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Nicolas PIPER D'ARRAS, known as Niccolò PIPPI (ca. 1530 – ca. 1604) (attr.)

*Descent from the Cross*

Circa 1580-1585

Rome

Ivory

29 x 22 x 1.2 cm

FGA-AD-BA-0046

**Provenance**

Marc-Arthur Kohn, Monaco, 27 July 2011, lot no. 53



*A composition inspired by Michelangelo*

Carved with virtuosity in thin plaques of ivory applied on a slate background – added presumably later –, this bas-relief figuring the Descent from the Cross is laid out on two levels.

The upper part is set out around the body of the dead Christ, supported by a set of six characters, clustered around the cross and the two ladders used for the deposition. The two saints who, according to the Gospels' narrative, attended the event, can be identified: Joseph of Arimathea, seen from behind on the foreground, who begins to climb the ladder to retrieve Christ's dead body, as well as Nicodemus, who, at the top of the cross, has detached the corpse. They are assisted in this task by four other characters, amongst whom is Longinus, the Roman soldier who pierced Christ's body with his lance before converting, who can possibly be figured by the man with a powerful body, positioned on the ladder to the right and supporting one of Christ's legs. As for the lower part, it spreads out in a frieze, including the figure of Joseph of Arimathea, who constitutes a pivotal form between both levels. The scene depicted on the left (fig. 2) represents the Lamentation of the Virgin, in a swoon, supported by Mary Magdalene and Saint John, a group to which is added a set of servants and faithful who remained by Jesus during his crucifixion. Three other characters, on Joseph's right, are also associated with this scene from the Lamentation cycle.

The overall scheme of this *Descent from the Cross* thus derives from two drawings by Michelangelo, the paternity of which, amply debated by art historians since the beginning of the twentieth century, has now been established<sup>1</sup>.



A sanguine drawing, now kept at the Teylers Museum (Haarlem, inv. A25r.), inspired the core of the composition around the deposition itself<sup>2</sup>. The lower left part of the relief, devoted to the swoon of the Virgin supported by Mary Magdalene and saint John (*fig. 2*), reproduces a composition present on a black chalk drawing kept at the British Museum ([London, inv. 1860-6-16-4](#))

Fig. 2 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva.  
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<sup>1</sup> RAGGIO, *The Vatican Collections. The Papacy and Art*, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> HIRST, *Michel-Ange dessinateur*, p. 62-63.



A combination of these two drawings in pen and brush is to be found on a sheet of paper kept in a private collection in Cologne, which had been attributed in the past to Daniele da Volterra, due to its similarity with the famous fresco painted on this theme by the artist in the Orsini chapel of the Trinità dei Monti church in Rome<sup>3</sup>. However, the group of the Lamentation, in the lower left corner of the fresco, which figures the Virgin already unconscious, reclining, not merely in a half swoon, differs widely from the group on the Cologne drawing. Thus, as early as 1965, this sheet had been given to Vasari by Marita Horster<sup>4</sup>. More recently, in 2013, Harula Economopoulos suggested it should rather be considered as having been drawn by the hand of Stefano Maderno's master: Nicolas Mostaert, known as Niccolò Piper d'Arras, or Niccolò Pippi<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps trained in the Netherlands under Jacques du Broeucq, then established in Rome in the district of Trastevere, Niccolò Pippi was one of the most active and popular sculptors of the Eternal City during the last twenty years of the sixteenth century.

*The Descent from the Cross by Niccolò Pippi and its variants: a luxury « series production »*

Indeed, the composition of the Cologne drawing shows a striking similarity to a bas-relief in ivory, now kept at the Museo degli Argenti in the Palazzo Pitti (inv. Avori no. 197), in Florence, the first *Descent from the Cross* attributed with certainty to Pippi by the art historian Charles Rufus Morey in 1936<sup>6</sup>. The relief is then identified as being the work mentioned in the first inventory of the Tribuna of the Uffizi in 1589, the palace's room reserved by the cardinal Ferdinando de Medici to the display of his most precious objects.<sup>7</sup>

Three other variants in ivory of this same *Descent from the Cross*, also attributed to Pippi and playing on the contrast between the whiteness of ivory and the blackness of the background, have since been identified. A relief preserved since 1835 by the Vatican museums ([Roma, inv. 62445](#)), also attributed with certainty to Pippi by Morey<sup>8</sup>, thus presents a few variants compared to the Pitti exemplar: the most notable difference being the number of characters, which amount to 20 instead of 19, at the cost of slight modifications in the composition. A third relief in ivory has been located in 1984 within the collections of the duchess of Parcent's heirs in Malaga<sup>9</sup>: according to Eike Schmidt, this would be

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<sup>3</sup> ALBERTI, « *La Descente de croix* de Daniele da Volterra... », p. 189-238.

<sup>4</sup> HORSTER, « Eine unbekannt Handzeichnung aus dem Michelangelo-Kreis... », p. 199.

<sup>5</sup> ECONOMOPOULOS, *Stefano Maderno scultore, 1571 ca.-1636*, p. 82-84.

<sup>6</sup> MOREY, *Gli oggetti di avorio e di osso del Museo Sacro Vaticano*.

<sup>7</sup> SCHMIDT E., « Cardinal Ferdinando, Maria Maddalena of Austria, and the Early History of Ivory Sculptures at the Medici Court », p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> MOREY, *Gli oggetti di avorio e di osso del Museo Sacro Vaticano*.

<sup>9</sup> ESTELLA MARCOS, *La escultura barroca de marfil en España*, Book 1, p. 12.



the very first known *Descent from the Cross* by Pippi, mentioned in the inventory of Ferdinando de Medici in 1579<sup>10</sup>, and sent as a diplomatic present to Fernando of Toledo, viceroy of Catalonia. A certain number of iconographic and stylistic details, in the hairdos or attitudes of the characters, distinguish this relief from the Italian museums' exemplars. Jesus's body notably presents a more prominent musculature, more exacerbated than in the Italian versions – and thus shows a manner nearer Michelangelo's heritage as transmitted by his entourage... The whole of these characteristics are to be found in a fourth exemplar, kept at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon (inv. L487), hailed from the former collection of Jacques Antoine Lambert, and bequeathed to the museum in 1850<sup>11</sup>.

Apart from the missing left arm of the character situated at the bottom left of the ladder, the *Descent from the Cross* of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art bears a strong resemblance to the Malaga and Lyon exemplars: the relief is carved with the same minuteness and the treatment of the musculature is assertive.

Of great technical virtuosity, the relief, which can now be considered as the fifth one carved by Pippi, combines skilful depth rendering, subtle precision of anatomical detail and a wide variety of faces and expressions (*fig. 3*); the highly polished surface leaves no trace of abrasion. If it remains difficult to identify the very hand of Pippi amongst works that were probably collective, the whole of their characteristics induces the viewer to place this work within the high quality production of the artist and of his workshop in the context of a thriving devotional sculpture market designed to spread the symbols of the Counter-Reformation among the elite.



Fig. 3 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
Photographeur : Thierry Ollivier

<sup>10</sup> SCHMIDT E., « Cardinal Ferdinando, Maria Maddalena of Austria, and the Early History of Ivory Sculptures at the Medici Court » ; SCHMIDT E., *Das Elfenbein der Medici*, p. 31-32.

<sup>11</sup> MALGOUYRES, « Baroque Ivory, Florence ».



### *An international distribution*

At the same time, the *Descent from the Cross* by Niccolò Pippi has seen a great number of replicas made of different materials: stucco, plaster, wax, bronze or silver, the list of which has been established for the first time by Morey in 1936<sup>12</sup>, then completed in 1993 by Christina Schmidt<sup>13</sup>. Part of this second-hand production, intended for a wider clientele than the works carved in ivory, would have been elaborated from the version now kept at the Palazzo Pitti, on the basis of a model probably made of wax. Just as the gilded stucco of the Victoria and Albert Museum ([London, inv. A.1 :1-1941](#)) and the plaster of the Casa Buonarroti (Florence, inv. 196), many of the other variants known of the *Descent from the Cross* may thus originate from a mould elaborated on the basis of that wax and mainly used after Pippi's death at the beginning of the seventeenth century<sup>14</sup>. Numerous late reinterpretations of Pippi's composition have thus been made, namely in southern Germany and in Austria up to the eighteenth century. Without resorting to the moulding technique, others, however, remain closer to the Italian model.



This is the case of a stamped silver plaque, created towards 1620 in Augsburg by the silversmith Hans II Manhart, also kept at the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art (*fig.4*). As virtuously performed as Pippi's ivory piece, this plaque, in turn, bears witness to the international circulation of an emblematic work of the Counter-Reformation, inspired by a prestigious model that it helped to propagate.

Fig. 4 : Hans II Manhart, *Descent from the Cross*, circa 1620, Augsburg, silver, 29 x 18,5 x 2 cm, FGA-AD-BA-0081

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Fabienne Fravallo  
Curator Decorative Arts Collection  
Geneva, June 2020

<sup>12</sup> MOREY, *Gli oggetti di avorio e di osso del Museo Sacro Vaticano*, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> SCHMIDT C., « Das Kreuzabnahmerelief in der Dülmener Kreuzkapelle – eine Michelangelo-Kopie in Westfalen », p. 194.

<sup>14</sup> ECONOMOPOULOS, *Stefano Maderno scultore, 1571 ca.-1636*, p. 89-93.





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