

Composition

Matthijs Musson (Antwerp, 1598 –1678/79)

Jesus in the House of Martha and Mary

ca.1640-1650

oil on canvas

230 x 340 cm

inv. no. 2565



The scene takes place in a bourgeois interior devoid of architectural references other than the walls delimitating it. The prevailing mood is relaxed and familial.

Jesus' clothing conform to the conventions of religious representation, with the blue of the robe speaking to his divinity, and the red of the cloak remitting to blood and thus to his humanity. The flower vase would represent the nexus between the active, material life represented by Martha and the still life next to her, and Mary who is absorbed in listening to Jesus' teachings.

The space is divided into two balanced masses which are connected by the flower vase, the movement of the bodies and the gazes.

Composition Similarities with other works:

The similarities in the composition with respect to other paintings of the same theme by 17th century Flemish artists are fairly evident. These can be seen for instance in the postures of the characters portrayed, in the colouring or in the layout and elements of the still life.

Worth underscoring are two versions by Erasmus Quellinus, one in the Musée des Beaux Arts de Valenciennes—in which the position of Jesus and Mary is very similar though inverted—and the other in the Musée des

Beaux Arts de Bordeaux. The colouring of the figure of Jesus is very similar in both.

The National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin has a painting dated around 1628, with figures made by Rubens and backgrounds painted by Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601-1678), that places the scene of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary in a totally different setting: the outside of a mansion with a park in the background. However, the position of the figures, the characters' posture and the way in which they interrelate are strikingly similar, a correspondence that also applies to the colours of the clothes of Jesus and Mary. We should bear in mind that Musson trained in Rubens' workshop and therefore it would be no surprise that he may have seen this work at the master's studio at a time when he was still in close contact with him.

The collaboration between Jan Brueghel the Younger and Rubens is highly plausible, for the master already worked with his father, Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), and at his death he probably maintained the relationship with the son.

Traditionally, the scene of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary takes place in an interior. By moving it to an exterior the elements specific to the representation of an aristocratic villa gain greater force. In the distance, in the background, we see the Château de Mariemont, the summer residence of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella Clara Eugenia, the Spanish regents for whom both Rubens and Brueghel the Younger were painters.

In 2011, two works emerged on the art market in which the position of the figures is very similar. One of them, very close to the above-cited piece and which could be set in the same surroundings, is attributed to Jan Brueghel the Younger and Frans Francken the Younger (1581-1642); and the second one, set in an interior, comparable in composition and very similar to Mary's posture in the work by Musson, is attributed to the circle of the Flemish painter Gerard Seghers (1596-1651)

Shifting our focus to the still life and flower vase, one can detect a striking resemblance with some of the elements in paintings by Frans Snyders, for instance the basket and fruit in the foreground, or in the flower paintings, also in glass vases, by Daniel Seghers.