Albert van Ouwater: *The Raising of Lazarus*

The acquisition of the *Raising of Lazarus* (fig. 1) by the Gemäldegalerie Berlin in the year 1889 meant at the same time the raising of Albert van Ouwater from a mere name in Karel van Mander’s *Schilderboeck* of 1604 to a major figure of fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting. The panel had been completely unknown to scholars and was only shortly before its acquisition recognized – on the basis of a poor photograph – by Ludwig Scheibler as the work described in some detail by Van Mander in his ‘*leven van Albert van Ouwater, Schilder van Haerlem*.’ Moreover, Van Mander’s claim that the painting had been abducted from Haarlem by Spanish troops – during the occupation of the city in 1573 – fitted well with the provenance of the panel which had come from the collection of a Marchese Mamelli in Genoa who in turn had inherited it from the Balbi family. In this family it was believed to have been gained once as a gift from king Philipp II of Spain.

The medium-sized panel shows the event described in John 11:1–45, set into the rounded apse of a building of Romanesque style. Carved reliefs on the capitals of the ambulatory showing scenes from the Old Testament – the Flight of Hagar and Ismael, the Sacrifice of Isaac, Moses before the burning bush and God giving the tablets of the law to Moses, Moses showing the tablets to the people (fig. 2) – make clear that the building represents a Jewish temple. In the centre of the round apse, the grave of Lazarus opens in the floor; obviously this is the earliest known instance of a placement of the burial inside a sacred building, which corresponds to late medieval custom but not to the pictorial tradition which had Lazarus’ tomb set in the open air. In the Berlin painting, the rising saint sits on the slab, his body still looking like a pale corpse, his confused gaze cross-eyed. Christ is standing left of the grave, on the dexter side of the composition, and has just called ‘Lazarus, come forth’. Behind him are standing three disciples and a woman with a skirt of brocade under a blue robe, no doubt Lazarus’ sister Martha. His second sister Mary Magdalene, clad completely in bright red, a colour underscoring her passion and love, is kneeling in the left foreground, her hands clasped in prayer. Behind Lazarus, St. Peter is pointing out the miracle to a group of Jews on the right; some of them are turning away from the event or hold cloths to their noses in order to escape the smell of decay. Peter plays a major role in the composition and is clearly understood as the apostle or missionary of the Jews. The pose of Lazarus himself recalls the rising dead in pictures of the Last Judgement and makes thus clear that his raising is a promise to the faithful to rise from death at the end of times. The scene is completed by curious observers who have crowded behind a grate in the screen closing off the ambulatory; their position as well as their desire to see the miracle reflect that of the beholder in front of the painting.

Van Mander gives a sufficient description of the picture and an appraisal of its merits in his publication of 1604. Nevertheless, what he describes was not the work...
Albert van Ouwater, *The Raising of Lazarus*, c. 1460-1475, panel, 124 x 92 cm.