



Saint Sebastian

Artist	Marco Palmezzano Forlì, 1458/63 – Forlì, 1539
Type	painting
Material	wood
Technique	tempera, oil
Sizes	magasság: 81 cm szélesség: 61 cm
Inventory No.	55.221



Description

Saint Sebastian, who lived at the end of the third century, was an officer in the bodyguard of Emperor Diocletian, a fierce persecutor of Christians. Although he enjoyed the emperor's favour, he gave protection to captured Christians; for this reason, on Diocletian's orders, he was tied to a tree and shot with arrows. He survived this torture thanks to the care of a Christian woman named Irene, but after he denounced the emperor face to face for persecuting the Christians, he was beaten to death with clubs and thrown into Rome's main sewer, the Cloaca Maxima.

He was venerated as a saint who offered protection against the plague; his cult flourished especially during the devastating epidemics of the fourteenth century, and from that time onwards his image also became increasingly common. Marco Palmezzano, a painter active in the city of Forlì in Romagna, represents the martyr saint, as was often the case in this period, tied not to a tree but to a column. Behind him, the ruined ancient buildings symbolize the passing pagan world, while the fresh shoots growing from the remains of brick and marble architecture symbolize the strength of the Christian faith and the hope of resurrection.

Thus, in his depiction of the column, wall, cornice, piers, and arches, the Renaissance master simultaneously pays homage to the grandeur of Roman imperial architecture and to the heroic age of Christianity, the glory of those who accepted martyrdom. In keeping with this duality, Sebastian's moral nobility and confessional purity are embodied in a male nude of classical proportions, shown in a contrapposto pose reminiscent of Greco-Roman sculpture. The saint looks up towards heaven; in his left hand he holds aloft, like a badge of victory, the palm branch of martyrdom, received from the angel appearing among the clouds.

In the background, on both sides, an idyllic and serene mountainous landscape opens up. For this sunlit landscape, Palmezzano drew on Venetian models, especially the landscape representations introduced by Bellini and Giorgione. Beyond the composition itself, it is the Mediterranean light streaming in from the left that creates the unity of the pictorial space. The natural light that replaces the gold background also carries religious and mystical meaning. As it bestows its blessing equally on man and nature, it bears witness to God's universal earthly presence.

A historically interesting and readily explicable detail is that the two executioners appearing in the middle ground are not Roman soldiers of the imperial period, but Turkish soldiers: a topical allusion to the pagan threat facing Christianity in the painter's own time. At the same time, around 1530, when the painting was made, its style was already somewhat archaic. There is no trace in the picture of the High Renaissance created by Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, and others, nor of the new ideal of dynamic and living harmony. Even in his late period, the painter remained faithful to the formal language of the Early Renaissance of the Quattrocento.

Dóra Sallai, 2002, website.



Marco Palmezzano of Romagna worked in many parts of Italy, including Rome and Venice, but spent most of his life in his native Forlì. In this late painting, made around 1530 and rightly regarded in the scholarly literature as the finest among the master's depictions of Saint Sebastian, the Venetian influence based on Bellini's tradition is especially strong. The marble column and ruined architecture play an important role in creating the illusion of spatial depth and in evoking the Roman setting of the martyr, but the overall effect is shaped even more emphatically by the lively mountainous and hilly landscape opening out on both sides.

The harmoniously formed, light-swept male nude, devoid of dramatic expression, recalls similar figures by the Umbrian painter Perugino. Characteristic of Palmezzano is the way in which the composition is overlaid by the irregular ornament of tree branches. The branches sprouting both from the brick wall and from the truncated tree trunk in the foreground, here and there putting forth leaves, symbolize Christianity triumphing over paganism and eternal life victorious over death.

Vilmos Tátrai, 2015.

Provenance

Simor collection. Purchased from the Bertinelli estate in Rome in 1878.

Exhibitions

- 2015 Sankt Pölten, Diözesanmuseum, Meisterwerke aus dem Keresztény Múzeum Esztergom

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