Cornelis van Poelenburch
Dutch, 1594/1595 - 1667

Christ Carrying the Cross

early 1620s

oil on copper
overall: 44.2 x 62.3 cm (17 3/8 x 24 1/2 in.)
The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund 2007.49.1

ENTRY

Cornelis van Poelenburch, one of the most famous Dutch painters of his time, had a remarkable ability to convey atmospheric effects evocative of a distant past, whether in the Holy Land or the Italian countryside near Rome.[1] In these works, a silvery light, softened and diffused by clouds that spread across blue skies, quietly floods the gently rolling countryside, giving it an aura of age and venerability. With carefully selected pictorial elements such as ancient ruins, Poelenburch provided a visual and historical framework for the small-scale mythological and biblical figures that populate his landscapes.

Christ Carrying the Cross, which Poelenburch probably executed soon after his arrival in Rome, is a rare example of the artist's expressive biblical scenes from the very beginning of his career. It portrays that poignant moment when Christ, wearing a purple robe and a crown of thorns, and struggling under the weight of the cross as he is being dragged forward by a muscular and foreboding executioner, looks back at the kneeling Veronica.[2] Veronica holds out a linen cloth, the *sudarium*, on which Christ's true image, or *vera icon*, was miraculously imprinted when she wiped the sweat from his brow.[3]

The large band of figures massed near these protagonists includes not only Christ's tormentors but also, more important, friends and family who were with him as he began his slow and sorrowful march to Golgotha, the distant hill where the Crucifixion would take place. Among these are Simon of Cyrene, the rough-hewn man with a red cloak over his shoulders, whom the Roman soldiers forced to carry the cross after Christ stumbled under its weight (Luke 23:26); the Virgin Mary, distinguishable by her white cowl and blue robe, quietly communing with Mary

Magdalene; and behind them John the Evangelist, who covers his eyes in grief with the sleeve of his red robe. The elderly men with blue hats in the middle of the crowd are most likely Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, both of whom would help remove the body of Christ from the cross and assist at his burial.

The mounted armed Roman soldier leading the procession to Golgotha is Longinus, the centurion who would pierce Christ's side to verify his death at the Crucifixion and who exclaimed: "Indeed, this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54). In the lower left, curiosity seekers turn and run as they are confronted by Longinus' fierce gaze and threatening steed. Equally intimidating are the stern, bare-chested soldiers who control the procession; the disproportionably large executioner dragging the cross; the menacing figure who threatens Christ with a clenched fist; and the young man at the right who carries a lance and a basket filled with hammer, nails, and ropes. Another soldier clasps the arm of one of the two bound men near the front edge of the large stone ruin at center. Walking with heads bowed, they are the good thief and the bad thief, whose crosses already await them at Golgotha.

Poelenburch's interpretation of *Christ Carrying the Cross* belongs to a long pictorial tradition, yet its character is surprisingly different from earlier examples in northern and Italian art. With the exception of the large, panoramic engraving of this subject from the late fifteenth century by Martin Schongauer (German, c. 1450 - 1491), most artists, including Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471 - 1528), Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch, 1558 - 1617), and Raphael (Marchigian, 1483 - 1520), created vertical compositions that focused closely on Christ and the figures immediately surrounding him.[4] Poelenburch, on the contrary, chose to depict relatively small figures in an extensive landscape, thereby stressing the great distance that this sorrowful band had to traverse to reach its destination at Golgotha. In this respect, he followed the lead of Adam Elsheimer (German, 1578 - 1610) and Paul Bril (Flemish, 1554 - 1626), artists whose small-scale biblical and mythological paintings on copper he would have encountered in Rome after he arrived there in 1617.[5] Nevertheless, as neither Elsheimer nor Bril depicted this particular subject, Poelenburch's vision of the pictorial narrative in this painting was largely his own.

Aside from emulating the way these masters focused the narrative flow on foreground figures, Poelenburch clearly admired how they depicted light spreading across wide open landscapes and the delicacy with which they rendered their scenes. Poelenburch, adapting a technique utilized by Elsheimer, applied a silver-colored coating, most likely an alloy of tin and lead, over his copper

panel.[6] He allowed this silver-coating to give a luminous tonality to the landscape by painting a thin, somewhat modulated but translucent layer of earth tones over it.

Northern artists who traveled to Italy sought out the artistic heritage of antiquity and the Renaissance as inspiration for their own works, and Poelenburch was no exception. His paintings and drawings from his years in Rome and Florence are filled with visual references to the architectural and figural sources he found in Italy.[7] As Joachim von Sandrart I (German, 1606 - 1688) noted, Poelenburch was greatly inspired by Raphael's figures, and, indeed, the general disposition of the carefully proportioned figures in *Christ Carrying the Cross* was clearly based on the Dutch artist's close study of Raphael.[8] The clearest example of his borrowing from the Italian master in this work is the figure of the centurion Longinus, whose Roman armor and rearing steed are taken directly from the mounted Roman soldier in Raphael's *The Meeting between Leo the Great and Atilla,* 1514, in the Stanza di Eliodoro in the Vatican [fig. 1]. The stance of the young man carrying a spear at the right in Poelenburch's painting is also borrowed from this work, although the primary prototype may have been a sculpture based on Polykleitos' *Doryphorus,* or *The Lance Bearer* (450–440 BC). Another ancient Greek sculptural source that may have inspired Poelenburch was the *Torso Belvedere* (first century AD), a figure whose muscular back has been brought to life in the figure of the central executioner.[9]

Poelenburch's most significant reference to an antique source was his adaptation of the Tomb of Cecilia Metella on the Appian Way for the large ruin at the right of the painting. This travertine structure was built around 50 BC as the tomb of Cecilia, the daughter of Metellius, conqueror of Crete, and wife of Crassus, Caesar's general in Gaul and the wealthiest man in Rome. Its dramatic shape and historical significance made it a favorite subject for foreign artists to study as they traveled along this early and well-preserved Roman road [fig. 2]. Even though Poelenburch elaborated on the ruins of the walls surrounding the sepulcher, he accurately rendered the tomb's distinctive cylindrical shape, its frieze of festoons and *bucranes* (ox-head motifs), and the marble plaque with its engraved inscription.

Poelenburch chose this particular structure for its symbolic effect. He exploited the association with death to enhance the power of his narrative by having the procession pass through the tomb's large arched doorway on the way to Golgotha, just as darkness starts to settle over the land. Moreover, by cropping the ruin tightly to the picture frame, he created the impression that the structure was part of

an urban mass and that the procession was passing through a city gate. That Poelenburch depicted the procession as taking place near Rome and not outside Jerusalem was of little consequence. Romans ruled the world in which Christ lived and taught, and he died at their hands.

Determining the chronology of Poelenburch's early works is difficult because he rarely dated his paintings. Nevertheless, the artist probably created this ambitious work soon after he arrived in Rome, in the late 1610s. By that time he would have seen paintings by Elsheimer and Bril, would have had a chance to study works by Raphael, and would have encountered Cecilia Metella's tomb on one of his expeditions to the surrounding countryside to make landscape drawings.[10]

Another argument for this early date, which would place this painting at the very beginning of his known oeuvre, is the awkwardness of scale evident in the figures, particularly in the mounted figure of Longinus, which is too small in relation to the muscular executioner near him.[11] Poelenburch, moreover, made a number of changes to this work, including the elimination of two figures in the lower left and the alteration of the position of the executioner's legs, which suggests the difficulties he encountered in finding a satisfactory compositional solution for the narrative [fig. 3]. Finally, despite the many stylistic and thematic connections to Poelenburch's Roman stay, the costumes of the group of peasants in the lower left bear striking similarities to those depicted by Abraham Bloemaert (Dutch, 1564 - 1651), Poelenburch's teacher, a further indication that Poelenburch had not yet entirely left behind his earlier training in Utrecht when he came to paint this work [fig. 4].

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April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Raphael, *The Meeting between Leo the Great and Attila*, 1514, fresco, Stanza di Eliodoro, Palazzi Pontifici, The Vatican. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY

fig. 2 Claude Lorrain, *The Tomb of Cecilia Metella*, c. 1638, black chalk, pen and brown ink with brown and gray wash on white paper, The British Museum, London, RD283. Photo © Trustees of the British Museum

fig. 3 Detail, infrared reflectogram, Cornelis van Poelenburch, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, early 1620s, oil on copper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund, 2007.49.1

fig. 4 Cornelis Bloemaert after Abraham Bloemaert, *Pastorals*, c. 1627 or 1630, etching from the complete suite of 16 etchings, The New York Public Library, Kennedy Fund

NOTES

[1]   I would like to thank Afiena van Zanten and Molli Kuenstner for their assistance in preparing this entry.

[2]   According to the Gospels, the Roman soldiers dressed Christ in a purple robe and placed a crown of thorns on his head before mocking him (John 19:2–3).

[3]   Although Christ's Crucifixion is mentioned in all four of the Gospels, the legend of Veronica does not appear in the Bible but in the *Legenda Aurea*, or *The Golden Legend*, which was published in the thirteenth century. See: Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1993), 1:212.

[4]   See Martin Schongauer, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, c. 1475–1480, engraving, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (35.27).

[5]   Joachim von Sandrart remarked upon the importance of Elsheimer's inspiration for Poelenburch. Sandrart wrote that after traveling to Rome and Florence, Poelenburch painted "his landscapes after the incomparable Adam Elsheimer, the figures, however, he made his figures after Raphael's manner." Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Kunste von 1675: Leben der beruhmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer, 4 vols. (Munich, 1925), 175. Albert Blankert, in *Dutch 17th-Century Italianate Landscape Painters* (Soest, 1978), 63–64, emphasizes that Poelenburch would have been familiar with Elsheimer's compositions in Utrecht prior to his trip to Italy in 1617, as he would have seen prints after Elsheimer's paintings by Hendrik Goudt (Dutch, 1585 - 1648), who had returned to Utrecht in 1611. A contemporary source also links Poelenburch and Bril. In letters written in 1621 and 1622 by the Utrecht canon (*kanunnik*) Johan de Wit to his friend in Utrecht Arnold van Buchel, Poelenburch's and Bril's names are mentioned together.

[6]   See Technical Summary. For Elsheimer's use of a silver-colored ground layer over copper, see Keith Andrews, *Adam Elsheimer: Paintings, Drawings, Prints* (Oxford, 1977), 170; and Rüdiger Klessmann, *Adam Elsheimer 1578–1610* (Edinburgh and London, 2006), 102–115, no. 20. On copper as a support, see Isabel Horovitz, "The Materials and Techniques of European Paintings on Copper Supports" in *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Painting on Copper, 1575–1775* (New York, 1999), 63–92.

[7]   See, in particular, Eckhard Schaar, "Poelenburgh und Breenbergh in Italien und ein Bild Elsheimers," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 9, no.1 (August 1959): 25–54; and Alan Chong, "The Drawings of Cornelis van Poelenburch," *Master Drawings* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 3–62, 85–116.

[8]   Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Kunste von 1675: Leben der beruhmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer., 4 vols. (Munich, 1925), 175.

[9]   For the Polykleitos *Doryphorus*, see the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow; for the *Torso Belvedere*, see the collection at the Museo Pio-Clementino at the Vatican Museum.

[10]   The earliest dated of these drawings is 1619. See Alan Chong, "The Drawings of Cornelis van Poelenburch," *Master Drawings* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 24–25, nos. 1–9. No drawings of Cecilia Metella by Poelenburch, however, are known.

[11]   Poelenburch frequently had difficulties in establishing spatial relationships between figures, but the discrepancies are more extreme in this work than usual.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on a thin, copper panel. Tool marks are visible on the reverse. On top of the copper is a silver colored layer, which X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy analysis indicated is probably a lead-tin alloy.[1] Over this there may be a lead white priming layer.[2] A toned imprimatura layer is visible in the transparently painted landscape. The paint was thinly and smoothly applied. Poelenburch left reserves for the figures, but painted the details of the landscape last, sometimes over the figures. Examination with infrared reflectography at 1.5 to 1.8 microns[3] revealed that the artist painted out two additional figures in the group on the left. It also showed compositional changes to the figure guiding Christ by a rope.

The copper panel is slightly bent, but it is mostly in plane. There are two small dents at the right edge. Paint losses are scattered throughout the painting, but especially in the sky and along the edges. Examination with ultraviolet light revealed that an old varnish was only partially removed at some point. Remnants remain in the greens and browns.

[1] X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF) analysis was performed by the NGA Scientific Research department (see report dated December 27, 2006, in NGA Conservation files).

[2] This layer is not readily visible, but its presence was revealed by XRF analysis performed by the NGA Scientific Research department (see report dated December 27, 2006, in NGA Conservation files).

[3] Infrared reflectography was performed using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

Private collection, Paris;[1] (Galerie Claude Vittet, Paris); purchased 11 April 2007 by NGA.

[1] Claude Vittet, in an e-mail of 14 January 2007 to Molli Kuenstner (in NGA curatorial files), writes that the painting had "not been seen on the market since probably the beginning of the XVIIIth century."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Cornelis van Poelenburch/*Christ Carrying the Cross*/early 1620s," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, http://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/137505 (accessed April 24, 2014).