

Individual Project 2

ART205 – 09

(Written and researched by Vaughn Davis)

1. Rogier van der Weyden – “*The Descent from the Cross*” also “*Deposition*”
c. 1435 Oil on oak panel, 220 x 262 cm
<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/art/w/weyden/rogier/01deposi/1deposit.jpg>

Rogier van der Weyden's “*The Descent from the Cross*” was an altarpiece as well, intended for the chapel of the Confraternity of the Archers of Leuven, who commissioned it. In this painting there are ten figures in all that cover almost the entire surface of the panel. Christ's lifeless body has been removed from the cross by the bearded Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus. On the left Mary has fainted beside her son, and is supported by Christ's favorite disciple, St. John the Evangelist and another woman. On the extreme right, St. Mary Magdalene is on the verge of fainting while resting on the shoulder of an elderly man in the rear. The other figures in the painting look on sorrowfully at their Savior, holding His body for a moment before setting it down.

Rogier's primary concern in this painting was to emphasize the forcefulness of the depiction. He deliberately breaks away from the realistic spatial depiction that had only recently been achieved in painting. The niche he paints is deep enough at the bottom of the picture to accommodate several figures. Yet, the figure's heads are painted very close to the Cross and nearly touching the top of the panel. The painted niche offered Rogier another advantage: he could retain the gold background, which was common in medieval paintings without offending against the demands of naturalistic depiction. All the figures are brought forward by the golden back wall so that the space surrounds them closely: convincing as their actions may look individually, there would never really have been room for them all. The result is a sense of timelessness and an almost oppressive intensity.

2. Matthias Grunewald – “*The Crucifixion*”
c. 1515 Oil on wood, 269 x 307 cm
<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/art/g/grunewald/2isenhei/1view/1view1c.jpg>

Matthias Grunewald's painting of “*The Crucifixion*” is displayed on the first panel of the first view of the Insenheim Altarpiece. This painting depicts the terrifying crucifixion of Christ. Christ's battered dying body is greatly distorted by his outstretched limbs over the Cross. The darkened red blood forms a brilliant contrast to the pale diseased green of His flesh. The torment and torture is seen through the anguished look on Christ's face as well as the arrangement of His hands and feet where the stakes were driven through. On the left of Christ is Mary who dressed in the garments of a widow, fainting in the arms of St. John the Evangelist. Below the two is a smaller figure of St. Mary Magdalene with her vessel of ointment, kneeling down and looking up to Christ while wringing her hands in sorrow. On the right of the Cross, stands St. John the Baptist with the ancient symbol of the lamb carrying the cross and pouring out its blood into the chalice of the Holy Communion. St. John stands there with his finger pointed towards Christ, and over him are written words that he speaks (according to the gospel of St. John): ‘He must increase, but I must decrease.’

In painting “*The Crucifixion*” it is clear that Grunewald rejected the rules of modern art that had developed since the Renaissance, and purposely returned to the principles of medieval and primitive painters, who varied the size of their figures according to their importance in the picture. This distinction can be seen when you compare the hands of St. Mary Magdalene directly under the Cross to those of Christ to become fully aware of this amazing difference in the figures dimensions. It is obvious that Grunewald intended for the viewer to notice the Savior more than any other figure due to the fact that He is larger in size and particularly more detailed. Just as Grunewald gave up the sight of beauty for the sake of the spiritual lesson, he also disregarded the new demand for correct proportions, since this helped him to express the spiritual truth of the words of St. Johns.

3. Hans Holbein the Younger – “*Erasmus of Rotterdam*”
c. 1523 Oil on wood, 43 x 33 cm

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http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/art/h/holbein/hans_y/1525/07erasmu.jpg

Hans Holbein's "*Erasmus of Rotterdam*" shows Erasmus writing the first lines of his "Comments on the Gospel of Luke". The lines are not legible in the painting listed above but it is legible on a smaller version of the portrait in the museum of Basle. Holbein illustrates Erasmus as a writer, actively pursuing his vocation. Erasmus' head is in an upward position with his gaze lowered and focused entirely on the text he is writing. One hand is writing the comments as the other, decorated with rings, rests motionless holding the page still. Though his entire chamber is not visible, Holbein demonstrates his mastery of his vocation with the tapestry that has a pattern of plants and beasts and the wooden paneling in the background.

Holbein's portrait of Erasmus not only demonstrates his technical mastery but also a comprehension and presentation of the significant features of the subject's personality and activity. Unlike other portraits of Erasmus, Holbein intended for this particular piece to be more intimate. It is painted as if he was close and looking over the writers shoulder. In fact Erasmus who befriended Holbein often asked him to illustrate his books.

References:

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