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PRESS FILE / PRESENTATION NEW
ACQUISITIONS





NEWLY ACQUIRED FLEMISH PRIMITIVE MASTERPIECE ARRIVES IN BRUGES

In December 2018, the City of Bruges gave its approval for the purchase of the St. Veronica by the Master of the Ursula Legend. Now, a number of months later, it is possible for the first time to admire this remarkable work in the Groeninge Museum. Musea Brugge wishes to take this opportunity to also display a number of its other recent acquisitions to the public.

It only happens very rarely that a 15th century Flemish Primitive masterpiece of the quality of St. Veronica comes on the market. Its condition is remarkably good and its charming depiction of the saint makes it a joy to behold. It is often very difficult for museums both at home and abroad to compete in the art market for works of this kind. However, thanks to the Museum Collection Fund, which receives 15% of the proceeds from all museum ticket sales, on this occasion it was possible for Musea Brugge to act quickly and efficiently to take advantage of this outstanding opportunity to buy this masterpiece for the city.

The Master of the Legend of St. Ursula is one of the most important masters who was active in late 15th century Bruges. He is sometimes identified with Pieter Casembroot, but a lack of conclusive evidence means that this identification is not watertight. The alternative name given to this fine artist is based on two panels from an altarpiece that depict eight scenes from the life of St. Ursula. These panels are also part of the Musea Brugge collection.

As a contemporary of Hans Memling, the Ursula master painted for some of Bruges' leading patrons of the arts. The elongated bodies and egg-shaped heads of his figures are characteristic and this can also clearly be seen in the painting of St. Veronica. The saint, with her exotic headdress and its flowing scarves, has her eyes turned down, looking at the cloth she holds in her hands. On this can be seen the true face of Christ, the Vera Icon, which explains how the saint was given her name. According to an apocryphal story, during the procession leading Christ and his cross to Calvary Veronica wiped the blood and sweat from Christ's brow with this cloth, on which

an imprint of his face was left in a miraculous manner. This Sudarium was later revered as a holy relic. By the time that this painting was made, the centre of this veneration was located at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Like Hans Memling and the Bruges Master of the Lucia Legend, the anonymous Master of the Ursula Legend was very popular with the rich Italian merchants who visited the city. Using as his basis paintings by Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling, this unknown artist made various paintings on which angels were seen displaying the Vera Icon. A number of these had already reached Italy in the 15th century, where they were reworked by, amongst others, Sandro Botticelli. The panel that has now been purchased, of which there is also a second known version, eventually found its way to a monastery in Tuscany and was copied by Piero di Cosimo. During the 19th century, the painting was the property of Paul Durrieu, one of the pioneers of research into Franco-Flemish miniaturist art. Later, the work became part of the collection of Hester Diamond, who owned one of New York's most important private collections of Old Dutch art. It was she who lent the painting to the 1994 Memling exhibition in Bruges.

The purchase of this painting not only extends Musea Brugge's collection of paintings by the Master of the Ursula Legend and the Flemish Primitives, but also brings an important work of art back to the place where it was originally created.

MUSEA BRUGGE PRESENTS SOME OF ITS OTHER NEW ACQUISITIONS

Anonymous Brussels master, *The Gregorian Mass*, c.1500



The scene depicted in this painting is an interesting example of the use of altarpieces in the liturgy of the Late Middle Ages and gives visitors to the Groeningemuseum a good idea of the purposes for which the altarpieces made by the Flemish Primitives were intended. The story shown in the scene is known to us from the *Legenda Aurea*. Pope Gregory was a very devout man. During a mass that he was celebrating together with a number of other cardinals and bishops in the Church of Santa Croce in Jerusalem, one of his attendants cast doubt on the act of transubstantiation, by which the Eucharistic bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. In order to convince the doubter, Christ appeared in a manifestation as the Man of Sorrows on the altar, surrounded by the instruments of the Passion, and displayed his stigmata.

This intriguing subject was popular in the art of the Northern Renaissance during the 15th and 16th centuries, when, in the face of a growing reformist movement, controversy raged at various church councils about the true nature of the transubstantiation.

The Bruges panel is remarkably complete in its depiction of the details and provides us with

interesting insights into liturgical practice at the end of the Middle Ages. On each side of the altar stands a cardinal and a bishop with an open book; they serve as witnesses to the unexpected divine manifestation. It is Gregory the Great himself who is celebrating the mass, kneeling before the altar in his beautifully decorated robes of red brocade. He is assisted on his left and right by two deacons.

On the altar, the figure of Christ as the Man of Sorrows can also be seen. The typology of this figure harks back to a number of Byzantine prototypes and reflects the popular depiction of the *imago pietatis* as we know it, for example, from the diptych of the *Mater Dolorosa* and the *Man of Sorrows* in the Groeningemuseum.

The panel was painted in a Brussels workshop around the year 1500. Different versions of the same composition are known. One of these versions - also painted in Brussels at around the same date - is now in the Cluny Museum in Paris, while another is part of the collection at the Mittelrhein Museum in Koblenz.

The composition is associated with an engraving by the German printmaker Israël van Meckenem (1440/1445 - 1503), which has been dated to circa 1480. As far as the positioning of the figures and the church interior are concerned, this print can be seen as a direct example for various elements later included in the painted versions. Significantly, the Van Meckenem print also has a caption that encourages its viewers or users, each time they view the face of the *Arma Christi*, to repeat in prayer the seven apostolic articles of faith, seven Our Fathers and seven Hail Marys, so that in this way they could gain an indulgence of 20,000 years. In later editions of the print, this period of remission from purgatory was increased to 45,000 years. This might be one of the reasons why the printed prototype was also subsequently disseminated through the medium of painted art.

The painting that now forms part of the Groeninge Collection was once part of the *Marqués de Conquistas* collection in Madrid. In the past, it was regarded as the work of a Hispano-Flemish artist, but more recent research has shown convincingly that the panel had its origins in Brussels. Its many remarkable features include the quality of the execution, the use of light and the refined depiction of the costly garments.

Ambrosius Benson, Holy Family, 1525-1530



Jesus is sitting on his mother's arm. He has put his own right arm around her neck, while with his other hand he takes a walnut from a silver platter being offered to him by his father, Joseph. This intimate scene gives us an everyday and readily accessible image of this young Holy Family. The power of this work is to be found in its small scale, its sober use of colour, its high level of detail and its bold contrasts of light and dark. With this panel, Benson knew exactly how to play to the increasing desire of many of the Christian faithful to discover a more human side of Jesus and Mary.

Benson arrived in Bruges from Lombardy during the years following 1510. His Italian background can be clearly seen in his strong use of shadow, an effect known as *sfumato*. After a short period of employment in the workshop of Gerard David, he set himself up as an independent master. As such, he became one of the city's most successful artists in the first half of the 16th century. He dominated the export market of paintings, primarily to Spain, and had a major influence on contemporaries like his former employer Gerard David, Adriaen Isenbrandt and Pieter Claeissens I.

The enormous output of his workshop and his large number of imitators often makes it difficult to distinguish original paintings by Benson.

Musea Brugge already has other works by this master in its collection, including one of the two known monogrammed works, which makes it a core piece in his oeuvre. This latter work is also a depiction of the Holy Family, but with the addition of a young St. John the Baptist. The other monogrammed work is the St. Anthony altarpiece in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels. With its intimate nature, this acquisition of a Holy Family with walnut supplements the Bruges collection of Benson paintings in an important manner.

Jan van der Straet (Johannes Stradanus), oil sketch of St. John the Baptist, before 1572



This sketch in oil paints is attributed to the Bruges-Italian master Stradanus, primarily because of its similarity with the altarpiece depicting The Baptism of Jesus in the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. This sketch, which is dated 1572, was probably made as a study for the larger work, since the head of St. John in the sketch is the same size as in the finished painting. During recent restoration of the painting in Florence, traces were found which suggest that a cartoon was used to transfer the composition to the panel. The sketch is probably a detail of that cartoon.

The altarpiece was commissioned by the Mazzinghi Baccelli family for their chapel in Santa Maria Novella. It is possible that Stradanus showed this drawing (or the full cartoon) to the family for their prior approval. The painting is one of the most famous of all Stradanus's works and some years later was made into a print by Philips Galle, which ensured that the composition became much more widely

distributed.

Oil sketches were first developed in Italy in the 16th century as an alternative to drawings. They are characterised by their great spontaneity and often depict a composition or detail at full size. They were often used as part of the negotiation process between the artist and his prospective patron. Peter Paul Rubens is perhaps the most famous creator of oil sketches, yet even he drew his inspiration and gained his experience for the use of this technique in Italy, where he stayed from 1600 to 1608. However, this oil sketch by Stradanus precedes Rubens by some years.

The sketch, like many of its genre, has a great natural quality. In places, the first lines in charcoal (or perhaps in another fluid medium) are still visible through the thin layers of paint. The freedom of the technique used by the artist is evident in the loosely applied swirls and shadowed elements. The posture of the head, the sideways glance and the slightly opened lips all give an unexpected dynamism to this 'preparatory' image. The purchase of the sketch fills what was previously a gap in the Bruges collection of painted works, and this in two different ways. On the one hand, the collection had, until now, no painted work by Stradanus (although it already contains many of his prints). On the other hand, it also the first oil sketch of its kind to be added to the collection. As these sketches are often a fine and visual pleasing testimony to the talent of the artist concerned, the acquisition of the Baptist sketch brings a new and interesting dimension to the works of art on display in Bruges.

Jan van der Straet (1523-1604) or Johannes Stradanus was born in Bruges. He followed his artistic training with Pieter Aertsen and left to complete his studies in Italy when he was in his early twenties. As a Fleming in the South, he went to work in the workshop of Giorgio Vasari, which also gave him an introduction into the court of the Medici. He soon made a fine reputation for himself, both as a painter and as a designer of tapestries. He was equally skilled as a designer of prints, which were subsequently engraved and printed in Flanders. In this way, his long absence notwithstanding, he was able to maintain a connection with the Low Countries.

Practical info

The works can be viewed from 2 April onwards in room 2 of the Groeningemuseum

Opening hours: from Tuesday to Sunday from 09.30 to 17.00.

Tickets: € 12 (26-64 y.) | € 10 (>65 y. & 18-25 y.) [incl. permanent collection]
free for people younger than 18 years of age.

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MORE INFO

All arrangements can be made via sarah.bauwens@brugge.be or on +32 50 44 87 08.

Press visits to the exhibition are possible with an appointment: see under the heading 'pers' (press) on the website www.museabrugge.be. The press file is available at this web page too.

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