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RESURRECTING PHILLIPE HODART

An Artist's View of a Very Modern
16th-Century Sculptor

I. January 12: THE MACHADO DE CASTRO MUSEUM IN COIMBRA,
PORTUGAL

It has been almost two weeks now that I have been in Coimbra and my struggles with the language have exhausted me. I suffer the rage of a deaf-mute. To relieve my isolation I am determined to exhaust myself physically by climbing the steep hill of the "old" city. It is cold and my breath steams into the fog-laden air. Tortured streets rise up. Glistening cobblestones, slick and treacherous, and nearly vertical staircases take their toll on my energy. Clothes hanging from the windows to dry are fog-soaked, their colors bleeding faintly into the grey air. I feel the silent weight of the buildings leaning inward over me in the narrow, curving street. Chilled, breathing heavily, calves cramping from such unaccustomed exertion, I stop and look about. On my left is the small plaza before the museum. To escape the fog and drizzle I decide to go in. Maybe it will be heated. Through the heavy iron grille. Through the door. My footfall echoes much too loudly on the stone floor. At the far end of the large entry hall is the counter where a young woman sells tickets, post cards, and books. I am the only visitor there. The weather, the season—no tourists. But the young woman is involved in her book. She does not even look up at me as she pushes the ticket across the countertop. I wander aimlessly past anonymous stones carved by clumsy medieval primitives. The pieces around me seem to have no presence—are as indifferent to me as I am to them. Tired and morose, I have no appetite for seeing. The museum is not heated. I keep moving to keep warm.

A long, narrow gallery of dim, white sculptures ends abruptly in a group of dramatically illuminated terra cotta figures. Their earthen reds, flickering in light and shadow, draw me immediately toward them. I am seized by the excitement of discovery. The world is no longer mute.

Any true historical information in this paper is due entirely to the work of Portuguese and Spanish scholars. All errors, misinterpretations and omissions are due entirely to my own efforts.

PHILLIPE HODART, ULTIMA CEIA
do Mosteiro de Santa Cruz, 1530-34

But this *Last Supper* is a paraplegic ward! Arms are missing. Legs are gone. Entire bodies. There is an inspired madness here and brilliance too. Consternation. Intense agitation. Bodily gestures of shock and disbelief. Even without arms the bodies still exclaim. A torso quivers. One head has a gaping hole in the back. Another head, frighteningly animate, without a visible neck, rests directly on a pedestal like a surreal nightmare. Before me is a terra cotta disaster area of shattered Apostles.

What iconoclastic rage smashed this *Last Supper*? Who thought so little of it or so detested it? Was it the French retreating to Coimbra after their defeat at Bucaco? Was it an anti-clerical frenzy? What heresy had this impassioned, sophisticated sculptor committed? How is it that I do not know him? Where did he come from? What else did he do?

The life-size figures are arranged in a semi-circle against this end of the gallery, resting on a section of raised floor. They are well-displayed in the given space but, of course, that need not be how they were originally placed. I am caught up in the game. Christ dominates the center, flanked, as tradition demands, by Peter on his right, and, at his left, John. The others follow, ending in the flayed busts of two Apostles, all that remains of them, set in convenient niches in the walls on either side. Except for Christ, Peter, John, and Judas, we cannot use position or size to identify any of the others—since we do not even know the shape, size, or direction of the missing table. The scale of the figures may have been dictated as much by the emotional and psychological needs of the drama as by the requirements of perspective.

Whether the missing table was circular, as it appears in some paintings of the period,¹ or the more usual rectangle, Judas will

¹For an example of the use of a circular table see Jorge Alfonso's *Last Supper* (before 1525) in the Grão Vasco Museum in Viseu. The present semi-circular arrangement of Hodart's Apostles in the Museum strongly suggested such a table to me at first, and indeed, the Museum is, at the moment of writing, reinforcing that notion by constructing a semi-circular wall at the end of the gallery. It will surely make for a more handsome display but will be misleading for those inclined to take it as the Museum's proposal for how it will once have been.

have been seated on our side of the table, turned toward us, away from Christ. Judas, standing, would be perhaps seven foot tall—like a figure out of Il Rosso Fiorentino's *Volterra Deposition*. The attenuation of the figure is the expression of a spiritual condition. John, younger, and further away, is as tall as Judas. His stature is also the measure of his emotional response—the drama of shock and outrage that pervades his pose and expression. This John is clearly the “son of wrath” we know from Mark's Gospel. In their original positions will John's glare have been directed at Judas? Surely Hodart had some connection with the theatre.

John is, of course, young and beardless. Here, in the midst of all these bearded men, he is presented as a powerful youth, more than a stripling. Yet between the fall of the hair and the modish fullness of the sleeves, he is disconcertingly feminine in appearance. Peter's face we recognize too, with a curled island of hair centered on the top of his forehead. His nose is red even in the red clay, so vivid is the characterization. Judas we also know from the downward bend of his head, his face somber within its own dark shadow. His glance is furtive, avoiding contact.

And of their clothing only the contrasting simplicity of Christ's robes serves to confirm identity. The more complex garments of the others offer no clues. The table top must have slanted downward subtly to make the repast and its setting visible—to fully reveal, on the far side, the drama of Christ. Christ looks upward and slightly to his right. The planes of his face are smooth, ideally serene as he makes his pronouncement: the prediction of betrayal. The light catches his face fully and the smooth calm of the surfaces makes his skin seem pale, delicate, and luminous in color—especially when compared to the weathered features of Peter, or the shadowed face of Judas. In the way the surfaces receive the light, by the effects of animated gestures, in the vibrant characterizations, these figures are rich in shifts of tone and color. It leads one to believe that this Apostle was blue-eyed and that one, brown. These sensations of color will have been conceived in the very making of it—before the polychrome was added.

The strange, expressionistic asymmetry of the heads may have seemed more normative when viewed from below—but even so, the faces, with their wrenched features, register a feverish, almost frantic look of inner turmoil. An open mouth is moved off-center and its coherence with the underlying structure of the bones is dangerously loosened. Yet it remains so convincing that we feel,

almost with the tongue, the inside flesh of the enclosing cheeks.

The sudden, axial turn of the head on the neck; the sharp twist where the neck joins the shoulders, these are violent, almost impossible anatomical inventions. They do not have, these gaunt figures, the graceful, Italianate rhetoric of gesture that will, perhaps have inspired them originally. They are closer in spirit to the harsher, angular staccatos of Il Rosso than to the courtly, sinuous grace of Parmigianino.² Hands will have been bent or twisted at the wrist with a painful acuteness—rather like the tragic, clasping hands of the *Virgin from a Calvary* that the Museum assigns to Oliver of Ghent. The Virgin is arched in suffering, shocked erect—a distancing recoil from an unbearable event. Such late northern Gothic, both French and Flemish, must have been Hodart's immediate inheritance—the very air he breathed. The emotionally heightened realism of much of northern Gothic sculpture must have pervaded his youthful thinking before he met with those vital Italian influences that so shaped his mature years. It is, after all, from the fusion of northern Gothic and Italian art that Hodart's Mannerist realism emerged.

Hodart's broken figures are so animate that we feel a completeness of gesture even from the fragment. We know how those missing hands would have been: the thickness of the palm, the tense curl of the fingers, the wrench at the wrist. That Apostle opens his mouth and speaks! Exclaims! And we lean forward to listen. What kind of voice comes from between those terra cotta lips? Inaudible, invisible sounds. Perhaps it is the very incandescence that we hear: the hushed, spitting, crackling sound in the fiery heart of the kiln. Phillipe Hodart, poet, has made sound out of silence. Whole, these Apostles would have been passionate and grand. They are not less now, fragmented. But they are different—having, with time's afflictions, acquired layers of mute loss—the anxiety of uncertain memories.

²Hodart belonged to the side of Mannerism given to "inner stress" and emotion, as opposed to polished, courtly elegance. See Gilbert, Creighton, *History of Renaissance Art*, Prentice-Hall/Abrams, New York, 1970, pp. 208–9, for a brief discussion of the several facets of Mannerism. A more extended analysis depicting the social and political climate of the Mannerist period may be found in Hauser, A., *The Social History of Art*, Vol. 1, Vintage Books, New York, 1960, pp. 97–106.



Hodart, *Last Supper*, Apostle

II. January 15: PROFILES

Nothing, I am happy to learn, is known of his origins. Only that he was French. His life is full of voids. Documentation is scanty. Attributions uncertain. A dim light first touches Hodart in Spain, in 1520, in Valladolid at Santo Domingo de la Calzada, where, almost lost among a series of reliefs by other artists, are some of his early works in wood. Undistinguished, they follow the dictates of Andrés de Najera's designs for the silleria of the choir³—not a situation likely to call forth great originality. He appears next in Toledo where he worked from 1522 to 1526—four years in which his style develops sufficiently to claim both promise and significance. And there too, he worked in his chosen medium, clay, as well as in wood and stone. Two reredos, a *Domine Quo Vadis?*, and a *Christ at the Column*, all in painted terra cotta, are in the Cathedral. Another silence, from 1526 to 1530, is punctuated by only two incompletely documented commissions in Portugal. Four stone figures of Saints were done for the roof corners of the Capella dos Coimbras in the city of Braga—one of these is surely by his hand and others are perhaps done by assistants after his clay models. The second commission is the praying figure of Luis da Silveira for his tomb in the town of Gois,⁴ not far from Coimbra. Not enough work, not enough documentation to adequately illuminate four years. At last he is called by King Manuel himself to work in Coimbra, where, now with its University, a major humanist center exists. Hodart was "in." In 1530, the Prior of the wealthy Monastery of the Holy Cross, Frei Brás de Braga, funded by the king, commissioned the *Last Supper* for the new refectory of the monastery. Three and a half years are devoted to this grand work. The *Last Supper* is completed in January of 1534. One last work, an orante figure for the tomb of Duarte de Lemos in Trofa, and then? In 1536 he disappears. Utterly. Without a trace. I am delighted.

Here then, in Coimbra, are the remains of his only major work, his masterpiece in tortured chiaroscuro. The man's life is like his work, fitfully revealed by light, and trembling on the edge of a

³Macedo, Giogo de, *Phillipe Hodart*, Ed. Academia Nacional de Belas Artes, Lisboa, 1956, p. 14.

⁴Gonçalves, A., Nogueiro, *Estudos de Historia da Arte de Renascença*, Livraria Estante Editora, Aveiro, 1986, p. 132.

shadowy void that, at last, engulfs him. Where can he have gone? Did he revert to indifferent, undistinguished work that no one would think to ascribe to him in the mistaken belief that artists only get better? Did he fall upon hard times and succumb to a fit of Mannerist madness? Retire to a monastery in a spasm of guilt? Change his name? Become Frei Possidónio? In 1536 the Inquisition was officially installed in Portugal.

One mutilated, incomplete masterpiece speaks brokenly for Phillipe Hodart. So it is difficult to make a full assessment of his worth and importance. We cannot even be certain of the extent of his influence—whether the few things that we see related to his style are the works of followers, assistants, or himself.⁵ Scholarly conjecture about Hodart's negligible influence on his contemporaries suggests that Hodart suffered from an isolation imposed by his own idiosyncratic thought.⁶ His work was so particular, so individual, that he could not easily be followed by anyone. Nor could he be sympathetically understood by those from whom further commissions might have come.

It was not until thirty years later that the sculptor, Jean de Rouen, Hodart's friend, reflected Hodart's influence in his own work.⁷ Given the force and originality of the *Last Supper*, it must have excited marvelling and astonishment when first it appeared. Its anti-classical immediacy, its reduction of aesthetic distance, its lack of devotional stillness, will have been felt by many to be a lack of piety—perhaps even heretical. In any case it was too early for general acceptance even in an intellectual center like Coimbra. Oversimplifying, we tend to think of the Iberian peninsula as that place where ideas ended up in an exaggerated form—rather than where ideas began. And here, unexpectedly, is Hodart, who launches a significant vision which has no place to go—no one in Portugal being yet ready to recognize its import.

The *Last Supper* was destroyed and removed in 1855 to make room for a monument to one Possidónio da Silva. To Possidónio

⁵Hodart did receive commissions for clay models to be translated into stone by other artists. See Correia, V., *Obras III*, Imprensa da Universidade, 1953, p. 110.

⁶Gonçalves, A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 212. "... Searching for a more responsive ambience he continued to wander. This was his destiny ... a natural condition for a man so different from his fellows and so full of talent."

⁷Vitry, Paul, *Essai sur l'oeuvre des sculpteurs français au Portugal*, Imprensa da Universidade, Coimbra, 1933, pp. 26-27.

was given the honor of burying Hodart in dust and obscurity for thirty years. The table, the architectural surround, the fragments of Apostles, were used, it appears, as a rubble fill for new walls and flooring. Perhaps the work was already in very bad condition when they decided to tear it down. Broken. Parts missing. The target of monks enraged by an heretical realism? No. Not so. Not at all. Nothing so dramatic. Just the banality of changing taste, neglect, and the casual destructiveness of officialdom. The space that Hodart created will remain a mystery, and, like Hodart himself, part real, part ghost.

The term "realistic" describes this work stylistically more than it does Hodart's earlier sculptures. Are these Apostles actual portraits? With such powerful realizations of character, gesture, and expression, one would have to say that there were undoubtedly models. Yes. For heads, hands, feet, and the details of garments. But the tortured length and narrow chests are not those of specific individuals, but rather the result of the emotional urgency of his vision. How is one to explain the memories of Hellenistic Baroque in the "disembodied" head with its anguished, heavy-lidded eyes, so disconcertingly joined with a particular individual? In Italy Hodart must have made his pilgrimage to see the Laocöon along with so many others. Hodart's power resides in a startling fusion of "realism," such remembered images, and a Mannerist's spiritual sensibility.

As models for these "portraits" the "New Christians" have been proposed by Portuguese scholars, along with beggars, street vendors, and riff-raff.⁸ The conversions of the Jews began before King Manuel's edict of 1496, in anticipation of the worst, and in response to threats and ominous pressures. But why Jews and beggars? We sense that the depiction of the poor and the oppressed was the deliberate expression of mystical belief—perhaps connected to the Franciscan Spirituals. The Apostolici, the Brethren of the Common Life, and other such populist movements suggest themselves—particularly those that embraced the austere, Apostolic life of poverty as a true expression of faith.

Were these depictions based on some idea of a necessary historical authenticity? Some notion that Jewish Apostles should look like Jews—like Jewish "types"? Noses? Lips? Hair? Forelocks? Garments? Hats? All the outward signs of Jewishness, real or

⁸Macedo, pp. 18-21.

stereotypical, that the New Christians would have been at such pains to obliterate? The dense energy of hair and beards is integral to the tensions of Hodart's style. Imaging the head of a friend, he had only to think "Jew"—an ancient head of surging curls, free of classical idealizations. Hodart, in his zeal, equated spirituality with poverty. Perhaps he thought the Jewish Apostles exemplary in this. Truthfully, several Apostles look quite French to me. Did he not, as artists often do, use a friend for this one? Is that other a barely concealed self-portrait? Artists do that too. But I will concede that one of them is perhaps a Jew. The Judiaria flanked the monastery immediately on the east. The former Jews, those that did not flee Portugal, will have lived there still. Hodart would not have had to go far to find a possible Apostle.

III. January 19: HODART DECONSTRUCTED

Phillipe Hodart disappears in 1536 because he was slain by the apprentice in return for that blow across the face in front of all the others. Late that night, in an alley-way of the Baixinha,⁹ he was knifed by that vengeful, drunken lout, who then managed to drag his body all the way through the mud to the river bank and shoved it over into the flood. The corpse was never found.

Or: Hodart, his hair long and curled, takes leave of his mistress in the Judiaria and is slain by fanatics who mistook him for one of the secret Jews. It was that dark night when the mob took to the streets after the killers of Christ. His body, beaten and unrecognizable, was just one more added to the several piles of corpses on the streets of the Judiaria next morning.¹⁰

Or: The only indisputable fact is that, in the winter of the year, having finished the commission for Silveira's tomb in Trofa,

⁹The Baixinha was the lowest part of the city and the poorest—with the possible exception of the Judiaria. It was a long, narrow strip, with twisting muddy streets and extended from near the river's edge to the massive walls of the Monastery of the Holy Cross. It was organized rather like a souk and its population was made up of arab traders, thieves, beggars, prostitutes, and the sullen poor.

¹⁰In this context one need only mention the Lisbon pogrom of 1506 and the continued harshness against the New Christians launched yet again by the Portuguese Inquisition in 1536. See Maxwell, K., 'Prisoners of Glory,' *The Wilson Quarterly*, Jan. 1985, p. 55. Did Hodart flee before the arrival of the Inquisition in anticipation of accusations of heresy because of the *Last Supper*?

Hodart, suffering a morbid dissatisfaction with his work, returned to Coimbra to look again at the *Last Supper*. Satisfied that it was truly a masterpiece, he left the refectory and the chanting of the monks behind him. Outside he found a dense Coimbra fog belly-ing down onto the tiled rooftops of the Baixinha—a great, grey, omnivorous whale. It's moist, ghostly viscera clung to him. It digested Hodart—sucking out his heat first, consuming his clothing, disintegrating his skin, probing his bones for the marrow. Finally, there was nothing left but a silent, cold, grey void.

Or: Young still, Hodart travelled south across the Pyrenées. Having used almost all the monies that his patron, the Cardinal of Rouen, had provided for his wanderings in Italy, he made his way across northern Spain—following up connections, looking for commissions, his letters of introduction and recommendation carefully preserved in his portfolio. Somehow the masons always seemed to know before anyone else where important new projects were being launched. Although he found French artists, architects, artisans, and prelates—Cistercians and Benedictines—in all of those places, he felt himself, somehow, always an outsider. Latin was the lingua franca for those with whom he conversed. Or was it French? Did he feel he was turning his back on his past, his history, his own people? No. His allegiance was, if anyplace, to the sophisticated, often cynical excitements of the humanist circles. Tormented by scepticism he searched for a renewal of belief, for directness and simplicity—unlike the glut of corruption he met with everywhere in the large cities. That is why he wandered, and why he disappeared every so often.

But his art served the whims of princes and prelates as much as it may have served God. Happily for Hodart's purse, King Manuel and his agents eagerly sought out and encouraged the "new," the "modern," the "latest thing." Hodart's idiosyncratic differences were duly noted. They bought him, then, like a novelty, not fully understanding how different to the point of heresy his work really was. After the completion of each commission he felt an overpowering disgust with the oiled, self-congratulatory clerics, but, even more for himself. The pretense, the hypocrisy and self-seeking opportunism, was his own as well as theirs. He detested his own sycophantic behavior in their presence and desperately wanted to escape them. And himself.

Yet you cannot refuse a summons from the King himself, and the chance of a major commission to do a *Last Supper* for the

Monastery of the Holy Cross. He would have, by God, that commission directly from the bone-gnawing ambition of that fat Brás de Braga. There his work would be revered and all its subtle meanings pondered by those who chose to look. Perhaps it would even surprise and touch the indifferent.

And already in Coimbra were old friends and acquaintances. The commission would take, perhaps, four years of work. Setting up a workshop. Building kilns. Finding good workers and training them. Enough time to establish a secure name, a presence, a belonging. Enough time to love the place where he was esteemed and invited into the homes of the wealthy and powerful—the nobles, the magisterial clerics, the humanists. His Gallic wit and charm were much sought after. He married there, and children were born. No. Perhaps he was homosexual. Covertly. Carefully. In love with the youth who posed for John. But was nevertheless married and had several children. No. Not that either. He never married because she was Jewish.

He worked as he spoke, in sudden burst of rapid, intense activity. A lovely form would emerge from beneath his hands with astonishing speed. He would stop. Contemplate it. Snarl without sound, his lip curled in pain, and with one slap of his palm, flatten and demolish what he had just made! What an agony of discontent! An impossible man. Mad.

Or, at last, sweated from the heat of the kilns, and now chilled, he came into the house. He had managed to singe his eyebrows again. He sat down wearily, leaning back, nape resting over the chairback, arms hanging straight down, eyes closed. She could see that it had not gone well, and that, in addition to the exhaustion, he was in one of his fits of doubt and despair. "Lies! All I make is lies," he muttered. Who had he been working on today? It was Thomas, wasn't it? Yes. Thomas. Full of doubt and despair. Corroded with the acid of scepticism, grasping at straws of belief.

So she knelt and undid his boots, added logs to the fire, and with a moist, warm cloth, wiped his scorched brow. The children stood in the doorway mutely watching. In turn he had become each of the Apostles. His gestures changed. He literally seemed to shrink or grow taller, grew thinner or fatter. His speech changed and his temper. He was a metamorph, transforming himself as he worked on each Apostle. He became each of them and all of them. And then, in the midst of creating someone—John, perhaps—he would change his mind about whether John was asleep or awake,

shocked or angry, a little younger or a little older. When he was working on Judas he developed a nervous habit of twisting a lock of hair on the left side at his temple. Twisting and twisting. A forelock? He would sit with his head lowered, looking sideways and down, feeling how Judas' eyes were when Christ made his prophecy.

Tonight, in the midst of supper, he suddenly paused with his extended arm in the air, holding the bread—then turned to offer it to her. His eyes closed to see better. "Like this?" he said. And again, he shifted his position, lowered the bread to the table, twisted his head sharply, and said, "Like this!" And then his eyes opened, met hers, filled with recognition, lit with the smile of love, and he said, "That's it, isn't it, my sweet?" The next day's work was clearly planned in his head. He would finish Thomas. After that he would become Matthew and who knows what that might bring? So that evening she sent the children immediately upstairs to Fatima and pulled him promptly into bed.

IV. January 21: DOCUMENTATION

Having received permission to photograph the *Last Supper* I went back to the Museum today with two cameras, determined not to be defeated by technology. The lights were turned on for me and I was left to work in tranquility. Bathed in light, the sculptures seemed calmer to me. Perhaps my increasing familiarity with the sculptures has made me feel more at ease with them, and more dispassionate. No. Because of the camera's "objective eye," I am more conscious of the separation of the figures and of the openness of the spaces between them. When I saw them the first time I pulled them instantly together and grouped them more dramatically. I ignored the actual, present condition with its lacunae and inconsistencies. I saw the *Last Supper* only as a provisional proposal from which to reconstruct—an invitation to imagine. I imagined them unified by the horizontal of the table, elbows engaged upon it, arms gesturing through the space above it, dividing it axially, the space alive with a drama of movement and emotion. And, at its center, the grand, hushed, simple pyramid of the figure of Christ.

But today I have come with my cameras to document the facts of the case. That is my mental set—my commitment. They are separated and there is no table to pull them together. The expressive glances of the Apostles, directed toward Christ or each other, only



Hodart, *Last Supper*, Judas

remind us of the psychological interplay which once existed. When they were connected to the table and the gestures were full and complete, was there not a more angular series of moves and less of this circular softness? A harsher rhythm?

Of course they were sectioned—in two or three parts usually. At the base of the neck or just below the shoulders; through the middle of the sternum or just below it; at the waist; at the juncture of hip and thigh; mid-thigh, mid-arm. They were sectioned variously, depending on the bulk and fall of the garment, or on movement, turn, gesture. These divisions would have been invisible in the finished state, concealed with filler and color. Ironically, time has given back to us these original fragments. The lines of separation are again naked because these vulnerable joins yielded first to the violence of destruction. In its ruined state, Hodart's *Last Supper* reverts to a memory of its birth. Are some of these sections mismatched?

The largest sections are two and a half to three feet long in each direction. The kilns must have been as large as a cubic meter to allow enough space for the circulation of waves of heat and the separation of the piece from the walls of the kiln. Very large kilns, then, and smaller ones for a head, an arm, a hand, an extended foot.

This time, too, I was more aware of the elegance of facture. It is as though Hodart clothed the already formed and braced figure by draping it with sheets of clay. Nose against the surfaces, searching for traces of polychrome, I came to the rich and subtle variations of garments and the stuffs of which they were made: soft, thin materials that wrinkled with a delicate fineness like the shirtsleeves of Judas, or the weighty woolen folds of John's garment. The quiet, unstressed fall of the robes of Christ contrasts with the complex details of leather vests, tunics, shirts, thonged buttons, the belts and cords of the Apostles' clothing.

There are such striking variations in the style of hair and beards: nape-length, with a fringe of bangs across the brow; massive, energetic curls, or heavy waves of hair, flying or still, hugging the head, or flaring outwards. John's hair falls on one side, curving, enclosing a well of air against neck and cheek. The finest hair, gently embracing his head and the smooth tranquility of his brow, belongs to Christ. The treatment of his hair, in contrast to the Apostles, is lyrical in its reticence. His beard, made of silken threads, ends in lovely wavelets at each of its two pointed tips—even the one which no longer exists. The delicacy of the hair and



Hodart, *Last Supper*, John

beard add to our awareness of Christ's radiance and the particularity of his physical being. Christ, like John, is older than precedent leads us to expect. Christ's face is that of an experienced man forty-five to fifty years old. It is a face carved with suffering and the pain of foreknowledge. John is no longer a sleeping innocent. He is a palpable force, a believable equal among the Apostles. These are deliberate, mystical "agings." The mystical and the spiritual are embodied in the credible reality of their human, impoverished condition. And who, we wonder, posed for Christ?¹¹

Only one hand, John's remains intact in the entire work. It is a beautiful and powerful hand, bent at the wrist inward toward his breast with a Donatello-like tension. But Hodart's most essential gestural energy, his emotive strength everywhere in the work, we see stressed by the subtle vertical fold rising up the center of Christ's chest. That fold is the apex of the round triangular form of the rising chest itself, pressing forward where we would expect flatness, and giving a particular poignancy to the body's inner gesture. That pressure from within generates a dramatic contact with the observer. We sense its urge to speak to us; we hear the strange timbre of its echo chamber.

Color is a fact. The clay ranges from a buff touched with rose to a strong red-ochre. The more highly fired, the darker the passage would have become, and the redder. The more a passage will have been burnished before firing, the glossier and deeper the tone. For it to have been painted, a white ground would have been laid down first. There are many traces and fleckings of a greyish white. But as paint is laid on, the thickness of its successive layers fills in and mutes the fine details of hair, the tracteries of wrinkles on the faces, and reduces the difference between the smoothness of skin and the roughness of wool. The clarity and precision of detail and texture must then be restored by heightening with the brush. The paint wears off first from the raised surfaces, and residues remain embedded in cracks and in the engraved depths of fine lines and textures. Here and there are traces of a heavy coat of color that has

¹¹In all respects save that of age, Hodart's Christ seems to follow the description given by a fictitious governor of Judea named Lentulus. Lentulus' description is quoted in Michael Baxandal, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (p. 57). This forged account was widely accepted during the fifteenth and into the sixteenth centuries. The correspondence does not preclude the existence of an actual model who can have lent to Hodart's Christ the qualities of a specific individual.



Hodart, *Last Supper*, Christ

been flaking off, revealing the greater precision of details beneath.

I would like, of course, for Hodart to have been so obsessive about his medium that he would have resisted any notion of painting the work. But, of course, it wasn't like that either. Our notion of purity was not theirs.¹² One painted. Think of what it would have been like if the color had been as expressive and dramatic as the temper of Hodart himself—vital and innovative. There is, for instance, a depth in the tone on John's face that is surely the red flush of his anger. Were the colors not simply reinforcements of the physical reality but of the qualities of emotional response as well? The sudden pallor of shock—almost cyanose. The subtle undertone of green beneath the flesh that speaks of evil. A roseate warmth of compassionate yearning. The vibration of atmosphere.

(Suddenly, a dozen schoolchildren are racing down the length of the gallery to the focused illumination of the Hodart. They mill about, chattering and exclaiming. They cluster around the talking, disembodied head for several moments, then race back up the hall. When I go back again to photograph, feeling ponderous and solemn, I am shocked by what appears to be a pale, ochre communion wafer in the open mouth of the bodiless Apostle. One of them had placed a potato chip between the open lips!)

In October of 1530 Hodart signed his contract with the Monastery for the *Last Supper*. Later in the same month, his friend, Cristóvão de Figueiredo signed his contract to polychrome Hodart's sculpture.¹³

V. January 25: SHADOWS OF THE PROBABLE

The many obscurities in his life and work spur fantasy and invention. I am painfully conscious of the conflict between the poetic mystery of the man and whatever clear, prosaic categories of

¹²Muller, Theodor, *Sculpture in the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Spain*, Pelican History of Art, London, 1966, p. 179. "Reimenschneider's Műnnerstadt Altar was delivered uncolored—something only the Netherlands had done hitherto—obviously relying for full aesthetic effect upon the beauty of the material. But this innovation does not appear to have met with approval, for in 1503, when Veit Stoss was staying at Műnnerstadt during his exile from Nuremberg, he was commissioned 'to colour, paint, and gild the alterpiece.'" The issue appears to have been as much alive then as it is for us now.

¹³Correia, p. 102.

fact and detail are given to us. And there is, too, the magnetic grey area of the probable. On the side of prosaic fact we have the contract and a schedule of payments from the monastery ledgers.¹⁴ From that schedule we know that Hodart was to receive on such and such a date, 1700 maravedis, and again, to be paid another 100 cruzados douro, and so on; we know that his contract provided clay, kilns, and all necessary equipment for the satisfactory completion of the work; and that his contract also called for payment in clothing of good materials—a doublet, a jerkin, shoes, a cape, a fur cap. These things mean that he was well paid. They tell us how high he stood in the estimate of his contemporaries and how he compared to his friend, the sculptor Jean de Rouen, who witnessed the contract. It suggests how commissions and positions of importance were arranged among circles of influential friends. In 1524 Pero Anes, chief carpenter for the monastery, gave one of his daughters in marriage to the painter, Cristóvão de Figueiredo. In 1528 Jean de Rouen took to wife Pero's other daughter.¹⁵ If Pero had a third daughter would she not have married Hodart? Muito provável. Is that a philosophical proposal, a joke, or a possible pursuit of how and why marriages were then made—not in heaven, but within the networking of useful power and connectedness? We have no record to tell us whether or not Hodart was married. Assuming he was not, was it a matter of sexual preference? Was he secretly in love with the young man who posed for John? Or did the mystical sect to which he probably belonged have strictures against marriage and sexual relationships? If he believed in glorifying poverty, in an ideal of the "poor church," or in directness of revelation—how did he feel about his grand commission in a wealthy church? Was he tormented by a humanist's scepticism and repulsed by his own pretence and hypocrisy? Was his wandering the result of his search for a renewal of belief—for a directness and simplicity he could not ever seem to find?

To return from such greyness back to fact: The contract, finally, specified that the work had to satisfy the Prior, Frei Brás de Braga. In giving the commission to Hodart, the Prior declared himself an adventurous and broadly sophisticated advocate of the new and

¹⁴Correia, p. 112.

¹⁵Franca, J. A., Morales y Marin, J. L., Rincon Wilfredo, *Summa Artis: Historia General del Arte, Arte Portugues*. Vol. XXX, Espasa-Calpe, S. A., Madrid, 1986, pp. 228, 269.

the modern. These sophistications must have been acquired during his studies at the Universities of Louvain and Paris. An embrace of the nearly heretical position of Hodart's art demanded such worldliness, and perhaps a corresponding deep vein of mysticism as well. Brás de Braga was satisfied. Hodart was paid. A matter of record.

We all begin with broken contracts although we learn about it only too late. It is the condition of being alive that all contracts are imperfect instruments. The creative imagination is devoted to the invention of perfect, unfailing contracts—if not that, then given to rage or lamentation over broken clauses. Art criticism is a discussion of the terms and the durability of the contract the artist proposes.

The monks who destroyed his work, broke Hodart's contract with the monastery—that unwritten clause about a lasting monument. They broke Hodart's personal contract with time—destroying his bid for immortality. In that calculated destruction were they being art critics declaring a contract null and void? In that revisionist act they consigned his work to perdition—to non-existence. Surely a kind of art historical Last Judgement.

Can this play of fact and conjecture really resurrect Hodart? Even the fact of his name is blurred by so many variant transcriptions: Houdart, Odart, Duarte, Hodart, Olarte, Duardos, Udart, Eduart, Phillipe, Phélippe, Byryo and Vyryo. Are these all the same man? Hodart had at least as many personae as there are Apostles in the Last Supper, and so I have limited these names to twelve.

Not less than a name, travel shapes identity. Particularly for an artist. Surely Hodart must have made a trip to Italy. Others have made the same assumption.¹⁶ Muito provável. Without more proof than that which the omniscient eye affords, one feels that his trip to Italy was as certain as the missing tip of Christ's beard, but cannot claim to know it. It is only probable. Very probable. How else could he have come by that sophisticated range of ideas? or seen the Laocöon? It is probable that the young Hodart will have been part of a circle of sculptors working under the aegis of the Cardinal of Rouen, Georges d'Amboise. The Cardinal, whose mission it was

¹⁶Macedo, p. 17. "Muito provável que Hodart antes de surgir em Valladolid tivesse vagamundeado por Italia." (... Very probably, Hodart, before emerging in Valladolid, had been wandering in Italy.)

to bring the spirit of the Italian Renaissance to France, encouraged these sculptors to emulate "les modes et les usages des Italiens."¹⁷ To be sure there were Italian sculptors close at hand in France itself and Hodart could even have worked under their direction. In the Royal Abbey of Saint Denis in Paris, Hodart will have seen the tomb of Charles VIII done by the Italian sculptor Guido Mazzoni—the sculptor who most influenced his mature style. Surely that would have spurred him to see more of Mazzoni's work in Italy—in Modena or in Venezia. In Bologna he would also have seen the work of Niccoló dell'Arca. Not only did both Italians work in terracotta but they offered to Hodart a stringent realism, intense characterizations, and a repertoire of dramatic and emotional gestures. The kind of incised detailing that we find in Hodart's work derives from them. Hodart is Mazzoni's long lost heir.¹⁸ A dramatic illusionism establishes their kinship. The mystery plays to which Mazzoni's tableaux are so surely related are also connected to Hodart's theatre. "Heed all these things as though you were present," we are told in the Franciscan *Meditation on the Life of Christ*. "If you weep not, seeing this, I cannot know if you believe firmly in Christ." It is in this spirit of direct emotional response that Hodart invited the monks' participation.

Sculptured tableaux of the Lamentation, like those of Mazzoni, often portray, with a meticulous realism, wealthy and aristocratic donors in the roles of Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea tending the body of the dead Christ. In this sculptural parallel to the theatre, the donor, known and familiar to everyone, is now an actor and participant in a visionary and timeless reality. But it is a much more radical step to identify persons of lowly status with the

¹⁷Vitry, p. 20.

¹⁸Verdon, Timothy, *The Art of Guido Mazzoni*. Garland, N.Y., 1978, p. 160. I strongly suspect that Verdon had never heard of Hodart, nor seen his work. I did not discover Verdon's work on Mazzoni until eight months after I had completed the second version of this work on Hodart. So many striking similarities of description and response would have made anyone believe that we were speaking about the same artist. There are, of course, signal differences, some of which can be thought of as logical 16th century expansions of Mazzoni's contribution—but there are major differences that can only be attributed to Hodart's own distinctive personality and to influences from sources other than Mazzoni. If I have claimed the Laocöon as source for Hodart, I note here that Verdon mentions on p. 25 the possible influence of Hellenistic portrait heads from Delos on the "pathetic expressiveness" of Mazzoni's heads.

Apostles of the Last Supper. If it is true¹⁹ that Hodart's models were ordinary people from the poverty-stricken Baixinha just outside the walls of the Monastery—beggars, thieves, hoodlums—and former Jews from the Judiaria, it is quite possible that some devotional limit had been overstepped. Would the monks have happily given their prayers and devotions to the portrait of the Jew they had seen in the streets only this morning, or to the portrait of the stinking beggar to whom they had so often given alms, to the thief whose sins they knew only too well? Were the monks so sophisticated that they would have been willing to read into the visages of these sinners an apostolic grandeur? Or would the permissions of religious theatre have then ceased to apply and such realism been construed as a possible heresy? Or, if not heretical, at least as vulgar as my approach to the history of art.

Would Hodart also have been in Toulouse? I think of those prepossessing terra cotta figures in the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse that I saw once so long ago—life size figures of a brilliant and startling realism, monumental and grand. What an impetus they might have provided for Hodart's realism! A French scholar²⁰ proposes a connection between Hodart and the Toulouse master. Très probable. But a Portuguese scholar²¹ thinks otherwise—não provável. Although I suspect that the Portuguese scholar is right, I, neither French nor Portuguese, do enjoy the vision of a young Hodart travelling south toward Italy, going via Toulouse, carrying a letter of introduction to the Toulouse master from his patron, Georges d'Amboise. Toulouse is such a fine place for Hodart—still secretly haunted by Albigenian mysticism, still blessed with first class troubadours, a humanist circle, and good French food.

Aren't the destroyed and missing parts of Hodart's life and work like the draughty spaces of my ignorance—both demanding to be filled in? I am speaking of that despairing and hopeless urge to reconstruct the work, to resurrect Hodart. Is that something like Borges' scholar, Pierre Menard, rewriting Cervantes again word for word? Seeing his work and writing about it is like exchanging letters with an important friend who lives so far away that one is never troubled by the possible grossness of his physical presence or the dismaying pressure of his actual needs?

20. Vitry, p. 13.

19. Macedo, p. 21.

22. For an alternate attribution and interpretation of the *Virgin of the Annunciation*, see Gonçalves, A., *Op. Cit.*, pp. 55-67.

What I write is perhaps no longer connected with Hodart at all. What is it about his work that invites such speculation from those who study him? The tragedy of its incompleteness. The erasures and uncertainties in the history of the artist himself. We are provoked by how apparently different his work is from all that surrounds it. We are tempted by those brilliant clues in the work itself that lead us to the brink of an understanding just short of revelation. What haunts me is my failure to envision his space. Hodart will not be real until I can breathe the atmosphere generated by his work. For such eloquent figures there must have been a not less eloquent space.

VI. February 3: THE MONASTERY OF THE HOLY CROSS: THE SPACE INVENTED.

The Last Supper was, of course, in the refectory—a vast, once elegant space designed and built in 1528. Now it is a classroom for adult education attached to the Municipal Library. At either end the walls have been built forward of their original surfaces, and the floor levels, now of dingy wood, have certainly been changed. The remnant of a pulpit emerges from one end, its access now buried inside the wall—perhaps along with a recess that will once have partially housed the Last Supper. Some dusty portrait busts, the kind no one ever looks at, are mounted at both ends. Perhaps one of them is Possidónio da Silva. Neglected and only intermittently occupied, the refectory seems morose. It suffers from the gloomy poverty of municipal greyness even though painted white. Yet the handsome vaulting of the high ceiling and the massive, fortress-like piers of the ancient outer wall led me to imagine a sequence of prayers and responses. I saw, for a brief, hallucinatory moment, the *Last Supper* dominating a full and ample space; the murmuring voices of the Apostles echoing mysteriously behind the cadences of the monks' prayers. Tonight when the biology class meets, the instructor will name the parts of the body on the chart next to his desk. He will name the parts, and the students, in unison, will chorus the litany after him.

The architecture of the Monastery Church, the Sacristy, the Chapter House, the Choir, and the paintings and sculptures they contain, position Hodart. From this context we can sense how radical Hodart may have been—how much at odds, finally, his work was with the serene classicism and devotional stillness of his

contemporaries, Nicolas Chanterene, Jean de Rouen, and their disciples—and even with the evident Mannerist tendencies of Grão Vasco and Cristóvão de Figueiredo—two of the more advanced painters of the period.

Consider Hodart's Apostles in relation to the *Virgin of the Annunciation* done by Nicolas Chanterene²² sometime between 1515 and 1529. The Virgin embodies, in the forms of the Renaissance, the medieval idea of the beauty of "goodness" shining from within—pure and radiant in its simplicity.²³ She is so tenderly formed. We feel certain of her adolescent chastity and modesty. She is so ideally beautiful that the suggestion of realism in her features makes us think perversely of how perfect a Juliet she would have made for Shakespeare, or a Lolita for Nabokov. Hodart, while admitting to the beauty of the work, would have been impatient with its classical single-mindedness and unsullied Italian elegance. He would have doubted its credibility, its lack of ambivalence or conflict. He would have wanted in her face, in the turn of her head, in the twist and recoil of her pose, the foreknowledge of suffering and death; he would have wanted anguish, fear, awe, and exaltation as well. He would have wanted that powerful array of emotions that we see expressed in the bodily gestures and face of each Apostle.

But in speaking of these differing attitudes toward emotional and psychological states, we are really also speaking about differences in the space that is created. In the work of Nicolas Chanterene or Jean de Rouen, the figure commands the space and occupies it. The figure must have a space that will encompass its stillness, its majesty, its mass and expanding volumes. The proportions of the space, more often than not, are measured by a containing architectural setting—a vaulted and columned recess perhaps. But the figure itself is the initiating force even when the space for it has been predefined by the architecture.²⁴

²²From a conversation with Professor Pedro Dias of the University of **Columbia Coimbra**

²³For a discussion of an identification of the "good" with the "beautiful" in medieval aesthetics see Eco, Umberto, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 17-27.

²⁴For a telling example of this aesthetic on a large scale see Jean de Rouen's *Apostolado* of 1566 in the Sé Velha of Coimbra. For the devotional stillness and classicizing restraint that marks this style consider the same artist's earlier work, the *Entombment* of 1540, originally done for the church of the Monastery of Santa Cruz and now in the Machado de Castro museum.

The physical substance of the figure is absolute and indisputable. Its existence is an article of faith reinforced by the dictates of reason and logic. Even in a bas-relief, the plane of the background provides only the minimal information for setting or place. Any illusionistic recession in the background is limited by some architectural re-assertion of the surface so that the eye may not leave the figure for too long.²⁵ The substance of the figure is a Platonic purification of actuality in a fixed and unchanging world.

To find Hodart's space we must begin again with the figure, since that is all we have. We begin with the physical facts of broken, separated Apostles. From them we must infer the space of Hodart's vision—the full intention of his invention. His personages are imbued with a complex range of emotional energies. In their poignant realism they insist on the fitful nature of feelings and attitudes. In their elongation and inward throbbing, they insist on the spirit as an animating force. Gestures, both large and small, twisting and turning, compressions and expansions, reinforce the immediacy of movement.

Hodart's figures are energy in space. Space is the medium in which the figures move and gesture, in which the drama unfolds. Figure and space are envisioned as one—all at once. The dynamic interplay of space, a transforming light, color, the figure itself, afford us the vision of a changing and uncertain world. The space resists containment and final definition—merging with the spectator's. With so strong an impulse toward movement, transitions, and transformations, I see, at last, a solution for the problem of Hodart's table—one that is at variance with the surrounding traditions. It is a rectangular table moving diagonally into the space that provides the essential condition for Hobart's theatre. It would have moved from right to left at an angle to the east wall so that the dim light entering through the high windows of the north wall, would suffuse the work with an atmospheric drama. And on the darkest days the flicker of candles would add anxious uncertainty. It is a solution that adequately rationalizes the apparent differences of size among the Apostles. It is the best solution I can find for completing the space in accordance with all the other manifestations of Hodart's mastery in this work.

²⁵For the relation of the figure to illusionistic architectural settings see Jean de Rouen's large cycle of high reliefs devoted to the life the Virgin and the life of Christ in the apse of the Cathedral in Guarda. Of particular interest in this context is the same artist's version of the *Last Supper* in the absidiole to the right.

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Hodart's dramatic realism is in the service of a profound mysticism: the spiritual grandeur of God made manifest and inherent in present reality. Hodart was a radical innovator. More than Berreguete, Hodart is truly the counterpart of Pontormo and Il Rosso Fiorentino among Mannerist sculptors. He moved in diagonals, anticipating later Mannerists. In his concern with dramatic light and atmospheric mystery he prefigures the Baroque. In spirit he anticipates Caravaggio.

And now I have him!

And yet with such categorizing, I have killed and buried him once again, since it is not this particular art historical categorization that is important in my response to Hodart. What is important and alive is the modernity of the *Last Supper* as it is and as it was. The living immediacy of that work-deformed foot; of forms swept by a turbulent anxiety; by the imperative urge to speak; the wrenching of the spirit in the molecules of red clay these are important. What is important is that a great work, prophetic of betrayal and doom, yet bathed in the celebratory light of the real world, contains for us still, a vibrant humanism.

No. None of this is true. That is the obdurate reality. Except in our dreaming this *Last Supper* does not exist. We recognize in the destruction it has suffered, our own sundered dreams and burnt illusions. Hodart knows us as we know him. Our need to resurrect him is our need to resurrect ourselves.

Coimbra, Portugal