



Portable Altar with Carrying Case, 1608

Jacopo Ligozzi (Italian, 1547-1626)

Painting: Oil on copper; Tabernacle and Case: mixed materials

26 ½ x 16 ½ x 5 ½ in. (67.5 x 41.9 x 14 cm)

➤ Who are the figures in the central painting, and what is their relationship?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

The work consists of the altarpiece itself along with the wooden, velvet-lined carrying case it would have been kept inside. The altarpiece has one central, painted image of Christ at the Mount of Olives, flanked by two columns made of the precious lapis lazuli stone. A small panel runs across the bottom with another very small painted image, depicting the Sacrifice of Isaac. Two angels made of gold float on the top,

near the slanted “roof” of the altar. The entire work is focused along the vertical, with the figures in both the lower and central paintings gently curving along this axis, but always moving the viewer’s eye upward towards the chalice in the painting and the top of the altar. Additionally, the placement of the stones and decorative motifs is highly symmetrical along the vertical axis.

The entirety of the work is crafted with utmost precision and intricate detail, using semi-precious stones, colored glass, mosaic, enamel, and gold. The rich, vivid colors of the tiny paintings are quite unusual for the solemn subject matter depicted, but they reflect and complement the colors of the semi-precious stones decorating the piece.

- How can you tell this object served a specific function?
- Can you identify what kinds of flowers are displayed on the case? (Hint: they look exactly like the real things!)

FUNCTION/Form & Style

Jacopo Ligozzi's *Portable Altar with Carrying Case* from 1608 is a rare, beautifully preserved example of the small altarpieces that were popularized in the 16th and 17th centuries. The object itself was both artistic and functional, an exquisitely decorated work of art, yet a practical tool for private worship. Devout Christians with a certain amount of wealth would commission such small, intricate altarpieces with which they could travel, or keep at home for private prayer in an intimate setting.

The wooden carrying case, stained dark to resemble ebony, has two hinged doors surrounded by fine gold-painted patterns and two brass handles. The entire front of the case is adorned with beautifully detailed plants and flowers, which were a specialty of the artist. In the center are the letters "IHS," an abbreviation for the Greek spelling of "Jesus Christ," as well as a popular monogram for the *Jesuit Order*. These letters are encircled by a wreath of flowers, all of which are associated with Christ's Passion and suffering.

Cultural and Historical Importance

The central image on the altarpiece depicts Jesus Christ slumped over in the lap of an angel as it attempts to comfort him. This Biblical scene is Christ at the Mount of Olives (as told in Matthew 26:39), also known as the Agony in the Garden. In the Gospel's telling, Christ comes to a secluded hilltop following the Last Supper, when he announced to his disciples that one of them will betray him. While on the Mount of Olives, Christ struggled with the knowledge of his impending death, and is literally overwhelmed by it. Ligozzi depicts Christ at this moment, looking pale and weak, as though fainting or swooning. His body is twisted and elongated, in keeping with the Mannerist style that directly followed the Renaissance. Ligozzi also included a cup or chalice in the upper left corner, symbolic of the blood of Christ and therefore Christ's Passion.

The little painted image directly below the central painting depicts the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac from the Old Testament—just as Abraham is lowering

VOCABULARY

Jesuit Order: A religious order of the Roman Catholic Church; also known as Soldiers of Christ, or Foot Soldiers of the Pope, as the founder of the order, St. Ignatius of Loyola, was a knight prior to becoming a priest.

Medici: A powerful and influential Florentine family of the 13th to 17th centuries. The family produced three Popes and numerous rulers of Florence, notably Lorenzo the Magnificent—patron of many of the greatest works of the Italian Renaissance.

Putti: A representation of a small, cherubic child, often naked and having wings, used especially in the art of the European Renaissance and afterwards.

Veneration: Respect or awe inspired by the dignity or wisdom of a person.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Mathematics:** Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes
- **Sciences:** Earth and Space Sciences; Life Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; People in Societies; Geography; Citizenships Rights and Responsibilities; Economics; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

his sword to kill Isaac, his own son, an angel intervenes. It is no coincidence that Ligozzi chooses to juxtapose these Old and New Testament stories—the Sacrifice of Isaac was widely interpreted as foreshadowing the Crucifixion, and there are many parallels between the two stories.

As for the carrying case, there are many hidden symbols in its elaborate decoration, all referring again to the Passion of Christ: a heart with three nails piercing it, two heads of *putti* with wings, and the dove of the Holy Spirit. Also, the wreath of flowers mentioned earlier contains further significance—it refers to the practice of draping images with floral arrangements during feasts and holy days, as a sign of honor and *veneration*. Because the flowers are draped around Christ’s name, it could be seen as another way the artist is celebrating Christ.

This particular altarpiece was probably created for a prominent member of the Jesuit order. At the time it was made, the Jesuits were emphasizing

the reverence of images as a way to make Christianity more “human,” and to elicit a strong personal identification or empathy from the viewer. This was accomplished especially through images of Christ’s Passion and his suffering. The expensive decoration of this work, as well as the iconography of the images on the altarpiece and case, all lead to the assumption that the patron was indeed a high-ranking Jesuit.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Ligozzi was born in the Northern Italian city of Verona in 1547, to a family of skilled artisans who served in the courts of wealthy families. As a result, Ligozzi was surrounded by craftsmanship from an early age, impacting the quality of his own work later in life. Most of his formal artistic training took place in Verona, which is evident through close study of Ligozzi’s works.

In 1576, Ligozzi was summoned to Florence at the request of the Grand Duke Francesco de *Medici* for the job of “scientific illustrator,” as well as painter and designer, for the Medici workshop.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

MATHEMATICS: If the carrying case is 26 $\frac{11}{16}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and the altarpiece is 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 3 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches, what is the size of each in centimeters? How much room will be left over if the altarpiece is placed within its carrying case? (*Elementary and Middle School*)

SCIENCE: Ligozzi was said to be a master of drawing various types of plants, as a “scientific illustrator.” What does it mean today to be a scientific illustrator? Select a subject to draw that has been studied extensively in class, and attempt to accurately depict it as an illustration. (*Middle School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Investigate what was happening in the year 1608. What was going on politically and socially in Europe? Who was Ligozzi’s main patron, Grand Duke Francesco de Medici, and why is he significant? (*Middle and High School*)

VISUAL ARTS: Create a personal work commemorating a special story or event that can be transported. Think of the many different materials and colors that are evident in the work Ligozzi created, and use a variety of materials in this work—go into detail! (*Elementary School*)

It wasn't until the 1590s that Ligozzi became more active as a painter in his own right, at which time he began producing many altarpieces and frescoes for Florentine churches.

Ligozzi worked for the Medici family for the rest of his life, creating many different kinds of artwork, including

miniatures for private worship, botany illustrations, designs for the Medici stone-inlay workshop, as well as large-scale paintings. He was one of the most productive artists in 17th century Florence, and his works are renowned for their craft, measured precision, and detail.