

Towneley Altarpiece Notes

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extract

BURNLEY, LANCS., TOWNELEY HALL ART GALLERY

42. Altarpiece of the Passion of Christ

257 X 203.7 cm, oak, Antwerp, c.1520-5

The narrative of the Passion of Christ begins in the lower left compartment with Christ Crowned with Thorns, in which soldiers brutally press the crown of thorns onto Christ's head with staves. Very unusually, the sequence then moves to the lower right compartment with Christ at the Column. Christ Carrying the Cross above is represented according to convention, including the Virgin and St John behind the cross, St Veronica in the lower right, Simon of Cyrene assisting with the cross and the two thieves in the background. Like almost all early-sixteenth-century Antwerp Passion altarpieces, the Crucifixion group is divided vertically into two zones, the fainting Virgin with St John, female mourners and soldiers below and the three crosses and horsemen above. Unusually, it is not entirely clear which is the believing Centurion and which is Longinus piercing Christ's side with a spear. In the Lamentation in the lower central compartment, Joseph of Arimathea holds the body of Christ in a winding sheet, accompanied by the Virgin, St John, four female mourners and a male figure to the left not obviously identifiable as Nicodemus. The forehead of the Christ figure is pitted with holes where a crown of thorns was once attached. The Entombment in the upper right shows Mary Magdalene in the right foreground, the Virgin and St John behind the tomb and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus at either end; the identity of the figure to the left with the crown of thorns is unclear.

In the borders of the three upper scenes are small subsidiary scenes representing the Sacraments, or Old Testament scenes with a sacramental significance considered to be 'types' or symbolic forerunners of New Testament events: in the borders of Christ Carrying the Cross are Baptism and Confirmation, and Extreme Unction is on the left margin of the Entombment; The Sacrifice of Isaac and the Meeting of Abraham and Melchisedek, types for the Crucifixion and Eucharist are in the left margin of the Crucifixion and the right margin of the Entombment. The final scene in the right margin of the Crucifixion shows the horned Moses and might be Moses and the Brazen Serpent, another type for the Crucifixion. Set into the front of the altar on which the altarpiece is placed are three further scenes, a practice known in the nineteenth century but not in the late Gothic period - see cat. Oxburgh.[1] They represent the Passover, The Holy Kindred and the Gathering of the Manna. All the figures are neo-Gothic with the exception of one bystander in the left background of the Passover, and the two Old Testament scenes appear to be loosely based on Dieric Bouts' Sacraments altarpiece commissioned for an altar in the church of St Peter, Leuven in 1464.[2] This may be an indication that these carvings were done in Belgium rather than England.

The Towneley Hall altarpiece appears to be in excellent condition, but the altar scenes signal the fact that it has in fact been extremely skilfully restored. Several figures in the altarpiece are of more

solid proportions, more mechanically and tidily carved and of more carefully-smoothed wood than the others and are likely to have been carved by the craftsmen responsible for the Passover and Manna scenes: the figure with the basket over his shoulder in the left foreground of Christ Carrying the Cross; the soldier to the immediate right of Christ in Christ at the Column; the figure in the right foreground of Christ Crowned with Thorns; two horsemen to the left of the cross in the Crucifixion; the figure of Christ on the Cross itself. A full technical examination would probably reveal more. Significantly there is no Antwerp mark on any of these figures. The restorer may have modelled his work on damaged originals. The frame, tracery, landscape background and the patchwork floors have been equally cleverly restored. It seems most unlikely that anyone in England would have possessed the skill to produce the altar carvings and restore the main altarpiece so seamlessly as early as c.1800, if the altarpiece was indeed purchased by Charles Towneley himself. A Belgian carver is very likely to have been responsible.

The mark of the Antwerp hand appears numerous times both on the heads of figures and on the base of the carved sections, testifying to Antwerp craftsmanship. The altarpiece has been thoroughly stripped of its original polychromy and no trace now survives. The painted wings are lost, and modern boards cover any surviving hinge marks on the sides of the case. The altarpiece was fumigated and treated with linseed oil on its repurchase for Towneley Hall in 1969 and with linseed oil again in 1972.

History

Tradition has it that the altarpiece was acquired by Charles Towneley, the well known collector.[3] If true, the purchase was probably made at one of the Revolutionary sales on the Continent and probably took place in the late 1790s or shortly before Charles' death in 1805, at which time he was reputed to have become more religious and to have turned his attention to the family chapel at Towneley Hall.[4] There is no reference to the altarpiece in the Towneley Papers, however.[5] Although there seems no real reason to doubt the tradition that it was Charles who purchased the altarpiece, it is worth noting that he was not the only family member to bear this name. His cousin Peregrine owned the Hall 1813-46, and it was Peregrine's son, confusingly also called Charles, the owner 1846-76, who funded St Mary's church, Burnley.[6] In the absence of firm evidence, in view of the level of skill involved in the restoration, it may be more plausible to place this work in the third quarter of the nineteenth century during the ownership of the younger Charles. A visitor to the hall in 1889 recorded that the altarpiece came from Bruges.[7]

Towneley Hall was sold in 1901, but according to one source, the altarpiece was removed from the chapel in 1895, perhaps because the current owner, Lady O'Hagan, had renounced her catholic faith.[8] It is not clear what happened to the altarpiece at that point, but it may have been on Lady O'Hagan's death in 1921 that it came into the possession of Mary Elizabeth Towneley, a nun who served her noviate at Namur and subsequently joined the convent at Ashdown Park, Sussex, opened in 1920. The altarpiece was installed at the convent, and remained there until 1969, when it was put up for auction and repurchased for Towneley Hall with the combined financial resources of the National Art Collections Fund, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Edward Stocks Massey Bequest.

Each of the carved compartments has been carefully designed, the tracery filling almost exactly half each scene in the vertical height of the lateral sections, and each scene strongly symmetrical, designed around vertical and horizontal lines. The overall impression, then, is one of coherence and clarity, despite the crowded nature of the scenes. Many of the figures wear Antwerp Mannerist costumes, like the soldier to the right of Christ in Christ Carrying the Cross, with his breastplate decorated with a winged head with a ring through the mouth. Nevertheless, the carvers avoid the exaggerated movement and heavy, theatrical figure types of Antwerp Mannerism. The rather bulbous facial types are rather summarily carved, particularly the slit eyes, and must have relied heavily on the original polychromy for their characterisation.

Although the Burnley altarpiece is a richer and more elaborate altarpiece than many of its type, it was probably not a one-off design, for an Antwerp Entombment scene from a lost carved altarpiece survives in the Vleeshuis in Antwerp which is clearly made by the same workshop, almost identical in both style and design and probably a little earlier in date.[9] This scene at least, then, was produced by rote from one altarpiece to the next, and very probably the other scenes as well. The altarpiece is no less accomplished for its lack of originality; on the contrary, it reveals the high degree of economy to which altarpiece production had been honed in Antwerp in the first quarter of the 16th century. A parallel for this economy and the restrained interpretation of Antwerp Mannerism is the Antwerp altarpiece from the Soltykoff collection now in The Hermitage in St Petersburg, which was heavily restored between the Soltykoff sale in 1861 and 1874.[10] This altarpiece is probably a little earlier in date than the Burnley altarpiece.

The cusped upper profile of the altarpiece was a design in use until at least 1525, the date of delivery of the Dortmund Petrikirche altarpiece and the installation of the Xanten altarpiece, both of this shape.[11] The Burnley altarpiece probably dates from around the same time.

Notes

1. Nineteenth-century scenes are also set into the front of the altar on which the altarpiece of Buvrinnes is placed. See Borchgrave d'Altena & Mambour 1968, pp. 14-16.
 2. Friedländer 1967-76, iii, pls 26-32.
 3. Bourne 1979, p. 7. I am very indebted to Susan Bourne's own researches on the history of the altarpiece.
 4. Whitaker 1818, p. 487 and Bourne 1979, pp. 22-3.
 5. Information kindly provided by Gerard Vaughan.
 6. Chapples 1976, chapter 1 (not paginated).
 7. Anon., Mary Elizabeth Towneley, London, 1924, pp. 5-6.
 8. Ibid., p. 369 and Chapples 1976, chapter 8.
 9. Jansen & Herck 1949, p. 165, no. 130.
 10. Liebmann 1988, pls 77-9.
 11. De Boodt 2002, pp. 449-52
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Some sixteenth-century Antwerp carved wooden altar-pieces in England

During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, Antwerp's most prosperous decades as an international centre of trade, carved and polychromed wooden altar-pieces were manufactured in huge numbers in the city and exported all over Europe. They were produced both to commission and ready-made, the latter being sold at the Onser Liever Vrouwen Pand, an art market located on premises leased from the church of our Lady from 1460. Just as their rivals in Brussels introduced craftsmen's marks in 1454 as guarantees of quality, so too from 1470 the Antwerp Guild of St Luke, to which carvers and painters alike belonged, required that the carvers' mark of the open hand and the castle mark of the painters should be applied once the completed altar pieces had been inspected by the guild. The open hand is usually found on the heads of some of the figures and on the base of the carved sections, while the castle mark (or 'burcht') is commonly found on the sides of the case. The fact that these marks are usually clearly visible means that it is very easy to identify Antwerp products - though not, of course, those pre-dating 1470. From c.1515 to c.1535 altar-piece production was dominated by the idiosyncratic style known as Antwerp mannerism in which exaggerated and distorted figure types are grouped in graphic narratives liberally enlivened with exotic dress and detail. Thereafter carvers began to adopt a more antiquising approach to decorative detail and even to the human figure, but the narratives remained just as embellished. Antwerp carved altar-pieces were still being produced in the mid-sixteenth century though apparently at a reduced rate as the Reformation eliminated some markets and tastes changed.

Although there have been many valuable and scholarly publications by conservators and art historians in the Low Countries and Germany, surviving altar-pieces have stimulated little consistent interest until very recently. The exhibition in Antwerp Cathedral in 1993 provided the first major overview of Antwerp altar-piece production since the pioneering work of Comte Joseph de Borchgrave d'Altena earlier this century. This exhibition, together with the publication last year of the first general book on Netherlandish carved altar-piece production, has signalled the resurgence of interest in this particular art form and helped to put it on the art historical map. Collectors, however, have been ahead of art historians in the value they have placed on these works. From the early years of the nineteenth century Antwerp carved altar-pieces were sought by an admittedly limited but by no means insignificant group of collectors both on the Continent and in England.

As is well known, large quantities of northern European church furnishings were removed from their original settings, as monasteries were closed and churches faced financial crisis during the French Revolution and in the subsequent decades. Many were imported into England. As Gustav Waagen commented in 1854: '... scarcely was a country overrun by the French, when Englishmen skilled in the arts were at hand with their guineas ... In the same manner, and with the best success, the English have exerted themselves from the year 1798 to the present time in Belgium and Holland'. They were not always successful, however. In 1824 an unidentified Englishman offered a large sum of money for a carved wooden altar-piece which had been moved on the closure of the Cistercian house of Mariawald to the parish church of Heimbach. He was refused. This altar-piece which is still in the church at Heimbach, was made in Antwerp in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, and provides evidence that such vivid late Gothic carved religious narratives were sought

after in England at this early date. It was not necessary for potential customers to journey to the Continent, however: a wide range of imported Continental ecclesiastical sculpture, including large-scale carved wooden altar-pieces, was available through English antique dealers and auction houses.

There are now in England six complete carved wooden altar-pieces originally made in sixteenth-century Antwerp and imported into this country during the nineteenth century. In addition to their intrinsic significance as examples of Antwerp production, they are also of interest because the individuals who acquired them were inspired to do so not only by the enthusiasm for late Gothic art engendered by the Gothic Revival but also by their religious sympathies. Catholic Emancipation and the various High Church movements within the Anglican church prompted a renewed interest in the church furnishings that were now becoming redundant abroad.

The altar-piece now in the Towneley Hall Art Gallery, Burnley, Lancs., may, if Towneley family tradition is correct, be the first Antwerp carved wooden altar-piece to have been acquired by an English collector. It is reputed to have been installed in the family chapel at Towneley Hall by the well-known connoisseur of ancient art, Charles Townley (1737-1805), some time between 1772, when he finally settled in England following several years in Italy, and his death. The Catholic Relief Act of 1791 permitted Roman Catholic families such as the Townleys to build or reopen family chapels, though the Towneley chapel had long been in use in spite of legal restrictions. A visitor to Towneley Hall in 1889 stated that the altar-piece had been purchased in Bruges: 'The chapel, last done up in 1601 in accordance with the taste of that date contains objects of very great interest: a piece of fresco said to be brought from the Catacombs and to belong to the 4th century . . . and a very admirable altar-piece carved in wood, brought from Bruges'.

Like many old recusant families the Townleys retained links with Catholic Belgium and France and this may have helped in the acquisition of the altar-piece. Charles went to college in Douai on the Belgian border and his old tutor, John Turbeville Needham, a Catholic priest, spent his last years in Brussels before his death in 1781. One of Charles's descendants, Mary Elizabeth, who later installed the altar-piece in the convent of Notre Dame, Ashdown Park, first became a nun in Namur. Presumably the Towneley Hall altar-piece was acquired during the Napoleonic wars, but the exact date is not known, and it has to be said that beyond tradition there is no direct evidence to link the purchase of the altar-piece with Charles rather than a later member of the family. Charles's tastes were firmly classical, which would make the choice of a late Gothic altar-piece rather surprising. Nevertheless, the fragment from the catacombs announces clearly his concern for suitable and relevant furnishings for the chapel, and the altar-piece may have been viewed as an appropriately Roman Catholic ornament. Townley is reputed to have become more deeply religious in later life, and was engaged on alterations to the family chapel shortly before his death.

The Towneley Hall altar-piece consists of a decorative case with a raised central section and elaborately carved ogival edging. The incised hand mark of the Antwerp carvers appears frequently on the bases of the carved scenes and on the heads of individual figures. The altar-piece contains six carved scenes: Christ crowned with thorns, Christ at the column, Christ carrying the cross, and the Crucifixion, Lamentation and Entombment. Six tiny subsidiary scenes of sacramental significance are in the margins of the three upper compartments. The scenes of the Passover, St Anne with the Virgin and Child and angels, and the Gathering of the manna set into the altar itself are largely neo-Gothic work (though one or two sixteenth-century figures have been incorporated) and are presumably the result of a restoration around the time of purchase. The same restorer may also have worked on the main altar-piece.

The Towneley altar-piece has all the appearance of one originally produced to be sold on the open market, as was the norm in Antwerp in the sixteenth century. The mass produced nature of the work is apparent in the standardised iconography suitable for most ecclesiastical locations. Although maintaining high standards of craftsmanship, the rendering of individual figures is rather formulaic and rudimentary. The faces tend to be slightly bulbous with heavy lidded, wide, slit eyes and narrow chins, showing neither individuality nor strong expression, and figures are more lively than anatomically accurate. Nevertheless, the altar piece attains a narrative clarity by virtue of its carefully proportioned and balanced compositions and, with its original polychromy, this would have been a highly engaging and dramatic work. Polychromy was not to nineteenth-century taste, however, and was often removed, as happened here.

There are few direct comparisons that can be made with other Antwerp altar-pieces, but the workshop responsible must have produced the Entombment fragment in the Vleeshuis, Antwerp, and there are parallels with the later altar piece in Scarisbrick Hall. Altar-piece cases of the Towneley type are date-able to between c.1513 and c.1525. The Antwerp mannerist dress combined with more classically structured compositions suggests a late date of c.1520-25.

{There are other similar altarpieces at Scarisbrick Hall; Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk; Carlisle Cathedral (originally purchased for Brougham Hall, Cumbria); St. Peter's College, Radley, Oxfordshire; St. Michael and All Angels Church, Brighton. A seventh altarpiece in Arundel Castle, West Sussex, is probably not attributable to Antwerp.}

The altar-piece is mentioned as being in Christchurch 'Ashurstwood' (Ashdown) in N. Pevsner and I. Nairn: *Sussex, The Buildings of England, Harmondsworth* (1965), p504. The convent sold the altar-piece in 1969, when it was purchased by private agreement for the Towneley Hall Art Gallery.

[My thanks to Gerard Vaughan, who has worked in depth on the papers of Charles Townley, for his assurance that he has found no reference to the purchase of the altar-piece.]

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Extracts from **Mary Elizabeth Towneley - A Memoir** (Burns Oates and Washbourne, London 1924)

[page 5 – 7]

A soldier and statesman, the Right Honourable Sir M. Grant Duff, a guest at Towneley in 1889, records the visit in his diary:

I consider it . . . one of the most interesting places I have seen in England, partly from its antiquity, for portions of the house go back to 1366, but chiefly because the Mass continued to be said there through all the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Puritan times. The chapel, last done up in 1601, in accordance with the taste of that date, contains objects of very great interest: a piece of fresco said to be brought from the Catacombs and to belong to the fourth century, but far more perfect in style than anything we usually associate with that age; a fine Jansenist Crucifix in ivory, the arms so placed as to indicate the belief that Christ died only for the elect, and a very admirable altar-piece, carved in wood, brought from Bruges. I attended on the 9th Low Mass, which was said by Dr. Vaughan, the Bishop of Salford, and on the 10th that said by --- , who also preached in the evening before Benediction. The family supplied, and charmingly supplied, the music."

...

The chapel at Towneley is approached by an oak staircase. Formerly its entrance was from outside. It was in the year 1454 that Reginald, Bishop of Lichfield, granted a licence to John Towneley, Gentleman, of Towneley, for "an Oratory and Mass at Towneley Hall, Cliviger . . . during the Bishop's pleasure." This privilege was continued until the year 1895. The main building of this chapel has a somewhat low flat ceiling of carved oak beams, elaborately panelled, and bearing the initials of various members of the family. It is, however, relieved by the chancel, which is twice its height, lighted by a window placed rather high, its sill being twelve feet from the ground. An altar-piece of exquisite wood-carving, from the hand of a Flemish master craftsman, stood in a panelled recess, the artist having reverently and very beautifully portrayed scenes from the Sacred Passion of our Lord and representations of the Sacraments. This interesting work of art came into the possession of the subject of this memoir about a year before her death, the Requiem Mass for the repose of her soul was upon it in the entrance-hall of the Convent at Ashdown Park, Sussex.

[According to the Memoir of Mary Elizabeth Towneley, the altarpiece was "banished from Towneley" in 1895 (when Lady O'Hagan left the Catholic church). This is not true as a report of it being admired by visitors to a garden party at Towneley was recorded in the Burnley Express in June 1899. It came into the possession of Mary Elizabeth Towneley about a year before her death (31st March 1922). It was purchased for Towneley Art Gallery and Museum from Ashdown Park in 1968, having remained at Ashdown since around 1921.]