



FONDATION  
GANDUR  
POUR L'ART



Fig. 1 - © Photographic credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
Photographer: Thierry Ollivier

*Christ on the Cold Stone*

Circa 1490

Brabant

Oak wood, traces of polychromy

72 x 44,5 x 26 cm

FGA-AD-BA-0176

**Provenance**

Private collection, Belgium

Private collection, Greenwich, Connecticut, USA

Sam Fogg Gallery, London, 2020



Seated on a mound, ankles crossed, hands tied with a rope and left on his emaciated thighs, the Christ represented here, identifiable by the crown of thorns that encircles his forehead, belongs to the iconographic type known as the "Christ of Pity" or "Christ on the Cold Stone". Except for his hips, around which the perizonium is wrapped, his weakened body, with his protruding rib cage and marked veins, is almost completely naked. Slightly bent forward, his unstable posture subtly expresses a state of deep pain, which is echoed by the expression of his face's restrained sadness. Finding its place in the cycles dedicated to the Passion, this representation shows Christ at a particularly moving moment, one that leads to meditation.



After having climbed up to Calvary while carrying his cross, after having undergone the Flagellation, Jesus waits for the preparations regarding his last torture on Mount Golgotha: the Crucifixion. This episode, not narrated in the accounts of the Evangelists, is said to derive from the mystical literature developed from the 14th century onwards, mainly in the old Netherlands, and from the theatrical representation of sacred Mystery plays<sup>1</sup>. Some texts did go so far as to make Christ express himself in this waiting position. His representation in the field of sculpture, extremely popular starting at the end of the 15th century, would even be the more or less direct transposition of these stagings<sup>2</sup>.

Fig. 2 - © Photographic credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Quarré, *Le Christ de pitié, Brabant-Bourgogne autour de 1500*, exhibition catalogue [Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon, Palais des ducs de Bourgogne, 1971], 1971, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Émile Mâle thus develops: "I would readily believe that this image of pain was inspired by the Mysteries. It is in the theatre, indeed, that they had been able to see, for a few moments, Christ stripped of his robe, waiting with resignation that the executioners had prepared his cross." (É. Mâle, "L'Art français de la fin du Moyen Âge. - L'apparition du pathétique", *Revue des Deux Mondes*, vol. 29, October 1905, p. 666).



## From Brussels to Beaune

According to research conducted since the 1970s by Pierre Quarré, this sculptural iconography was developed by the Brabant workshops of Brussels. It was then taken up by the workshops of Antwerp and Mechelen, before spreading to the north-east of France – in Flanders, Champagne, Lorraine and Burgundy, until the middle of the 16th century. This common origin and wide diffusion explains the perceptible similarities in the attitude of Christ, his gestures, the accessories present and the execution processes used, for example, between one of the most famous and oldest Burgundian sculptures, the famous Christ on the Cold Stone from the Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune (fig. 3) – currently attributed to Jacques I Borman, active from 1460 to 1502/1503<sup>3</sup> – and the one in the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels (inv. 5967).



Fig. 3 - © Hospices de Beaune.  
Photographer: Francis Vauban



Fig. 4 - © KIK-IRPA, Bruxelles. Photographer :  
Hervé Pigeolet

The geographical stretch of this spectrum of diffusion, one that took place over more than a century and a half, also allowed for subtle variations: each region, each workshop developing its own details, its own inflections, its own sensitivity. A little further south, in the region of Namur, sculptors turned to a particularly refined iconography, paying particular attention to the long graphic curls of the hair and the beard. They did so while providing the pathetic with an almost ornamental refinement, in the image of the pearly tears running on the cheeks of the Christ of the Saint-Lambert church in Bouvignes, made around 1500-1510 (fig. 4).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Miroir du Prince. La commande artistique des hauts dignitaires bourguignons, 1425-1510*, exhibition catalogue [Chalon-sur-Saône, musée Vivant-Denon et Autun, musée Rolin, 5.6 – 19.09.2021], Gand, Snoeck, 2021.



As for the Christ of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, it embodies a certain reservation that is more typical of the Brussels workshops, despite its careful attention given to the figuration of its undulating curls and the network of veins on its arms. The linear graphics of its features, one that holds an almost geometric arrangement, especially in the eyebrow arch (fig. 5), gives it a sense of austerity and a form of abstraction absent from sculptures originating in Namur in the early 16th century.

Fig. 5 - © Photographic credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
Photographer: Thierry Ollivier

Several iconographic peculiarities distance it from the most frequently used codes in the genre: the absence of the skull and the Passion's instruments, the presence of a sheepskin covering the mound under the cloak. This work is nonetheless fully in line with the sculpted production of the Southern Netherlands and Brabant. Around 1500, the Christ on the Cold Stone was one of the most common themes, reflecting the spiritual preoccupations of a period that was as tormented as it was fertile.

### The cycles of the Passion

The popularity of Christ on the Cold Stone is to be registered within an unprecedented development of iconographic cycles inspired by the Passion, from Christ's arrest to his resurrection. It is one of the most frequently treated subjects, along with the Ecce Homo, the Pietà and the Entombment. Sometimes confused with the Ecce Homo figure, it yet does not refer to the same episode. It is certainly true that the two subjects are close by way of their iconographic details, the place they occupy in the Passion's narrative, or even by their symbolic and emotional value. Like the Ecce Homo, the Christ on the Cold Stone represents Jesus after the Flagellation, his hands bound and his forehead crowned with thorns; however, he is no longer standing as he was when Pontius Pilate presented him to the crowd. Here he is seated, almost naked, on a cloak that has slipped from his shoulders.

Also known as "Christ with Bonds", the subject is more focused on the emotional intensity of the moment, being more introspective than narrative. It shares this characteristic with *Pietàs*, which depict Mary holding the lifeless body of her son on her lap as he is taken down from the cross. Even more popular, from Germany to the Iberian Peninsula, this group was interpreted in a wide variety of scales and materials, as it is evidenced by the small ivory *Pietà* in the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art (fig. 6).



By staging the psychological pain endured by the main protagonists of the Gospel narrative, these two subjects do also invite the faithful to meditate on Christ's sacrifice, on his sufferings and on those of the human species. Mirroring Jesus himself in the midst of this meditation, the Christ on the Cold Stone is thus one of the most effective and popular subjects of the type of spirituality that was in vogue at the end of the Middle Ages.

Fig. 6 - © Photographic credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier



### Convincing through Emotions

From the very end of the 14th century onwards, under the impulse of the movement that developed in the Netherlands under the name of *devotio moderna*, religious practices "base themselves on a projective, affective and emotional relationship with the sacred<sup>4</sup>". In that period, images became a means towards spiritual edification, offering a direct and personal relationship between the faithful and the divine, in which the intellect gave way to the emotional. If altarpieces allow narratives to unfold in all their magnitude, the sculpture in the round seems to have imposed itself, according to Marion Boudon-Machuel, as "the best support for the affective experience<sup>5</sup>" until the middle of the 16th century. If the narrative power of the statuary is more limited, its capacity to incarnate biblical characters is yet singularly powerful. Its three-dimensional character, its scale and search for veracity, often reinforced by polychromy, do indeed "incite all the more to stop, to enter, by way of the gaze, into a mute dialogue to lose oneself in a meditation that is at first visual, then spiritual.<sup>6</sup>". In his face-to-face encounter with the Christ of Pity, the faithful is thus "directly called as a witness to the sufferings endured by Christ for the salvation of humanity<sup>7</sup>".

<sup>4</sup> J.-M. Guillouët, *L'art du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Rennes, PUR, 2021, p. 232.

<sup>5</sup> M. Boudon-Machuel, "La Passion du Christ", in].-D. Gaborit et al. *Le beau XV<sup>e</sup> : chefs-d'œuvre de la sculpture en Champagne*, exhibition catalogue [Troyes, église Saint-Jean-au-Marché, 18.04 - 25.10.2009], Paris, Hazan, 2009, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> M. Boudon-Machuel, cat. n° 27, "Christ de pitié", in].-D. Gaborit et al. *Le beau XV<sup>e</sup> : chefs-d'œuvre de la sculpture en Champagne*, p. 259.



At the turn of the twentieth century, art historian Émile Mâle thus amply insisted – at times somewhat in a caricatural way – on the attraction of late medieval artists for the pathetic, their selection of dolorous subjects linked to the Passion, and their taste for the physical details of suffering<sup>8</sup>. According to him, these traits were the echo of a religious mentality that had an exalted sensitivity, linked to an era perceived as essentially dark and tragic, marked by wars and epidemics. From Northern Europe to Italy, many 15th century works emphasize, with a certain theatricality, the dramatic intensity of the scenes extracted from the Passion cycles<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup>. In that sense, the Christ on the Cold Stone of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art is to be distinguished for its sobriety.



While it retains some of the dolorous vocabulary – prominent veins, emaciated body, hypertrophied extremities, yet it offers a vision of the episode that is highly nuanced. Bereft of any dramatic gestures, Christ appears singularly silent, almost serene. His face, profoundly gentle and sad, very slightly bent to the dextral side, makes the intensity of the emotion sensitive without drawing on its expressiveness. With its fixed eyes, its barely open mouth, his face contributes in making this Christ of Pity more touching than poignant, at once magnified and profoundly human by way of a perfectly balanced combination of matter-of-fact details and quasi-abstract elements.

Fig. 7 - © Photographic credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.

Photographer: Thierry Ollivier

**Fabienne Fravalo**  
**Curator of the decorative arts collection**  
**April 2023**

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. É. Mâle, "L'Art français de la fin du Moyen Âge. - L'apparition du pathétique", *art. cit.* and *L'Art religieux de la fin du Moyen Âge en France. Étude sur l'iconographie du Moyen Âge et sur ses sources d'inspiration*. Paris, A. Colin, 1902.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Marco Albertario, " 'Une gestuelle imagée'. La lamentation sur le corps du Christ, entre les centres de la plaine du Pô et le duché des Sforza", in Marc Bormand, Beatrice Paolozzo Strozzi, Francesca Tasso (dir.), *Le corps et l'âme. De Donatello à Michel-Ange, sculptures italiennes de la Renaissance*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, musée du Louvre, 22.10.2020-18.01.2021 ; Milan, Castello Sforzesco, 5.3.2021-6.6.2021], Paris / Rome, Louvre éditions/Officina libraria, 2020, p. 201-210.



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## Legends

Fig. 1 - *Christ on the Cold Stone*, circa 1490, Brabant, oak, traces of polychromy, 72 x 44.5 x 26 cm, FGA-AD-BA-0176

Fig. 2 - *Christ on the Cold Stone*, circa 1490, Brabant, oak, traces of polychromy, 72 x 44.5 x 26 cm, FGA-AD-BA-0176

Fig. 3 - Jan I Borman (attr.), *Christ on the Cold Stone*, circa 1450-1500, Leuven or Brussels, polychrome oak, 175 x 85 x 47 cm, Beaune, Hospices civils

Fig. 4 - *Christ on the Cold Stone*, circa 1500-1510, Namur, oak, traces of polychromy, 178 x 88 x 45 cm, Dinant, Bouvignes, Saint-Lambert church

Fig. 5 - *Christ on the Cold Stone*, circa 1490, Brabant, oak, traces of polychromy, 72 x 44.5 x 26 cm, FGA-AD-BA-0176

Fig. 6 - *Pietà*, circa 1450-1500, Meuse (?), ivory, 21 x 16 x 12 cm, FGA-AD-BA-0017

Fig. 7 - *Christ on the Cold Stone*, circa 1490, Brabant, oak, traces of polychromy, 72 x 44.5 x 26 cm, FGA-AD-BA-0176