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Nikolaus Haguenauer (attributed to the workshop of)
(circa 1440-1445 – after 1526)

The Last Supper

Strasbourg, circa 1490-1500

Linden wood

52.6 x 52.6 x 4.9 cm

FGA-AD-BA-0150

Origin

Sam Fogg, London, October 2015

Bibliography

Unpublished



Altarpiece element

Square in form, this lindenwood high relief shows the Last Supper. It comes in all likelihood from a now-disassembled altarpiece whose theme was surely the Passion of Christ. Based on its size, it could be an element of a predella¹. Very well preserved, it is made of three vertically-joined boards, as can be seen in the two discreet vertical grooves at the top of the panel. While the two holes drilled through the two upper corners have been filled in, the gap at the level of the head of Saint Peter, positioned on Christ's right, has not been restored. The height of the relief varies, from the ultrathin layer at the bottom to the upper parts that are almost five centimeters deep, for example the prominent foreheads of the characters. The sculptor even detaches certain elements from the surface of the panel, such as the right hand of Christ holding the bread, in order to highlight the most important elements of the scene. No trace of polychromy is detectable, which suggests that we have here one of the few examples of unpainted sculpture from the late Middle Ages.

The Last Supper

The story of the Last Supper, told in the four Gospels (Mt. 26:7-30; Mk. 4:12-26; Lk. 22:7-38; Jn. 13:17-30) is the source of the iconography of this work. Jesus is sharing his final meal before the Crucifixion with twelve of his disciples. During that meal, he unmasks Judas who will soon betray him, and he introduces the Eucharist. The composition of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art (FGA) relief is organized around the central figure of Christ, seated behind an oval table on which are placed bread, a plate of lamb, and a pitcher of wine, objects all referring to the Eucharistic ritual. The disciples are positioned symmetrically on either side of him. Among them we recognize John, asleep at Jesus's chest, Peter at his right hand, and Paul facing him. As for Judas, he sits in the left foreground and receives bread from the hand of Christ. According to the Gospel of John (13:26),² that gesture, emphasized by the hand standing out from the relief, designates him as a traitor. The other participants are not identifiable in the absence of attributes. They exchange looks and talk amongst themselves, with the exception of two on the bench on the right, one drinking, the other reading. The scene takes place in a vaulted

¹ The panel could also have served as a memorial, like the one made by Veit Stoss for the Volckamer family in 1499, consisting of three carved square panels, one of which represents the Last Supper (https://photos.smugmug.com/Orte/Franken/Nuernberg-Sebald/i-KFtw4cj/1/X2/030_Nbg_Sebald-X2.jpg).

² The account in the three other Gospels reports that the traitor is discovered when he dips his hand into the dish at the same time as Christ.



interior with a tiled floor that is depicted in perspective. The base lines meet where the ribs of the vault come together, at the level of Christ's head, following a formula inaugurated by Pietro Lorenzetti in the Lower Church in Assisi (before 1319).

Nikolaus Hagenauer and his workshop

This work can be attributed to the workshop of Nikolaus Hagenauer, active in Strasbourg. The artist, documented between 1480 and 1526, is known, among other things, for having executed, after 1510, the sculpted part of the Issenheim Altarpiece.³ His work seems to have been strongly influenced by the production of sculpture in Strasbourg, such that it is difficult to distinguish works from his hand or from his workshop - where his two brothers Veit and Paul worked - from those of his contemporaries.

The sculpted panel of the FGA shows many similarities with the works of Nikolaus Hagenauer. First, the treatment of the faces of the various participants of the Last Supper, all individualized, very expressive, even caricatured, recalls the artist's work as it appears, for example, in the bust of a leaning man held by the Musée de l'Oeuvre de Notre-Dame in Strasbourg (Inv. MOND 445). The comparison of his face to that of the disciple to the left of Saint Peter in *The Last Supper* is clear: we find the same kind of deep, expressive lines, as well as similar eyebrows, nose, and chin. The Christ in *The Last Supper* can also be compared to the one in the center of the predella of the Issenheim Altarpiece, while the face of Judas resembles that of one of the apostles from the Assumption of the Virgin preserved in the Chapel of the Collegiate Church of Saverne (Alsace, Bas-Rhin). As for the curly hair of the disciple next to Saint Paul, it is identical to that of one of the apostles of the predella of the Issenheim Altarpiece. The varied representation of the hands, in movement or resting on the shoulders of their neighbor, is also characteristic of the sculptures of Nikolaus Hagenauer and his workshop.

³ BEGUERIE-DE PAEPE, Pantxika and Philippe LORENTZ (eds.), 2007, p. 62.



A contemporary scene?

In *The Last Supper* of the FGA, some of the disciples wear garments - particularly hats - that are contemporary with the making of the sculpture. Others, like the man next to Judas, present a jawline beard, anachronistic to biblical times. In fact, the sculptor blends timeless elements with others from the late fifteenth century, as artists often did at the time. Similarly, the architectural setting in which the scene takes place is also contemporary. Once again, this is a strong trend in staged sculptures beginning toward the end of the fifteenth century in the Germanic regions. For example, the Last Supper of the predella of the high altar of the Church of Saint Nicholas in Kalkal (North Rhine), made between 1490 and 1500, presents a similar version, though much more sophisticated and ornate than the panel of the FGA. The Issenheim Altarpiece also displays similar vaults above saints Augustine and Jerome. By updating biblical scenes in this way, late medieval artists made their works more accessible to viewers, encouraging their identification, and thence their devotion.

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for the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art
Geneva, January 2017

This note was prepared in the context of a study of the entire medieval collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art undertaken between 2014 and 2017 by Dr. Brigitte Roux, currently a research associate at the University of Neuchâtel and with e-codices: Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland, at the University of Fribourg.

General bibliography

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