

Altarpiece Creator

The lower section of the pilasters shows ornamentation typical of the workshop of Cornelis Floris de Vriendt (Antwerp 1514 – Antwerp 1575).

Restoration of the Polychromy

It is in terms of polychromy that most 15th- and 16th-century wooden altarpieces suffer the ravages of time. Unfortunately, excessive care aimed at preservation often resulted in betrayal. This is the case with the Daverdisse altarpiece, whose current color palette no longer resembles the original tones.

The altarpiece has undergone three overpaintings, the second of which was local. The first two overpaintings were oil-based, featuring muted colors far removed from the original tones that combined gold, azurite, vermillion, and green. An artificial patina has further darkened the colors, which is particularly distracting on the skin tones.

Since the altar table symbolizes Christ, early Christian liturgy forbade placing any object upon it. In the 9th century, the Pope allowed a reliquary shrine to be displayed, but only on side altars. In the 11th century, the custom was introduced of placing a raised, narrative panel behind these side altars (retro tabulum). It was not until the 14th century—when the priest turned his back to the congregation, and the bishops, abbots, canons, and clergy took their places in front of the main altar rather than behind it—that an altarpiece could be placed behind the altar.

The Passion cycle forms the primary theme of altarpieces. At the end of the Middle Ages and in the 16th century, the Southern Netherlands built a considerable reputation well beyond its borders, thanks to its major production centers for these works; this activity dates mostly to the second half of the 16th century.

At the beginning of the 16th century in Antwerp, a new style emerged under the influence of Humanism and the Renaissance. The ornamentation became Italianate, and altarpieces grew taller, wider, and more populated. The figures became more mannered, wearing fashionable attire.

Although many altarpieces were destroyed over time, Belgium still preserves a significant number of them. Their creation had become a true art industry, with remarkable surviving examples in countries such as Sweden, France, Germany, Poland, Spain, and Portugal.

(D'après "Retables en bois" de G. Derveaux-Van Ussel, éd. Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Bruxelles).

Le Retable de la Passion Daverdisse

History

The Altarpiece of the Passion dates from the second half of the 16th century. According to tradition, it was transferred to the new church from Saint-Pierre castle chapel, which was demolished in 1851. Its style belongs to the very end of Antwerp's sculpted and polychromed altarpiece production, which came to a halt around 1570. Saint-Pierre Church in Daverdisse, much newer than its altarpiece, was built in 1847. This transfer to a sanctuary twice as wide and neoclassical in style likely justified expanding the altarpiece by framing it with columns topped by Corinthian capitals, as well as adding an upper section in the 19th-century style.

Description

Two 17th-century statues dominate the ensemble: Saint Roch on the left (with a dog) and Saint Fiacre on the right (holding a shovel). Saint Roch (14th century) was invoked locally against the frequent and devastating epidemics (the plague); Saint Fiacre (7th century) is the patron saint of gardeners. In the spandrels on either side of the Crucifixion arch are the statues of Saint Barbara (A) and Saint Catherine of Alexandria (B), dating from the 15th and 16th centuries. They are integrated into the interior structure using wooden blocks and flank garlands of fruit and winged angel heads—elements belonging to the original Antwerp architecture of the altarpiece. The figure of Saint Peter (C), also of fine craftsmanship, probably dates from the 16th century.



Seven compartments belong to the original altarpiece :

Bearing of the Cross (1)

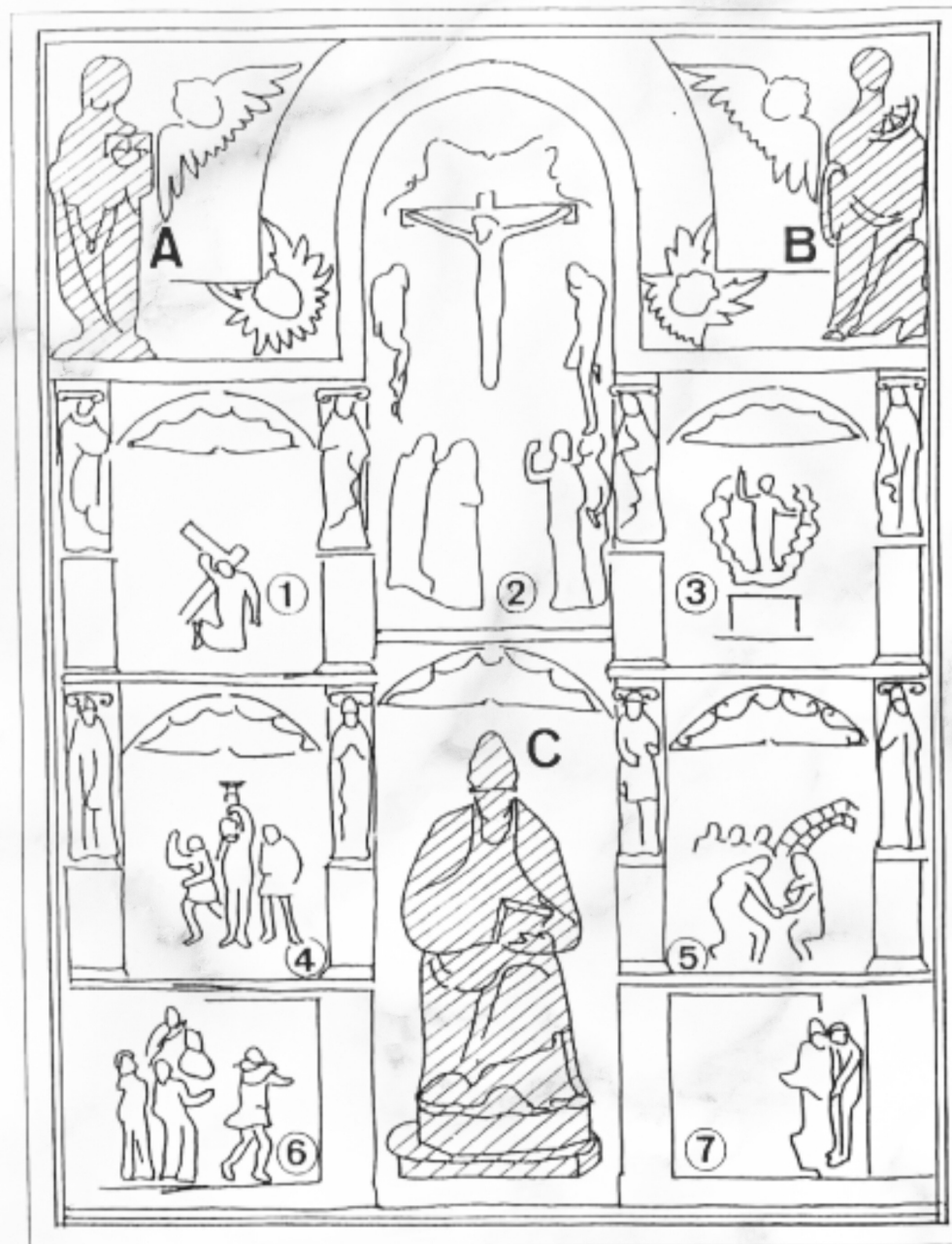
A cityscape forms the background, featuring two horsemen. Christ has fallen to His knees. His face was recut flat and redrawn in black pencil. In the foreground are Saint Veronica holding the veil and a soldier missing his right arm.

The Crucifixion (2)

The background depicts city architecture, a horseman, and a group of three soldiers casting dice for Christ's tunic. The figure of Christ is attached with two old forged nails. The thief on the left is secured with two pegs at the base, and the thief on the right with two nails. Mary Magdalene embraces the foot of the cross. The foreground is occupied on the left by the Virgin Mary and Saint John, and on the right by two soldiers, one of whom held a spear that has disappeared. Note the elongated proportions of the figures.

The Resurrection (3)

Christ emerges from the tomb surrounded by a wreath of clouds. In His left hand He holds the cruciform banner, and with His right hand He gives a blessing. Two terrified soldiers surround the open tomb. A soldier occupies the front-left. The front-right section is missing. This compartment is particularly representative of the rough, somewhat awkward style of the Daverdisse sculptor.



The Flagellation (4)

The background shows a wall pierced with windows where five people lean out to observe the scene. Christ, flanked by two soldiers, is bound to a Tuscan-style column. The foreground is lost.

The Harrowing of Hell / Descent into Limbo (5)

This compartment has suffered damage. The background shows a wall with an arched doorway representing the entrance to Hell. A black female demon emerging from behind the wall threatens a group of three nude figures with a pitchfork. Their faces were recut flat and redrawn in black pencil. Their bodies, also recut, were coated in plaster, giving them a grainy appearance. This intervention predates the 19th-century overpainting. This detail could point to acts of vandalism during the Revolutionary period that were clumsily "repaired" with plaster... Jesus brings Adam out of Limbo. The base was broken, and the presence of a body-less leg next to Adam suggests that Eve originally accompanied him.

Ecce Homo (6 et 7)

These two parts were likely once joined together and occupied the compartment between numbers 4 and 5. The isolated figure was stolen and remade through the efforts of Raymond Jacquemart of Daverdisse. The three vertical bays of the altarpiece are emphasized by pilasters with Ionic capitals depicting the Four Evangelists (upper horizontal register) and the Fathers of the Church (lower register).