

Catalan art

Josep-Lluís González
Educationalist and writer

The Prince of all God's angels

Analysis of Catalan artwork Jaume Huguet's 15th century painting of Saint Michael the Archangel, commissioned for Barcelona's Santa Maria del Pi church

AN ARTISTIC GEM

Saint Michael the Archangel

Artist: Jaume Huguet

Original location: Retaule dels Revenedors, Santa Maria del Pi, Barcelona

Current location: MNAC, Barcelona

Date: 1456

Technique: Tempera, stucco and gold leaf on panel

● Look at those lips, those eyes, cheeks, thick wavy hair and swaying hips! When I gaze at this dapper young man, I cannot see an angel as such. And, if I do, it is a very particular kind of angel: a valiant knight, a courtly prince and a poet.

Jaume Huguet's painting, Saint Michael the Archangel, was part of an altarpiece commissioned in 1455 by the Guild of Resellers for their chapel at Santa Maria del Pi in Barcelona. The complete panel also included depictions of the crucifixion, the enthronement of the Virgin Mary, Saint Michael killing the Antichrist and the miracles performed at Castel Sant'Angelo. Undoubtedly, however, it is the representation of Michael as a youth proudly stamping on the devil that has become the best-known section of the altarpiece even if the bottom part was cut off.

Saint Michael has a long tradition in the three monotheistic religions since he is mentioned in the Hebrew Kethuvim, the Book of Revelation and the Koran. He is described as 'a prince of the first rank', a general who leads an army of angels against Satan's forces.

A man of arms indeed but also a man of letters, thus anticipating Baldassare Castiglione's ideal courtier. As a young victorious warrior, Michael can be compared to Donatello's David (c. 1440) and, in the angular masculinity of his arms and the tilting lance crowned by a cross, it prefigures Verrocchio's bronze statue of the future King of Israel. On the other hand, the beautiful tight-fitting black and golden tunic and the sumptuous cloak fastened with a precious brooch bring to mind the refined courtier who is about to start the steps of a slow, majestic *basse danse*.

This is no ethereal cherub. I can feel the weight of Michael's body, including his heavy wings with the eye-like markings characteristic of peacock feathers.



Jaume Huguet's painting Saint Michael the Archangel ARCHIVE

JACOMART'S AUSIÀS MARCH

He is a younger version of Jacomart's painting of Saint Sebastian in Gandia, thought by some to be a portrait of Ausiàs March. As a matter of fact, I have always imagined the Valencian poet to look like Huguet's saint. I am thinking of Ausiàs in 1419 when, at the age of twenty-two, he left home and went to serve King Alfonso in his Italian and North-African campaigns alongside great poets such as Jordi de Sant Jordi (the king's personal valet) and Andreu Febrer (translator of Dante's Divine Comedy into Catalan).

Spirit and matter, mind and body, the heights of the soul and the temptations of the flesh. That's what Michael and Ausiàs, respectively God's leading soldier and the king's falconer, represent to me. I doubt I could ever get to know a man as well as I know Ausiàs. He pours his whole being into his poems and the result is magnificently human. I can feel his joy and pain, his acute sexual desire and his yearning for transcendence through love. His writing does not seem contrived. Instead, it

mirrors a complex world inhabited by women who accept him or reject him, who can provide what he needs but often just offer the scraps of the fantastic amorous banquet which he imagines to be possible. In his sincerity and manly sensitivity, Ausiàs reminds me of John Donne in one of the best love poems of all time: 'The Sun Rising'.

Huguet's workshop largely monopolized the production of altarpieces for generations, but what I particularly value about his work is the truly humanistic balance of love and war, courting and jousting, spirituality and sheer physicality, which we come across in Michael the Archangel. What a swansong the fifteenth century was! It brought the Golden Age of Catalan culture to a close, but it did so with a flourish of artists such as Martorell, Dalmau and Huguet as well intellectuals of the likes of Ausiàs March and the authors of two impressive chivalric novels: *Curiel e Güelfa* and *Tirant lo Blanc*. Without a doubt, Michael and Ausiàs are the princes of all those angels. And my own archangels.