

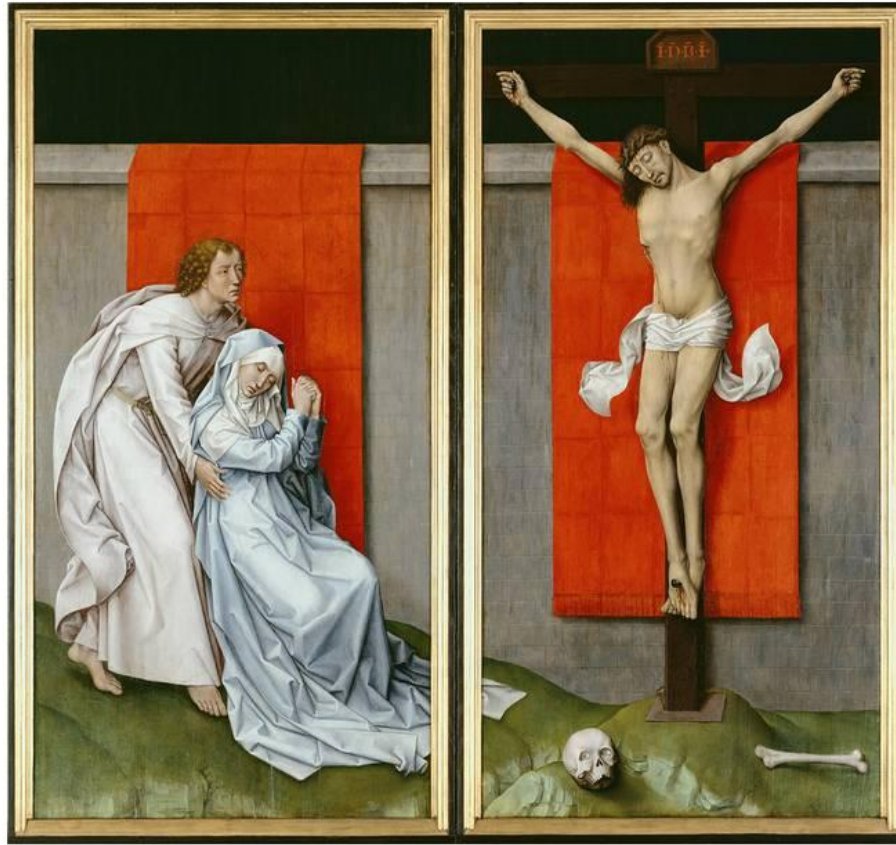
The Wall Street Journal
December 19-20, 2015

Masterpiece

“The Crucifixion, With the Virgin and Saint John the Evangelist Mourning” (c. 1460-64) by Rogier Van Der Weyden

Finding Life Through Death

Rogier van der Weyden's 'The Crucifixion, With the Virgin and Saint John the Evangelist Mourning' uses an unusual format to tell a well-known story



Rogier's 'The Crucifixion' (c. 1460-64) uses an unusual format, the diptych, to place viewers at the emotional center of Christ's Passion. Photo: The Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource

by Lance Esplund

Great paintings carry great distances. Rogier van der Weyden's "The Crucifixion, With the Virgin and Saint John the Evangelist Mourning" (c. 1460-64)—with its chest-thumping reds—announces itself across a distance of more than seven galleries. A pinnacle of both Western painting before 1500 and of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's collection, it is installed at the far end of the east wing's second-floor European galleries. I have often stopped with my students on the PMA's stair hall balcony or deep within the west wing (at distances of 200 to 300 feet) to give them their first encounter with Rogier's miraculous diptych.

The oil painting's abutted two panels create a slightly horizontal square measuring roughly 6-by-6 feet. But authority and grace, not size, are what really matter here.

Rogier's visionary "Crucifixion" is austere, theatrical and unusual. Though belonging to the tradition of 15th-century Netherlandish painting's fine-tuned realism, and typically Gothic in the figures' angularity, this "Crucifixion" also has something in common with the pared-down essentials of Italian Renaissance frescoes and the flat, hard-edged rectangles of Modernist abstraction. In the pure, frontal expanses of red cloth and black sky, Rogier's unmodulated paint-handling feels closer to the Neoplasticism of Piet Mondrian than the naturalism of the Northern Renaissance.

Considered by the PMA to be "the greatest old master painting in the museum," this late work is a dynamic, bare-bones distillation of the Passion's physicality and spirituality. Rogier (1399/1400-1464) forgoes traditional triptych or single-panel formats. Instead, he cuts away all superfluous elements, creating an entirely unique interpretation that is direct and poetic—a bipartite format that drives home the story's narrative and emotional core.

Up-close, the painting's voice shifts from public to private. It speaks to us individually, as if in hushed tones, yet without sacrificing urgency. Colors quell, crescendos soften. Forms become nuanced, supple.

Undoubtedly, Rogier's picture emphasizes suffering and death. In the right-hand panel, the emaciated, elongated Christ is pinned and splayed like a mounted trophy against the cross. The skull—alluding to Golgotha, Adam's burial place (and representing Adam's own skull)—lies at Christ's feet, its hollow sockets following viewers wherever they go. In the left-hand panel, St. John weeps, while beside him the Virgin collapses into his arms. Her legs shatter at the knees as her robe spills forth around her feet like waters through a busted dam. A corner of it extends into the adjacent panel, helping to unify the two. Beneath the couple, the shallow shelf of earth literally tilts and drops—adding a further layer of tension. And the grim, stone walls are streaked as if by tears.

Behind Christ, the blazing red banner feels sharp and electric, lit from within. It startles like fresh spilled blood, and because it appears flush with the picture plane, it pushes Christ forward toward us. The brilliant vermilion banner behind St. John and the Virgin is heavier and in shadow, suggesting blood beginning to congeal. Set against it are their bleached pink and blue pearlescent robes; the pale, icy hues—as if suddenly drained of life—accentuate their anguish and shock. Overhead, pressing down and forward are wedges of blue-black sky, ominous palls alluding to the three hours of eclipsing darkness during the crucifixion.

But besides death and despair, this is a story about redemption, resurrection, the reunion of man with God. The scene is sun-drenched. Moist, spring-green grasses and yellow lichen twinkle, enlivening the earth.

Though deceased, Christ appears torn between this world and the next, the dancing flowing ends of Christ's loincloth suggest the spark of life. Even in death Christ has erotic swagger—living, lasting proof of the eternal on earth, of God in man.

True, we see a crucified man and his grieving, swooning mother. And Christ's good friend St. John, who—twisting and shuffling this way and that—attempts in vain to support, but can hardly contain her. Yearning, as if invisibly tethered to her dead son, the Virgin's hands and arms jerk upward and toward Christ, as if pulled by strings; as he, in response—wrenching—turns his body and tilts his head toward her. All St. John can do is to hold on. Levitating off the ground, he rises with them. Rogier expresses that here spirituality defies physicality. There is joy in grief, life through death, ascension in the fall.

—Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.

@2015 The Wall Street Journal