

“CALENDAR”

PEETER BALTEN

31 JANUARY – 10 MAY 2020

THE CREATION OF THE DIOCESE OF MIRANDA, in May, 1545, at the same time as Leiria and Portalegre were also raised to the status of episcopal sees, corresponded to an important reorganisation of the Portuguese ecclesiastical administration promoted by King João III. The new sees, whose construction was entrusted to the most important royal architects, reflected the full scope of royal protection at that time, not only in relation to the architectural programmes that were followed, but also in terms of the artistic contents of the churches that were built. In the case of Miranda, it is known that Gonçalo de Torralva, Miguel de Arruda and the Spanish Francisco Velásquez, whose works were undertaken entirely under the scope of Portuguese late Renaissance architecture, were involved in the more austere models of the “plain style” and the references to the design of the classical orders. The diocese of Miranda was, however, to have only an ephemeral existence, for, on 27 September, 1780, Pope Pius VI incorporated it into the bishopric of Bragança, through the Bull entitled *Romanus Pontifex*.

These twelve oil paintings on oak, representing the twelve months of the year, come from the co-cathedral of Miranda, in what is now called the diocese of Bragança-Miranda. They were recently studied by Vítor Serrão, who was able to identify the artist who probably painted them and to reassess their general meaning. Through a comparison that was made with an almost identical series housed in a private collection in Paris, it proved possible to attribute the set of small paintings from Miranda to the artist Peeter Balten (c. 1527-1584), who was active in Antwerp. It is, however, more difficult to understand the exact circumstances under which they were incorporated into the church’s collection of artistic treasures. The most likely hypothesis is that they were acquired by the bishop Dom Jerónimo de Meneses (1581-1592), a cultured and erudite prelate, who launched a campaign of building works at the cathedral and commissioned other paintings. In 1720, there were one hundred and twenty-seven paintings at the episcopal see, spread around the sacristy and the chapter house, as well as the bishop’s office and chamber.



Peeter Balten (Antuérpia, c. 1527-1584), attrib.

Calendar

c. 1580

Oil on oak panel

21.3 × 28.2 cm

Sé de Miranda do Douro

There are not many surviving works of the painter Balten, and there is little biographical information available, but we do know that he worked with Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c. 1525-1569) and that, like him, he showed a preference for genre scenes and the newly emerging landscape paintings. We should also remember his religious paintings,



as well as his work as an engraver — of his own original works, as well as of others produced by other contemporary painters — and his genealogies illustrated through engravings. As an artist, he was, in fact, seduced by entirely new themes linked to Flemish country life, which was how he came to make his name. Country feasts and festivals, kermesses, masquerades, scenes from taverns and fairs, with their parades of countryfolk and peasants — sometimes denounced, because of their excesses, in the writings of Protestant theologians and memorialists — were, in fact, a recurrent theme in Northern European painting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The twelve paintings from Balten’s calendar clearly show the attention that the artist paid to everyday life in the fields, marked, in this case, by the productive cycles of the different seasons. The agricultural, pastoral and hunting activities that were peculiar to each month served as a pretext for enunciating the conventions of landscape painting and “genre scenes”, in the treatment of rural scenarios, the representation of animals and the description of the festive and working costumes of the peasants, with their characteristic farming implements. But, over the apparent thematic simplicity of these paintings, Peeter Balten developed a complex network of symbolic allusions and allegories, founded upon his evident mastery of an erudite culture, filled with classical citations and references to medieval or contemporary visual sources. Through a process of accumulation, taking place at multiple levels of meaning, memories from ancient and pre-Christian mythology (the Cycles of the Seasons and the fertility cults) are mixed with the iconography of the Books of Hours, canonical or popular festivities and the zodiac calendar, which is included here as a demonstration of the harmony that exists between the astral organisation and earthly life.

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