DE BACKKER
ART BELGIUM



Altarpiece of Saint Michael

3 panels from an altarpiece of Saint Michael
tempera and gold ground on gesso
Spain/ School of Valencia or Granada under Mozarabic influence
2nd quarter of the 15th century
Measures without frame:
2 panels 53 x 100 cm - 1 panel 53 x 106 cm
Measures with complete frame:
w: 70 cm - h: 146 cm

It is most likely that these three panels were once part of a larger retable or altarpiece dedicated to Saint Michael. **The Last Judgment** The first panel represent the Last Judgment. This scene is divided into two registers. Christ sits on a throne in the centre of the upper register, within a shell-shaped nimbus or 'mandorla'. This is not the traditional representation of the Supreme Judge with one open and one closed hand. Christ shows his stigmata, which refers to the Ecce Homo. He wears an orange robe with exotic-looking motifs. This robe is entirely different from the traditional red of the passion and is unusual in Christian iconography. His posture resembles the Sanskrit 'Padmasana' or lotus position. This is a cross-legged position used by Hindus when meditating. The whole scene makes one think of a Hindu painting. On the left we see the Virgin Mary. She is wrapped in a blue mantle, symbol of the celestial and divine. She wears a white veil around her neck, a symbol of innocence, purity and chastity. As the 'Salvatrix Mundi' or advocate for mankind, she raises her hand in a pleading gesture to her son. Her cloak has a red lining, the symbol of her passion. On the other side is a picture of St John the Baptist. He is not only an advocate, but also the most significant saint from the Old Testament. In contrast to the traditional stance where he points his hands towards Christ, he is holding his arms in front of his lap. He is wearing a red passion cloak. He is not depicted with his traditional camel-hair shirt but with a green tunic. This could possibly refer to the colour of the liturgical green garment worn by priests on the day of remembrance of the Lord's baptism. What is different from traditional iconography is that this saint is depicted without a beard, an iconography which is more usual with St John the Evangelist. Six angels are hovering behind Christ. The two above are blowing their trumpets. They are waking the dead and calling both the dead and the living to appear before the Supreme Judge. The other four angels are displaying the instruments of the Passion: the cross, the spear which pierced Christ's heart, the sponge on the reed with vinegar and the nails of the crucifixion. The divine

dispensation appears in the lower register. The Archangel Michael in armour is standing in the centre. He wields the sword of justice. In his left hand he holds the scales that will weigh the souls of the people who are to be judged. On his shoulder he wears a chlamys or travelling cloak. On the right hand of Saint Michael – his divine side – an angel receives a soul, depicted as a praying man. On his left side a devilish figure is waiting to receive the soul of a frightened, weeping man. Both mortals are wearing a white gown. Below and above these mortals the dead are crawling out of their graves. They are naked or wrapped in shrouds. The devils on the right are anthropomorphic or zoomorphic, meaning they look like people or animals or a mixture of both. **Salvator Mundi** The central panel depicts Christ as Salvator Mundi or Saviour of the World. He is represented as a Roman emperor seated on a throne. In Christian iconography this refers to the death by crucifixion of Christ through which He saved the world from original sin. As tradition has it, Christ is shown holding an orb but, contrary to the conventional representation where Christ makes a blessing gesture with his right hand, here he is holding his hand above the Archangel Michael. Because of its restrained form, this figure again gives a strong sense of the East. It is striking that he is again robed in an orange gown over a white undergarment. Both of these are decorated with Eastern motifs. The Messiah is placed within a mandorla decorated with stylised clouds between blue angels, the seraphim. They are seen as the angels of light, love and divine fire. From the four attendant angels, Christ chooses Michael. The name Michael means 'Who is like God?' He is most often depicted as a knight and bearer of the sword of justice. The banishment to hell The final panel shows the Archangel Michael banishing the fallen angels to hell. Again he is depicted as a knight in armour with a travel cloak and a sword in hand. An angel with a sword and an angel with a spear help him. The firmament is again represented above the stylised clouds with brilliant gold stars. The archangel is standing on earth and banishes the fallen angels into the cracked earth down to the burning inferno. Some of these anthropomorphic or zoomorphic demons have a dog's head. The lance with Michael's crossed staff drive them to hell. **Conclusion** We can conclude that the altarpiece is devoted to the holy Michael. Although the image corresponds to Christian iconography, the work nevertheless exhibits a few peculiarities. To begin with we have Christ in oriental dress. Furthermore, the various saints are adorned with green garments in addition to white (purity) and red (passion) clothing, a colour which does not have immediate significance in Christian iconography. In the world of Islam the colour green was reserved for the clothing of Muslims. Foreigners who stayed in the Islamic world and who had not adopted the Muslim faith were not allowed to wear green. It is possible that the artist wanted to tell us that this colour could also be worn by Christians. This work has been executed in tempera paint on a soft, thickly applied gesso ground, which has been reinforced with cloth. The flat rendering of the clothing, the grey colouring, the aureoles applied layer upon layer in relief and especially the onion-shaped arches of the Gothic fretwork enable us to assign this work to the Spanish school. Subdivision into bands and a background decorated with relief fretwork are found all over Spain until the 16th century. An example of this is the St Michael retable from Corrales de Duero (at present: Valladolid, Museo Diocesano y Catedralicio). Southern Spain The iconography clearly shows that we are dealing with a work of art that shows influences from South-Central Spain, the region above Andalusia. Andalusia was occupied by the Moors until the middle of the 15th century. We can already see in the 8th century that because of the Muslim conquest of territories in the Far East, there was a connection between Andalusia and India. The road from Andalusia to the Far East was opened up. Musicians, performers, artists and architects learned about each other's culture on the road there and back through the Islamic world. Not only do we see the Indian influence on the Iberian peninsula in the visual arts, this influence is also evident in other branches of the arts. A clear example of this is Spanish dance and music, such as Flamenco, which was strongly influenced by Hindu music. This work of art too has an Indian influence including the lotus posture and the clothing of the Christ figure. **Muzarabic influences** Over the centuries a relationship of trust grew between the Christian north of Spain and the Muslim south, to such an extent even that Granada more or less became a vassal state of Castile in the 14th century. Islamic Granada fought on the Castilian side against rebellious Muslims. The Muzarabs made up the indigenous Christian population in the Islamic kingdom and were predominantly Catholics practising the Visigothic or Muzarabic-Latin rites. They were in a small majority and were on the whole farmers, masons and translators, as well as artists. In addition to their own Spanish dialect, they also spoke Arabic. Although it would have been relatively easy to take Granada, the Christian rulers probably refrained from conquering it for a long time because of the lucrative trade they enjoyed with the Islamic world via Granada. It is evident that the creator of this work of art was familiar with Muzarabic artists. The Gothic style of this work shows that he had mastered the Christian arts and iconography and that he worked in the tradition of the International Style. **The International Style** On further examination the St Michael retable shows the influence of the 14th century Gothic style, among other things passages in the

decorative clouds which we encounter not only in High Gothic miniatures and painting, but even in the art of tapestry (for example the Angers Apocalypse). The balanced shapes and the Mannerist style also recall the 14th century. We also notice an interest in the representation of naturalistic environments and the potential of livelier rhythmic patterns where awareness of the real model is crucial. These elements are of paramount importance in the Spanish International Gothic style. We can see a quest for profundity in this work. In spite of the limitations of the empirical and conventional perspective, we sense an impression of depth and space which brings every element of the composition to life. The painter also displays an exacting attention to detail. These characteristics are typical for the style of Bernat Martorell (died 1452), as a result of which we may assume that the art of this St Michael retable follows a tradition from the second quarter of the 15th century. In his scene of St Michael as the weighing master, we can see that this artist goes somewhat further and shows the influence of the nascent realism of Flanders. On the basis of the technique, we can say that the triptych with the scenes from the legend of St Michael was painted in Spain. Its Hindu elements as well as the elements which refer to Islamic art (onion-shaped arches) lead us to locate the artist in the Iberian Peninsula. This art still follows the International Style but the landscape already betrays the emergence of realism, which enables us to date this altarpiece in the half of the 15th century. Further examination will show which Spanish master created these panels. Further research will certainly reveal us his name.

Provenance:

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