



**AMBROSIUS FRANCKEN II**

(Antwerp 1581 - 1632)

*"Crucifixion"*

Oil on panel

64 x 50 cm. (25,19 x 19,68 in.)

1610 ca.

**Certified by Professor Jan de Maere  
Exhibited at TEFAF Maastricht 2022**

For this month of February we have chosen this magnificent work by Ambrosius Francken II, an outstanding Flemish painter and draughtsman of religious, allegorical and historical themes.

Ambrosius Francken II was a Flemish painter specializing in historical and religious painting. Little is known with certainty about his life. He was known as the young man, to distinguish him from his uncle of the same name. He was the son of the well-known painter Frans Francken I (1542-1616) and was most likely his pupil in his early years. In 1623-1624 he became master of the Guild of St. Luke in the city of Antwerp. In his early works, we see a clear influence of his father, especially in the way of treating the human figures, taking care of the anatomy and faces of the characters depicted in his paintings. It is said that he spent some time painting in the city of Louvain, but no documentation of this fact is preserved. We also know that on the death of the painter Abraham Govaerts (1589-1626), Ambrosius contributed to the realization of some figures in the landscapes that Abraham had left unfinished.

Among the best followers of the late Romanist figurative tradition were the first members of the Francken dynasty. Among them, Ambrosius Francken II, also known for having completed some works that De Backer left unfinished at the time of his untimely death. A dating of the initial phase of Ambrosius II's work also allows us to read with familiarity the strong proximity to the figurative grammar of Hedrick Goltzius, the choice to focus on the capacity of expressions and anatomies in a vibrant and muscular way, accompanying everything with dim and dynamic light, without distributing symbolic and allegorical references in the painting, according to that custom that will later be typical in the final phase of the author.

Ambrosius Francken II dedicated his career to painting small religious scenes of great quality in the style of his brother Frans Francken II (1581-1642), but we also find among his works genre scenes.



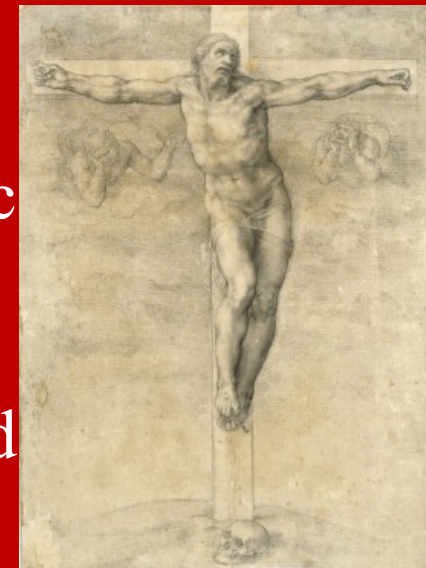
In contrast to Holland, in the 17th century Flanders remained under the Catholic influence of the kingdom of Spain.

During the Baroque and as in previous periods, the most outstanding and rich artistic manifestation is the pictorial, which links with the traditional

Flemish painting and shows a parallel development to the Dutch painting, including the new genres that are developed in it.

The preoccupation with Italian art and the constant relationship with Venetian painters will be maintained. The most outstanding figure, and one of the geniuses of universal painting of all times, is Pedro Pablo Rubens, whose work will have a great transcendental importance in the rest of Europe.

Our panel is closely linked to a figurative prototype by Michelangelo, perhaps one of the most widespread iconographic sources throughout the 16th century: Buonarroti's Christ Crucified. The work (known through the drawing, Fig. 1) spread throughout Europe through engravings and drawings, quickly



(Fig.1) Michelangelo, *Drawing for Crucifixion*, mm 368x268, The British Museum , London.

becoming a figurative canon of nude Christ anatomy, especially for artists such as Frans Floris and Marten de Vos, who were enthusiastically discovering the Italian way of conceiving anatomies and the conception of space of which Tuscan art/Roman art had become a champion. In particular, at least two major compositions closely related to ours are known today.

The first in the Gerstanmeier collection in Madrid and the second recently entered the art market, both attributed to Jacob de Backer. If for both paintings the commonality of the figure of Christ on the Cross is evident, the compositional differences underline the absolute originality of our painting.

Our panel represents the Crucifixion, one of the most recurrent themes in Christian art with very evident iconography. The composition of the work is triangular, where the protagonist is Christ Crucified. We observe the great mastery of the painter when representing the human anatomy, which reflects in a very plausible way each part of the body. Under Jesus represented the skull, as an allegory of redemption of Adam's sin and the birth of a new man. It is the emblem of the triumph of the cross over sin, with a clear allusion to the resurrection of Christ.



On the left, the Virgin Mary with black mantle dedicates a prayer to her beloved son and on the right, St. John the Evangelist crosses his hands and directs



his gaze towards the Virgin. Under the cross, St. Mary Magdalene kneels before Jesus, with a gesture of great pain before such horror.



Behind the main scene, we find two women embracing, they would be the other two Marys: Mary of Cleophas and Mary Salome. In addition we also see two characters on horseback with oriental attire, the soldiers who watched over the execution of Christ.

The strong contrast between the leaden sky and the clothes of the characters (with variations from pale pink to deep red), accompanies the strongly shortened faces and bold poses, tense muscles and agitated gestures, based on that typically Nordic interpretation that



likes to absorb the brightest tones of Michelangelo, in line with the innate

Flemish taste for anti-classicism. Subtle touches of light are then used to create

the effect of tears on the faces or for the natural sheen of the skin (note the touch on St. John's nose), while everywhere a nervous design can be seen that takes the form of folds of powerful movement: romanticism in all its splendor.

The whole scene is framed on an urban background, very recurrent in the scenes of Calvary. We observe a dark and turbulent sky as a symbol of what is happening, which envelops the scene in a halo of sadness and pain.





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  - Thieme, U. Becker, F. *Allgemeines Lexicon der bildengen Künstler: von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Catálogo razonado, Leipzig, 1619, vol. 12 p. 338

## PROVENANCE

- Private collection, France

## EXHIBITIONS

- TEFAF Maastricht 2022.

## MUSEUMS

There are works by Ambrosius Francken II in the museum collections of the following cities among others:  
Kunstmuseum, Basel (Switzerland) - Billedgalleri, Bergen (Norway) - Museum of Fine Arts, La Rochelle (France) -  
Museum of the Augustinian Sisters, Toulouse (France), etc.