A TONDO BY CORNELIS ENGBRECHTSZ

by Julius S. Held.

No more pleasant task can fall to the historian of art than that of "whittling down" the huge oeuvre of Master "Inconnu". His name is still connected with a lamentably numerous group of works, especially in European museums whose possessions have never crossed that great baptismal font, the Atlantic Ocean. This is regrettable chiefly because works so labelled generally do not enjoy a high reputation; they have a tendency to disappear into marginal rooms, dark hallways, foreign embassies and finally, into cellars or attics. There they rest until a nosey art historian comes poking around and by christening the outcasts restores them to the company of works with decent names.

The picture published here (Fig. 1) is one such nameless foundling, extracted by the author some years ago from the attic of the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence 1). It has been listed in the old catalogue as "École Flamande" (No. 403) but it has probably not been seen by anyone for a long time, since the proper attribution offers hardly any difficulty and will, I am sure, be accepted without any lengthy demonstration. As a work by Cornelis Engebrechtsz, it adds a pleasant item to the small group of primitives at the Musée Granet, among which the Madonna with Saints and Donor by the Master of Flémalle remains, of course, the most important piece. The little tondo cannot compete with that work in historical, or even in aesthetic significance; yet it surely deserves more attention than it has had so far.

The subject of the picture had a special vogue in the late 14th and in the 15th century; it has been traced into all its ramifications by Panofsky 2) and we rely for the iconographic discussion on his study. Engebrechtsz' painting corresponds to one of the characteristically "northern" types in which Christ is shown standing upright in the sarcophagus, exhibiting to the beholder his wounds in a manner that evokes pity as well as the hope of salvation. Engebrechtsz stressed the latter aspect by introducing prominently a chalice into which spurts the blood from the side-wound of Christ. His picture is still rather close to the type that according to Panofsky exists in several graphic renderings, one of which he reproduced in Fig. 32, where two small angels accompany the half-length figure of Christ, who stands in the sarcophagus, the crown of thorns on his head. A painting of this type — more French than Flemish — is in the Museum of Ghent 3). There is also a connection with the type represented by Israhel van Meckenem's engraving (Panofsky,
Fig. 34) — which in turn may go back to a Rogerian idea — since Engebrechtsz’ Christ, just as that in van Meckenem’s engraving, stands under a canopy. The curtains of this canopy are pulled back by the two small angels with appropriately sad gestures and expressions. Thus it is clear that the iconographic pattern of the painting is tied closely to the tradition of the fifteenth century. Only in the weightier proportions of Christ and the more softly modelled flesh-parts, particularly of the faces of the angels, does the later date of the work become manifest.

Yet, even chronologically, the painting is surely close to the 15th century. Although it is not dated, it evidently belongs to Engebrechtsz’ early period. It still has the staidness and the simplicity that are generally associated with Engebrechtsz’ early works. All things considered, a date of ca 1500—1505 is probably not too far off.

It is not without interest for our knowledge of Engebrechtsz that the stylistic as well as the iconographic character of the work appears to be tied up more with the tradition of Flemish painting than that of Dutch. With Geertgen’s blood-covered Man of Sorrows and the general emotionalism of that famous work the little tondo of the Musée Granet has nothing in common. With its balanced design, its air of quiet resignation, its restrained movement and delicate though conventional modulation of light and shade, Engebrechtsz’ painting continues the line that leads from Rogier to Dirk Bouts and Memling on the one hand, and to the minor masters of the Brussels school on the other. That Engebrechtsz may have had part of his artistic education in the Southern Netherlands has been suggested before; this theory has recently been supported with new arguments and a period of training for Engebrechtsz in the studio of Colijn de Coter has been made plausible. The assumption of a Flemish training for the Leyden master would seem to receive further support from the tondo in Aix. Even coloristically the painting follows traditional patterns of Flemish art. One angel, the one on the left, is dressed in blue and the other in red, suggestive of the distinction between cherubs and seraphs; yet, this very “simple” arrangement of colors (combined with the light ochre of the canopy) is in keeping with the unostentatious and “unsophisticated” color-patterns of the Flemish school, especially in the tradition of Rogier.

The painting is very small, its diameter being only 15 cm. Thus it belongs to a group of Flemish tondos which are equally small and which have in common a preference for simple devotional themes. One of the earliest is the Nursing Madonna by the Master of Flémalle which apparently has come down to us only in copies. Albert Bouts painted the Head of the Man of Sorrows on such a small round panel. The Metropolitan Museum in New York has two such panels by Memling, one a Salvator Mundi and another one with the Virgin. Some years ago I saw on the New York market a charming small tondo of the Virgin with Child by Gerard David. A reading Magdalena, in the Meus collection, stylistically related to the Master of the Mansi Magdalena, belongs to the same type, and perhaps also — despite its more complex subject matter — a Beheading of St. John the Baptist in the Bargello which I should like to attribute to Provost (Fig. 2). Many further examples can easily be added to the list.

In view of the fact that such small tondos were evidently quite numerous, the question as to their original function would seem to be inescapable. No one, to my knowledge, has studied this problem, which can be isolated from the much larger one of the history of the Tondo in Flemish art in general — a problem which has not yet been dealt with either. One could imagine that they were originally permanently attached to a larger object, and we find indeed on Memling’s St. Ursula-Shrine six small tondos attached to the roof. There are reasons, however, to reject this idea for the majority of the examples that we have mentioned. A good many of them are painted on fairly thick panels and still have their original frames adding to the bulk. In other words, they have the characteristic appearance of independent, even though small, panel pictures. Engebrechtsz’ Man of