

Studio of Quinten Metsys (1466-1530)

CHRIST BLESSING, c.1520-29

Oil on wood 72.9 x 50.2 cm

Presented to St Peter's Church, Heswall, by Thomas Brocklebank in 1893.

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Subject and Symbolism

The head of Christ – full-face, long-haired and bearded – follows the form well-known throughout medieval Europe. Images of the Holy Face were everywhere, many of them claiming to be copies or versions of a miraculous ‘true likeness’ housed in St Peter’s in Rome. This was the ‘Veronica’, also known as the ‘vernicle’ or the ‘sudarium’. According to the most familiar version of the story, this was a cloth offered to Christ by St Veronica on the road to Calvary so that he could wipe his face. On receiving it back she discovered Christ’s features miraculously imprinted upon it. The Veronica became the most reproduced image in Christendom. The head of Christ also accords with the so-called Lentulus Letter, said to have been sent by Publius Lentulus, Governor of Judea, to Octavius Caesar. This apparently eye-witness description of the appearance of Jesus recorded:

His hair is the colour of an unripe hazelnut, and is smooth almost down to his ears, but from thence downward, is somewhat curled, darker and shinier, waving about his shoulders; with a parting in the middle of his head in the manner of the Nazarenes. His forehead is very plain and smooth. His face without either wrinkle or spot, beautiful with a comely red; his nose and mouth so formed that nothing can be reprehended. His beard is full, of the same colour of his hair, not long, and forked in form; simple and mature in aspect; his eyes, blue-grey, clear and quick.

The figure of Christ, a little over half-length, is shown making the sign of benediction with his right hand, while his left hand extends above a globe surmounted by a cross – an image called in Latin ‘Salvator Mundi’ (the Saviour of the World). Christ’s cloak and tunic are red, the colour of the blood which he shed to redeem the world. The border of the cloak is embroidered with gold thread and pearls. The cloak is clasped with a magnificent trefoil morse of gold set with pearls. The upper roundel depicts God the Father, enthroned between kneeling angels, his right hand raised in blessing like his Son. The lower left roundel depicts God creating Eve from the side of the sleeping Adam. The lower right roundel shows Eve receiving from the serpent the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, with Adam looking on. Thus is depicted the Fall of Man from which Christ, the second Adam, redeemed the world.

Christ’s left hand extends above a huge crystal globe, surmounted by an elaborate gold cross on a long shaft, set with pearls and secured to the globe

with bands of gold. Although the morse and cross are Gothic in spirit, the ornament is Renaissance in detail, seen most clearly in the grotesque masks and writhing dolphins towards the foot of the cross. The globe floats unsupported beneath Christ's hand, symbolising the cosmos over which he rules. The sphere, as all-comprising, represents omnipotence and, as a body without beginning or end, symbolises eternity. The crystal recalls the heavenly Jerusalem, described in Revelation 21:11 as "clear as crystal". The cross above the globe stands for salvation.

Seen within the globe is a nocturnal landscape with a city beside the sea, lying beneath a sickle moon and faintly illuminated by the first rays of the rising sun. Light is a symbol of salvation, since Christ described himself as "the bright star of dawn" in Revelation 22:16. The landscape also represents the four elements – the land for earth and the comet-like star (towards the centre) for air, the bonfire (at the left) for fire and the sea for water. Reflected in the globe at the upper left is a cross within a mandorla of light – the mystical window. As a source of light and as holding a cross, the window cross is a double reference to redemption. It recalls the words of Christ, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), together with the cross which is the symbol of Christ's sacrificial death.

Function

The 'Salvator Mundi' was an image especially favoured in Northern Renaissance art. Metsys produced devotional images that were intended to serve the private pious needs of the worshipper. Because of their private religious purpose, they were frequently painted on a small scale and were meant to be seen close up. As Larry Silver has explained: "the importance of the personal address of the image to the pious beholder creates a predilection for choosing images whose efficacy or conferred grace have already been established by tradition." When the devotional painting contains a particular image bestowing grace, the essential ingredients of the prototype are retained in all of its replicas. The link between the conferral of grace and a pictorial conservatism was reinforced by the linking of religious indulgences to specific formulaic prayers before prescribed images. That relating to *Christ Blessing* began in 1216, when Pope Innocent III established an indulgence for a prayer composed by himself and directed towards the image of the Holy Face. Such indulgences were a popular feature of late medieval piety.

Quinten Metsys

Maker of altarpieces for local guilds and confraternities, exporter of altarpieces to princes and merchants in Portugal and Germany, portraitist of kings and scholars, and an important painter of secular subjects, Metsys produced examples of every kind of picture known to the Netherlands of his day.

Quinten (or Quentin) Metsys (or Massys) was the leading painter in early 16th-century Antwerp. He was born in Leuven (Louvain) in 1466, the son of Joost Massys, a prominent blacksmith. His training is not recorded, but the leading artists' workshop in Leuven in the 1480s was that of Dieric and Albrecht Bouts, while Hans Memling's studio in Bruges provides another possible source for his style. Metsys was recorded in Leuven in 1491, but the same year was admitted as a master painter in the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp, the rapidly expanding commercial capital of the Duchy of Brabant. His sons Jan Massys (c.1509-1575) and Cornelis Massys (c.1510-1556/7) became masters in the Guild shortly after their father's death of the plague at Kiel near Antwerp in 1530.

No signed or dated works from Metsys's pre-Antwerp period have survived. Early works show the influence of Dieric Bouts and, even more, of Hans Memling, whom Metsys also followed in his occasional use of Renaissance ornament. His first major public commission was the large St Anne altarpiece (Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels), for the Collegiate Church of St Peter in Leuven, inscribed QUINTE. METSYS SCREEF DIT 1509 ('Quinten Metsys painted this 1509'). His masterwork is the enormous St John altarpiece (1508-11; Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp), painted for the Collegiate Church of Our Lady in Antwerp (now the Cathedral) and relating to the work of Rogier van der Weyden. Metsys's deliberate celebration of native South Netherlandish tradition is also evident in other works, both sacred and secular, echoing variously Hugo van der Goes, the Master of Flémalle, Jan van Eyck and Petrus Christus. Metsys's later pictures, in particular portraits and depictions of the Virgin and Child, are clearly influenced by Italian Renaissance painting, a knowledge of which was possible in the cosmopolitan trading centre of Antwerp without having to travel to Italy. He experimented with Italianate lighting and ornament, and in some of his paintings the sense of atmosphere, very similar in effect to Leonardo da Vinci's 'sfumato', softens and modifies form and colours. His expressive figures are characterised by a sense of an outward and inner

harmony, revealing emotions without resorting to sentimentality. His dual interests in modern Italian and old Flemish style, like those of many of his contemporaries, reflect the taste of the Governor of the Netherlands, Margaret of Austria, whose court was in Mechelen (Malines) from 1507-30.

Quinten Metsys also had British connections. In 1491 he produced a portrait medal of William Schevez, Archbishop of St Andrews. In 1517 he painted a diptych as a gift from Erasmus to Sir Thomas More, representing Erasmus of Rotterdam (Royal Collection) and Pieter Gillis (Longford Castle, Wiltshire). Quinten Metsys also painted a portrait of John Barrow, signed and dated 1521 (now lost, but described by George Vertue in the 18th century). His grandson, Quentin Massys the Younger (?1543-1589), lived in London c.1581-88 and painted Queen Elizabeth I ('The Sieve Portrait') in 1583 (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena).

Attribution

Xanthe Brooke of the Walker Art Gallery and Professor Larry Silver believe the Chester *Christ Blessing* to have been painted by an artist working in the studio of Quinten Metsys. The original painting by Metsys, from which it is derived, is in the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp. There are numerous copies and studio variants that derive from this composition.

The numerous versions of Metsys's *Christ Blessing* were clearly much in demand. In addition to commissions, pictures were produced for sale on the open market: from painters' studios, at the great annual fairs held in Antwerp and elsewhere, or through dealers. Like most successful painters, Metsys worked with assistants. A vital part of the equipment of any studio was the collection of reference material – probably mainly in the form of drawings, but perhaps including paintings or coloured drawings. This would have been constantly consulted by the master and his assistants, and might also have been shown to clients. The use of assistants and reference material, together with the wishes of clients, led to variations between different versions of a popular image.

The morse in the Chester painting is unique in its scale, form and iconography. The decoration of the morse and cross vary between Gothic and Renaissance in the different versions, and the view within the globe also differs. The mystical window appears in several versions, but the globe in the Chester painting is the largest and the view of the moonlit city within it

the most detailed and extensive. Also unique to the Chester version is Christ's left knee: the artist presumably felt that the enormous globe needed some visible support, although it actually floats between Christ's knee and hand.

In addition to the essential features of this composition, other elements point to the origin of the Chester *Christ Blessing* in the studio of Quinten Metsys. The long, tapering fingers are characteristic of the artist. Elaborate metalwork appears in other paintings by Metsys throughout his career, as well as in the versions of *Christ Blessing* and the Virgin's crown in the *Madonna at Prayer*, which is the pendant to the Antwerp painting. Elaborate metalwork with Renaissance elements appears in the *Dance of Salome*, the left wing of the St John altarpiece (1508-11; Antwerp). The *Adoration of the Magi* (1526; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) contains elaborate gold objects which, like those in the Chester painting, are Gothic in spirit but Renaissance in detail, the spiral shaft of the sceptre being noticeably close to the Chester cross. The city in the Chester globe also echoes other paintings by Metsys. A far more detailed city in a rocky landscape appears in the *Annunciation to Joachim*, the left wing of the St Anne altarpiece (1507-09; Brussels). The central tower in the Chester globe, bisected by the horizon, bears some resemblance to the tower in the background of the *Offering of Joachim and Anne in the Temple*, the exterior of the left wing of the St Anne altarpiece, and to the tower seen through the window in the *Rattier Madonna* (1529; Musée du Louvre, Paris).

Metsys's *Christ Blessing* in Antwerp is a modernisation and refinement of the crowning figure of Christ in Hubert and Jan van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece (c.1423-32; St Bavo, Ghent), the supreme masterpiece of early Netherlandish art.

Date

The original painting by Metsys in Antwerp is placed with the early works of c.1491-1507 in Larry Silver's *Catalogue Raisonné*, but the studio presumably continued to produce versions for many years until Metsys painted a completely different *Christ Blessing* in 1529 (Museo del Prado, Madrid). Although Quinten Metsys's studio may have been taken over after his death in 1530 by his son Jan Massys, the Chester painting bears no stylistic relationship to the latter's work. Marian Campbell and Timothy Schroder both feel that the goldsmiths' work in the Chester painting is

“absolutely the height of Antwerp fashion in the 1520s”: a dating of c.1520-29 therefore seems most likely.