

THE INTERLANDI "THRONE OF GRACE" (c. 1485-1495) BY VRANCKE VAN DER STOCKT

During the fifteenth century, in the sphere of Germanic and Flemish religious art, the second type of *Throne of Grace* predominates. God the Father, portrayed with the likeness of a majestic old man, no longer carries Christ on the cross, but directly on his body in a painful gesture of exposition and sacrifice.

In the Year of Grace 1777, Baroness Agata Interlandi of Favarotta made a provision in her will that on her death (1783) this extraordinary painting should be displayed for public veneration in the Basilica of San Giorgio in Caltagirone. The Baroness, who was devoted to the Trinity, stated firmly, "I wish, order, and command that every year my aforementioned executors and their successors in this role shall celebrate the feast of the Most Holy Trinity in the venerable church" (State Archive of Catania, recorded by the notary Ignazio Avila, 1777).

The painting has been acknowledged as the work of the full maturity of the Flemish artist Vrancke van der Stockt (c. 1420-1495) and dated as being from the years 1485-1495. The painter was probably born in Brussels around 1420 and educated in the flourishing studio of Father Jan. This period in Flanders was characterized by a very distinctive way of representing nature and the human figure in vivid colours and with a highly accentuated realism. Every detail, in close-up or in the distance, insignificant or large, was put into focus with the greatest precision, without thereby losing sight of overall theological and symbolic meanings.

Around 1445, van der Stockt inherited his father's studio and became Master of the Guild of St Luke in Brussels. He may have been a pupil of Rogier van der Weyden (1399-1464) on whose death he succeeded to the role of Official Painter of Brussels. An equally important influence on van der Stockt was Robert Campin (1375-1444), van der Weyden's teacher, also known as the *Master of Flémalle*.

In fact, the Interlandi *Throne of Grace* was inspired by a work on the same subject by Robert Campin, one panel of a diptych (Fig. 1), dated c. 1433 in which van der Stockt closely matches the vertical positioning of the three Persons but, above all, the image – an illogical but strongly symbolic one rich in theological potency – of a dead Christ whose hand is indicating the wound in his side (a). In fact, this gesture alludes to the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of sinners and re-evokes the moment of the Offertory in the celebration of the eucharist, as in the *Te igitur* of the ancient miniatures.



Other elements, such as the sphere which symbolizes the World, placed under the feet of Jesus, the red apocalyptic cloud, the Archangels on either side of the throne (Michael with the sword of Judgement and Gabriel with the lily of purity), are traces which direct us towards the theme of the *Last Judgement*. As in the words of the *Letter to the Hebrews* (4, 16), "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and grace to help in time of need", the merciful Trinity of the *Throne of Grace* will not refuse salvation to whoever has faith in it.

In the lower part of the panel, the representation is completed by two images with a strong dramatic impact: the Madonna collapsing into the arms of St John the Evangelist, and the Magdalen caught in a pose of heartrending grief.

The Magdalen (b) is wearing a strange belt around her robe. Although there are precedents for this in the Flemish art of the time and, in particular, in the triptych of the *Deposition of Christ* by Rogier van der Weyden, dated c. 1435 (Fig. 2), this is an unusual detail. It is a chastity belt, alluding to renunciation and repentance, a model of salvation for the faithful. At the same time, the spectacle of the Magdalen's beauty and the elegance of her clothes in the fashion of the time are being celebrated. Flemish women were indeed famous for the precious fabrics they made. Restoration has brought out the attention to detail with which the various kinds of cloth have been rendered in paint and the distinctive tones of the delicately applied hues. Van der Stockt obtains this result through incredible mastery of oil technique, typical of Flemish painting, which enables multiple coats to be thinly laid. The detailed representation of the sacred scene, the use of fashionable clothes, and his realism make the event alive and present, allowing the faithful to experience it as if it were happening in that moment.



1. Robert Campin, *Throne of Grace*, c. 1433, oil on wood, Hermitage, St Petersburg.

2. Rogier van der Weyden, *Deposition of Christ* (det. with Mary Magdalen), oil on wood, c. 1435, Prado, Madrid.