case of other figures as well. For example, the same man nailing Christ's feet is found in the woodcut in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (Fig. 3) and the bad thief is a reverse depiction of his 'twin' in the Crucifixion woodcut in the same book (Fig. 5). Because the figure is depicted in reverse, one could conclude that our painter not only knew the woodcuts but also the preliminary drawings for them and that, therefore, the painting would

have to date from before 1471. This is not impossible. The costumes of the figures in our painting resemble those in paintings by Dirk Bouts, a Haarlem painter who was primarily active in Louvain, where he died in 1475. In the latter's works from the 1460s the men often wear half caps or pointed caps decorated with a ribbon or some kind of turban-like rim. At the upper left in our panel is a group of three men arguing. The one at the left wears a cap with a raised rim ending in a point at the front and back. The same cap is worn by the Jew at the left in the scene of the Easter Lamb on the right wing of Bouts's *Last Supper Altarpiece* in Louvain, by several figures in his *Crucifixion* in Bergamo and in the *St Hippolytus Altarpiece*.<sup>12</sup> Similar caps are also found in the panel with the *Raising of Lazarus* by the Haarlem painter Aelbert van Ouwater from around 1455-1460.<sup>13</sup>

While all of this argues for a dating of our panel between 1465 and 1470, the correlation of

our picture with the work of an anonymous wood engraver employed by the Haarlem printer Jacob Bellaert in the 1480s casts doubt on such an early dating. His *Der Sonderen Troest* (1484) contains a full-page woodcut with scenes of the Downfall of Man, Noah's Ark, the Passage through the Red Sea, and the Baptism of Christ (Fig. 6).<sup>24</sup> The rocks are striking, and somewhat reminiscent of those in our panel. At the left we see the Jews disappearing through a crevice after their successful exodus. The two front Jews, sitting on horses not visible to the beholder, are very similar to the rear two in the group of horsemen on the road to Calvary in our panel. A woodcut in another book

by this printer, *Le Recueil des histoires de Troyes* (1485), depicts Hercules taking notice of the fact that King Laomedon has closed his castle to him (Fig. 7).<sup>25</sup> The riders with their horses are stylistically close to the horsemen posted around the crucified Christ, and the architecture is also akin to that in the painting.<sup>7</sup>

The clothing of the figures by the Bellaert Master differs, however, from that in our work, representing a later phase. Therefore, I think that – like the Bellaert Master – the maker of our Passion scenes was indeed active in Haarlem but some ten to fifteen years earlier, thus around 1470–75.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Exhib. cat. 'Middelieuwe Nederlandse Kunst uit Hongarije', Utrecht Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent 1990, cat. no. 17. The entries on the paintings were written by Susanne Urbach, those on the sculptures by Éva Szmodis-Eszlári who, like Susanne Urbach, at that time was affiliated with the Museum of Fine Art in Budapest.

<sup>2</sup> *Scenes of the Passion of Christ*, oil paint on panel, 106.5 × 73.5 cm (132 × 102 cm including the frame), inv. no. ABM s00126. Lit.: Rientjes 1922–21, pp. 41–47; *Catalogus der schilderijen* (cat. Utrecht Centraal Museum/Aartsbisschoppelijk Museum), Utrecht 1933, cat. no. 16; *Catalogus der schilderijen* (cat. Utrecht Aartsbisschoppelijk Museum), Utrecht 1948, p. 130; H. W. van Os, 'Mediteren op Golgotha: "O devote siele slaet gemerck hierop diner bruidegom"', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 44, 1996, pp. 366–367; *De schilderijen van Museum Catharijneconvent*, Utrecht-Zwolle, 2002, pp. 137–138.

<sup>3</sup> For the development of Passion mysticism and the role of the Devotio Moderna, and its impact in word and image, see: James Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance*, Kortrijk 1979.

<sup>4</sup> On this and the many references to Psalm 21 and other passages in the Old Testament, see James Marrow, *o.c.* in note 3, *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> H. Eckert van Humberch, *Boezken van devocien gheheten die Neghen couden*, Antwerp, n.d. (B. Kruitwagen O. F. M. *Catalogus van de handschriften en boeken van het Bisschoppelijk Museum te Haarlem*, Amsterdam 1913, no. 279). 'Open die oghen dijns herten ende siet aen hoe onwaerdeliken ende onghenadelijcken hi sonder alle medelijden ende barmherticheit dijne alrelieste heere ihesus wert geworpen op dat cruce achterrughe. Also dat al sijn litmaken mochten sijn ghebroken ende wert daer ghenagelt met groten harden stompen naghelen ende met groten starcken roepen ghetogen totdat die heylighe handen ende voeten quamen totten gaten die sy te voren ghemaect hadden die te wijde vaneen waren. want sy gheen mate van sijne lancten ghenomen en hadden. Also dat hi ghespannen ende utghereect stont ghelijc een boghe die ghespannen is. Datmen al sijne aderen ende leden onderscheydeliken sien mochte ende tellen ghelijc gheseit hadde Sij hebben alle mijne beenen ghietelt O mensche hier sulstu bi wesen inden gheeste ende sien dat coer dinen oghen ende horen den galm in den clanc vanden hameren daermen die nagelen mede slaet ende drijft doer die handen ende voeten des minliken ihesu die doerghelijc een lammekijn

*onsculdeiken totter doot gebracht wort. Och verstaet oec den soeten sonderlinghen sanc ende concordancie doe die hamen sloegen ende ihesus riep met luyder stemmen. Vader verghif hen die mij dus grote pijn aendoen want sy en weten nyet wat sy doen.*' Similar passages occur in numerous other devotional works, including the *Leven ons Heren ihesu Cristi* by Ludolphus de Saxonia, and in the various versions of the Secret Passion. On the Secret Passion, see: Marrow *op. cit.* note 3, pp. 216–218.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 4:21–22.

<sup>7</sup> E. Kloss, *Speculum humanae salvationis*, facsimile, Munich 1925; exhib. cat. *De vijfhonderdste Verjaring van de Boekdrukkunst in de Nederlanden*, Royal Library, Brussels, pp. 68–72; Ina Kok, *De houtsneden in de incunabelen van de Lage Landen 1475–1500. Inventarisatie en bibliografische analyse*, Amsterdam 1994, vol. 1, pp. 38–39 and 45–48, vol. II, pp. 779–780.

<sup>8</sup> See: F. P. Pickering, *Literature and Art in the Middle Ages*, London 1970, pp. 270–273; Marrow *op. cit.* note 3, p. 166 and note 708.

<sup>9</sup> Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, inv. no. 1926/928. For this engraving and other representations of this subject, see exhib. cat. *Die Karlsruher Passion*, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, 1996, cat. no. 83 and figs. 131, 218, 219. A faithful copy of the smith in the engraving is also found in a probably Northern-German panel from around 1480. See: H. G. Gmelin, *Spätgotische Tafelmalerei in Niedersachsen und Bremen*, Munich 1974, pp. 224–225, fig. 51.

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Marrow, 'Dutch manuscript illumination before the Master of Catharina of Cleves: the Master of the Morgan Infancy Cycle', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 19*, (1968), pp. 51–113; *The Golden Age of Dutch Manuscript Painting*, exhib. cat. Utrecht/New York 1989–90, cat. nos. 12–16.

<sup>11</sup> For a thorough discussion of the spikeblock, see: Marrow, *op. cit.* note 3, p. 171 ff.

<sup>12</sup> M. J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Leiden-Brussels, 1967–76, vol. III, no. 18, suppl. 108 and 29.

<sup>13</sup> Friedländer *op. cit.* note 12, vol. III, no. 34.

<sup>14</sup> A. M. Hind, *An introduction to a history of woodcut*, New York 1963 (original ed. 1935) vol. II, pp. 574–575; M. J. Schretlen, *Dutch and Flemish Woodcuts of the XV Century*, London 1925, pp. 22–23, fig. 13; Kok, *op. cit.* note 7, pp. 438–443.

<sup>15</sup> Schretlen, *op. cit.* note 14, p. 26, fig. 25B; Kok, *op. cit.* note 7, pp. 451–453.