

The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John



This striking crucifixion piece was painted from 1624 to 1625 by Dutch painter Hendrick Jansz ter Brugghen. Little was written of him in his own time, but contemporary Joachim von Sandrart referred to his work as “Profound, but melancholic...”

Profound, but melancholic is an apt descriptor for this piece. Christ’s body hangs limply on the cross, blood pouring from His wounds. He is flanked on either side by the Virgin Mary and St. John, and a memento mori in the form of a skull lies at the foot of the cross reminding the viewer of the fate awaiting all mortals.

One might even describe this piece as despairing, but I see in it an understated hopefulness. The starry night sky overhead gives way to the morning light coming up from the bottom of the piece. Mary and John gaze up at Christ not with horror and sadness, but with more neutral expressions, perhaps understanding. The most profound detail to me is the posture of Mary and John. One foot is planted while the other is lifted slightly behind the first as if to suggest they are slowly and tentatively approaching the cross, drawn to it.

This piece is a reminder to find the beauty in Christ’s grim sacrifice and see that He has paid the price for our sin out of love for us.