

The Pietà
France, Champagne
c.1510-20



88 x 66 x 32 cm, Limestone with traces of polychromy. Christ's right arm and one section of the Virgin's veil restored. Some toning pigments on the surface of the stone in places. An old Inventory number '801 A5995' inscribed in red ink on one side).

Provenance

Collection of Fernand Lafarge (1920-2013)

Description and Iconography

Framed by a simple headdress, the face of the suffering Virgin concentrates the narrative tension of this emotive depiction of the Pietà. Mary holds the collapsed, lifeless body of her Son, who has just been taken down from the Cross, the drops of blood emanating from the wound in his side mirroring the tears flowing on his mother's cheeks. Whilst she does not display uncontrollable grief, the sense of pathos and melancholy she exudes through the flowing of the tears down her cheeks, frowning eyebrows, and the tender action of holding Christ's head with one hand and the other placed over her heart, shows a mother mourning her son. The gesture of holding her hand to her heart may refer to the prophecy of Simeon who prophesied that a sword would pierce the Virgin's heart upon Christ's death (Luke 2:35). Her gaze is directed towards Christ's head, which she supports with one hand delicately despite the presence of the crown of thorns, a further allusion to her role in co-suffering with her son.

Christ's right arm falls vertically from beneath his body, its hand resting on the skull carved directly below the line of his head.¹ He is depicted with his eyes and mouth half open, long flowing hair and beard. The torment afflicted during the Passion is evident - blood flows from a deep wound on his side and there are nail wounds on his hands and feet. Christ's face is turned towards the worshipper, with his numbed body forming an irregular arc surrounding Mary's legs.

Traces of a considered and delicate gilding and polychromy scheme, including the on gold border of the Virgin's mantle, the traces of blonde hair under the Virgin's veil, and Christ's brown locks, suggest that our sculpture may always have been intended to be picked out with subtle high-lit elements. At the base of the sculpture is a fragmentary inscription and coat of arms on the shield, both displaying traces of paint. The great quality of execution is visible in the delicacy of the faces, the hands and the feet. The harmony of the composition, the contrast between Christ's static body and the undulating movements of the Virgin's clothing, the delicacy of anatomical detail and cloth, shown by the traces of highly precise tools, demonstrate an extraordinarily high level of artistic skill and a lavishing of attention upon the commission.

Context and Meaning

The iconography of the Pietà was widespread in late Medieval art, especially in sculpture, and appeared to have developed gradually over several centuries.² The Scriptures do not mention the Virgin Mary holding onto Christ's body after the deposition. Despite this, over the course of the fifteenth century and into the early sixteenth, late-medieval theologians asserted the primacy of the Virgin within the Passion narrative, and worship for her grew as part of a new theological movement known as *Devotio Moderna*. The same period also witnessed the emergence of the trend of realism, which included the 'humanisation' of the Virgin and Christ, and a concurrent interest in the naturalistic droop of Christ's lifeless body.

The stylistic and iconographic treatment of the present group can be closely associated with a small number of comparably sculpted Pietà groups carved in the region of Champagne during the early sixteenth century. According to the pioneering research of William H. Forsyth, the workshops of Champagne produced two types of Pietà sculpture, the second being dependant on the iconography of the first.³ Our example appears to be more closely related to this second group, characterised by their showing Christ's loincloth tied at his side and their arrangement of the Virgin's mantle over her legs.⁴ The similarities of the present version with another of almost identical size in the church of Saint-Phal in the Aube subregion of Champagne suggests a closely shared artistic idiom, particularly in the angling and papery fold structure of the Virgin's lower draperies, and the arced composition of Christ's right arm and body (fig. 1). Dated to around 1520 in the surrounding scholarship, the Saint-Phal group offers strong parallels with which to date and locate ours accordingly. Another, also of related form, survives in situ in the church of Saint-Loup, Auxon, a few miles south-east of the Aube (fig. 2).

¹ The skull is a direct reminder of the location in which Christ's Crucifixion took place; Golgotha, which translates as 'Place of Skulls' (see Matthew 27:33 and Mark 15:22).

² William H. Forsyth, *The Pietà in French Late Gothic Sculpture: Regional Variations*, (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), p.17

³ *Ibid.*, p.47

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.49

Perhaps somewhat apocryphally, Forsyth suggests that the emphasis of the sculpted drapery found within the Pietà sculptures of Champagne can be understood in relation to the champenois cloth industry. He writes that ‘the beautiful supple drapery and careful distinction between the various textures and thicknesses of the fabrics reflect the professional interest of the inhabitants of Champagne, who made and sold fine cloth that was famous throughout Europe’,⁵ and that ‘the cloth industry must have been the main support of most people who commissioned sculpture’ in towns which were filled with guilds and confraternities.⁶

Many late-medieval Pietà groups made for champenois contexts were placed within shallow niches set into the walls of transepts or aisles in parish churches and family chapels. This mix of private and communal devotion demonstrates that such sculptures could be applied to a variety of functions and contexts. The present example, which includes a coat of arms and inscription at the base, was almost certainly commissioned by a wealthy patron, perhaps for a private chapel, while its unfinished and only roughly hollowed reverse indicates that it was made to be placed hard against a wall or within a niche with a tight viewing angle. The concurrent placement of the key motifs, gestures, and points of contact between the two figures is further evidence of this, and lends the group an intense and dramatic air.

Related Literature:

Tadeusz Dobrzeński, ‘Medieval Sources of the Pieta,’ *Bulletin du musée National de Varsovie* 8.1-2 (1967), pp.5-24

William H. Forsyth, *The Pieta in French Late Gothic Sculpture: Regional Variations*, (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995)

Raymond Koechlin and Jean-Jacques Marquet de Vasselot, *La Sculpture a Troves et dans la Champagne meridionale au seizieme siecle* Rpt. (Paris: F. de Nobele, 1966)

⁵ Ibid., p.47

⁶ Ibid., chap. 2, n. 3



Fig. 1
Pietà
c.1520
Limestone with traces of paint; 97cm high
Church of Saint-Phal, Saint-Phal, Aube



Fig. 2
Pietà
c.1520
Limestone; 90cm high
Church of Saint-Loup, Auxon