

MEDIEVAL STATUES OF THE PIETÀ IN THE MUSEUM

By WILLIAM H. FORSYTH

Associate Curator of Medieval Art

No subject was more congenial to late medieval piety than the sorrowful figure of Mary mourning over her dead son. This subject is usually called by its Italian name of Pietà, perhaps because Italian Pietàs, though not the earliest, are the best known—for instance, the famous Pietà by Michelangelo in St. Peter's, the painting by Perugino in the Accademia, Florence, or the sculptural group in the collections of the Museum attributed to Giovanni della Robbia or his school. *Vesperbild*, a German name for the Pietà, suggests the time of vespers, when the event was pictured to have taken place.

The Pietà was often represented in sculpture and paintings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It seems to have had its origin in the contemplations of the mystics, as Wilhelm Pinder was the first to show. Saint Bridget of Sweden, Saint Bernardino of Siena, Henry Suso of south Germany, and John Tauler of Strasbourg, to name only a few of them, directed their meditation so intensely upon certain scenes of Christ's Passion and even upon certain moments of a particular scene that they imagined themselves actually present and sharing in the suffering of their Lord. Saint Francis felt Christ's suffering so keenly that he was portrayed with the stigmata on his hands, his feet, and his side.

The mystics also brooded over the suffering of Mary, sometimes called her Compassion (*compassio*), which paralleled the Passion (*passio*) of her son. In considering the deposition of the body of Christ from the Cross and his entombment, they saw in their mind's eye a moment when Mary in her grief took the body upon her lap. They imagined that Mary lost all present sense of time and place as she brooded over her dead son. Thus the medieval Pietà was primarily thought of as an isolated

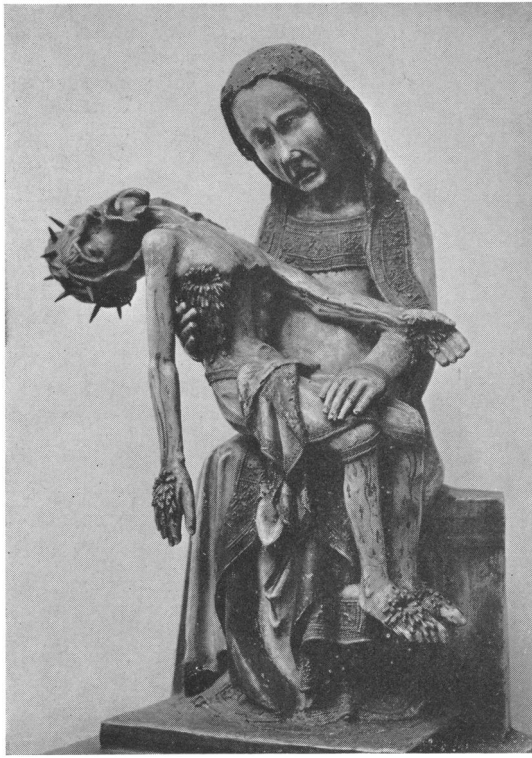
theme, set apart from the other historical scenes of the Passion. It was an image of devotion, like the Crucifix.

And like other devotional images of late medieval art, such as the Man of Sorrows, John leaning on Christ's shoulder, the Virgin of Mercy, and Our Lady of Sorrows, the Pietà became popular because of a growing demand for a more direct and personal approach to the divine nature. This demand was accelerated by the religious revival after the Black Death, the terrible plague which in 1348 carried off a large part of the population of Europe.

The mystics' vision of the Pietà was apparently first translated into a devotional image in Germany, the earliest example recorded being in 1298. German Pietàs are not only the earliest known but they also show the greatest variety. Their chronological development and their variations have been zealously studied and meticulously divided into types by German scholars.

There are many ways of representing the Pietà, and these are interesting to trace because they show essential differences as well as resemblances between various national and regional schools of sculpture. Such relationships can often be more clearly seen and sharply felt in comparing Pietàs than in making the more usual comparisons between miscellaneous sculptures of different subjects.

The earliest German Pietàs have the sharp powerful thrust of the mystical thought which engendered them. They are a direct translation into sculpture of the mystics' clear vision of Christ's martyrdom and his mother's sorrow. The worshipers' feelings are not spared but are lacerated, as was Christ's body, inducing a state of repentance in the beholder. These early Pietàs show the grim details of suf-



German Pietà of the earliest "stepped" type. XIV century. Painted wood. Provincial Museum, Bonn. Courtesy Paul Bijtebier, Brussels

fering as Saint Bonaventura, Saint Bridget, and Suso imagined them, including the dried open mouth, the protruding ribs, the sunken stomach, the many bloody wounds. Some have the same appalling realism as is later seen in Spanish figures of the Passion, and still later in the stark and primitive *Santos* made in New Spain.

The original austerities have already been somewhat softened in the Museum's earliest Pietà, at The Cloisters, from the southern part of Germany or the Rhineland, but Mary still shows the stiff awkwardness of intense grief; and Christ's body, rigid in death, still bears the marks of his Passion. The small size of his body throws the emphasis upon the suffering mother. It may also refer to the mystics' idea that Mary in her grief imagined that she again held her baby son on her lap. Suso expressed this thought in his *Little Book of Holy Wisdom*: "I took my tender child (*mein*

zartes Kind) upon my lap and gazed upon him, but he was dead," and the writer called Pseudo-Bonaventura imagines Mary holding Christ as in the time of his tender youth. Saint Bernardino says that while the Virgin held her son she imagined the days of Bethlehem to have returned, and others echo this pious idea. Psychologically it is interesting to note that statues of the Pietà are said to have first been popular in German nunneries and to recall that the Holy Women were among the most ardent mourners at Christ's death.

In another German Pietà in the Museum, possibly from a middle-Rhenish school of the fifteenth century, Mary leans toward her son and gazes intently at his face. Saint Bridget remarks that she looks at his eyes full of blood, while Ludolphe le Chartreux says she looks at the thorns driven into his head. The body of Christ, held horizontally, or almost horizontally, on his mother's lap, has here assumed a position often found not only in German but also in French Pietàs. There are a number of variations of this position.

Although French Pietàs are largely derived from the German, the transformations they undergo eventually free them from the stiff-

BELOW: *German Pietà of the horizontal type. XV century. Alabaster (legs and shoulder of Christ restored). At the Main Building*





South German or Rhenish Pietà, a variation of the stepped type, 1375-1400. Painted wood. A reliquary was once attached to the statue. The Cloisters. Rogers Fund, 1948

ness and intense feeling so characteristic of their German prototypes. It has been supposed that French Pietàs were derived directly from the fifteenth-century mystery plays of the Passion, but such a derivation ignores the existence of the German Pietàs, many of them datable in the fourteenth century, a hundred years or more before the subject became popu-



French Pietà of a diagonal type, related to a Rhenish-Westphalian group. Early xv century. Painted wood. At The Cloisters

lar in France, in the latter part of the fifteenth century.

A Pietà at The Cloisters, from the early fifteenth century, before the subject became well known in France, can be compared to several attributed to the Rhineland and Westphalia. It keeps the deep concave folds found in Rhenish sculpture as well as the small body of Christ, shrunken and rigid in death and held in a stiff and painful diagonal position, but there is a new note of grace in the more relaxed posture of the Virgin. There is also a more tender relationship between mother

and son, the mother no longer oppressed by the fierceness of her grief. She pulls her cloak around him in a protective gesture that makes one think of images of the Virgin of Mercy, in which Mary is shown sheltering her followers with her cloak. The gesture also recalls Saint Bernardino's remark that Mary imagined that the shroud in which she enveloped Christ was his swaddling clothes. The group was said to have been acquired in the region of Fontainebleau, but it may have come originally from eastern France, where early French Pietàs related to the earlier German types are to be found. More relationships can apparently be traced in these eastern French examples than in others further removed from the German frontier. The most striking overall difference between French and German examples is the greater sense of amplitude and relaxation of the French, a greater concern with creating a pleasing balanced composition, whereas the German ones, closer to the original mystical thought, tend to keep a greater intensity in the figures.

What probably gave most French Pietàs their sense of monumentality and volume was the advent of the great Claus Sluter, sculptor to the Dukes of Burgundy. The Burgundian Pietà in the Municipal Gallery, Frankfort, is very close to Sluter's style and is probably inspired by his lost Pietà, which he carved in 1390 for the chapel of the Carthusian abbey of Champmol, near Dijon. Although it derives from the German type just described, the interpretation is so new and original as to constitute almost a new type. The body of Christ lies limp and relaxed across the lap of the Virgin, turned slightly outward in an almost unbroken curve. The group has none of the angularity characteristic of German Pietàs. The large soft folds of the Virgin's cloak around her legs and over her body clothe her with majesty befitting so august a mourner.

Sluter's Pietà may well have established the horizontal type most commonly found in France, if one allows for its several variations. In Burgundian art one can clearly trace its influence for over a century, not only by the style but also by Mary's posture and the

body of Christ. A small-sized group in the Museum from Dijon illustrates Sluter's type by the general position of Christ's body and the position of Mary's legs.

The heavy Burgundian style of drapery was somewhat modified as the style penetrated other parts of France in the fifteenth century. The sense of quietness, already present, increased. In a number of Pietàs of the Loire valley and central and southern France, many of them showing Burgundian influence, the Virgin calmly folds her hands in an attitude of

ON THIS PAGE: *French Pietàs of the horizontal type of Claus Sluter's lost group.* RIGHT: *Burgundian, beginning of the xv century. Limestone. The Liebighaus, Frankfort on the Main. Courtesy of the Städtisches Gallerie*



ABOVE: *xv century painting from Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. In the Louvre, Paris.* RIGHT: *Burgundian limestone group from Dijon. Early xvi century. At the Main Building*

prayerful resignation to the sacrifice of her son. The most famous example of this praying Pietà is a painting from Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, now in the Louvre. The Avignon Pietà and related paintings are closely connected in pose and posture to sculptural Pietàs in southern France, although the style of the paintings is quite different from the rounded relaxed forms and the softer draperies of the sculptures. It cannot be categorically stated that sculptured Pietàs were earlier than painted ones when one recalls, for instance, the group

of French primitives and manuscript illuminations of the later fourteenth century. However, it has been rightly said that the severe isolation of the early Pietàs suggests a sculptural tradition. Certainly a number of Pietàs in fifteenth-century German woodcuts seem inspired by sculpture, but such resemblances are not in themselves conclusive, given the interrelationship between the arts at this time.

In a variation of the praying Pietà but closely allied to it, the Virgin crosses her arms over her breast with the spirit of resignation and humility typical of this group. This is the





French group of the Sluter type, with figures of Armand and Pons de Gontaut. About 1500. Limestone. From the château of Biron. Main Building. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916

gesture, by the way, which she sometimes makes when the archangel Gabriel announces to her that she is to be the mother of Christ and again when she stands with Saint John, first at the foot of the Cross and then at the entombment of Christ. A life-sized group from the château of Biron in southern France is the finest medieval Pietà in the Museum and a splendid example of this variation. In two Pietàs from Le Mans and Laval, just north of the Loire, the Virgin has the same crossed arms. The style of the Biron Pietà allies it with the school of the Loire, which was dominated by the work of Michel Colombe, who occupied much the same position in Touraine and the lower Loire valley as Sluter did in Burgundy. The Biron Pietà probably represents a southern extension of the Loire school, paralleling the influences of the Burgundian and Flemish schools in southwestern France. Burgundian influence can be noticed in the heavy cowl-like hood of drapery that encloses Mary's head and envelops her body, as it does in so many other Pietàs of southern France.

In the Biron Pietà, the donor's brother, Armand de Gontaut, supports the head of

Christ. Sometimes, as in the Avignon Pietà, Saint John the Evangelist takes this position, with the Magdalene at the feet of Christ. In the Biron Pietà Pons de Gontaut kneels at Christ's feet. Although Pons was the donor of the chapel at Biron and probably also of this Pietà, which was formerly placed above the main altar of the chapel, he allowed his brother Armand, Bishop of Sarlat, the place of honor at the head of Christ, probably in deference to his ecclesiastical rank. Pons de Gontaut, seigneur of Biron, was the grandfather of the shrewd and pugnacious Maréchal de Biron who first served and later betrayed his king, Henry IV. Pons, who was maître d'hôtel to Charles VIII, accompanied Charles on his expedition to Italy; and there in 1495 he obtained from the Borgia Pope, Alexander VI, permission to build a chapel in his château. The chapel at Biron was completed by 1501, and the Pietà can therefore be dated about 1500. The stylistic connection with Michel Colombe's work is confirmation of the date. Pons seems to have had a special devotion to the Pietà, since his chapel was dedicated to "Notre Dame de Pytié," and his tomb effigy in

the chapel represents him wearing a chest ornament decorated with the beloved image of a Pietà. Émile Mâle has noted that a great number of the Pietàs which were carved in France in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries—the time of their greatest popularity—were probably ordered by confraternities for similar altars dedicated to Our Lady of Pity.

The mood of the Biron Pietà is one of quiet solemnity suitable for the religious ceremonies of a seignorial chapel. The lord of the manor and his episcopal brother are represented much as if they were attending mass in their own chapel. The modern imagination cannot help speculating on the psychological effect which such a representation may have had upon these two worthies as they actually knelt in front of their own kneeling statues. But modern man too often worships his own works to dwell on this point with more than a sympathetic and embarrassing recognition of himself in medieval guise. Suffice it to say that the Pietà has here lost a primitive religious force which was perhaps as uncongenial to the seigneur of Biron as it is to many people today. But the quietness it suggests is as moving as the earlier image of grief.

The last medieval Pietà belonging to the Museum to be considered here is a relief in which Mary no longer supports the full weight of the body but allows it to rest on the ground against her knee. The faint outline of a cross painted behind Mary suggests the relation of the scene to the Deposition from the Cross. The positions of John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalene are much the same as they are usually represented in the next episode of the Passion, the Entombment, or Burial. As in the burial scene, the Magdalene carries her ointment jar half-opened as if about to anoint Christ's body. The Virgin's clasped hands suggest the dramatic mood of the Lamentation scene, dear to Italian painters, who developed it from their Byzantine inheritance. This group may still be called a Pietà rather than a Lamentation because Mary is still the dominating figure. How-



French relief, late diagonal type, related to Deposition and Lamentation scenes. Early XVI century. Painted wood. Main Building

ever, she has begun to yield first place to the body of Christ and to become part of the group of mourners, as she is in the Lamentation. The emphasis upon the muscular beauty and suppleness of Christ's body, quite different from the stiff torsos of earlier examples, also suggests the growing influence of the Italian Renaissance upon French art.

While many, perhaps the majority, of French medieval Pietàs represented Mary holding the body of Christ without accompanying figures, as in the early German groups, the introduction of other figures had begun as early as Claus Sluter's Pietà with two angels. Sometimes French Pietàs are accompanied by two such kneeling angels, sometimes by other holy figures, as we have seen. Donors when first introduced are very small in scale and only gradually become as large as in the Biron and Avignon Pietàs. Even more readily than sculpture in the round, painting and sculpture in relief can enlarge the scene by adding related figures, as well as landscape, background accessories, and a sense of atmosphere. Flemish and Rhenish relief sculptures as well as paintings often represented a Pietà in which Christ was shown

partly on the ground, since such a composition of itself invited the use of additional elements and accessories more readily than the more compact and self-contained composition where the Virgin held her son's body upon her lap. Another reason for this composition has already been suggested, namely the merging of the Pietà theme with that of the Deposition and the Lamentation. In such scenes as these the old isolation of the Pietà group in time and space was gone. Even before the new elaboration of the group, the sharp poignancy of the early German Pietàs had gradually been replaced in France by a serene composure and a gentle pathos characteristic of late Gothic sculpture at its full maturity.

From its beginnings in the cell of the mys-

tic, the Pietà grew into a popular image of devotion, a divine *memento mori* which gave dignity and meaning to human suffering by linking it to the suffering of Christ and his mother. Through this fellowship of suffering the faithful hoped to share in the triumph of the Resurrection.

The bibliography of the Pietà is too extensive to be quoted. Besides Pinder, the work of Panofsky, Passarge, F. C. Schneider, and G. Swarzenski is essential. James B. Ford and G. Stephen Vickers discuss the iconography of the Pietà in France in the Art Bulletin, vol. XXI (March 1939), no. 1, pp. 5-43. Except for Mâle, little else has appeared on French Pietàs. See also Körte and Francovich, Jahrbuch of the Bibliotheca Herziana, 1937, 1938.