

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Bartholomäus Spranger (Antwerp 1546 - Prague 1611)

The Sufferings of Christ

oil on copper
29.5 x 22 cm (11⁵/₈ x 8⁵/₈ in)

Bartholomäus Spranger's emotive depiction of Christ, surrounded by the instruments of His torture, unites the Italian Mannerist style of Parmigianino (1503-1540) with the naturalism of his native Netherlands. In the centre of the painting, outlined against a burst of golden light, an angel supports Christ's lifeless body. Towering on either side and framing the pitiful figure, are the cross that was used to crucify Him and the stone Corinthian pillar to which He was tied before being flayed. The jagged nails are still visible sticking into the cross and a whip is held by a classically modelled figure standing by the column. The lance that pierced His side can also be seen, its point resting near the foot of the cross. Spranger creates a unique perspective with the deliberately diagonal slant of the pillar and the crucifix, which exposes and centralises the exaggerated curve of the dead Christ.

In form, the figure of Christ bears a striking resemblance to the elegant and lengthened subjects that dominate Parmigianino's work. The angels detailed here represent a supreme example of Spranger's skill at combining the Flemish and Italian styles. The iridescent wings of the central angel resemble those of birds and are rendered in a typically Flemish naturalistic way. And yet, the wings of the standing angels to the left of the composition are far more reminiscent of early Renaissance Italian painters such as Fra Angelico (c.1395/1400-1455). The little putto hovering above and bearing the sudarium of St. Veronica, has wings that seem almost like peacock's feathers. The cloth which he holds aloft is an

allusion to the cloth which Veronica, a pious woman of Jerusalem, gave to Jesus on His way to Calvary. Moved to pity as she witnessed Him carrying His cross to Golgotha, she gave Him her veil so that He might wipe his forehead. Jesus accepted the offering and when He returned it to her, His face had miraculously imprinted itself onto it. Veronica's sense of wonderment is beautifully depicted in El Greco's (c.1541-1614) *Saint Veronica Holding the Veil* (Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo).

El Greco treated the theme of St. Veronica several times. Despite their different backgrounds and nationalities, El Greco and Spranger are curiously linked by Giulio Clovio (1498-1578), an Italian painter and illuminator of Croatian descent. When Spranger was in Rome during the summer of 1566, Clovio introduced the promising artist to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese who became an important source of patronage. In total, Spranger's travel to Italy spanned a period of ten years, from 1565 to 1575, with most of his time in Italy being spent in Rome. Clovio equally supported El Greco in a similar fashion persuading the Cardinal in the 1570s to provide the young artist with lodgings in his Palazzo so that he could concentrate on his work. El Greco's period in Rome, from 1570 to 1576, coincides with that of Spranger, as such it is quite possible that the two would have met through Clovio during this period, which is also when the present painting is believed to have been executed.

The climactic moment of the Passion story is the crucifixion itself. Paintings of this subject were usually intended to foster meditation on Christ's self sacrifice and this present work is no exception. Its relatively small size suggests that it was a devotional image used for private prayer. Devotional literature from the thirteenth century, such as the *Little Book on the Meditation of the Passion of Christ*, suggests: 'It is necessary that when you concentrate on these things in your contemplation, you do so as if you were actually present at the very time when he suffered. And in grieving you should regard yourself as if you had our Lord suffering before your eyes, and that he was present to receive your prayers.'¹ Other small-scale works executed by Spranger include the *Lamentation*, which now hangs in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

Whilst a great deal of Spranger's later output gave prominence to the playful subject matter popular at the imperial courts of Prague and Vienna, his [*Adoration of the Kings*](#), is alike in its religious subject matter to the present work. It is interesting to note the extensive stylistic differences in the course of the intervening twenty years between the execution of *The Sufferings of Christ* and his *Adoration of the Kings*. The mannerist style that pervades *The Sufferings of Christ* has been replaced here by a distinctly more courtly and artificial atmosphere, showing influences of El Greco in the figures of the Virgin and Child. The composition is carefully arranged so that the two kings in the foreground are mirror images of each other just as their pageboys, too, imitate their balletic stance. There is none of this in Spranger's more serious depiction of Christ's suffering in all its intensity. Similarities can be identified in the richly vivid colours of the cloaks adorning the three kings and those worn by the two angels in the left hand corner of *The Sufferings of Christ*.

Spranger is renowned for his unique ability to fuse his native Netherlandish tradition with the Italian Mannerist influences of his extensive European travels. Along with his fellow countrymen, Hans von Aachen (1552-1615) and Joseph Heinz I (1564-1609), Spranger was one of the most important artists at the court of Rudolf II in Prague. Early in his career he travelled to Italy, studying fresco painting in Milan and then, in the spring of 1566, he worked in Parma as an assistant to Bernadino Gatti (c.1495-1576) where he painted the dome of S. Maria della Steccata. Whilst in Italy, the works, particularly, of Correggio (?1489-1534), and Parmigianino, made a deep impression on him.

Indeed, he had taught himself some of their artistic methods by copying engravings after Frans Floris (1519/20-1570) and Parmigianino. Following his time spent in Milan and Parma, Spranger journeyed to Rome. It was here that Clovio introduced him to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese for whom he worked and where he also became an assistant to Federico Zuccaro (1540/2-1609) in the Villa Farnese in Capraola where he produced landscape frescoes. Distinguished patronage followed when he was taken into the service of Pope Pius V, for whom he worked for two years, in 1570. In 1575, the celebrated sculptor and Spranger's compatriot, Giambologna (1529-1608), was instrumental in introducing him to the Emperor Maximilian II's court in Vienna.

Spranger's *The Resurrection with Portraits of Nicholas Müller and his Family* - which was painted for

Maximilian - is clearly influenced by Roman Mannerism in its almost pastel colours. Some features have been borrowed from Michelangelo (1475-1564) and there is the characteristic rear view of a figure derived from similar representations by Zuccaro. After Maximilian's death in 1576, Spranger painted for his successor, Rudolf II and moved with the imperial court to Prague. Less than a decade later, in 1584, the artist was awarded the title 'painter by royal appointment' to the Hapsburg monarch.

Rudolf was one of the great collectors of curiosities and rarities in the arts. He patronised predominantly secular, refined and often erotic art, favouring representations of the female nude or as it has been called, 'silken titillation couched in mythological or allegorical guise.'² Thus Spranger's early work for Rudolf has bright colouring and a Mannerist feeling for form. He painted mythologies and learned allegories including *An Allegory of Rome* and *Mercury Leading Psyche into Olympus*. His works, especially renditions of his female nudes, owe much to the elegant figure drawing of Correggio and Parmigianino. One of his most famous works for Rudolf II was the *Triumph of Wisdom* (c.1591, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). Despite this Spranger continually produced works on religious themes including *The Three Marys at the Tomb* (1598, Vienna) and a series of saints and biblical scenes.

It is very difficult to appreciate fully Spranger's great achievements as a painter without taking into account his abilities as a sculptor. Throughout his career, Spranger was engaged with sculpture. The complicated embraces of his couples and the extreme contrapposto of many of his painted figures would be unthinkable without the example of contemporary sculpture, including works by his friend, Giambologna. It is thought that Spranger acquired his first practical knowledge of sculpture when working with Hans Mont (c.1545-after 1582).

Whilst in Rome, Spranger had made the acquaintance of his countryman, Karel van Mander (1548-1606). In 1577, Spranger invited van Mander to Vienna to assist him with some of his works. In recognition of his help, Spranger gave him a number of his drawings which van Mander in turn took back to Haarlem. He showed them to his new friend and associate Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617) over whom they exerted a profound influence. It could be said that this exchange formed the basis of Haarlem Mannerism. Through the many reproductive prints after his work Spranger also influenced Matthäus Gundelach (c.1566-1654) in Bavaria.

Thomas Da Costa Kauffman, the author of *The School of Prague, Painting at the Court of Rudolf II*, recognises this present painting as an original in agreement with M. Foucart, curator at the Louvre who says 'que le tableau serait par le main de Spranger, je crois que l'artiste l'aurait fait pendant les années 1570 avant son arrive à Vienne ou à Prague' ['The painting is by the hand of Spranger, I believe that the artist would have painted it during the years 1570 before his arrival in either Vienna or Prague'].

¹ Sturgis, A., *Understanding Paintings: Themes in Art Explored and Explained*, p. 48.

² Langmuir, E., *The National Gallery Companion Guide*, pp. 154-155.

Literature:

Sally Metzler, *Bartholomeus Spranger: Splendor and Eroticism in Imperial Prague* (Yale University Press, 2014), cat. no. 8, pp.77-78 (illustrated).

Artist description:

Bartholomäus (Bartholomaeus) Spranger was a Flemish Mannerist painter, draughtsman, and etcher. He was born in Antwerp and active in Italy, Austria, and Bohemia. With Hans von Aachen and Josef Heinz he was one of the most important artists at the Prague court of Emperor Rudolf II. In 1565 Spranger travelled to Italy, staying for some months in Milan and Parma, before going to Rome. There he entered the service of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, for whom he also worked at Caprarola, and later of Pope Pius V. On the recommendation of his compatriot the sculptor Giambologna, he took an appointment at the court of the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian II in Vienna (1575). After Maximilian's death in 1576, Spranger was taken into the employ of his successor Rudolf II, and moved with the

imperial court to Prague. He painted mythologies and learned allegories, often featuring female nudes, in a refined and mannered style that owed much to the elegant mode of figure drawing of Correggio and Parmigianino (*Triumph of Wisdom*, c.1591; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum). While in Rome, Spranger had made the acquaintance of Karel van Mander, and it was through van Mander that his style was introduced to Goltzius and thus formed the basis of Haarlem Mannerism.

Collections

Spranger is represented in the following collections: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Koninklijk Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; The Louvre, Paris; Musée des Beaux Arts et d'Archéologie de Besançon, France; National Gallery, London; Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan; State Museums of Florence; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, amongst others.