

Composition

Anthony van Dyck (Antwerp, 1599 – London, 1641)

Christ and the Adulteress

ca. 1620-22

oil on canvas

169 x 252 cm

inv. n° 581

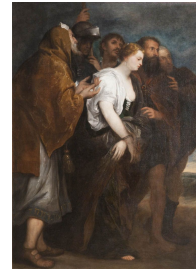


The scene corresponds to a passage from Saint John's Gospel (John 8:1-11) recounting the story of how Jesus confronted the Scribes and the Pharisees who, following Moses' law, asked him about the custom of stoning a woman caught in adultery. The specific moment depicted by Van Dyck shows Jesus addressing the men and asking them to throw the first stone if they are without sin.

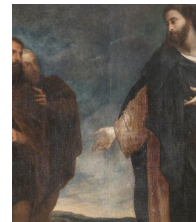
The composition respects the classic models of this theme. The scene is shown from a low viewpoint, thus enhancing its monumentality, and is organised in two blocks of compact characters, separated by a beautiful swathe of landscape.



On the right, Jesus is standing on the first step of the stairs, possibly of the Temple of Jerusalem, where the scene told by St John takes place, in the company of three of his apostles. It does not seem likely that the bearded character sitting on the steps would be St John himself who, however, could well be the man just behind Jesus.



The centre of the group on the left is occupied by the adulteress in dishevelled clothes with her hands tied as she bows her head in a sign of submission and acceptance of her punishment. She is surrounded by the Scribes and Pharisees, one of them in the ornate robes of a priest, and a soldier, whose helmet is similar to those seen in other paintings by Van Dyck and who seems to be escorting the group, although remaining aloof from what is happening.



Christ's hand is cut out in chiaroscuro in the centre against the landscape in the background, in a gesture of tolerance that adds to the power of the scene, due in part to the solidness of the masses and the harmony with the open space.