

Grief Captured

Embrace the reserved yet dramatic art of the Northern Renaissance

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Meet the artists: Roger (Rogier) van der Weyden

Meet the subject: 'Descent from the Cross (Deposition)' (c.1440), oil on panel, is considered Weyden's masterpiece. The 'Descent from the Cross' was painted for Notre-Dame Outside-the-Walls at Leuven (near Brussels), which was founded in the fourteenth century by the Archers Guild and the collapsed Virgin Mary, clearly prostrate with grief.

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Descent from the Cross (c.1440)

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Close-up of the Virgin Mary

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Mary Cleopas (half-sister to the Virgin Mary), Saint John the Evangelist (or Joseph of Arimathea) and Mary Salome (another half-sister to the Virgin Mary).

<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-descent-from-the-cross/856d822a-dd22-4425-bebd-920a1d416aa7>

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Portrait of a Lady

“Rejecting a naturalistic landscape setting, van der Weyden compresses the ten nearly life-size figures in his composition within a gilded niche simulating the appearance of a sculptured altarpiece of polychromed wood. The tightly interlocked figures seem to seethe in a single convulsion of pain which brutally drives home the anguish of the Passion. Although the Descent from the Cross is a work of immense formal and coloristic richness, these characteristics are subordinate to the fundamentally emotional purpose of the design. In its compact composition, purity of color and intensity of emotion, Weyden’s Descent from the Cross (Deposition) must be one of the greatest religious paintings in the history of Western art.” <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/old-masters/roger-van-der-weyden.htm>

He was also in much demand for his portrait painting. For an example of secular art by Roger van der Weyden, see Portrait of a Lady (1460), an oil painting on panel, that is now a part of the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Visit NGA site at <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.51.html>

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Meet the Artist:

Roger Van der Weyden embodied the Flemish Painting School (style of painting) during the Northern Renaissance of the 15th century. He was mainly active in Brussels, although he is known to have briefly visited Rome, Florence and Ferrara in Italy. He was recognized for stylish and elegant figures that seem to lean closely into each other, creating tight, powerful interactions and for his exacting and realistic perspective. He is best known for his colorful, religious panel (wood) paintings, usually altarpieces. He was a leader among Northern Renaissance artists, along with Robert Campin, Hans Memling, Hugo van der Goes and Hieronymus Bosch. Weyden is now considered to be one of the best biblical history painters of the Flemish School.

Meet the subject:

'Descent from the Cross (Deposition)' (c.1440), oil on panel, is considered Weyden's masterpiece. The 'Descent from the Cross' was painted for Notre-Dame Outside-the-Walls at Leuven (near Brussels), which was founded in the fourteenth century by the Archers Guild. Famous for its figures painted in such highly defined relief that they seem to extend into the viewer's space, for strong basic colors (reds, whites, blues) that pop out dramatically and for the highly realistic body poses and facial expressions that convey strongly felt emotions, especially those of the collapsed Virgin Mary, clearly prostrate with grief. Attention to details of clothing fabric and the play of folds with shadow and highlights, in voluptuous profusion, are a visual feast.

Curious fact:

He was called Rogier (or Roger) van der Weyden or 'Rogelet de la Pasture,' being the Flemish and French translations of 'Roger of the Meadow.'

More info-bites:

- He was apprenticed to Robert Campin, an early master of the Flemish School; Campin was later banned for adultery.
- Two small crossbows hang from the tracery in the top corners of the panel (Descent from the Cross) indicating that it was commissioned by the Archers Guild.

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How he did it:

Weyden's oil paintings were characterized by rich color and dramatic style. He painted on both canvas and wood panels, depending upon the commission. He went on to paint many serene, aristocratic portraits of the local aristocracy.

“Roger probably began by making a detailed study to be approved by his patrons. Using rather large brushes and a paint rich in medium, he then copied his study freehand, and this copy constitutes the bold underdrawing that is revealed in infrared reflectograms. When he painted, he did not always follow his underdrawing: the heads of Mary Salome, Joseph of Arimathea and the bearded man in green are underdrawn higher; several of the hands and feet, the rungs of the ladder and many areas of drapery have been altered. Roger's changes of mind are always of interest, while the underdrawing itself, rapidly and boldly executed, reveals a spontaneous creativity that may surprise many observers. The sureness and speed of his technique and the confidence of his brushwork are best admired through microscopes or in vastly enlarged detail photographs.” From art exhibit catalog, Prado Museum <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-descent-from-the-cross/856d822a-dd22-4425-bebd-920a1d416aa7>

Want to learn more?

Visit YouTube and watch:

The Renaissance Unchained - Rogier van der Weyden's Descent from the Cross (5 ½ minutes)

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pv1oh-a-gQM>

Exposición: Rogier van der Weyden by curator of the Museo Nacional del Prado (8 ½ minutes)

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDsv5gyHXuQ&feature=emb_logo

An analysis of van der Weyden's Deposition (7 minutes)

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiDuz44Lk-w>