

# COLNAGHI

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## WILLEM KEY

(Breda *circa* 1515/16 -1568 Antwerp)

### *THE CRUCIFIXION*

oil on panel

102 x 74 cm.; 40 x 29 in.

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#### Provenance

Belgian private collection, until 2023;  
Acquired from the above.

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#### Literature

Jonckheere, Koenraad. Willem Key (1516-1568): Portrait of a Humanist Painter, Turnhout 2011

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*We are grateful to Dr. Koenraad Jonckheere, who after examining the painting in person in January 2024, has confirmed the authenticity of the work - he will publish it later this year.*

This signed panel is a recently rediscovered work by Willem Key. Key is most known for his portrait paintings, which account for roughly two-thirds of his known output. However, he was also a gifted painter of historical and religious subjects - this picture is a testament to Key's powerful religious achievements, several of which were destroyed during the Iconoclastic Fury, or *Beeldenstorm*, that swept the Low Countries and famously struck Antwerp in 1566. Only a handful of other religious paintings by the artist are known, including one which sold at Koller Auctions for CHF 204,500 on 31 March 2017, lot 3029 (fig. 1, the closest to the painting in question), one which sold at Sotheby's on 29 July 2020, lot 111, and one which sold at Christie's on 27 April 2017, lot 18.

Willem Key was a prominent sixteenth-century painter from Antwerp, then one of the greatest commercial and artistic centres of Europe. Recognised for his exceptional talents, Key enjoyed high social and artistic status, earning the admiration of both local nobility and international figures, including Don Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba, and Antoine Perrenot, Cardinal Granvelle. Described by Karel Van Mander as possessing '*Sulcke edele gheesten*' ('such a noble mind') and '*Docta manus*' ('a learned hand'),<sup>1</sup> Key's artistry was celebrated for its innovation and unique blend of local and Italian influences. After moving from his hometown of Breda to Antwerp and apprenticing with Pieter Coecke van Aelst in 1529, Key's exposure to a variety of patrons and styles, including the works of classical antiquity and modern Italian masters, shaped his artistic vision. His stint in Liège in the workshop of Lambert Lombard around 1538-39 further enriched his understanding of Renaissance principles, contributing to his reputation as a leading artist in Antwerp upon his return in 1542. Key's career is marked by his ability to integrate the Netherlandish and Italian artistic traditions, making him a distinguished figure in the vibrant cultural landscape of sixteenth-century Flanders.

Jonckheere believes this *Crucifixion* provides evidence that Willem Key was the originator of this composition, of which various examples exist by multiple artists, including by Jacob de Backer who until now was considered the inventor. The existence of copies of the composition attests to the success of Key's design. Jonckheere proposes that the present painting is most likely an autograph replica by Key after a prime altarpiece that would have been destroyed during the Iconoclastic Fury and would have been of much larger dimensions. The present work, of a smaller scale, would lend itself better to private devotion. Key is known to have painted repetitions of his major works, so the existence of this second version is in keeping with his practices. The prime, lost altarpiece is possibly the *Crucifixion* that was published by Jonckheere in the section of lost and untraceable works in his catalogue.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary records mention a series of panels by Key commissioned for the town hall of Antwerp and the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe Cathedral which were destroyed in the Iconoclastic Fury, including a

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<sup>1</sup> Karel van Mander, *Het schilder-boeck*, Haarlem 1604, folio 233v.

<sup>2</sup> Koenraad Jonckheere, 'Catalogue of Lost and Untraceable Works' in *Willem Key (1516-1568): Portrait of a Humanist Painter*, Turnhout 2011, p. 211, cat. no. C4.

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*Crucifixion*. Even though little is known about the appearance of the various altarpieces, the fact that Key was awarded such important and prestigious commissions is worth mentioning in itself.

This painting is a great example of Key's unique blend of artistic influences. Its restrained palette and smooth modelling are hallmarks of Flemish art. Yet, unlike the cadaverous Christ figures typical of his Flemish peers such as Rogier Van der Weyden, Quentin Massys, and Joos van Cleve, the depiction of Christ's body here is muscular and robust, echoing the physicality of figures by Italian Renaissance masters, notably Michelangelo (fig. 2). This resemblance is further underscored by the dynamic poses and sculptural qualities of Saint John the Evangelist and, particularly, the Virgin Mary, whose twisted posture also mirrors Michelangelo's influence.

Willem Key emerged as a pivotal figure in the Counter Reformation in Antwerp, an era starting in 1585 marked by the Catholic Church's efforts to clarify and propagate its doctrines through art, aiming to make religious narratives accessible and relatable to the general populace.

Jonckheere underscores Key's significant role in this movement, highlighting his use of allegory to convey complex theological concepts. The featured painting centralises the crucifixion, placing the cross prominently at the forefront, accompanied by the Virgin Mary and Saint John, and omits the depiction of the two thieves, focusing instead on the spiritual essence of the scene against a backdrop suggestive of Jerusalem. Saint John, holding his Gospel, witnesses this pivotal moment whilst looking out at the viewer, and Key leaves his mark on the scene through his signature on a sealed document at Christ's feet.

This composition, while deeply rooted in Medieval iconography and inspired by the Gospels, is designed to underscore Christ's sacrifice and its universal message of redemption. Christ is portrayed with serene purity, devoid of morbidity, symbolising eucharistic sanctity. The narrative is enriched with symbolic elements: a subdued serpent at the base of the cross represents the defeat of original sin; Adam's skeleton in a macabre embrace with the serpent points to the crucifixion's site on Golgotha – believed to be Adam's burial site – and its deep theological implications; a broken arrow (lower centre) symbolises Christ's victory over death; a pelican, seen feeding its young with its blood at the top of the cross, embodies Christ's sacrifice and charity; and a phoenix in flames (upper left) symbolises resurrection. Allegorical figures of Patience (upper left), depicted with symbols of truth, eternity, humility, and innocence, and Justice (upper right), a figure wielding a sword, and an eagle in the upper right corner symbolising the righteous under Christ's protection, further elaborate on the themes of salvation, resurrection, and divine protection. Key integrates these elements within a Northern European landscape, bringing the sacred story closer to the contemporary viewer, thus fulfilling the Counter Reformation's aim of making religious works more comprehensible and meaningful to its audience.



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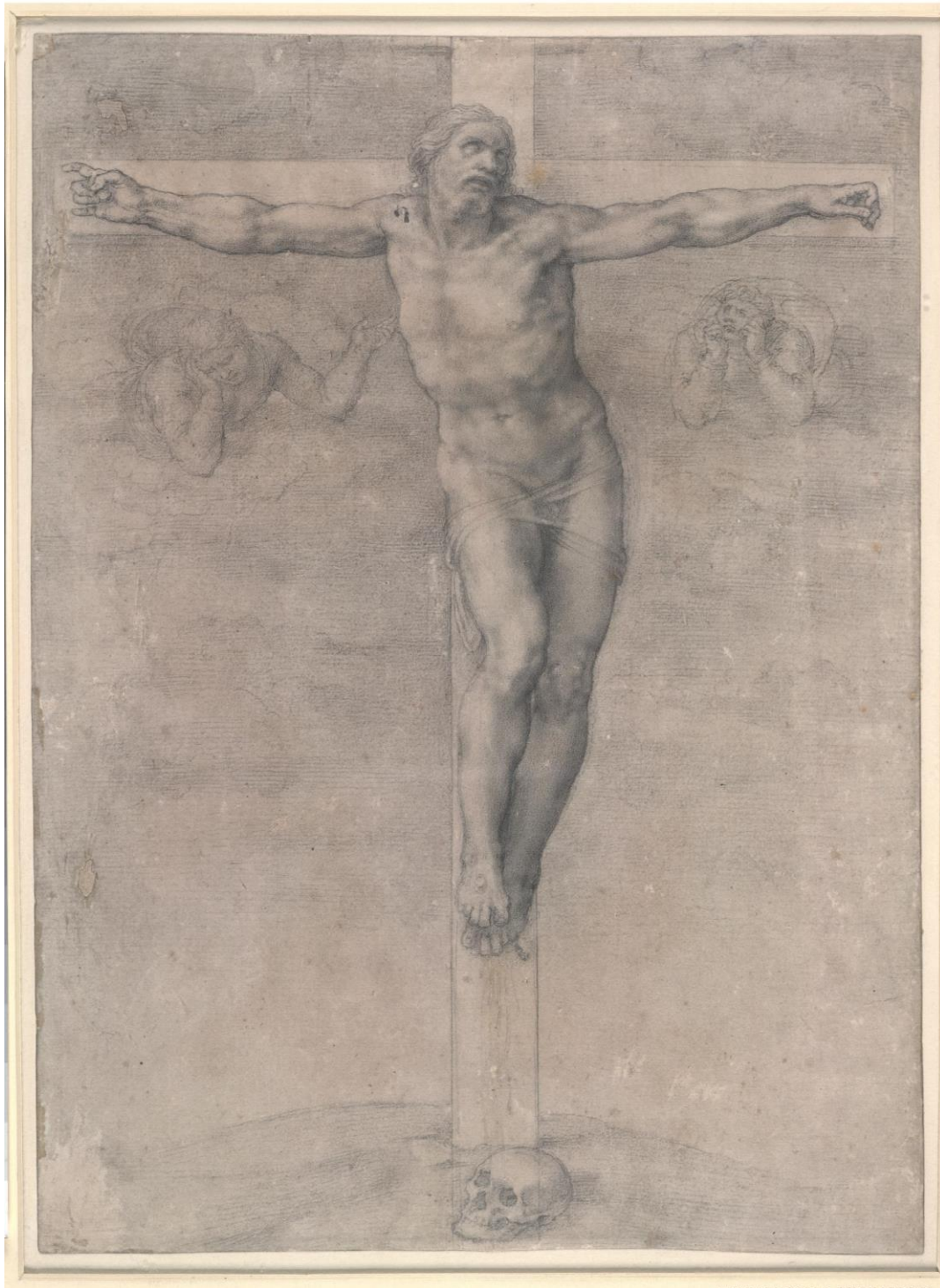
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**Fig. 1.** Willem Key, *The Lamentation*, signed and dated 1553, oil on panel, 137 × 103 cm. The Phoebus Foundation.

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**Fig. 2.** Michelangelo, Christ on the Cross; flanked by two lamenting angels, a skull at the base, c.1538-41, black chalk on paper, 36.8 x 26.8cm, London, British Museum.

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