

## “THE APPEARANCE OF AN ANGEL TO ST. CLARE AND ST. AGNES OF ASSISI AND ST. COLETTE OF CORBIE”

WORKSHOP OF QUENTIN METSYS

25 JANUARY – 13 MAY 2018

In 1629, at a time when Antwerp was one of the main artistic centres producing works in the Catholic Baroque style, the centenary of the death of Quentin Metsys was marked with a formal service and the unveiling of a commemorative plaque at the city's cathedral. It was an unusual event, just as the fame of this painter was itself unusual. Born in Leuven in 1466, he moved to Antwerp in 1491 and enjoyed a prosperous life there, working intensely until his death in 1529. His friendship with poets and humanists from his time, such as Pieter Gillis or Erasmus, whose portrait he painted, contributed greatly to his fame, perpetuated in biographical notes, poems and theatre plays. But his reputation was due, above all, to the fact that Metsys had become Antwerp's leading painter at a time when the city was undergoing a meteoric transformation into one of the most important artistic and economic centres and its port was becoming the central hub for trading relations between the north and south of Europe, taking over the strategic role that the city of Bruges had performed in the Middle Ages. Bruges itself had declined in importance due to the repression that it had suffered at the hands of Emperor Maximilian of Austria in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, after the revolt of 1488, also witnessing the progressive silting up of its port and the consequent departure from the city of the main foreign communities, which resulted in its inexorable decline in commercial and artistic terms. Antwerp, on the other hand, received protection from the emperor in the form of major improvement works at its port and a tax regime that encouraged the establishment there of industry and foreign trade, so that it consequently enjoyed a phase of tremendous development. In 1499, the transfer of the Portuguese trading post from Bruges to Antwerp, accompanied by the movement to the city of the community of Portuguese merchants, meant that Antwerp was transformed into the great European hub for the trade in spices and products from the Portuguese overseas territories, giving the city a major impetus in economic terms. When Carlos V ascended the throne of Spain, relations between the Iberian Peninsula and the imperial cities of northern Flanders became even closer, and Antwerp began to play an even more strategic role as a large Hispanic and Catholic commercial metropolis. It was therefore natural that



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Workshop of Quentin Metsys  
***The Appearance of an Angel  
 to St. Clare and St. Agnes of Assisi  
 and St. Colette of Corbie***

Antwerp, early 16<sup>th</sup> century

Oil on oak panel

152,7 × 97,3 cm

Museu de Setúbal / Convento de Jesus, MS/CJ 1/PR1

the most important workshop in Antwerp should also earn the preference of clients from the Iberian Peninsula and that the name of Metsys – “mestre Quintino” – should become known and be invoked by the Iberians. One of Metsys' four known disciples, Edwardt Portugalois, who entered his workshop in 1504 and was designated a master artist in 1506, was Portuguese. Queen Leonor and King Manuel I commissioned directly from Metsys the altarpieces for the convents of Madre de Deus in Lisbon and Santa Clara in Coimbra. Other series of paintings and separate panels, which can be found in Tomar,



Unknown Flemish painter  
*The Appearance of an Angel to St. Clare and St. Agnes of Assisi and St. Colette of Corbie*  
 Early 16<sup>th</sup> century  
 Oil on oak panel  
 MNAA, inv. 1276 Pint

Jorge Afonso, attrib.  
*The Appearance of an Angel to St. Clare and St. Agnes of Assisi and St. Colette of Corbie*  
 1520-1525  
 Oil on oak panel  
 Museu de Setúbal /  
 Convento de Jesus,  
 MS/CJ 12/PR12

at the convent of Madre de Deus in Lisbon, and in Setúbal, bear witness to the large number of works that Metsys' workshop produced for Portugal. He was the painter of the portrait of Queen Saint Isabel, produced for the festivities of her beatification in 1516, as well as the curious iconography of the paintings exhibited here. The Latin poet Cornelius Grapheus composed two poems dedicated to the emotions that the Portuguese humanist Damião de Góis felt as he contemplated a *Calvary* painted by Metsys, and even Francisco de Holanda, normally highly critical of Flemish painting, could not fail, in his treatise *Da Pintura Antigua* (1548), to place Quentin among the "eagles" of painting because of his "clean work". Probably, by using the expression "clean work", Holanda was referring to the purity and luminosity of the colours that Metsys used, the clarity of his compositions and the monumentality of his figures, which stand out from the landscape due to their remarkable volume. These aspects, coupled with the highly rhetorical sharpness with which he expressed emotions and the decorative exuberance that he

gave to the treatment of rich fabrics, accessories and architecture, made Metsys' painting a major influence on Portuguese art in the first decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, marking both the taste of the commissioners and the artistic practice of the main Portuguese painters that worked for the court. This Guest Work is a clear example of that influence. Originating from the Convent of Jesus, it was attributed to Metsys by Luís Reis Santos (1898-1967), who gave it a date that is perhaps rather too early. It shows the angel blessing and crowning the three saints kneeling outside a monastery: Clare, her sister Agnes, and Colette, all placed in a central position. While the building constitutes a reference to the monastic life, other scattered images clearly evoke a sense of devotion to Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints. Visible in the doorway is a sculpture of the Virgin and Child, and St. Clare's crozier is surmounted by a *Pietà*, while St. Colette's crook shows the Vir-

gin and Child. Inside the building, we can see an image of St. Bartholomew and inside the crook of St. Clare's crozier are the figures of the apostles Peter and Paul. From this rare iconography, which represents the divine gratitude for the action of both the founders and the reformer of the Order of St. Clare, there are only two other examples known to exist in Portugal. Other painting, which is also here, comes from the Convent of Madre de Deus and inverts the composition from Setúbal, while the other work is a panel painted by Jorge Afonso in the 1520s, for the altarpiece of the high altar at the Convent of Jesus. This monastery, founded in 1489, was the first in Portugal to follow the reform promoted by St. Colette of Corbie (1381-1447). This mystical character, born in Corbie, in Picardy, was a most striking example of female spirituality in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, receiving the support, in particular of the Duchess of Burgundy, Queen Isabel of Portugal. Colette defended a spirituality that was centred on the individual experience of prayer and asceticism and the return to the founding principles of the Poor Sisters of the Order of St. Clare. After a first phase in which these nuns had lived according to an adaptation of the Benedictine rule, St. Clare had seen her own monastic rule, based on her writings *The Form of Life*, approved by Pope Innocent IV, even before her death in 1253. This rule, the first to be written by a woman, was considered shortly afterwards to be too radical in its appeal to poverty and to the abandonment of worldly goods and, at the overwhelming majority of convents, it ended up being replaced by a Second Rule given by Pope Urban IV. The restoration of the original rule was one of the greatest motivations behind the reform introduced by St. Colette.

By the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the first movements for the reform of the Order of St. Clare had already appeared in Portugal, at the Convent of Conceição in Beja. In 1489, another noblewoman from the house of the Dukes of Beja, Justa Rodrigues Pereira, the nurse of King Manuel, founded a convent in Setúbal dedicated to the name of Jesus. After 1492, when Queen Leonor became interested in its foundation, it became the first convent of the reform of St. Colette in Portugal, with the first nuns coming from Gandia (Valencia). In 1509, Queen Leonor was to found the second convent of this new reform in Xabregas, the Convent of Madre de Deus. At the time when these paintings were made, the two convents were therefore the only ones that adhered to this rule in Portugal. It is easy to understand the interest that both had in such themes as the *Handing of the Rule to St. Clare*, or this *Apparition of the Angel*, which iconographically sanctioned the reform and the spiritual meaning of the new foundations. JOC

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