

DANIEL LEVINE

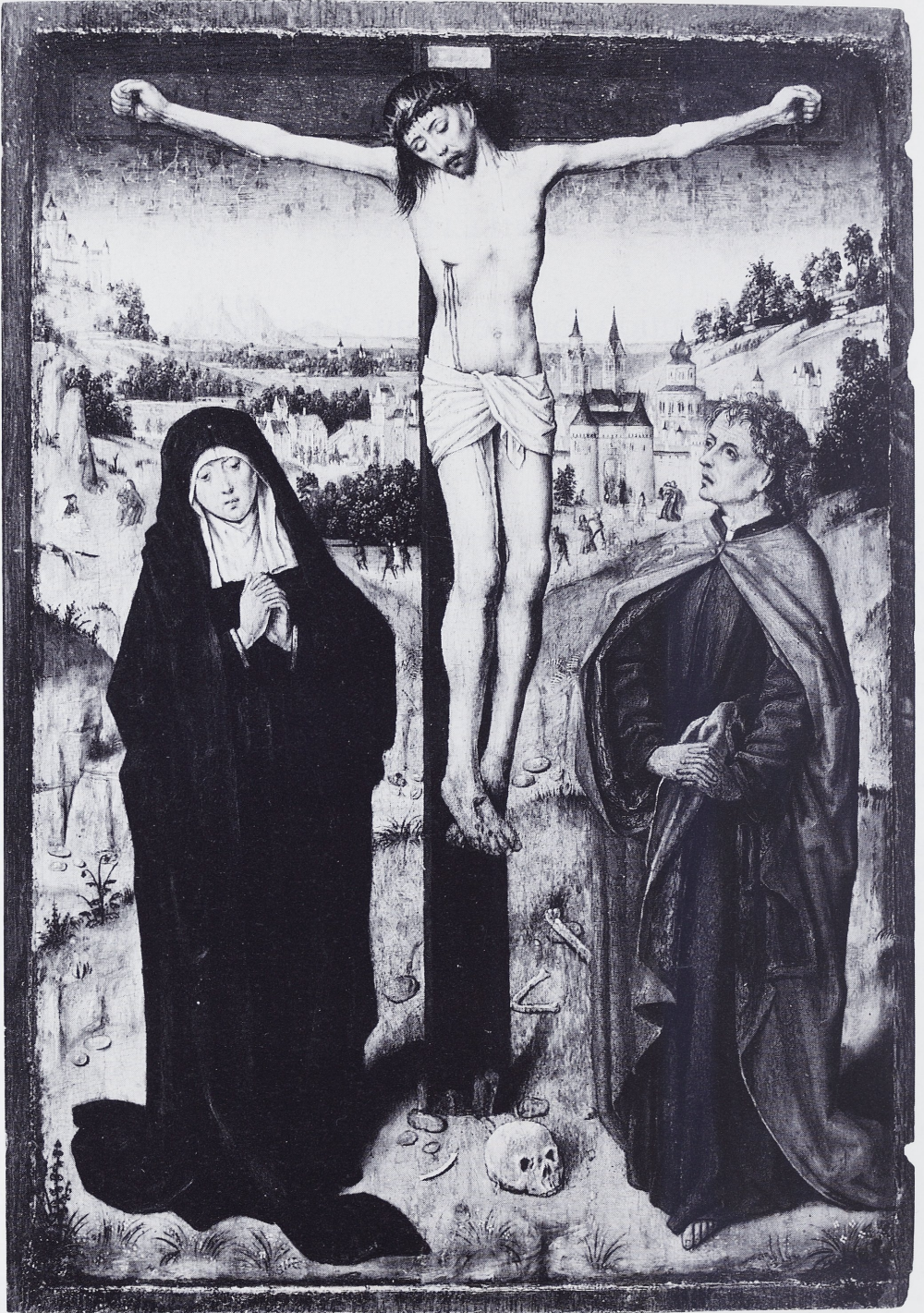
A new Attribution for the Bonn 'Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John'

The small Flemish painting of the 'Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John' in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn (No. G. K. 320; fig. 1), is currently attributed to a follower of Rogier van der Weyden, although it has been suggested that it could be an early work of the Master of the Legend of St. Catherine¹. However, the painting bears a strong resemblance to numerous works of a painter active in Bruges at the end of the fifteenth century, the Master of the St. Ursula Legend².

In this small (35 × 23,5 cm) panel, the figure of the crucified Christ dominates the center of the painting. His body hangs vertically, with virtually no torsion. Typically, the Virgin Mary is to Christ's right. Her hands are clasped, and she wears a dark blue dress and robe. To the left of Christ stands the Evangelist, dressed in a deep violet garment and a carmine mantel with a dark green lining. A town may be seen, nestled between shallow hills in the middle distance. Two subsidiary scenes from the passion are also depicted in the background of the painting. Behind Christ, and before the city walls, is a portrayal of the Road to Calvary, while to the left of the Virgin's head the Agony in the Garden may be seen.

¹ In M. FRIEDLÄNDER, *Alt niederländische Malerei* 2 (1924) 120, and the later English translation begun in 1967, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. 2, this work is grouped with several other Crucifixions by followers of Rogier van der Weyden. On pp. 77–78 of the latter it is noted that the 'scheme of the landscape is as in Rogier's crucifixions, but the types are different. About 1470'. In F. GOLDKUHLE (ed.), *Gemälde bis 1900* (1982) 552, it is suggested that the work dates to about 1470 and that it brought to mind the early works of the Master of the Legend of St. Catherine.

² In my 1989 dissertation, *The Bruges Master of the St. Ursula Legend Reconsidered*, I re-attributed this work to the Ursula Master. See especially, pp. 90–94 and 244–246. This work will be referred to from this point as LEVINE. Other important literature on the Ursula Master can be found, in addition to the previously mentioned Friedländer, vol. 6, in P. BAUTIER, *Le Maître Brugois de la Légende de Sainte Ursule*. *Bull. Musées Royaux de Belgique* 8, 1956, 179–230; G. MARLIER, *Le Maître de la Légende de Sainte Ursule*. *Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Jaarboek 1964*, 5–40, and *Anonieme Vlaamse Primitieven*. *Tentoonstelling, Groeningemuseum* (1969) 29–46; 195–205.



1 Master of the Ursula Legend, Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John.
Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn.



2 Follower of Rogier van der Weyden, Crucifixion. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen.

In general, this painting is typical of many late fifteenth century Flemish depictions of the Crucifixion. However, there are specific qualities which specifically relate this panel to the style of the Ursula Master, whose dependence upon Rogier van der Weyden has been overemphasized, rather than to closer followers of Rogier (fig. 2). The figure of Christ is suspended vertically, and the sense of agony characterised by the movement of the body and of the drapery, as depicted in most other contemporary works which draw more heavily upon Rogier van der Weyden, is missing³. Not only does the drapery not flutter expressively in the wind, but the ancillary figures are rather reserved, showing little overt emotion⁴. The Ursula Master's paintings are notable for their lack of deep emotion, and he preferred to illustrate a sweet, if naive, sadness in the face of difficulty⁵.

It is not only the tone of this work that is similar to that of other paintings by the Ursula Master; there are numerous compositional and stylistic similarities. In particular, the relationship to the 'Crucifixion with a Donor' in Birmingham should be noted (fig. 3)⁶. The image of Christ is quite similar in both works, not only in their pose but also in the treatment of the faces, which are virtually identical, despite the fact that the Bonn Christ has more hair. Also, the clear indication of the blood of the side wound running under the loin cloth is similar. However, it is the treatment of the loin cloth, which in both cases clings to the body and does not flutter, Rogier-like, which is distinctive. In both paintings the support for the cross is formed by several pieces of wood which have been driven into the ground, and not by stones piled up at the base. In both paintings the cross extends to the upper edge of the panel. The cross casts a short shadow towards the right in both images, and the Ursula Master invariably illuminated his paintings from the left⁷. The subsidiary depiction of the Agony in the Garden in both works is very similar, with Christ forming the top of a diamond-shaped group of figures, while an apostle sleeping on his belly indicates the lowest point of the diamond. Only the pose of the apostle who forms the right hand point of the diamond differs between the two works⁸.

The primary figures stand in a row in the foreground, with little movement in space, in a manner typical of the Ursula Master. While the head of the Virgin is somewhat reminiscent of the depiction seen on the (now separated) 'Annunciation' from the Detroit 'Nativity', the treatment of the head of St. John, with the downward curve of his mouth, seems somewhat unusual among the works of the Ursula Master. Still, the crescent shaped ears of both Christ and St. John are typical of those found on other heads by the Ursula Master. The deep modeling of the heads, and in particular, the cheekbones, is a hallmark of the Ursula Master's style⁹. The somewhat tousled, curly,

³ FRIEDLÄNDER, 1967, vol. 2, plate 108, illustrates the Bonn panel along with several other Crucifixions. The difference in the treatment of the drapery is obvious.

⁴ This is despite the fact that GOLDKUHLE, *op. cit.*, described the St. John as showing 'schmerzvolle Ergriffenheit', noted in LEVINE 91.

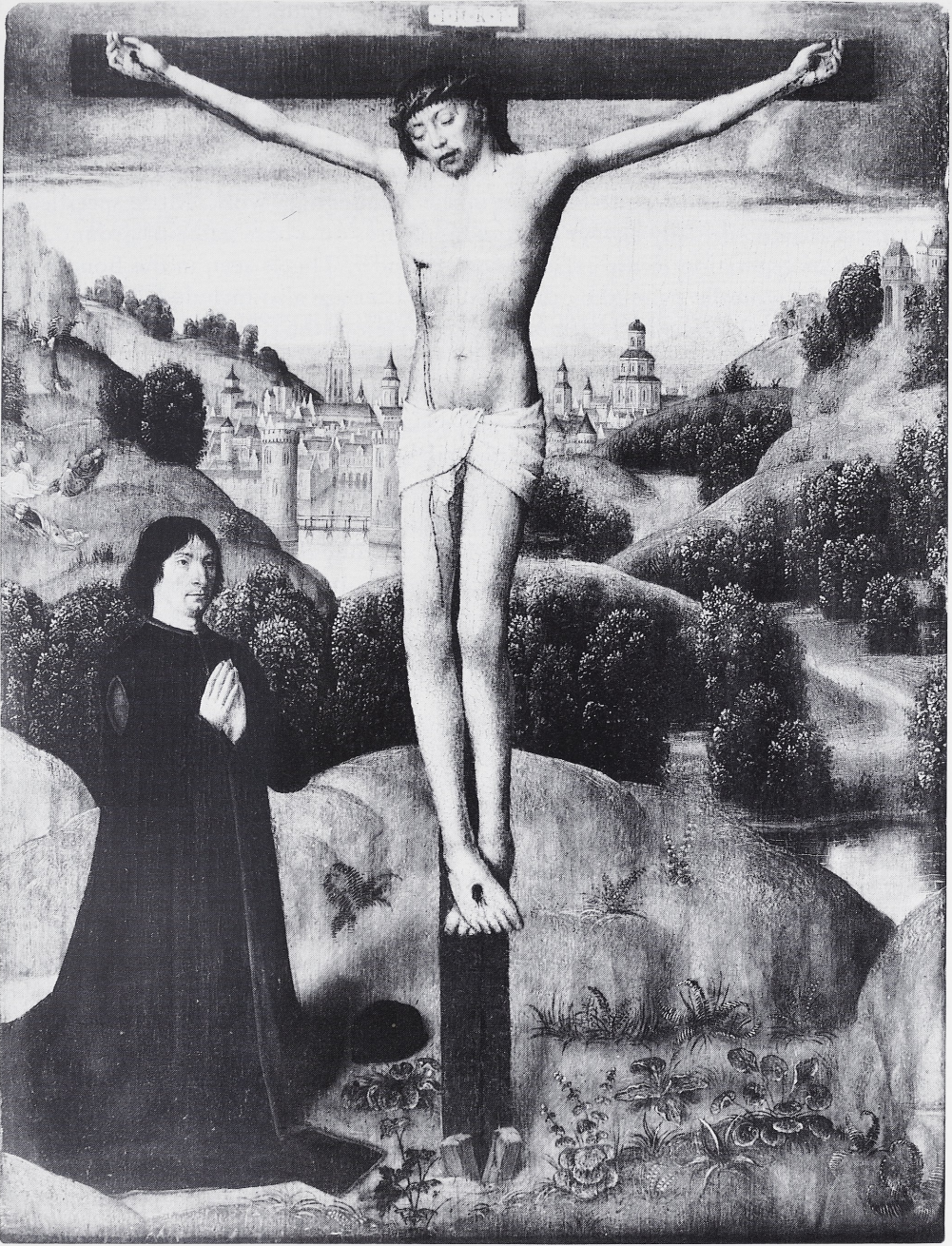
⁵ LEVINE 18-19; 91.

⁶ LEVINE 90-94; 244-246.

⁷ LEVINE 19.

⁸ LEVINE 93; 245.

⁹ The sculptural treatment of figures, and heads, was noted by MARLIER *op. cit.* 9, and in Anonieme Vlaamse Primitieven, p. 29. Also, LEVINE 245.



3 Master of the St. Ursula Legend, Christ on the Cross with Donor. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, The University of Birmingham.

hair of the Evangelist which falls over his forehead is reminiscent of the treatment of the Archangel Raphael in the Detroit 'Nativity' triptych¹⁰. Further, there are several smaller details which can be regarded as 'signatures' of the Master. In fact, the depiction of the landscape as a shallow bowl with a rocky mountain range in the distance is remarkably like the Birmingham panel as well as other works by the Ursula Master where exterior scenes are depicted. The castle seen on the top of one of the hills in the middle ground is also quite like that in the Birmingham work. More specifically, the Ursula Master virtually always painted his figures on a bare patch of ground, with a thin row of vegetation in the extreme foreground¹¹. This is seen in the Bonn work, and the plants typically painted by the Ursula Master are also included. These are the flowers with four blooms in a diamond pattern seen in the foreground and the ferns depicted near the cross, just behind the elbow of St. John¹².

It seems reasonable to conclude that the painting was executed by the Master of the St. Ursula Legend by virtue of the general feeling, overall composition, as well as specific details which are repeatedly found in the works of the Master. As the Master was active from approximately 1465–1504, the previous dating of the panel to ca. 1470 does not seem unreasonable. Such an early date might account for some of the slight anomalies in the style of a painter who had not yet fully defined his style. Despite the fact that the work must remain the product of an anonymous painter, it is worth knowing that the work stems from late fifteenth century Bruges, and that there is now a 'name' which can be attached to the work¹³.

¹⁰ LEVINE 92; 245.

¹¹ LEVINE 25; 92; 245.

¹² LEVINE 20–21; 92; 245.

¹³ In LEVINE 125–136, I argued, as did W. M. CONWAY, *The Van Eycks and their Followers* (1921) 247–248, that the Master is identical with Pieter Casembroot, who entered the Bruges painters guild as a master in the records of 1459/1460 and is last recorded in the records of 1504/1505.