



Rogier Van Der Weyden and Stone Sculpture (Distinguished Contributions to the Study of the Arts in the Burgundian Netherlands)

Bart Fransen

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En Brabant c'était le bois, à Tournai c'était la pierre in Brabant it was wood, in Tournai it was stone. With this sweeping generalization Paul Rolland concluded his 1931 article on the fifteenth-century Tournai school of sculpture and painting. His thesis has burdened subsequent art historical research with preconceptions that continue to dominate the literature on the topic even today. The study of sculpture in Brabant is all too often limited to wooden altarpieces, with works in stone receiving barely a mention, while the study of sculpture in Tournai (a name wrongly used by many as pars pro toto for the sculptural production of all Hainaut) is usually restricted to stone sculpture, with the importance of the local blue stone being emphasized all too often. Wood sculpture in Tournai and stone sculpture in Brabant are therefore pretty much terra incognita. All the same, thanks to data in a contract of 1466, Robert Didier has convincingly identified some fragments of a wooden Passion altarpiece (private collection), which stylistic criteria had previously led him to attribute to Antwerp or Utrecht, with the Tournai-made altarpiece of Vezon. Thus attributions and datings can vary considerably depending on the criteria applied. This is not only the case for Brabantine sculpture; it probably goes for sculpture in general. In painting the problem arises less often. No one is likely to confuse a Van Eyck with a Van der Weyden, for instance, or a fifteenth-century painting with one from the sixteenth century. Moreover, the painting of the Flemish Primitives has been the subject of systematic scholarly study for a much greater length of time. That fifteenth-century sculpture has not yet received the same degree of attention has been remarked upon by several authors. This deficiency is often attributed to the fact that many works were lost to sixteenth century iconoclasm, the French Revolution, the two world wars and the twentieth-century desire for modernization. Furthermore, the few surviving works are often difficult to get at, for many of them are not in museum collections but churches and monasteries. The first two chapters are conceived as steps on the way to the case studies. Chapter One provides a concise and critical look at the existing writings on the subject, Chapter Two deals with the artist's field of activity, with specific attention paid to the material and the guild. Chapter Three contains the six case studies. Finally, in Chapter Four, we look for the evidence of Rogier van der Weyden's direct contribution to the sculpture of his time. The primary sources that were used are in the first place written documents, then drawings, then last but not least, the sculptures themselves.

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