

The Resurrection

Here at the end of the Lenten season, I would like to highlight the triumph of Christ's resurrection with this piece, painted in 1553 by French artist Léonard Limousin. One of two surviving altar pieces from the upper chapel of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Both altar pieces were donations from Henry II and Catherine de' Medici.

Limousin's strong color work brings out the dense composition of this piece against its copper housing. At the center, Jesus is seen rising heroically from the grave, surrounded by the slumbering forms of Roman soldiers. As He rises, Christ looks not to the heavens but to the earth. At the bottom, we can see portrait medallions of the donors, Henry II on the left and Catherine de' Medici on the right. The two medallions at the top of the piece appear to depict John the Baptist on the left, and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the right.

Surrounding Christ in the center are four angels holding the Instruments of the Passion: the cross, the lance of Longinus, the crown of thorns, and the ladder which the soldiers used to hoist Jesus onto the cross. Now that Christ has returned from the dead, these objects of torment and execution have become symbols of Christ's mercy and sacrifice.

For those curious, the Latin inscription between the portrait medallions reads in English, "Until it fills up the whole world", referring to the crescent moon, a symbol of the Virgin Mary. Between the medallions at the top we can also see the royal banner of France. Finally, the monogram "H" and what appear to be two overlapping "D" symbols are the monograms of Henry II.

