



Colijn de Coter, *The Lamentation (Pietà)*, ca. 1510-15



Oil on three joined oak panels
left: 44 x 14 5/8 in., center: 41 1/2 x 29 1/8 in., right: 43 7/8 x 14 5/8 in.
Gift of Charles R. Crane, 13.1.1



Artist Biography

Few surviving archival documents provide us with details of the life and career of the painter Colijn de Coter (Netherlandish, ca. 1455—ca. 1538/1539). His name is mentioned in the contracts for two artworks (both of which are now lost or unidentified) and is inscribed on only three surviving paintings, although more have been attributed to him (like the Chazen's painting). His birthdate can be extrapolated from the information presented in a later document dated 1479 in which he is described as a married painter and the tenant of a house in Brussels. He appears registered as a free master with the painters' Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp as "Colyn van Brusele" (Colin of Brussels), who was commissioned to paint the vault of a chapel near Mechelen. The account books of the Brussels Confraternity of St. Eligius record that the artist was paid for a painting between 1509 and 1511. He likely died in or shortly before 1538-39.

Known at the time as the "Low Countries," the areas of present-day Belgium (including Brussels), Luxembourg, and the Netherlands were under the rule of the duchy of Burgundy from the end of the fourteenth to the end of the fifteenth centuries, along with Northern France. The court, or capital, of the Burgundian duchy was located in Brussels from 1441 onward and many artists were attracted to the region to seek and benefit from ducal patronage. One of the most well-known artists working in Brussels at this time was Rogier van der Weyden (ca. 1399—1464). De Coter's style shows the influence of this great painter.

In 1477, the duchy of Burgundy reverted to France, while the Netherlands was absorbed by the Hapsburg dynasty. This political transition led to partisan clashes among European powers, along with social unrest and resistance in the region that were met with violent suppression. This unease— influenced by religious contestations between Catholics and Protestants—would continue until 1566, when the Low Countries revolted, beginning the Eighty Years' War.

While there is no written evidence that De Coter kept a studio, this was common practice at the time, and scholars are in agreement that he likely oversaw an active studio with a number of assistants. De Coter and his workshop produced altarpieces for churches and smaller panels for private devotion, as well as tapestry designs.

De Coter's innovative approach and simplified technique were highly influential and in demand in the cities of Brussels, Antwerp, and Mechelen from the 1480s through the 1520s. Notable characteristics of his works included the monumentality of his figures who appears almost to be in the same space as the viewer due to the fact that they are crowded together and depicted extremely close to the picture plane. The figures are often cut off by the edges of the panels on which they are painted, heightening the dramatic effect. His expert use of light and shadow (*chiaroscuro*) to create forms and figures that appear three-dimensional, and his attention to ornamental details in the figures' dress, jewelry, and other objects give the figures presence. Finally, the extremely expressive gestures and facial expressions that he bestows on his figures animate his compositions and draw the viewer in.



Location

Due to the continued closure of the Elvehjem building under COVID-19, *The Lamentation (Pietà)* is currently unavailable for in-person viewing.

Visual Description

The Lamentation (Pietà) is an altarpiece painted by Colijn de Coter around the years 1510-1515. The work is composed of three wooden panels that have been adjoined by hinges. The central panel measures forty-one- and one-half inches by twenty-nine and one eighth inches and has a curved top that resembles an archway. Hinged to the central panel are two side panels, each measuring forty-four inches by fourteen and one eighth inches. When closed, or pushed towards the central panel, their shape echoes the archway, individually appearing as one half of the central arch. Each panel features a richly detailed oil painting that has been framed in gold. The altarpiece depicts a group of seven people observing the lifeless body of Christ. In the central panel, Christ is depicted nude, wearing only a white loincloth around his waist, a horizontal scar marking his rib cage. His head and torso are held upright, and his eyes are closed, cheeks sunken in, and a pale blue discoloration marks his eyelids, the tip of his nose and his lips. His right arm lays to his side and rests atop a pink slab that resembles stone and his left arm rests upon his left leg. Standing behind him, is the Virgin Mary, outfitted in her traditional dress of a dark blue robe with a white veil. She stands over Christ and bends slightly, looking down at Christ, her right hand holding his head. Her left-hand catches part of her veil and her eyebrows furrow as her rosy lips point downward. To the left of Mary, a man stands with his right arm outstretched as if gracing Christ's arm. He holds his head in his left hand and his facial expression matches Mary's as he looks down at Christ. To Mary's right stands a woman wearing elaborate dress, though we only see her from the elbows up. She wears a head covering resembling a turban covered with a light green veil. She, too, looks down at Christ, her face stoic and her hands clenched as if praying, a bit of the green veil crumpled in her hands. In the right panel, a pair of two women stand. In the foreground, a woman wearing a French cap and elaborate dress holds an open brown jar shaped like a spool in her hands. Her face is stoic, her cheeks rosy and she looks to the left as if focusing her gaze on Christ. The woman standing behind her stands, hands crossed in front of her chest, and looks down as if to see what's in the jar. In the left panel, stands a pair of older men, one in front of the other. The man in the foreground wears a hooded brown robe and holds an object that resembles a partially wrapped wreath in his hands. He appears concerned as his eyebrows furrow, but it's unclear as to whether he's looking right and at the body of Christ or down at the object in his hands. An older man with a long gray beard and green turban stands behind and looks right off the edge of the frame. At the very top of the left and right panels, a pair of weathered legs and feet dangle over a large pole. Only seen from the shin down, the legs are weathered and have visible bruising.



Content and Context

The *Lamentation (Pietà)* is painted on three wooden panels, the left and right of which are hinged to the central panel. This form indicates that the painting is an altarpiece (sometimes called a retable), or an “image-bearing structure” that would have been positioned in such a way as to stand up at the rear part of an altar within a Catholic church.¹ Due to its placement, the subject or theme of altarpieces often referred to the person or saint celebrated at a specific altar, or referenced more broadly the death of Christ, given that the Eucharist (a ceremony in which bread and wine are consecrated), which commemorates the Last Supper prior to Christ’s arrest and subsequent death, is performed at the altar. In addition, the likenesses of those individuals who donated the money to the church to commission the altarpiece were often incorporated by the artists into the composition. The fifteenth century saw a burgeoning in the number of altarpieces in the Netherlands and nearby areas, as the base of patronage grew due to the economic prosperity of the region. During this time, altarpieces grew to monumental proportions and complexity. With the effects of the Reformation, however, the desire for altarpieces subsequently decreased.

The subject of this painting is the Lamentation, or the Pietà, which in Italian means “pity” or “compassion.” This moment is not described in the Christian Bible but arose from the desire to augment the narratives of Christ’s suffering and death, referred to as the Passion of Christ. The Lamentation is a moment in which the Virgin Mary and others mourn the dead body of her son Jesus Christ after his body is brought down from the cross on which he was martyred. In this altarpiece, Mary and Jesus are shown alongside a number of other individuals including Joseph of Arimathea (a respected disciple of Jesus’s who took responsibility for his burial and who holds Jesus’s crown of thorns), St. John the Evangelist (one of the Apostles), Mary Magdalene (a follower of Jesus who witnessed his crucifixion), and Mary Cleophas (who holds a container of ointment to anoint the dead body). One can see in the background, as indicated in the upper region of all three panels, the post of the crucifix and a ladder, as well as the crucifixes still containing the bodies of the two thieves alongside of which Jesus was crucified.

De Coter focused on this funerary moment as one of immense loss, grief, and suffering, as expressed by the individuals who mourn Christ in the painting. In their faces and gestures, the viewer sees the unfathomable grief of a mother whose son has faced a brutal death, and of those close to him who have lost a beloved teacher, leader, and member of their community. The Virgin Mary raises her left hand to her heart indicating her intense suffering, while St. John the Evangelist with his left hand raised to his head, and another woman clasps her hands together. A popular thirteenth-century devotional guide describes the Virgin’s intense emotional response as she contemplates her dead son: “she wept inconsolably; beholding the wounds in his hands and side, seeing, too, the marks of the thorns, his dead face, his torn beard, his face besmeared with spittle and with blood as she looked at his features, now this way, now that; nor could she cease to gaze, nor cease to weep.”² The affective, or emotional, response to images depicting the Crucifixion and the Lamentation of the Virgin over the dead body of Christ intensified significantly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially in Northern Europe.

¹ For more information on altarpieces, see: Alexander Nagel, “Altarpiece,” [Grove Art Online](#) (2003, updated 2014)

² *The Meditations on the Life of Christ*, which was translated into many vernacular languages for use by the laity throughout Europe for centuries



The Dutch fourteenth-century popular preacher Gert Groote recommended that one keep the stories of Christ's suffering and death constantly in mind, contemplating the scenes in the mind's eye or by gazing on images "slowly and with tears." The worshipper was taught mnemonic and sensory techniques for visualizing and contemplating images of the suffering Christ. The figures of the Virgin, St. John and the attendant mourners became models for the layperson's meditations and devotional practice. By rehearsing grief in this manner, they may have been prepared to a certain degree to the traumas of life, such as the death of a child or loved one.

It has been shown that those who hold a belief in a greater power or are part of a spiritual community have great resiliency. For a sixteenth-century Christian viewer, this painting of the Lamentation would have been experienced as the literal embodiment of grief. It would have functioned as a mirror or a container for the viewer's own personal grief.



Discussion Questions

1. This artwork is overtly Christian in nature. Do you have to be a “believer” to relate to this work? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. At this time this painting was produced, it was common for people to keep objects of private devotion in their homes. These objects were usually icons, or sacred images rooted in Christianity. Do you keep any objects in your personal space that could be likened to objects of private devotion? If so, what are they and what function do they serve in your space?
3. Who or what do we worship in our culture? What aspects do you think account for the power they have?
4. How might our contemporary culture be seen to “rehearse” grief? Are there images, movies, writings, or music that have prepared you for trauma in your life?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Giovanni Minelli de’ Bardi (Italian, ca. 1440-1528). [*Christ, the Man of Sorrows*](#), ca. 1500. Polychrome terracotta, 26 x 16 3/16, x 6 ¼ in. Humanistic Foundation Fund purchase, 65.7.1.

This sculpted terracotta sculpture is another type of devotional figure, showing only Jesus Christ, with his wounds predominantly displayed. It was created around the same time as De Coter’s altarpiece, although in Southern rather than Northern Europe. It would have, however, served the same meditative purposes.

José Clemente Orozco (Mexican, 1883 - 1949). [*Grief*](#) (also called El Campesino, Mourning Figure, and Mural Study--Grief), 1926. Lithograph, 11 15/16 x 9 15/16 in. University Fund purchase, 52.1.3.

This print records a study for a mural that Orozco painted at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City entitled *The Revolutionary Trinity*, in which the Christian triad of the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost is replaced by fighters and laborers.

Unknown artist, Gandharan. [*Death of the Buddha \(Parinirvana of the Buddha\)*](#), 2nd-3rd century. Schist, 7 x 12 3/4 x 2 in. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William F. Spengler, 1986.62.

In Buddhist faith, the death of the Buddha is celebrated rather than mourned, because the Buddha was believed to have attained Enlightenment and therefore escape from the cycle of rebirth, becoming free from the suffering of life. On the day that the Buddha’s death is celebrated (Mahāyāna New Year), celebrants reflect on their own future death and that of friends and family who have passed.



Unknown artist, Nigerian (Yorùbá People). [*Pair of Twin Memorial Figures*](#) (àwon ere Ibéjì), ca. 1940. Wood and copper, 1) 10 3/16 x 3 ½ x 3 ½ in.; 2) 10 1/8 x 3 3/8 x 3 ½ in. J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 1991.30.1-2.

In Yorùbá culture, the birth of twins is considered to be a good omen, and twins themselves are seen to hold great power. In some cases, when a twin dies, *ere ibeji* figures are made to serve as a way to access the spirit of a departed twin. The parent(s) provides ritual care to the figure, feeding, bathing, and dressing it as they would their lost child.



Additional Resources

Saint Bonaventure (ca. 1217-1274), *The Life of Christ*, translated and edited by the Rev. W. H. Hutchings (London: Rivingtons, 1888),

<https://archive.org/details/TheLifeOfChristBonaventure/page/n313/mode/2up?q=lamentation>

David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) [Kohler Art Library N71 F65 1989]

Pamela Hibbs Decoteau, "Lamentation Triptych by Colin de Coter," *Elvehjem Museum of Art Bulletin 1977-1978* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1978), <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/Arts/Arts-idx?type=article&did=Arts.Bulletin7778.i0006&id=Arts.Bulletin7778&isize=M>

M. Leeflang, "Colijn de Coter, *The Lamentation of Christ*, Brussels, c. 1510-15," in J. P. Filedt Kok, ed., *Early Netherlandish Paintings*, online collection catalogue (Amsterdam, 2010),

<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/SK-A-856/catalogus-entry>

Christopher Krall, "'Resilient Faithfulness': A Dynamic Dialectic Between the Transcendent and Physical Dimensions of the Human Person," *Journal of Moral Theology* vol. 9, no. 1 (2020),

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=rft&AN=ATLAI14200127001274&site=ehost-live&scope=site> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Margarita A. Mooney, "Disaster, religion, and resilience," *The Imminent Frame: Social Science Research Council* (February 24, 2010), <https://tif.ssrc.org/2010/02/24/disaster-religion-and-resilience/> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

C. Périer-d'Ieteren, "Coter, Colijn [Colin; Collin; Colyn] de," *Grove Art Online* (2003, updated 2010),

<https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T019818>

Nienke Woltman, "'Spot the Difference' Technical Research into Two Versions of *The Lamentation of Christ*, attributed to Colijn de Coter," *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* vol. 67, no. 4 (2019),

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26842799> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]