

The Descent from the Cross

The Descent from the Cross, by **Rogier Van Der Weyden** (1400-1464), mixed medium of tempera and oil on wood, measuring 86"X103" (2.20 X 2.62m).

It was commissioned for the church of Notre-Dame-Hors-des-Murs in Louvain, Flanders (Belgium), it is purchased by Charles V, sent to Escorial, Spain and remained there till 1945, when it was sent to Prado Museum in Madrid. In this most cardinal work of Rogier, he achieved purposeful simplification of each form intended to make it more vividly experienced by the spectator, and this in the highest degree.

When working on *The Descent* Rogier is already an established name in his country. But he had to a far greater degree than his master teachers the faculty of idealization. He is, in the full critical sense of that term, a classic artist and concentrates on man, not man as a continuation of Nature, but man as the unique and isolated creation of God.

Before our eyes, on the narrow scene of *The Descent*, a real drama plays in the spirit of ancient-Greek tragedies. The main lines of the composition are simple: an oblong rectangle of upright figures enclosed, as it were, between two curved brackets. The twisted pose of Magdalene is the point of greatest tension in the whole design. At the center of the drama the figure of Christ seems to float without weight, like a crescent moon, a body of fragile, tranquil beauty.

Brilliant, almost heraldic simplicity of the colours is part of the tradition of symbolic colour, going back to the master glass-painters of the middle ages. In our picture the blue and red of the Virgin and St John and the light lavender and sage-green dress of the Magdalene are strongly contrasting, especially setting off her scarlet sleeves. The sense of strain which is repressed in the heads shows itself in the clashes and struggles of the drapery.

In the heads, hands and feet Rogier has achieved that difficult aim, an idealization that does not destroy identity. Magdalene's arms are in kind of circular movement, breaking and starting without loss of momentum. The hands of Mary are not only beautiful in themselves, but each has a sympathetic relationship with another member. Her left hand inert but still living, accompanies the lifeless hand of Christ, her right hand, between a skull and St John's exquisite foot, seems to draw some new life from the earth.

For the deeply pious Rogier the Passions of Our Lord was the central fact of existence. In *The Descent from the Cross* there is a slow tempo of resignation, an absence of strain and passion, without turning to frustration.

Rogier looks in the diversity of mankind for certain dominant characteristics, expressive of the activities of the human spirit. These essences of humanity are shown to be deeply involved with one another.