

ECCE HOMO AND MATER DOLOROSA

ALBRECHT BOUTS

27 JULY – 26 SEPTEMBER 2021

ON 15 APRIL, 1475, just a few weeks before his death on 6 May, the painter Dieric Bouts made a will leaving all of the money that he had yet to receive from the city of Leuven, all of his painting utensils and equipment and all of his unfinished or incomplete paintings and portraits to his two sons, Dieric the Younger and Albrecht (the artist left his already finished paintings to his widow so that she could sell them). In other words, Dieric, the great painter from Leuven in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, left his workshop to his two sons, who were painters like himself. This included the works that were still in progress and which naturally required finishing, so that Dieric and Albrecht did not just inherit their father's property, but they also received, as it were, an artistic legacy. His sons therefore continued their father's work.

Dieric, the first-born and his namesake, was born in around 1448 and died early in 1491, when little more than 40 years of age. Albrecht, the younger of the two, was born between 1451 and 1455 and died early in 1549, therefore living well beyond the age of 80. Thus, it was Albrecht, above all, who continued over time to follow the formulas and models of his father Dieric Bouts, one of the great creators of the innovative iconography and compositions of fifteenth-century painting in the Duchy of Brabant. Dieric was probably born in Harlem, but he is documented as living in Leuven, the great university city of the Netherlands, from 1457 until his death. A biographer (C. Périer-D'Ieteren) wrote that Bouts was not a particularly cultured artist and was thus incapable of introducing into his painting work the refined theological subtleties of other painters such as Van Eyck or Van der Weyden, but it should be stated, in his defence, that he was a brilliant storyteller and, above all, a dramatic exaggerator of emotions.

The images that are presented here are a good example of a type of dramatic representation created for the individual exercise of devotional practices that were essentially centred on meditating about Christ's Passion, and which,



Albrecht Bouts
(Leuven 1451/1454-1549 Leuven)
Ecce Homo* and *Mater Dolorosa

c. 1500; c. 1515

Oil on oak

64,5 × 84,2 cm

Provenance: Collection Dr. Adam Bock, Aachen;
bequeathed to the Suermondt-Museum, Aachen, 1912
Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen, inv. GK 57

between the late Middle Ages and the early days of the Renaissance, profoundly marked European spirituality, especially in the north of Europe, but also in the Iberian Peninsula. These “devotional images” were intended to help worshippers thoroughly immerse themselves in their contemplation of the representation that they were observing, thus facilitating their interior journey of meditation. The highly sentimental paintings produced at the Bouts’ workshop displayed a remarkable capacity for expressing the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon Christ and the Virgin Mary’s sorrow as she witnesses her son’s anguish, so that, over the space of two generations, such images proved to be extreme-

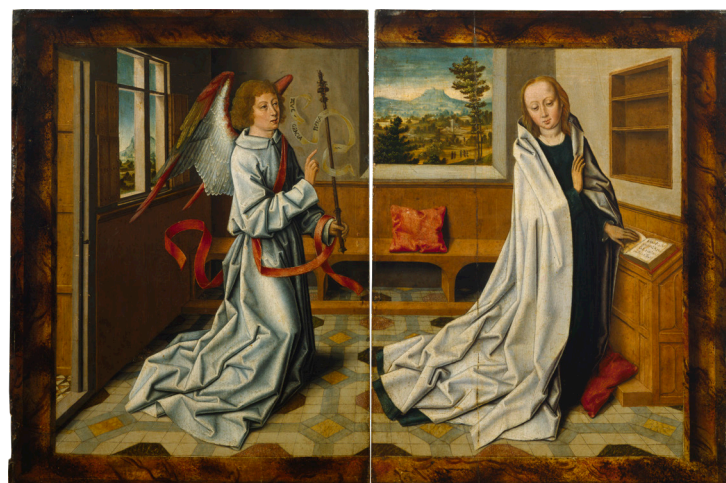
ly popular among the general public and guaranteed the family a steady source of income.

In its present-day form, this framing of the double painting of the *Man of Sorrows* and the *Mater Dolorosa* is the central panel of a triptych whose side panels display architectures painted in accordance with the Italianate taste of the Renaissance, and in which we can read two verses from the poem “De Passione Christi” by



Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (1405-1464), who later became Pope Pius II. When the triptych is closed, the outside of the volets shows a painting of the *Annunciation* that follows the composition of a model by Dieric Bouts the Elder and which is very similar to the panel on the same theme housed at the Gulbenkian Foundation Museum and considered today to be a workshop replica of a lost painting by Bouts.

The way in which these paintings were joined together in order to form the set that we



can now find today, albeit never exhibited in Lisbon in its entirety, is particularly interesting. Despite the fact that there were diptychs known to have been produced at the Bouts' workshop which associated the two paintings of *Ecce Homo* and the *Mater Dolorosa*, the two paintings in this group do not seem to have originally formed a diptych. They have important technical differences and do not display any traces of their frames having been joined together, while the dating of their supports is different and the technical quality of the panel with the Virgin Mary suggests a greater involvement of the workshop of Albrecht Bouts than is visible in Christ's face. Probably, the *Ecce Homo* dates from around 1500, while the *Mater Dolorosa* was painted a decade and a half later. The two panels were joined together in the same frame

on an unknown date, and for the side panels of the triptych another painting produced by the Bouts' workshop and representing the *Annunciation* was then cut vertically in half. The dating of the woods of the paintings through an analysis of their growth rings (dendrochronology) shows that the painting work itself could be dated as being from 1496 onwards. This is a plausible date for the painting of the *Annunciation*, but impossible for the architectural panels with the verses of Pius II, whose painting work dates from the end of the first half of the sixteenth century, towards the end of the life of Albrecht Bouts. The separation of the two parts of the panel of the *Annunciation* took place during the period of its actual production, even though the sequence of drawings and the marks of the incision in the definition of the floor prove that it was originally just one single painting. The final set of paintings therefore results from the joining together of autonomous elements of panels from the same workshop, which perhaps occurred towards the end of Albrecht's life or shortly after his death, in an attempt to construct a new object that would be more up-to-date and appealing, probably with the aim of promoting the sale of the works already existing at the painter's workshop.