



Kasteel van Loppem

STICHTING JEAN VAN CALOEN

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Additions to the castle

Mary and John from a calvary group: an exceptional addition to Loppem Castle's sculpture collection

Monumental, mediaeval calvary groups are quite rare in our region. The destruction wrought by the iconoclasm (at the end of the 16th century) and the French annexation (at the end of the 18th century), combined with renovation, sale or neglect ensured their disappearance from the streets or the interiors of churches. Such calvaries were indeed found at the entrance to a church, in the surrounding churchyard, or inside the church itself, then usually on a rood beam, above the chancel screen that separates the chancel and the nave. This custom dates back to around 1300. The Gothic Revival and Catholic revival in the second half of the 19th century saw a return to this tradition. Either a completely new concept was introduced in accordance with neo-Gothic principles, or, if the statues had been rescued in time from the destructiveness of the followers of the French Revolution, they were returned to their spot high in the arch between the chancel and the nave, for the edification of the worshippers.¹



St. John's Hospital in Bruges has a group of this kind, including the crucified Christ, that dates from around 1450-1475. In view of specific details, it can be said with some certainty to have been made in a workshop in Bruges. In their convent on Zilverstraat, the Bruges Sisters of St. Joseph have the early 17th-century calvary statues of Mary and John that come from St. Donatian's Cathedral. These larger-than-life sculptures used to stand on the rood beam, to the right and left of the cross, above the chancel screen that separates the chancel and the nave. Fortunately, when Bruges Cathedral was sold and demolished in 1799,

the sculptures were saved. Slight traces of blue paint (on Mary) and red paint (John's coat) show that both were originally polychrome. This is confirmed by the *Interior of the former St. Donatian's Cathedral in Bruges*, painted by Jan Baptist van Meunincxhove (? – Bruges, 1703), of which one copy is held by the Museums of Bruges and another in the Archives of the diocese of Bruges. Today, both the calvary sculptures of St. John's Hospital and those of St. Donatian's Cathedral are no longer polychrome.



Calvary group
Bruges, around 1450-1475
Oak
Mary: H. 92 cm
John: 92 cm
Christ: H. 104 cm
Bruges,
St. John's Hospital



Calvary group
Bruges, early 17th century
Oak
Mary: H. 190 cm
John: H. 192 cm
Bruges, Sisters of St. Joseph



Interior of the former St. Donatian's Cathedral in Bruges

Jan Baptist van Meuninckxhove, 1695-1703

Oil painting on canvas, mounted on a hardboard panel, 90.4 cm x 100.2 cm

Musea Brugge (inv. 0000.GRO1383.I), www.artinlanders.be, © Dominique Provost

The same Van Meunincxhove painted an *Interior of St. Salvator's Church in Bruges*. We see a richly decorated rood beam between the pillars of the chancel arch in the east, on which stand not only the crucified Christ, Mary (on the left) and John (on the right), but also the two murderers who were crucified alongside Jesus. On the left is the repentant or 'good' murderer, with the 'bad' murderer on the right. There are gilt stars as well as the sun and moon on the wrought-iron bars that were add-

ed to stabilise the monumental cross. According to the gospels, the sun and moon darkened at the moment of Christ's death, but in mediaeval art, they symbolise Christ and the Church, the Synagogue and the Church, the Jews and the heathens, or the Old and the New Testament. The entire ensemble was removed in 1719 so that the new organ could be installed on the chancel screen. As such, the two paintings offer unique testimonies.

Interior of St. Salvator's Church in Bruges
Jan Baptist van Meuninckxhove, 1683-1703
Oil painting on canvas, 82.5 cm x 117 cm
Bruges, St. Salvator's Cathedral, © B. Kervyn



On 23 June 2022, the Jean van Caloen Foundation was able to acquire such a group of figures² consisting of Mary (h. 132 cm) and John (129 cm). Both figures are made of walnut and their wonderful polychrome and gilding are exceptionally well preserved. Their origins must surely lie in the Duchy of Brabant, where Brussels, Mechelen, Leuven and Antwerp were major centres of production for figures and retables. As the style is still entirely Gothic, they date from around the end of the 15th century. Their monumental appearance clearly points towards their being part of a calvary group, from which the crucified Christ is now missing, and perhaps they were also placed on a rood beam as the above examples show. The crushed folds of the robes are typical of the autumn of the Middle Ages. And despite being intended for display at considerable height, the figures were carved with great care.

In addition to the grieving expressions of the two figures, we see that, in accordance with Western iconography of course, John is clean shaven and has delicately defined locks of hair in the shape of ringlets. The veins on his hands are defined too. In addition, the buttons on his open neckline and the detail of the tucked-in belt are fine touches of realism. The influence of the Flemish Primitives is not far off. John is mourning the death of his Master. Not, in this case, with the age-old gesture of despair, with one hand placed on his cheek, that we find on the 13th-century limestone fragment that is also on display in the collection at Loppem Castle. John is staring into the distance, apparently wondering “what now?”. His folded hands hang down, emphasising his state of

distress.

As an old woman and widow, Mary wears a guimpe (Lat. *guimpa*). This head covering made of fine linen (or silk) was in two parts: the barbette that passes under the chin and the wimple that covered the forehead and fell in regular folds at the back. The woman’s face was enclosed in an oval, as it were, whilst the rest of the head, the temples, the neck and nape remained covered. It was a typi-

cal garment for older women in the Middle Ages (and reminiscent of the iconography of Saint Elizabeth and Saint Anne, for example, who are also present in the collection at Loppem Castle). It was also worn by nuns until at least the mid-20th century. Mary’s sorrowful gaze is directed downwards, which substantiates the assumption that the figures come from a rood cross installed a couple of dozen metres higher. Her hands are folded, whilst her lower arms



Calvary group
Brabant, end of the 15th century
Walnut, polychrome, gilt
H. 132 cm and 129 cm
Loppem Castle,
Jean van Caloen Foundation

press the long wimple against her chest, creating a dynamic play of folds falling in zigzags. The rich polychrome, also on the carnation areas (skin), and the gilding must have glittered in the candlelit church.

John was not only Jesus' favourite disciple, he was the only one to follow him on the Way of the Cross to Golgotha. He therefore stands beneath the cross with Mary and the Gospel of St. John says: 'When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then he saith to the disciple, Behold thy mother. And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.' (Joh. 19:25-27).

Furthermore, Mary's position is also highly symbolic. According to the theologian and scholar Isidore of Seville, (Cartagena, 560 – Sevilla, 636), Mary, standing beneath the cross (on Jesus' right, left for the viewer), thus symbolised the Church. When everyone had abandoned Jesus, even Peter who had denied him, Mary was the only who kept faith in her son. John (left of the crucified Christ, on the right for the viewer) then symbolises the Synagogue.

This acquisition is more than just a fascinating addition to Jean van Caloen's collection of sculptures. Until recently, the collection included large statues of a *Madonna with Child* and a few saints. This purchase, with the Passion as its theme, thus fills a gap in the iconography. What's more, the exceptional condition of the two sculptures offers added value. This calvary group also supplements the various Passion scenes brought together by Jean van Caloen.

Amongst the retable fragments there are two episodes from the Passion of Christ: a *Longinus on a Horse*, the centurion who pierced the side of Jesus with a lance, and a *Swoon of the Virgin*. In addition there are three crucified Christs and the previously cited *Head of St. John with his Hand on his Cheek*. Besides these sculptures, there are also two early 16th-century altarpieces from the workshop of Adriaen van Overbeke with painted Passion scenes on the front and back (more on this in the next web magazine), a *Crucifixion* and a *Lamentation* as interesting specimens from Bruges (?) and Antwerp dating from the late 15th and early 16th century. And naturally, we must not forget the exceptional window with a *Pietà* as its theme, probably designed by Vrancke van der Stockt around 1454-1465.

Benoit Kervyn de Volkaersbeke

Notes

1. In the church of St. Andrew and St. Anne in Sint-Andries (Bruges), there is a calvary group that was donated by Jan Losschaert around 1500 and placed outside the church in the churchyard. It was not until 1950 that the cross was hung above the rood screen that separates the chancel and the nave, the sculptures of Mary and John were given a place against the columns.
2. Auction by Rob Michiels of the collection of Paul De Grande (Snellegem castle on 23 June 2022), lot 495.

Sources

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