

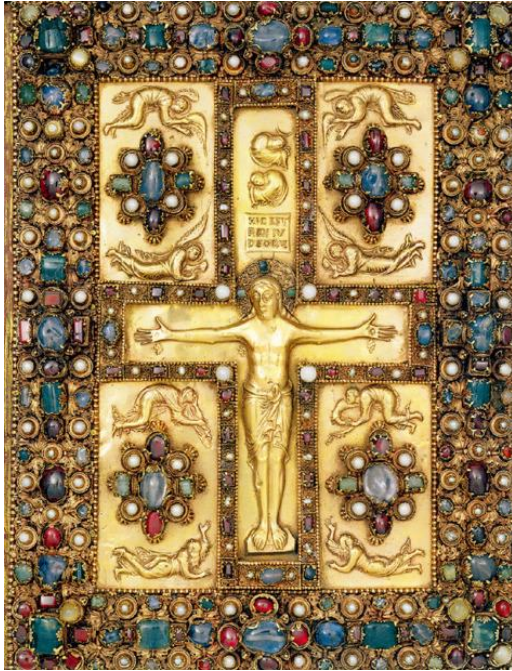
# Charlemagne vs. Rogier van der Weyden

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Left : Book cover of the Lindau Gospels by Charlemagne, 875 AD (Morgan Library & Museum, NY). Right: Deposition by Rogier van der Weyden, 1435 AD (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

Charlemagne or Charles the Great was king of the Franks from 768 AD to his death. During his reign, he conquered Italy and on 25<sup>th</sup> of December 800 AD, was crowned Imperator Augustus by Pope Leo III as a rival of the Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople. His statute is also associated with the Carolingian Renaissance, a revival of art, religion and culture through the medium of the Catholic Church. Through his foreign conquests and internal reforms, Charlemagne helped define both Western Europe and the Middle Ages. By 6th

century AD Franks were Christianized and Francia ruled by Merovingians, had become the most powerful kingdom where Western Roman Empire flourished. His reign and the era it led are often referred to as the Carolingian Renaissance because of the flowering of scholarship, literature, art and architecture.

Book cover of the Landau Gospels, decorated with gold, pearls and precious stones, which depicts Jesus on the cross along with the Evangelists is an example of the Carolingian art that is kept in the

Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City. The cover was probably produced at the Court School of the Emperor Charles the Bald. Both covers on this book attest to the reverence and ceremonial accorded to the Gospels. The cover is one of the most fascinating extant objects of its kind. Its cruciform design ultimately goes back to early Christian and early byzantine prototypes. The composition of the cross echoes antique representation of the classical axis associated by early Christians. According to Nesbitt the cover was probably made in south Germany under a strong Irish influence sometimes in the eighth century. The zoomorphic decoration of the quadrants is to be in pure Irish style. Landau cover has been proposed for it was certainly not made originally for the Landau Gospels. Deposition, portraits a heroic Jesus as described in the Landau Gospel.

Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Eyck are considered two of the greatest exponents of the school of Early Netherlandish painting. The period corresponds to the early and high Italian Renaissance but it is also seen as an independent artistic culture from the Renaissance humanism which developed in central Italy at the same time. Significant advances in illusionism, highly detailed with complex iconography and the use of iconic religious subjects are some of the characteristics of such style.

Rogier, is believed to have commenced his artistic life as a goldsmith and his figures show that he understood some kind of sculpture. He was apprenticed to Robert Campin in 1427 AD and eventually became a master painter. His vigorous, subtle, expressive style which was filled with popular religious conceptions had considerable influence on European style of painting not only in France and Germany but also in Italy and Spain.

Rogier quickly established an international reputation and received many commissions from foreign dignitaries. He spent a year in Italy, where he painted for distinguished families such as the Este in Ferrara and the Medici in Florence. Rogier's impact extended far beyond his immediate circle of artists; his dramatic and highly emotional paintings influenced every Netherlandish painter of the following generation.

What strikes the observer most in his paintings is a certain love and passion for people and objects. He was baptized in a Protestant church and some scholar's doubt Vermeer ever became a Catholic but one of his paintings *The Allegory of Catholic Faith*, which was made between 1670 and 1672 AD, reflects his belief in the Eucharist. It was probably made expressly for a Catholic patron or for a *schuilkerk* also known as a hidden church. His subjects offer a cross-section of

seventeenth century Dutch society ranging from the portrayal of a simple milkmaid at work to the luxury and splendour of rich merchantmen in their roomy houses. Religious and scientific connotations can also be found in his works.

Deposition pictures the migration from the chapel of The Virgin Mary from outside the Walls of Louvain to the monastery of El Escorial in Spain. It describes the journey from the Netherlands to Spain. In this picture two of Christ's followers Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus carry his body from the cross to the tomb. Mary his mother kneels and pulls her son's face close to her for one last moment, where Mary Magdalene kneels tearfully at his feet in splendid brocaded robes. Death has transformed Christ's green-tinged and rigid body in horrific details; his hands clenched into agonized claws and blood from his crown of thorns drops down his forehead. Both Charlemagne and Rogier are Christian therefore they apply a special interest to religious art. Charlemagne chooses the Crucifixions for the cover of the Gospel. The Gospel describes the birth, life, ministry, crucifixion and ultimate resurrection of Jesus. Rogier goes directly to the Crucifixions by picturing Jesus being carried away from the cross after the Crucifixions. Of the many gospels written in antiquity only four gospels came to be accepted as part of the New Testament or Canonical. In

Charlemagne's Gospel Jesus is a heroic man of action and that is perhaps why Rogier pictures him in centre of the painting while Charlemagne chooses an iconic and unforgettable image for the cover. They both picture Jesus as being the ultimate hero. He appears as a stoic and supernatural being, unmoved by his own crucifixion. One is putting the emphasis on the iconic Jesus in a painting and the other on the cover of the book.

As Rogier was influenced by German and mostly Christian art he creates a painting heavy in colour, full of emotions and details. The cover of the Gospel uses an early Christian design of the cross, ornamented by pearls and jewellery. Ornamentation and iconography are clear features of both the art works. Professional and social position of Charlemagne forces him to use a jewelled cover for the Gospel in order to create a sense of priority, richness, luxury and importance to the book. Jewellery is a clear symbol of wealth at the time where there was a noticeable gap between the rich and the poor. It's almost as if the king is trying to connect the rich and poor by ornamenting the Gospels, the most valuable book and moral guide at the time. Charlemagne witnesses a renaissance in the medieval period where there was a renewed interest in classical sources and styles such as Roman vaulting techniques and classical orders; gold and jewellery

were used in decorating the cover along with a bold symmetrical design where Jesus is in the centre; all common elements of the classical period.

Rogier, on the other hand is painting a picture with rich yet soft colours, symbolizing the Christ as a vulnerable being. The natural looking portrait brings you closer to a real hero made of bones and flesh and not solid gold; and perhaps with a less materialistic feeling. Choice of medium varied as did Rogier's and Charlemagne's lives. One is the king with gold and wealth as an inseparable part of his being where the other is a simple artist whose existence depends on his paints and brush. Charlemagne's image is of an unreachable, solid and indestructible faith where Rogier's picture is a simple portrait of a human being and his suffering in a form of a narrative. Charlemagne symbolizes the cover, Jesus and the cross as part of his kingdom and his authority. It also expresses a certain dominance and perhaps some force of will in having his people become followers of what he was reborn to. The tragedy of the death of Jesus is visible in both pictures.

It seems as Rogier's portrait must have become part of Charlemagne's Gospel as they both tell you the same story. In one, Jesus is being crucified and he is still on the cross; in the other, Jesus is on the ground after the shameful act is over.