An early Work by Robert Campin

In the catalogue *Flemish Paintings and Drawings at 56 Princes Gate, London SW 7*, the first entry describes, as a work by the Master of Flémalle, a triptych in original frame with the *Entombment* on the central panel, a donor on the left and the *Resurrection* on the right wing. The dimensions of the central panel are 60 x 48.9 cm; the wings, likewise panels, measure 60 x 22.5 cm each. Count Seilern informs us further that the present writer is preparing a comprehensive essay on this triptych and that 'It is generally regarded as one of the earliest known works of the artist'. (pl. 1-11, 14-17).

Around ten years later, the promise of an essay can finally be kept, with the kind assistance and agreement of the owner. The reasons for postponement lie in the nature of this particular work of art which, despite many investigations, still occupies an isolated place in the earliest period of Netherlandish painting.

The triptych was acquired at an auction at Christie's on 14 August 1942 as a work of Adriaen Isenbrandt, from the property of Colonel R. F. W. Hill of Barn's Close, Bickleigh, Devon. It was exhibited once, at the Royal Academy, in 1953.

Since the acquisition of the triptych in 1942 no new evidence has come to light regarding its date, its place of origin or the identity of the donor represented on the left wing. All these things are still unknown, although a provisional date will be suggested in the course of this essay. The pedigree of the triptych also remains obscure, in spite of the three names written in ink in the nineteenth century on the back of the central panel, which read as follows: (top) 'Mancinelli No. 32/'; (below in another hand) 'DeFalc(?)-' , 'DeFalc(?)oy(?)' , 'DeFalt(?)-' , 'DeFalt(?)oy(?)' or 'DeFall(?)oy(?); (below) 'Colonna'. Despite the last reference, the triptych is not mentioned either in the catalogue of the Colonna Collection, Rome, of 1783 or in the only known—but incomplete—copy of the sale catalogue of


2. Thanks are due to the most generous hospitality of the owner, who made it possible for me to study the triptych in his home as many times as necessary, and who helped solve its problems in the course of our many discussions.

3. No. 13, as by Adriaen Isenbrandt (Roland, Delbanco and others).
the ‘Galerie de la Rue de la Pilotta, No. 17A’ (Palazzo Colonna), 13th March to 14th April 1891. All three names clearly point to an Italian pedigree. Mancinelli occurs as a name several times in Naples in the nineteenth century, twice as the name of an artist. There were Neapolitan artists named De Falco (if that is the correct reading) in the same period.

After the triptych had been sold at the auction of 1942 mentioned above as by Adriaen Isenbrandt it was recognized by, among others, Grete Ring, L. Burchard, E. Schilling and O. Pächt (though none of them published his opinion) as a work by the Master of Flémalle. As far as I know, this attribution has been explicitly challenged only by H. K. Röthel; and F. Winkler, who at one time, judging from a photograph, regarded it as a Spanish copy from the mid-fifteenth century, rejected it by implication in omitting it from his article on the Master of Flémalle in Thieme-Becker.

After careful cleaning by Mr. S. Isepp in 1942–1943, it became clear that the condition of the triptych was perfect. Contrary to Erwin Panofsky’s view, the donor has not been repainted, nor is the dog (A. Dohmann, op. cit., p. 37) a later addition. The only part to have suffered is the scroll associated with the donor, with the result that the writing on this (see below) is no longer legible.

In the present writer’s opinion the high artistic quality of the work throughout precludes the possibility of its being a copy. The obvious parallels with other works ascribed to the Master of Flémalle fully justify its attribution to that artist, an artist who is now generally identified, as Hulin de Loo first suggested, with Robert Campin. Campin’s Nativity in Dijon offers a good comparison. The Seilern triptych is closely related to the Dijon painting in its colouring, facial types and gestures, in the treatment of the materials and drapery folds (especially those of the hovering angels), and in the treatment of the hair of St. John, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathaea.

With regard to the date, the Seilern triptych still contains many characteristics associated with the great stylistic changes that took place around 1400 in the art of France, Germany, Bohemia, Austria, the Netherlands and elsewhere. For that reason a date after 1420 seems unlikely (further indications given below should clarify this). Panofsky has suggested 1415–1420. I regard 1410–1415 rather than 1420 as the more probable. Baldass, though without going into details, also proposes a date before 1420 but after 1410. Only A. Stange suggested an earlier date: before 1410.

Despite the features that point to an early date, however, the painting itself shows no signs of being the work of a beginner. Only the facial features of the donor betray a relatively inexperienced touch. It must have been preceded by other works by the master which are now lost, but for a single fragment...