

1560 words

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A Michelangelo in Belgium? The Bruges Madonna

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Leafing through a book of Michelangelo's sculptures, I was struck by a hauntingly beautiful statue of the Madonna, and I knew I had to see the real thing. The book said it was in a side chapel of the Church of Notre Dame in Bruges. But how did a Michelangelo end up *there*, in a small town in the Flemish lowlands of Belgium?

No other statue of Michelangelo's made its way out of Italy during his lifetime. Even today the only other places outside Italy with statues by Michelangelo are the Louvre in Paris and the Hermitage in Leningrad, and those are two of the largest museums in the world. Bruges is famous for its art, but the colorful paintings of the Flemish primitives are the reason. This little known Michelangelo seems a bit out of place.

On a recent business trip to Belgium, I set aside an extra day for a trip to see the sculpture. It didn't disappoint me. Michelangelo executed the Bruges Madonna in white marble around 1504, shortly after the Pietà of St. Peter's and about the same time as the magnificent David—his two most famous sculptures. He was in his mid twenties and at the height of his powers. The Bruges Madonna looks very much like the Madonna of the Pietà, a young and extraordinarily beautiful woman. She is seated, and the Christ Child is standing at her feet, as though he has just slipped off her lap. He is about to take a step down and away from her, into the world. Yet he is fearful and clings to his mother's knee and her hand. On her face, especially when seen from below, is a look at once of sadness and serenity,

as though she knows both the tragedy and the glory that this single step will one day lead to. She holds his hand, but only lightly.

I saw the sculpture early in the morning, and the only person in the church was a custodian. I asked him what he could tell me about the statue's history. How it got there, for example. Among other things, he said it had been donated to the church by the Mouscron family in 1514. They were, he said, a family of Bruges cloth merchants. They had branch offices in Florence and Rome for importing woolen goods from England, and two brothers, Jan and Alexander Mouscron, bought the sculpture from Michelangelo sometime around 1506 and shipped it back to Bruges.

Later in the morning, however, I heard a tour guide tell another story. He said it was donated by an *Italian* family—"Moscheroni" is the Italian version of the name. One brother lived in Bruges, married to a Flemish woman, and it was bought as a present for him.

Well, which were they—Flemish or Italian? I decided to try to resolve the contradiction.

I went to the Archives of Bruges to see if anyone there could tell me the true story. I was directed to Mr. Vandermaesen who had catalogued one of the few contemporary documents on the sculpture—the document accompanying its donation to the church. Mr. Vandermaesen said he had only catalogued the document, one of a long shelf-full. He hadn't studied it, let alone remembered its contents. "But just a minute," he said, and he walked out the door. A few moments later he returned with an envelope, and pulled from it a piece of parchment nearly five centuries old. Carefully but with a confidence that amazed me, he unfolded it and spread it out, and for the next half hour patiently deciphered the cramped, ancient script for me. (At one point when he wasn't looking, I reached down to touch the parchment myself. American that I am, I'm awed by such antiquity. More than twice the age of the Declaration of Independence.)

A certain Alexander Mouscron wanted a chapel set aside for the burial of his family and friends. To sweeten the deal for the church, he agreed to throw in what he calls, in one of the only two mentions of the sculpture in the document, "a sumptuous tabernacle with an image of Mary, which is precious and expensive." No mention of Michelangelo. Who in Bruges would have known about *him*?

Bruges at the time was just past her prime as a center, perhaps *the* center, of the burgeoning modern world economy. Her harbor had recently silted up, and she was losing business to Antwerp. But for the previous two centuries Bruges had been the main port of entry into northern Europe for goods from

Italy and the Near East. She was the center of a thriving textile industry, importing wool from England and exporting finished cloth throughout the known world. She was also, along with Michelangelo's Florence, a city where great art was being created. In both cities artists were discovering the perspective, the colors, and the themes that were to dominate Western art in the centuries ahead. The rich merchants and nobles of both Flanders and Tuscany were commissioning and buying up the art as fast as it could be produced. A close connection between Florence and Bruges wouldn't have been so strange after all. The Bruges Madonna makes this connection real.

But all this still left open the question of where the family originated. So Mr. Vandermaesen pulled down a book cataloguing the graves of Bruges, and searched the index under various possible spellings. We found some Mouscron from the 1460s and 1470s, and that suggested the family was from Bruges.

It turns out that that's the story the art historians tell too, although on the basis of not many more documents than I saw.

The only other reference to the sculpture in the donation is a stipulation that no one be allowed to see it without the family's permission. Strangely enough, this may accord with Michelangelo's own wishes, as revealed in one of the few other contemporary documents about the sculpture. In a letter dated 1506, Michelangelo asks his father to let no one see it.

No one knows why he felt this way. I would guess it's because of the Child. There is something strange about him. He has the baby fat of a one-year-old and the proportions of a three-year-old. He's as tall as a seven-year-old, and he has the face of an old man. But the babies of Renaissance art often strike me this way. Some art historians feel the baby is the work's greatest success. For the first time in the history of art, the child is not lying passively in the Madonna's arms but is struggling, though tentatively, to get free, and this is a theme that is repeated again and again in the next few centuries.

Several art scholars have another theory, however. They suspect the statue was intended for the Pope's Piccolomini altar in Siena until Michelangelo got a better offer from the Mouscron. He was so secretive because he was trying to slip it out of the country before the Pope got wind of the deal.

In any case, Michelangelo's wish was not entirely in vain. The statue has a long history of being hard to see. It was so little known in Italy that in the mid 1500s Michelangelo's biographer Giorgio Vasari believed the white marble statue was made of bronze.

Belgium has been the battlefield of Europe through the ages, and the

Bruges Madonna has not escaped its turmoils. French revolutionaries conquered Belgium in 1792, and two years later the people of Bruges received orders to pack up certain art works for shipping to Paris. We look now at the list of what they wanted, and we can see that even then they knew what was good. It included all the masterpieces by Jan Van Eyck and Hans Memling that we go to Bruges to see today, and it included Michelangelo's Madonna. The sculpture wasn't returned until after the defeat of Napoleon.

Then in September 1944 the retreating German soldiers carried it off again. It was found two years later by American troops in an Austrian salt mine.

Fortunately, we can see it today. But if it was intended for the Piccolomini altar, we don't see it as it was meant to be seen. There it would have been nine meters off the ground. The Madonna and Child would have been looking down and slightly to the right—their best angle. As it is today, we see it face on, and the Madonna's cheeks look a bit puffy and her upper lip is pouting. The serene sadness sometimes transforms into a mere bad mood.

Add to that the fact that, like much great art, it is a bit harder to see at all these days. In 1979, in response to the crazed attack on the Pietà in St. Peter's several years before, a protective glass screen was placed in front of the Bruges Madonna, and tourists can't approach closer than about fifteen feet.

Nevertheless, the statue *can* be seen, and even behind the glass the haunting beauty comes through. It would be worth a trip to Bruges just to see it, even if Bruges were not the beautifully preserved medieval city that it is, full of the wonderful works of the Flemish primitives. But that's a story for another day.