Jan Toorop's Stations of the Cross

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Some of the intensity and introspection seen in Jan Toorop's work may be due to his inheritance of mixed Dutch, Norwegian and Chinese blood (Figure 1). Certainly, some of it must have been related to his environment. Toorop was born in 1858 in Poerworedjo, Java. Childhood memories strike deep roots, and his work never totally escaped the initial promptings of Javanese art and thought.

He studied at the Amsterdam Academy, and his earliest work was conventionally realistic, influenced somewhat by Georg-Hendrik Breitner's contemporary genre scenes.[1] Toorop's greatest talent was his fine draughtsmanship, and all his best work has a superior linear quality.

In Brussels on scholarship, he seemed to find the representation of nature too superficial for his probing mind, and he joined *Les Vingt* in 1885, the year after its founding. The group's 1887 exhibition included George Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte,*[2] and this painting caused Toorop to loosen his ties with James Ensor and work in the pointillist fashion for several years. After short trips to London, Paris, and Rome, he settled in Holland and began a new phase.

Given Toorop's compulsion to discover the newest and most meaningful methods of expression, it follows that he continued to be influenced by avant-garde artists and writers. His obsession in 1890 with the *femme fatale* motif seems to have been prompted by the writings of Hendrik Ibsen and Toorop's friend Maurice Maeterlinck.[3] The poetry of Émile Verhaeren inspired in Toorop a deeper interest in mysticism.[4] Full-fledged symbolic work was the next step, and the impetus for this was a visit to Holland by Paul Verlaine and Joséphin Peladan. Toorop was overwhelmed by the possibilities of their occult and mysterious approach to art. He joined the *Rose-Croix* and exhibited with this society in 1892.[5]

It is typical of Toorop that in the same year, as deeply involved as he was with the Symbolist movement, he was aware of other trends and presented the first exhibit in Holland of the work of Vincent van Gogh.[6] This necessarily entailed a familiarity on his part with van Gogh's painting. When Toorop's work later tended more to an effect of flatness and to simpler forms, it is very likely that his recollection of van Gogh's work was in some measure responsible.

In 1892 Toorop was most clearly identified with the type of painting which he called "linear idealism."[7] This approach may very well have been an influence on Art Nouveau.[8] Certainly it had a strong effect on Dutch painters, such as Johann-Thorn Prikker, and it was well known to the Glasgow School. *The Three Brides* ". . . was illustrated in the first volume of *The Studio* and the early drawings of Frances Macdonald and Charles Rennie Mackintosh are directly traceable to this source"[9] (Figure 2).

Perhaps the best known of Toorop's allegorical works in this style are *The Three Brides, Les Rodeurs,* and *Death, Where is Thy Victory?* In these, his mastery of line is displayed in virtuoso fashion. His compositions are a web of tightly packed lines, often difficult to follow, which swirl, flow, undulate and somehow manage to be both stylized and sensuous.

In these paintings Toorop's youthful impressions burst forth from his memory. The mannered, calligraphic line is most representative of Javanese art. In addition, the sinuous shapes of his figures are almost identical to the demigods in Javanese shadow puppet plays.[10]

Indonesian art and drama lean heavily to the symbolic, and there may also be references to this in his paintings, causing more than the usual difficulty in interpreting Symbolist work. Toorop's primary theme was always good versus evil, but at this point, evil seems to have the upper hand. There is a morbid atmosphere in these paintings—menacing figures, sadistic symbols of death and sin. It seems to have been part of Toorop's plan to shock the viewer, since he refers to contours in *The Three Brides* as *"gil-en-pang lijnen"* or "shriek-and-bang lines."[11]

This stage of his work has been dismissed by at least one critic as turgid fantasy, inspired by the Nabi group.[12] There is no evidence of any such connection, but there are similarities—the Nabis held that art should break with realism and express the interior world in terms of rhythm and complex decorative forms.[13] Of this group, Maurice Denis seems to have been the most compatible with Toorop, since Denis's development led to a simple, linear style with broad planes of color, as did Toorop's, somewhat later.

Denis owned a collection of Javanese art.[14] He was also a Roman Catholic. Toorop converted to this faith in 1905, and various critics assert that from this date his work took on a placid tranquility, totally at variance with his pessimistic Symbolist stage.

Three years before this event, however, Toorop had abandoned his disturbing arabesques for a new direction—a more monumental style, involving larger planes of bright unbroken colors and more static figures. The catalyst for this change was his collaboration with the rationalist architect, H. P. Berlage. Toorop provided decorative tiles for Berlage's Amsterdam Exchange and for his Corn Exchange Building, as well.

Scenes of agricultural life on a bright glazed yellow background constitute the first group. They feature broadly outlined figures "of an almost Arcadian peace and charm."[15] Similarly, the Corn Exchange tiles show rural subjects which include a reaper and sower, logical subjects owing something perhaps to van Gogh but bearing Toorop's personal emphasis on linearity.

In the course of this work, Toorop developed a strong interest in the integration of painting and architecture. This interest lasted the rest of his life. He went on to more tile work in the Aloysius Chapel of Haarlem Cathedral and began the large apostle windows in the Josef Church in Nijmegen.

In 1916, Mevrouw P. J. M. de Bruijn-van Lede, a wealthy resident of Oosterbeek, a village in eastern Holland, decided to surprise her pastor with a gift for his church, Sint Bernulphuskerk. She wrote Toorop, offering a commission for fourteen separate paintings to be hung on the church walls as Stations of the Cross. In view of his deep preoccupation with the combination of architecture and painting, this offer no doubt appealed to him, and he accepted.

There is little authoritative information on the Catholic devotion called the Stations of the Cross because it is one of those customs which spring directly from the spiritual emotion of the people. From the very inception of the Church, Christians would come to Jerusalem to trace the Lord's path of suffering from the Antonia Citadel to Calvary, with stops at small crosses along the way to meditate on various incidents. These stops were given the name "stations" from the Roman *statio,* a halt.[16] The number of them varied, but eventually stabilized at fourteen. Five of the Stations are based on ancient tradition, the remainder on biblical accounts.

In the fifteenth century, throngs of pilgrims were cut off from the Holy Land when the Moslems overran Jerusalem. The Franciscans, custodians of the holy places, were given papal permission to erect station crosses in their churches everywhere as the most pragmatic substitute for a pilgrimage.[17] It is because this practice was such a late innovation in churches and confined for some time to Franciscan buildings that we find almost no Stations by major artists. It was not until the nineteenth century that all restrictions were lifted and the Way of the Cross devotion was actively encouraged for Catholic churches.[18]

The only requirement is for fourteen small wooden crosses, suitably spaced on both side walls. But these are almost always accompanied by a pictorial representation of the scene commemorated, usually a painting or a relief in wood or plaster.

Toorop's *Kruiswegstaties* are rectangular in shape, approximately 100 x 80 centimeters worked in wax crayon on three-ply wood of soft-veined cedar, except for the third Station, which is mahogany. All are set in identical white frames. During World War II, the church was partially destroyed by bombs. The Stations survived intact because they had been removed to a bank vault for safety before the Nazi occupation of Oosterbeek.[19]

Seen together in the church, the compositions appear to have a strong orientation toward the horizontal and vertical. But there is a diagonal emphasis as well (sometimes the cross itself). There are, in addition, many sweeping, curving lines in the veils, sleeves and bowed heads. The rectilinear impression arises from each picture's balance and symmetry which are almost obsessive. Christ is always the central figure, flanked by varying groups, occasionally mirroring each other. This effect could easily become monotonous, but in the artist's hands, the tableau-like presentation, the stillness, the rigid figures, give an overall sense of a fate being fulfilled, the acting out of a sacrifice that was preordained.

There is no attempt at perspective or realistic background. All the figures stand, strongly contoured, in a shallow plane. The positioning of figures, lances and outstretched arms often creates a pattern, and the articulation of ribs and muscles is highly stylized. The colored shadow areas do not always fall naturalistically or organically. They are often arbitrary angular patches based on geometric forms, and they do nothing to relieve the general effect of flatness.

Most of the Stations include a number of very fine, extraneous lines, almost like *pentimenti,* but meant perhaps to subtly accent the direction of the forms nearest them. The use of these thin, Feininger-like lines increased in Toorop's later, more spiritual work and may have been related to his architectural interests. In writing about Toorop's *Children and Angels,* a 1919 painting stylistically much like the Stations, a critic said ". . . the severe mathematics and the clean lines make it seem to have the form of a building. . . . In the structure of this work, the lines give a suggestion of the Infinite."[20]

Toorop makes striking use of color. Conforming to the simplicity of pattern, he limits his larger areas of color to the complementaries of red and green, blue and orange, set against a plain, pale yellow, reminiscent of the medieval gold background which indicated the eternal heavens. Contours and shadow areas often display faint touches of grey, pink and brown, but these are unobtrusive and merely serve to add richness. The extremely broad handling of line and the forceful use of large, vibrant areas of color coalesce to give an effect of clarity and gravity.

Although the overall impression of Toorop's color tends toward simplicity, there are certain complexities. Usually he applied his colors in a downward motion but there are a number of areas in which he changed his approach, such as a sleeve with vertical contours but a horizontal application of color. The color is occasionally idiosyncratic, such as the drops of unexpectedly white blood falling from Christ's wounds in Station XII (Figure 3).

There are color inconsistencies, also, as in the lining of Mary's hood. In Station IV it is red and yellow, in Station XI red and white, in Stations XII and XIII all white, and back to red and white for the final Station, but in a different arrangement. The cloak worn by John the Evangelist is bright red in Station XI but white in the next scene. It is possible that the changes reflect a concern with blending the main figures and the background figures harmoniously, but considering Toorop's lifelong preoccupation with symbolism, a symbolic intent here is also possible. In the case of John's cloak, Station XI shows its red reflected in the red of Mary's veil, as the two kneeling figures face each other, flanking the cross in almost heraldic positions (Figure 4). This vivid dramatic red emphasizes the importance of the central figure on the cross, focusing the viewer's eye and heightening the emotion.

In Station XII, the red has retreated to the edges of the panel and is seen in a lighter shade worn by two minor figures (Figure 3). The comparatively paler central figures may indicate that not only color but life itself has fled. In this scene, Christ dies.

A study of his use of symbolism is, in the last analysis, unrewarding, since these paintings follow very closely the traditional Christian iconography of the Way of the Cross devotion. The depiction of the three falls under the cross, progressively deeper and more severe, representing man's tendency to fall deeper into sin, is only one of the time-honored usages which Toorop follows.

Some traditional symbolism, however, becomes even more meaningful in his stark interpretation. In Station III, the solid white of Christ's garment is set against the crushing black cross, provoking the realization that the Saviour is bearing not only a physical burden but the weight of the world's sin. In Station IV, his figure is on a forward

diagonal, forcing his kneeling Mother into a backward diagonal position, creating a strong impression of inexorability (Figure 5). She holds out her hands in a helpless gesture, implying that she still understands nothing of the reason for the sacrifice, except what he had told her years before—that he must be about his Father's business (Luke 2:50).

There are a few details in Toorop's version which differ from the customary presentation. In Station VII he has included a traveling hermit happening on the scene and a young woman who represents the pagan world professing its new belief.[21] In Station IX the centurion's decisive gestures indicate his own growing belief and an order for less severity. Toorop also departs from tradition in showing Christ's feet fastened by two nails rather than one, and in Station XI Christ is being nailed to the cross in a vertical position instead of the almost invariable horizontal position on the ground.

The artist's most striking innovation is his use of a number of Oosterbeek villagers as models for his figures and his peculiar translations of their characters. In some cases there is a direct correspondence. A Jewish lady was the model for Mary, and a farmer from Domburg posed for Simon of Cyrene, himself a farmer (Station V). The figure at far right in Station VII is clearly a self portrait (Figure 6), and a diminutive Mevrouw van Bruijn is seen kneeling in Station II, in the tradition of medieval donor portraits[22] (Figure 7). One writer believes the actual model for this figure was an acolyte or altar boy.[23]

It is not surprising to find a gardener's apprentice transformed into a servant of Pontius Pilate, but when a dignified elderly lady becomes a Roman soldier (Station XII/Figure 3) and the church's pastor is portrayed as a grieving woman, complete with anachronistic eyeglasses (Station II/Figure 7), we can only wonder at the mental processes that brought this about. It may be that the philosophy of Carl Jung which underlies so much Symbolist work is being drawn on here. In mystical tradition, androgyny is held to be a high and angelic state. A fusion of genders creates a being in perfect harmony with self and Creator.[24] Interpreted thus, Toorop's usage becomes a spiritual tribute to his subjects.

A number of other residents find their ways into the panels, the most interesting being Miek Janssen, a poet (Figure 8). She was the daughter of the proprietor of Oosterbeek's Hotel Schoonoord where Toorop stayed. From 1912 there had been a close relationship between the poet and the artist. She adored Toorop and wrote books about him, which are ". . . not always very clear."[25] In the Stations she appears as Mary Magdalene (Figure 9).

Toorop's letters to his friend, Anthony Nolet, a Nijmegen wine merchant, are full of references to the Stations on which he was working, but disappointingly few reveal his working methods or meanings. (It is only from an art critic, writing in 1919, that we learn that no preliminary studies or sketches were made.)[26] The letters deal largely with his moods, ranging from elation to despair, according to how the work was going, and to his increasingly poor health.

As Toorop labored on this large project from 1916 to 1918, during World War I, he was depressed by the state of the Belgian refugees who fled into Holland. These victims were much on his mind as he worked, equating their sorrows with those of Our Lord and all mankind. At sixty years of age, his own life was in great disarray. His wife, perhaps not surprisingly, left him for her family in England. The marriage of his daughter, Charley, broke up, leaving her with three small children. The culmination of these pressures was an attack of paralysis in the summer of 1918, before the Stations were finished.[27]

The panels were not done in chronological order. Stations VI, IV, VIII and III were the first to be painted, at Toorop's favorite retreat in Zeeland. He was enthusiastic at commencing the work, and it is noticeable that the subjects chosen involve the most human emotions and the more touching episodes, involving Christ's meeting with his mother and his comforting words to the weeping women.

Toorop was almost inordinately pleased with Station V, considering it "mature, sober, figuratively expressive, and rich with peace, line and color."[28]

Toorop claimed that Station I represented a different approach to composition and that his greatest problem was portraying the face of Christ; he changed it ten times.[29] An art historian has compared the features of Christ in this series to those in Albrecht Dürer's self portrait of 1500,[30] itself modeled on images of Christ.[31] Did Toorop, the agonized artist, also intend some spiritual identification with his suffering Redeemer?

The curator of Nijmegen's museum claims that as the artist's illness progressed he painted the most majestic panels: I, II and X.[32] Toorop finished the last two, XIII and XIV, in an Amsterdam sanatorium, disconsolate at his failure to have the series ready for the dedication ceremony and keenly conscious of the pastor's disappointment.

Despite the evaluations of critics and of the artist himself (he believed Station X to be his best[33]), it is difficult to discover any significant variations in style within the series. On the contrary, the Stations present a markedly cohesive effect, each panel contributing its share to the one overriding message of salvation.

Barnett Newman believes that his own totally abstract Stations of 1966 go beyond narrative and express the cry from the cross, *"Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani"* (Mark 15:34). His theme is the mystery of all human suffering.[34] Toorop presents the same theme, perhaps even more clearly, within the restrictions of his era and the functional nature of the work.

Because of his long career, his popularity and his openness to new directions, Toorop was a strong influence on younger artists, Henry van de Velde and Bart van der Leck, in particular. From 1908 to 1911 Toorop and Mondrian worked together on Walcheren Island.[35] Mondrian began by portraying natural figures against dunes, but absorbed much of Toorop's mysticism, as well as his geometric tendencies and reductive approach.

In regard to the Stations, one writer claimed it was difficult to find a name for their style.[36] But they are clearly recognizable to us today as early Art Deco. One of the first exponents of Art Nouveau, Toorop was also one of the first contributors to the newer style. Until his death in 1928, his work continued in this vein. The simplified, harsh contours of his *War and Peace* of 1922 are even more strongly identifiable as Art Deco.

In the Oosterbeek church, this style proves strangely effective for its intended purpose. Beneath the hieratic rigidity and stylized stances, there is a force and emotional intensity that cannot be ignored. The images are an invitation to prayer and contemplation, as they were meant to be, and the journey ends with serenity overcoming grief. In the

last Station, Mary gazes out with a glorified hope in her eyes, as if consoling us with the reminder that "By His bruises we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

In this work, Toorop seems to have achieved another goal as well: Berlage's ideal of art and architecture harmonized in service to man.[37] It is perfectly exemplified here in this dramatic and impressive interpretation of the Via Dolorosa.

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11 Spaanstra-Polak, p. 18.

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14 Dorival, p. 20.

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16 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, XIII, s.v. "Stational Churches," p. 662.

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19 *Informatie over de St. Bernulphuskerk te Oosterbeek*, n.d., p. 1.

20 Conge Kleijn-Janssen, *Jan Toorop's Kruiswegstaties St. Bernulphuskerk te Oosterbeek door Miek Janssen* (Amsterdam: L. J. Veen, Uitgever, n.d.), p. 35.

21 Kleijn-Janssen, p. 15.

22 Dr. G. Th. M. Lemmens, Address at opening of exhibition of Toorop's Stations, St. Bernulphuskerk, Oosterbeek, 12 June 1980, p. 7.

23 Oosterbeek: St. Bernulphuskerk exhibition catalog. *Jan Toorop's Kruiswegstaties*, 1980, n. pag.

24 Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 186.

25 Lemmens, p. 5.

26 Molkenboer, p. 274.

27 Most biographical data on years 1916-1918 from Lemmens's address. Dr. Lemmens was in 1980 curator of the Nijmegen Museum.

28 Jan Toorop, letter to Anthony Nolet, 3 March 1917, reprinted in *Jan Toorop's Kruiswegstaties*, n. pag.

29 Jan Toorop, letter to Anthony Nolet, 1 February 1917, reprinted in *Jan Toorop's Kruiswegstaties*, n. pag.

30 Molkenboer, p. 287.

31 Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, Vol. I (Princeton UP, 1943), p. 43.

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33 Jan Toorop, letter to Anthony Nolet, 10 March, 1917, reprinted in *Jan Toorop's Kruiswegstaties*, n. pag.

34 Barnett Newman, "The Fourteen Stations of the Cross," *Art News* 65 (May 1966), p. 27.

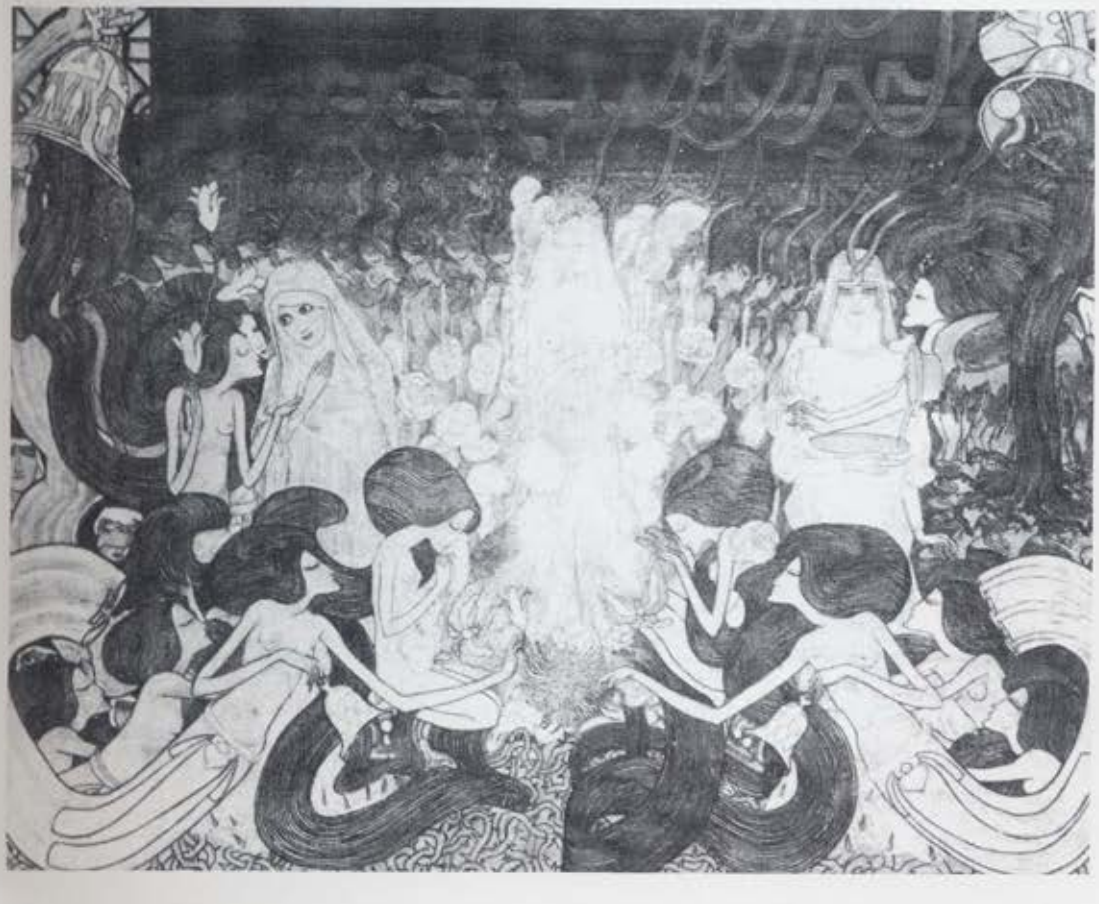
35 *Bénézit*, p. 226.

36 Peter Thoben, "De Nymeegse Jaren van Jan Toorop," quoted in exhibition catalog *Jan Toorop's Kruisweg: Sint Bernulphuskerk, Oosterbeek*, June 1980, n. pag.

37 Pieter Singelenberg, *H. P. Berlage* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1969), p. 9.

Figure 1, Antoon Molkenboer, Portrait of Jan Toorop, 1918, *Beiaard* III, No. 3 (1918/19), p. 17.

Figure 2, Jan Toorop, *The Three Brides*, 1893, Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo, The Netherlands, Briefkaart, Kroller-Muller Foundation. Epe: Hooiberg.



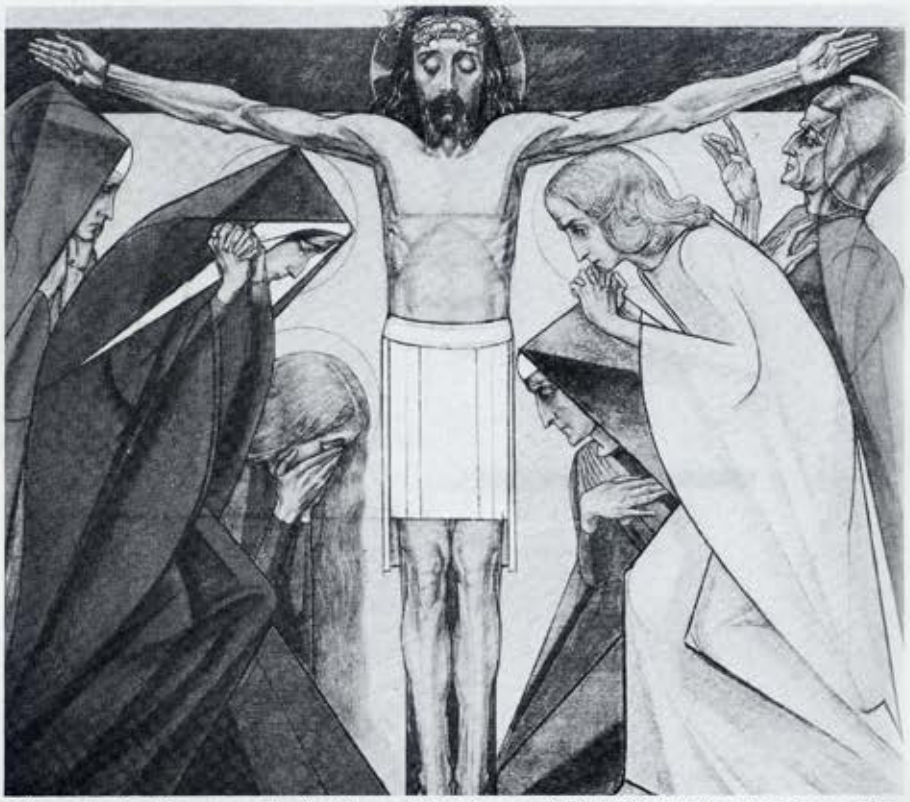


Figure 3, Jan Toorop, *The Stations of the Cross,* 1916-1918. Station XII: Jesus Dies on the Cross. Oosterbeek, Sint Bernulphuskerk. Exhibition catalogue of Jan Toorop's *Kruisweg.* Zutphen: Tesink, 1980, n. pag.

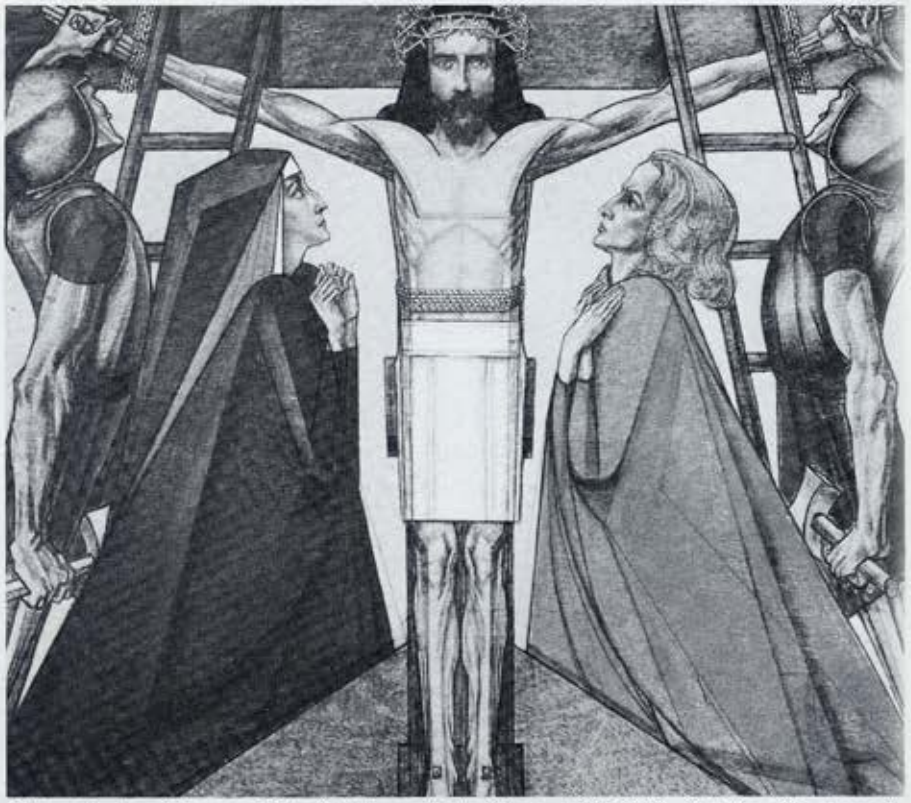


Figure 4, Jan Toorop, *The Stations of the Cross,* 1916-1918. Station XI: Jesus is Nailed to the Cross. Oosterbeek, Sint Bernulphuskerk. Exhibition catalogue of Jan Toorop's *Kruisweg.* Zutphen: Tesink, 1980, n. pag.

Figure 5, Jan Toorop, *The Stations of the Cross,* 1916-1918. Station IV: Jesus Meets His Afflicted Mother. Oosterbeek, Sint Bernulphuskerk. Exhibition catalogue of Jan Toorop's *Kruisweg.* Zutphen: Tesink, 1980, n. pag.

Figure 6, Jan Toorop, *The Stations of the Cross,* 1916-1918. Station VII: Jesus Falls the Second Time. Oosterbeek, Sint Bernulphuskerk. Exhibition catalogue of Jan Toorop's *Kruisweg.* Zutphen: Tesink, 1980, n. pag.

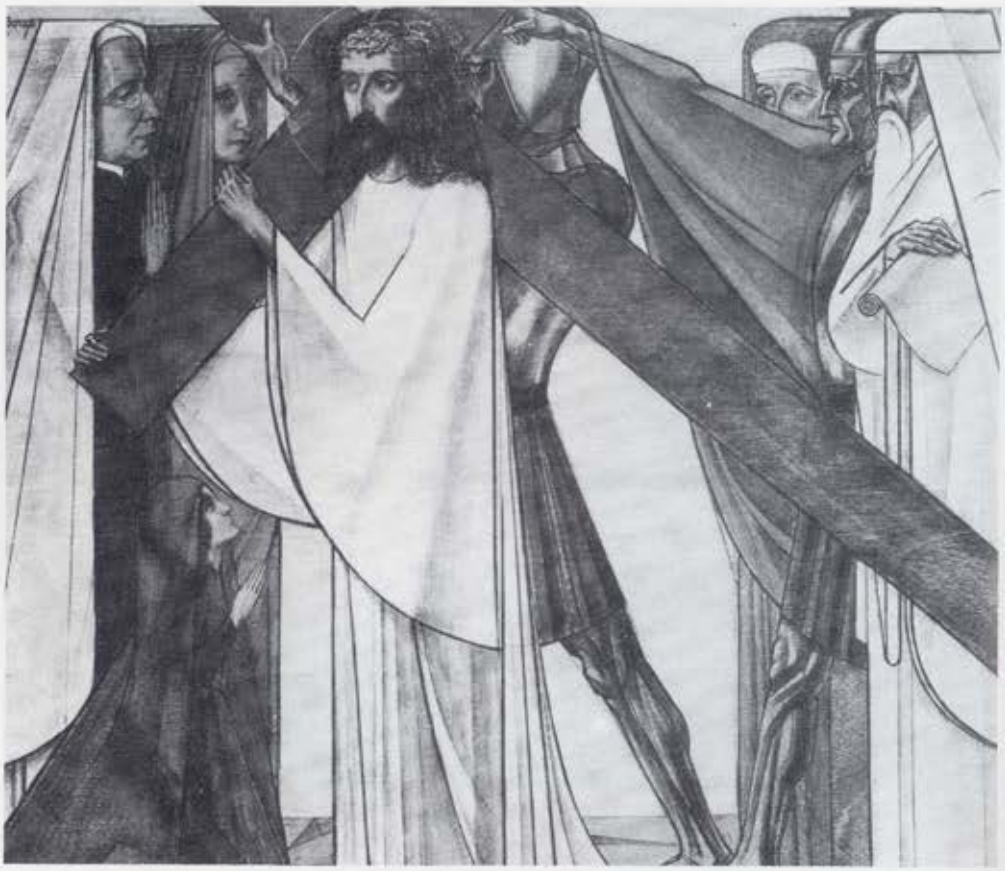


Figure 7, Jan Toorop, *The Stations of the Cross,* 1916-1918. Station II: Jesus Takes Up His Cross. Oosterbeek, Sint Bernulphuskerk. Exhibition catalogue of Jan Toorop's *Kruisweg.* Zutphen: Tesink, 1980, n. pag.

Figure 8, Jan Toorop, *Portrait of Miek Janssen,* 1914, Briefkaart, Printed Amsterdam by Felix P. Abrahamson.

Figure 9. Jan Toorop, *The Stations of the Cross,* 1916-1918. Station XIII: Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross. Oosterbeek, Sint Bernulphuskerk. Exhibition catalogue of Jan Toorop's *Kruisweg.* Zutphen: Tesink, 1980, n. pag.