French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945
The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor
Philippe de Champaigne, *Christ on the Cross*, ca. 1655

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**Artist**  
Philippe de Champaigne, French, 1602–1674

**Title**  
*Christ on the Cross*

**Object Date**  
ca. 1655

**Alternate and Variant Titles**  
Le Christ sur la croix; Crucifixion; Le Christ mort en croix

**Medium**  
Oil on canvas

**Dimensions**  
(Unframed) 35 5/8 × 22 1/16 in. (90.5 × 56 cm)

**Inscription**  
Inscribed verso (no longer visible due to relining): Voor myne beminde suster / Marie de Champaigne-Religieuse / Brussel[s?]

**Credit Line**  

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In this deeply poignant painting, Philippe de Champaigne gives visual and persuasive form to one of the central mysteries of the Christian faith: the willingness of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to suffer death for the sins of humanity. Champaigne depicts the crucified Christ alone on a rocky outcropping lined with dense vegetation, overlooking a panoramic view of the ancient city of Jerusalem. Dark, foreboding clouds crown the landscape, forming an almost impenetrable background that throws Christ’s torso into strong relief. Shown moments after his death, Christ’s figure appears upright, his bruised body presented for contemplation. Blood streams from the wounds on his side, hands, and feet, cascading down the crisp folds of his loincloth and the base of the cross to soak the ground beneath him. A network of fine lines on his chest—marks of the brutal flogging he received before his crucifixion—draw further attention to the physical torment he endured on behalf of humankind. Notwithstanding these visible signs of his agony, Christ remains an idealized figure. A beam of light bathes his body in a silvery radiance, illuminating not only his injuries but also the elegant proportions and musculature of his meticulously modeled body. His calm facial expression—head cast down, eyes closed—imparts...
a sense of dignity to the scene and, along with the faintly glowing halo, reveals his divine status as the Son of God.

Sober in its treatment yet deeply emotional in its impact, the painting exhibits a narrative clarity and pictorial restraint that has often been attributed to Champaigne’s close relationship with Jansenism. A controversial reform movement within the Catholic Church, Jansenism emphasized humankind’s inability to attain salvation without divine aid and insisted on pursuing a life devoid of worldly distractions. Much has been written about the artist’s connections with this movement and whether his work reveals a specific “Jansenist” aesthetic. As early as 1837, literary critic Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve linked Champaigne’s “calm, sober, dense, and serious” paintings with Jansenist spirituality and piety. The artist had close ties with the most important Jansenist center in France, the Cistercian abbey of Port-Royal-des-Champs. His two daughters entered the abbey’s school in 1648, and he earned numerous commissions to paint works for the Port Royal community. Leading scholars caution against interpreting Champaigne solely through the lens of his Jansenist affiliation, but they acknowledge that his work can be understood within the larger context of Catholic beliefs and practices as defined by the Council of Trent.

As Marianne Cojannot-Le Blanc observes, Champaigne cannot be regarded simply as a Jansenist painter, since Jansenism did not exist as a homogenous movement, nor did it break away from Catholicism. Such an approach is appropriate for Champaigne’s depiction of the crucified Christ in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. The unflinching focus on the figure of Christ and his physical suffering was in line with traditional Catholic ideas, affected by the Reformation and the Council of Trent, regarding the use of images as aids to religious instruction and devotion. Spiritual manuals by mystics such as François de Sales espoused a method of prayer that encouraged imaginative participation in the events of Christ’s life, meant to lead to a deeper understanding of the self and of the divine. External images played a significant role within these meditative practices by activating the senses and stirring the hearts and minds of the faithful. Key figures of the Counter-Reformation, most notably Johannes Molanus and Gabriele Paleotti, published treatises that provided specific direction on how sacred images could fulfill this important function. They insisted that, for the benefit of the faithful, religious works of art should be simple, readily intelligible, and easy to grasp, with no superfluous details. To that end, they privileged scriptural accuracy and promoted naturalism as a means of opening a pathway toward spiritual contemplation.

The Counter-Reformation’s preoccupation with truth and verisimilitude are qualities that characterize Philippe de Champaigne’s approach to religious art. Although the extent to which he followed these critical interpretations of religious texts is open to debate, Bernard Dorival’s analysis of the contents of Philippe de Champaigne’s library reveals a preponderance of diverse religious texts. This demonstrates not only Champaigne’s theological erudition, but also his receptiveness to various sources. Among these was Ezechiel Explanationes et Apparatus Urbis, ac Templi Hierosolymitani (Ezekiel’s Explanations and Apparatus of the City and Temple of Jerusalem, 1596–1604), a three-volume scriptural interpretation of the Book of Ezekiel by Jesuits Juan Baptista Villalpando and Jerónimo de Prado.

Villalpando and Prado’s text describes the design and reconstruction of the ancient Temple of Jerusalem, and the accompanying illustration (Fig. 1) probably inspired Champaigne’s view, in the Nelson-Atkins painting, of the holy city and the pyramidal tomb of Isaiah.
faithfully demonstrates an interest in rendering the sacred narrative with greater precision. Additional features of the painting similarly reveal Champaigne's fidelity to scripture. The foreboding sky that isolates the figure of Christ refers explicitly to Gospel accounts of the darkness that fell over the land following his death (Matthew 27:45, Mark 25:33, and Luke 23:44). Similarly, the paper titulus, a sign bearing the condemned person's name and crime fixed to upper part of the cross, includes the inscription “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, as described in John 19:20.

Champaigne, however, was not uncompromising in his approach to sacred subject matter. As Lorenzo Pericolo astutely observes, Champaigne occasionally ignored iconographic conventions and omitted historical details when seeking to enhance the devotional impact of an image. A comparison with Champaigne’s other scenes of Christ’s Crucifixion underscores his flexibility. The Christ on the Cross in Kansas City is one of six autograph versions that portray Christ with his head hung down in death; an additional two depict Christ alive, with his eyes raised toward heaven in supplication. Despite general similarities in composition and overall effect, all versions vary in size and in detail. The smaller versions may have functioned as either preparatory sketches or finished reductions of the larger works. The Nelson-Atkins Crucifixion is most frequently identified as a replica of one of the two larger versions: one in a private collection in Toulouse and the other in the Musée de Peinture et de Sculpture in Grenoble (Fig. 2). The Toulouse painting, known mainly through an engraved reproduction by François de Poilly (1622/23–1693), shares many characteristics with the Kansas City version but differs in the placement of the wound on the far side of Christ’s torso (Fig. 3). The Grenoble painting, commissioned by the Carthusian monastery of La Grande Chartreuse, incorporates elements absent from the Nelson-Atkins version. Most notable is the use of three nails instead of four to fix Christ to the cross, the depiction of the eclipse described by Luke (23:44), and the presence of a skull that refers to Christ as the second Adam. The Grenoble painting is the only other version that depicts Christ’s wound fully exposed by the beam of light, although the wound emits significantly less blood.

Fig. 2. Philippe de Champaigne, Dead Christ on the Cross, 1655, oil on canvas, 89 3/8 x 79 1/2 in. (227 x 202 cm), Ville de Grenoble / Musée de Grenoble, M.G. 60. Photo: J. L. Lacroix
These differences render it difficult to determine the precise sequence of the series and the relationship between the Nelson-Atkins Crucifixion and the other versions. Scholars Alfred and Ronald Cohen have suggested that Champaigne may have adopted ideas from both the Toulouse and Grenoble paintings to create a composite version intended for private, familial use.\(^{18}\) The early provenance of the Kansas City painting suggests that this might be the case. An inscription found on the verso of the original canvas indicates that the artist likely gave the painting to his sister Marie de Champaigne (1606–1665)\(^{19}\) when he visited Brussels in 1655.\(^{20}\) Little is known about her life except that she entered a beguinage (a home for lay religious women) in Brussels on September 3, 1641,\(^{21}\) and remained there until her death on December 11, 1665.\(^{22}\) Since scholars have not discovered a posthumous inventory of her possessions or other property-related documents, the subsequent history of the painting remains unclear. The painting only reappeared in 1968, for sale at the Palais Galliera in Paris.\(^{23}\)

Without sufficient documentary evidence, attempts to clarify the nature of Marie de Champaigne’s religious devotions are speculative at best. Recent studies of beguinages in the Low Countries, however, reveal general trends in their use of religious imagery that might provide some insight. Beguinages were semi-monastic communities where women took temporary vows of chastity and obedience but maintained financial independence and were able to retain property. A study of the art that adorned the homes of Beguines in Antwerp’s Beguinage of St. Catherine discloses a substantial number of scenes from Christ’s Passion, including several Crucifixions.\(^{24}\) As Sarah Moran points out, the abundance of Passion imagery was not unusual and was wholly in keeping with the beliefs and devotional practices promoted by the Counter-Reformation.\(^{25}\)
Sober depictions of Christ alone on the cross, without the distraction of a crowd of onlookers and mourners, like Champaigne’s, were widespread during the Counter-Reformation. Examples by Jan Boeckhorst (Fig. 4), Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577–1640), and Francisco de Zurbarán (Spanish, 1598–1664) demonstrate how such compositions helped satisfy the contemplative needs of faithful Catholics throughout Europe. Isolated against a darkened sky or background, these Crucifixions grant the viewer privileged access to Christ’s suffering. In the case of Christ on the Cross at the Nelson-Atkins, Champaigne’s ability to capture the frigid hue of Christ’s lifeless body and the blood spilling from his wounds provides the scene with a sense of lifelike immediacy that invites meditation. So does its restrained emotional power, the cool color palette, and the overall atmosphere of stillness that pervades the scene. Naturalistic in detail yet stylized in effect, Champaigne’s Christ on the Cross resembles a crucifix, a timeless and easily recognizable symbol of sacrifice and redemption. We can only speculate about the religious beliefs and practices of Champaigne and his Beguine sister, but a recent treatment report of the painting provides insight into the painting’s lasting spiritual impact: modern fingerprints were found along Christ’s body, serving as a testament to the power and persuasiveness of Champaigne’s presentation.\(^2\)

Rima M. Girnius  
July 2020

Notes


3. Bernard Dorival, Philippe de Champaigne, 1602–1676: La vie, l’œuvre, et le catalogue raisonné de l’œuvre (Paris: Léonce Laget Libraire, 1976), 1:160. Indeed, one of the most well-known stories about Champaigne is that his daughter Catherine de Sainte Suzanne was miraculously healed from a paralysis that had lasted for two years when, in 1662, the Abbess at Port-Royal prayed for Catherine’s healing. Champaigne was inspired to commemorate this event by painting Mère Catherine Agnes Arnauld and Soeur Catherine de Sainte Suzanne (1662; Musée du Louvre, Paris).


8. The body of research on the Council of Trent’s decrees on art and their interpretation by Paleotti and Molanus is vast. Christian Hecht provides a good overview in Katholische Bildertonologie im Zeitalter von Gegenreformation und Barock: Studien zu Traktaten von Johannes Molanus, Gabriele Paleotti und Anderen Autoren (Berlin: Mann, 1997). See also the English edition of Gabrielle Paleotti’s text, which features an introduction by Paoli Prodi: Gabrielle Paleotti, Discourse on Sacred and Profane


19. The inscription was discovered on June 5, 1969, when the original canvas was relined by Francis Moro, a painting restorer employed by the dealer Frederick Mont, who at the time was in possession of the painting. Although no photograph of the original inscription was found, the conservator transcribed the dedication, which is in both Flemish and French and reads: “Voor myne beminde suster / Marie de Champaigne–Religieuse / Brussel[s?]” (For my beloved sister / Marie de Champaigne–Nun / Brussels).

20. The date of Philippe de Champaigne’s visit is contested. According to his contemporary André Félibien, the Brussels visit took place in 1654. See André Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes* (Paris, 1685), 5:175–76. Pericolo, however, argues that Félibien may have mistaken the date and it should be 1655; see Pericolo, *Philippe de Champaigne*, 273.


to works on paper and a painting by Flemish artist Jan Boeckhorst (ca. 1604–1668).


Technical Entry

Technical entry forthcoming.

Documentation

Citation

Chicago:


MLA:


Provenance

Given by the artist to his sister, Marie de Champaigne (1606–1665), Brussels, by December 11, 1665 [1];


Notes

[1] According to an inscription on the verso of the original canvas, which was subsequently covered by relining, the artist gave the painting to his sister, Marie de Champaigne, a Beguine nun in Brussels. The inscription, which reads, “Voor myne beminde suster / Marie de Champaigne—Religieuse / Brussels,” was transcribed by Francis Moro, a painting restorer employed by Frederick Mont, Inc., at the time he lined the painting on June 5, 1969. See Nelson-Atkins curatorial files.

[2] Letter from Frederick Mont, Inc., to the Nelson-Atkins on December 11, 1969, states the painting was purchased in Paris by “Fritz” (per Nancy Yeide, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., this was probably Frederick Mont, né Adolf Fritz Mondschein, Vienna, 1894–1994; letter to Meghan Gray, The Nelson-Atkins, December 3, 2012). A restoration record from Paul Moro, Inc., New York, indicates that the painting was owned by Mont when the painting was brought to Moro for restoration on May 15, 1969. See Nelson-Atkins curatorial files.

Related Works

Variants with Christ looking down or dead

Philippe de Champaigne, Le Christ mort sur la croix (Christ Dead on the Cross), 17th century, oil on panel, 66 15/16 x 36 5/8 in. (170 x 93 cm), private collection, Toulouse.

Philippe de Champaigne, Christ en croix (Christ on the Cross), 1635–1638, oil on canvas, 32 x 22 1/4 in. (81.3 x 56.5 cm), private collection, São Paulo, Brazil.

Philippe de Champaigne, Le Christ mort sur la Croix (Christ Dead on the Cross), ca. 1654, oil on canvas, 37 x 27 1/2 in.
(94 x 70 cm), Trafalgar Galleries, London.

Philippe de Champaigne, *Le Christ mort sur la croix* (*Christ Dead on the Cross*), 1655, oil on canvas, 89 3/8 x 79 1/2 in. (227 x 202 cm), Musée de Grenoble.

Philippe de Champaigne, *Christ on the Cross*, ca. 1655–1660, oil on canvas, 33 3/16 x 24 15/16 in. (84.3 x 63.3 cm), National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

**Variants with Christ looking up**

Philippe de Champaigne, *Le Christ en croix implorant Le Père* (*Christ on the Cross Imploring the Father*), ca. 1674, oil on canvas, 196 7/8 x 118 1/8 in. (500 x 300 cm), Eglise Saint Pierre, Chaumes-en-Brie (Seine-et-Marne), France.

Philippe de Champaigne, *Le Christ en Croix* (*Christ on the Cross*), 1674, oil on canvas, 89 3/4 x 60 1/4 in. (228 x 153 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris.

**Exhibitions**


**References**


Christopher Wright, *The French Painters of the Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 154, as *Christ on the Cross*.


**Exhibitions**


The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art | French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945