



Kasteel van Loppem

STICHTING JEAN VAN CALOEN

# Web Magazine

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New insights

### The origins of two Passion panels executed by an Antwerp Mannerist

It is common knowledge that Jean van Caloen (Loppem, 1884 – Bruges, 1972) was an avid art enthusiast and collector. The impressive art collection preserved and partly exhibited in Loppem Castle bears witness to this. Two large panels depicting narratives from the Passion once hung in the castle's chapel but in a location hidden from visitors. When the paintings were taken down, they discovered that the panels were painted on both sides. The discovery came just before the panels were given a permanent home in the new exhibition's first hall devoted to medieval art.

These two large panels are part of a larger altarpiece, centred around the Passion of Christ<sup>1</sup>. The style clearly reflects the work of painters from the Southern Netherlands in the early sixteenth century. The author is unknown, but perhaps it was someone from or influenced by Adriaen van Overbeke's atelier. Adriaen van Overbeke was a Brabant painter who was active in Antwerp. His name crops up in 1508 as an independent guild member in the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke's Liggeren (register). Documented commissions show that he left Antwerp between 1513 and 1529 to complete commissions in Kempen (North Rhine-Westphalia). Van Overbeke worked in the Antwerp Mannerism style<sup>2</sup>. In 1522, he had two apprentices in his atelier. His name no longer appears in the guild's archives after 1529.

The panels are painted on both sides, revealing four scenes. The scenes do not follow each other chronologically, making it clear that parts are missing. Perhaps a central panel depicting the Crucifixion was surrounded by multiple panels that told the story preceding Jesus' death and what happened afterwards. From Jean's notes, the two panels appear to have been purchased by his grandparents Charles van Caloen and Savina de Gourcy Serainchamps.

The first panel is *Jesus Washes his Disciples' Feet*. The story comes from the Gospel of St. John (John 13:1-17). The painter placed the event in a space with a wooden barrel vault. It was a custom in Palestine to wash one's feet before sitting at the table, not just to clean off sandy feet but also as a sign of hospitality. Jesus did this to illustrate brotherly love and as a sign of humility; an enslaved person usually





Adriaen van Overbeke (act. 1508-1529), atelier of  
*Jesus Washing his Disciples' Feet* (front) and *The Resurrection* (back)  
Antwerp, early 16th century  
Jean van Caloen Foundation, Loppem Castle (inv. 00418)



carried out this task. 'So he (Jesus) got up from his meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.' (John 13:4-5, NIV) Simon Peter, one of his disciples, initially refused to have his feet washed by his master, but he was convinced in the end. It is this moment that the painter has chosen to depict in the foreground. The eleven other apostles frame the background.

The back of the panel shows *The resurrection*. The painter has used all the correct iconography. The risen Jesus wears a loincloth (a *perizoma*) and has a red mantle draped over his shoulders. The stigmata (the crucifixion wounds and the wound from the piercing of the spear) are clearly visible. His hand is raised in blessing, and he holds a cross-staff with a banner, or gonfalon<sup>3</sup>, in his left hand. Three guards look up in fear; the fourth guard is still fast asleep. The closed tomb is an interesting detail. Did the artist (or the patron?) wish to accentuate the divine nature of the resurrection? The mountain landscape fades into a vast green landscape on the horizon. Another striking detail is the free interpretation of the soldiers around the tomb. Pontius Pilate acquiesced to the high priests' and pharisees' request to have the tomb guarded to prevent the Apostles from taking away Jesus' body. At least, we may assume that these are Roman soldiers. The Antwerp artist undoubtedly did not know what arms and armour Romans wore in Jesus' time. Their outfits are a disparate collection of armour,

clothing, helmets and weapons<sup>4</sup>. The result is an exotic grouping where the man with the halberd and the slashed yellow costume is more reminiscent of a sixteenth-century German or Swiss mercenary, while the man in front with a turban around the pointed helmet, a pointed beard and protruding nose portrays the quintessential caricature of a Jew. It is probably no accident that two of the guards are dressed in yellow, considered in the West to be a repugnant colour for marginals such as whores, heretics and Jews. This made it clear to medieval Westerners that the Jews were responsible for the Crucifixion of Christ, hence their marginalisation.

The front of the second panel shows *Jesus' Prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane* at the foot of the Mount of Olives. He prays to his father, God, and asks him to spare him his naked suffering but ultimately submits to God's will. A chalice shines on the Mount of Olives, referring to Jesus' words when he speaks of his suffering as a cup he is about to drink (Matthew 26:39). Jesus is clearly afraid, accentuated by his theatrical gesture. It was, however, a mistake to depict the host above the chalice. Images of the chalice and the host are representative of the Eucharist. The Garden of Gethsemane is not the scriptural basis for the Eucharist (this took place several hours earlier during the Last Supper), but about Jesus' fears and having to drink the cup. It may be possible that the host was not part of the original painting but was added later by someone unfamiliar with the text or the iconography<sup>5</sup>. As Jesus battles his fears, he asks three of his disciples, Peter, John and Jacob, to watch and

pray with him. The gospels all describe how Jesus was left to face his fears alone; the Apostles had all fallen asleep. The imagery shows once again that the artist knew his iconography well. Petrus lies asleep in the front, with his characteristic profile, full grey beard, balding forehead and hair. The young, clean-shaven, sleeping man in the red tunic is John. The third man has to be James. In the background, we see how Judas, with a coin purse in hand and accompanied by armed soldiers and servants with torches, enters the garden through the gates to betray Jesus.

The reverse side of the panel depicts *The entombment of Christ*. The shroud with Jesus' dead body is lowered into the grave by two men. The man at his head is Nicodemus, and the figure at Jesus' feet is Joseph of Arimathea, judging by his opulent clothing. The Four Evangelists described him as a rich man (Matthew 27:57), a prominent member of the Council (Mark 15:43, Luke 23:50), and a disciple of Jesus (Matthew 27:57), but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders (John 19:38). He is also the man who asked Pilate, the *praefectus civitatum* of Judea who had ordered Jesus' crucifixion, permission to remove Jesus from the cross and bury him. Behind the grave, we recognise Mary and John the Apostle. To the right stand two women, one of which is Mary Magdalene. They wear fictional headdresses typical of the Mannerist style. In the background, we see Golgotha, the hill where Jesus was crucified, with a few people and the crosses of Jesus and the two murderers who were sentenced with him. In the distance, we see the imaginary city of Jerusalem. It is





Adriaen van Overbeke (act. 1508-1529), atelier of  
*Jesus' Prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane* (front) and *The Entombment* (back)  
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striking how the artist has depicted Joseph of Arimathea. Aside from the golden-yellow brocade mantle (as mentioned earlier, yellow is associated with Jews) lined with pearls, which refers to a wealthy, prominent individual, Southern Netherlandish artists generally portrayed Jews by giving them a hawk-like nose and a pointy beard. On the other hand, the man is not wearing the traditional Jewish hat but a turban, which points to a certain degree of exoticism.

## The panel's origins

The scenes from the Passion were painted on wooden panels. In these regions, oak wood imported from the Baltic Sea region was generally used. That is also the case here. In Italy, poplar was usually used. The panels discussed here are not only worthy of note for the scenes they depict; thanks to the visible underdrawings, we can also see evidence of the changes made during the creation of these four scenes from the Passion. Very few drawings or studies on paper or parchment by the Flemish Primitives have been preserved. The underdrawing on the panel provides clues as to how such a painting was produced. Sometimes, the drawing is only visible after a technical analysis with infrared reflectography. However, the drawing becomes visible to the naked eye when the paint is thinner, as is the case here. From the rough, or sometimes more detailed, sketch on the ground layer – which was coated with a mixture of lime plaster and animal-based glue to smooth out any irregularities on the wood surface – we can discern the contour lines that the artist used to indicate a person, landscape, building, or object as a starting point for the composition of the scene. This ensured that the painter had a reference for the exact position and pose of a person, landscape or other elements of the composition during the painting process. The painter sometimes takes the sketch further, fleshing out reliefs with light hatching to indicate folds in clothing or shadows. Sometimes, as is the case here, we see that the artist decides to adjust the composition, add a figure, or move an object to the right or left while painting. In other

Adriaen van Overbeke (act. 1508-1529), atelier of  
*The Resurrection* / detail  
Antwerp, early 16th century  
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00418)

The signing of the gonfalon shows that the painter first saw it twice its size. In the rocks, we discern shading that indicates where the shadows were supposed to be.





words, the painted result no longer matches the original drawing underneath. As with the painting process itself, artists often had their own techniques for applying underdrawings, using various materials such as a brush and black ink, or a type of watercolour paint based on soot or bone char<sup>6</sup>, as well as charcoal, pencil or black chalk.

Our master used hatching to indicate shadows and add depth to the image. We see this, for instance, in the large rock to the left of the grave (*The Entombment*) and the boots of the seated soldier (*The Resurrection*).

Elements that changed position (or were removed altogether) include the ribbed vault (*Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet*), the crosses, hammer and nails and Joseph of Arimathea's foot (*The Entombment*) and Jesus' banner (*The Resurrection*).

The author of these Passion scenes sometimes had trouble with certain poses among his figures (such as Peter's leg in *Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet*) and anatomy in general, as evidenced by the elongated fingers. The artist is a colourist, avidly using highlights to accentuate the apparel (both textile and armour details), hair and beard, and objects. He skillfully adds relief to the folds in the garments. He applies colour perspective expertly to create a sense of depth; the landscape evolves from dark browns and greens in the foreground to greens and blues towards the horizon, while the sky fades from blue at the top to white at the horizon.

Benoit Kervyn de Volkaersbeke

Adriaen van Overbeke (act. 1508-1529), atelier of  
*The Entombment* / detail  
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Detail of the signing of hammer, nails, grave and foot of Joseph of Arimathea. The underdrawing shows that the painter changed the location of hammer and nails; the foot of Joseph of Arimathea is also altered. Shading on the tomb indicates the shadows.



Adriaen van Overbeke (act. 1508-1529), atelier of  
*The Entombment* / detail  
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The signature shows that during painting, the crosses were moved to the right.





## Notes

1. Panel depicting *Jesus Washing His Disciples' Feet* (front) and *The Resurrection* (back) / h. 127,8 cm x x. 57 cm x d. 4,6 cm (incl. frame) / inv. no. 00418  
Panel depicting *The Garden of Gethsemane* (front) and *The Entombment* (back) / h. 128 cm x w. 56 cm x d. 4,6 cm (incl. frame) / inv. no. 00419
2. From a group of painters, which includes several master painters (or with an eponym), active in Antwerp between 1500-1530. Their style illustrates a transition from Gothic to Renaissance and is rich in colour, with figures often in extravagant poses, sometimes wearing exotic garments.
3. The banner (lt. *gonfalone*) ends in two swallowtails and is the banner of Christ, a cross in gules on silver. We also find this banner in depictions of the Lamb of God, the animal's right leg hooked around the staff, the cross-staff resting on its shoulder.
4. The flail held by the sleeping soldier is a medieval weapon consisting of a shaft that ends in a chain to which a metal sphere with spikes is attached. This often incorrectly referred to as a mace or morning star. The soldier standing behind the grave has a halberd. This medieval hacking and thrusting weapon consists of a long shaft mounted with an iron spike and two blades, an axe blade and a hook, mounted beneath the spi-
- ke. Neither weapons nor the depicted shields, helmets and armour were used during Jesus's time. It is typical for the Flemish Primitives to take Biblical or historical events and adapt them to their own environment.
5. The iconography used for the Agony of Jesus usually shows the chalice on a rock at the Mount of Olives, or the chalice is handed to Jesus by an angel, but always without the host. Similar faulty iconography is visible on a painting from Jan Gossaert (1478-1532) from the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin.
6. Bone char primarily consists of charcoal and is made by charring animal bones in an oxygen-poor environment.