The Avignon Panels:

A PRELIMINARY VIEW

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Among the finest works of art now in the Cloisters collection are two small panel paintings of the Crucifixion and the Lamentation. They have come very recently to the Museum as the bequest of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and have been placed in the Spanish Room in accordance with Mr. Rockefeller’s wishes. The paintings have been widely published, with varying attributions. Many problems still remain unsolved, and it is impossible at the present time to offer more than a short preliminary survey.

It is now generally agreed that the Crucifixion and Lamentation were painted about 1340-1350 by a Sienese artist working at the papal court in Avignon. This was the period of the so-called Babylonian Exile, when the French popes preferred to reside in southern France rather than in Italy where political conditions approached a state of anarchy. The court in Avignon was a brilliant one, attracting builders, painters, musicians, poets, bankers, traders from all countries in Europe, especially from Italy. In Avignon on Good Friday in 1327, Petrarch first saw his Laura. Here in 1340 Petrarch’s friend Simone Martini, the most renowned Italian painter of his time, arrived from Siena to work on frescoes commissioned by Cardinal Jacopo Stefaneschi for the cathedral of Notre-Dame des Doms, adjacent to the papal palace. Cardinal Stefaneschi,
native of Rome, writer, humanist, patron of artists including Giotto and Simone, lived in Avignon for the major part of twenty years, up to his death there in 1343. He is a key figure in the story of our two paintings.

Among the cardinal’s many literary efforts was a life of St. George, which is important chiefly because of the remarkable illustrations by an anonymous artist that illuminate the manuscript. The major illustration depicts St. George killing the dragon. This representation is closely related to a fresco of the same subject, now destroyed, that was painted by Simone Martini in the porch of Notre-Dame des Doms. Moreover, the four lines of Latin poetry that were inscribed under the fresco are exactly the same as a quatrain in Cardinal Stefaneschi’s text. A drawing of the fresco is in the Vatican Library, and the manuscript is in the archives of St. Peter, Rome.

On the basis of style the two paintings at The Cloisters are attributed to the artist of the manuscript, known as the Master of the Codex of St. George. A number of other panel paintings and manuscript illuminations are ascribed to this master, including at least one other in New York, a beautiful missal (see Figure 1) in the Pierpont Morgan Library.

The panels at The Cloisters, painted in tempera, suggest the work of a miniaturist, in their jewel-like colors and in the care with which the gilding was applied, so that scarcely a crack has appeared in six centuries. The excellent preservation of these panels, in fact, is undoubtedly due in large part to the expert, painstaking craftsmanship of the artist.

The scene of the Crucifixion is treated with restraint. In many Italian paintings of this period, and in several French ivories and manuscripts of the fourteenth century, the Virgin is portrayed fainting into the arms of the holy women or St. John; here, however, she remains upright, enveloped in her voluminous ultramarine cloak, hugging her grief to herself. Mary Magdalene, often shown clinging despairingly to the foot of the cross, here turns away as if she can scarcely bear to witness the sight. John places his hand on his cheek in a centuries-old, formalized gesture of sorrow. The centurion raises his right arm as he proclaims, “Truly this was the Son of God.” According to legend he became the first Roman convert and martyr, and so he is distinguished from the other soldiers by a halo. But his companions as well seem not so much evil executioners as instruments in the hand of God for the redemption of mankind. The artist has combined here the traditional, formal representation of the Crucifixion as a dogma of Christian faith, with the “newer” conception of the Crucifixion as a tragic event in the lives of human beings.

In the lamentation over the body of Christ the master follows closely the description in the Meditations on the Life of Christ by Pseudo-Bonaventura. This work by a thirteenth century Franciscan mystic added many imaginative and specific details to the Gospel story; it was so popular that it influenced painters and sculptors for at least two hundred years. The Lamentation, a scene not included at all in the Gospels, is described thus: “Our Lady supports the head and shoulders [of Christ] in her lap, the Magdalen the feet at which she had formerly found so much grace. The others stand about making a great bewailing over him . . . as for a firstborn son.” Here the Virgin, who remained upright at the foot of the cross, faints in the arms of one of the holy women. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, with haloes, stand in the background, preparing for the burial of Christ.

In facial type these two old men seem more French than Italian, and other French influences may be seen in the work of this master. Certain scholars have even maintained that the artist is in fact French; it is now generally accepted, however, that he was indeed a Sienese, as was his contemporary Simone, and that the French characteristics are a result of his stay in Avignon.

The two paintings at The Cloisters are very similar in style and identical in shape to two panels also attributed to the Master of the Codex of St. George, a Noli me tangere and a Coronation of the Virgin at the Bargello in Florence. The four works may originally have been parts of the same altarpiece, although the Bargello paintings are slightly smaller. Perhaps the four panels were planned as a pair of diptychs for use on private altars. Since the old frames on the Cloisters paintings have been lost, we have replaced them with modern ones copied from those in the Bargello.
OVERLEAF: The Crucifixion and the Lamentation, by the Master of the Codex of St. George. Tempera on wood, gold ground. Italian (Siena), about 1340-1350. Both panels 15 3/4 x 10 3/8 inches

Bequest of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 61.200.1-2