

**THE SHROUD IN FLEMISH ART****by REMI VAN HAELST, Antwerp, Belgium**

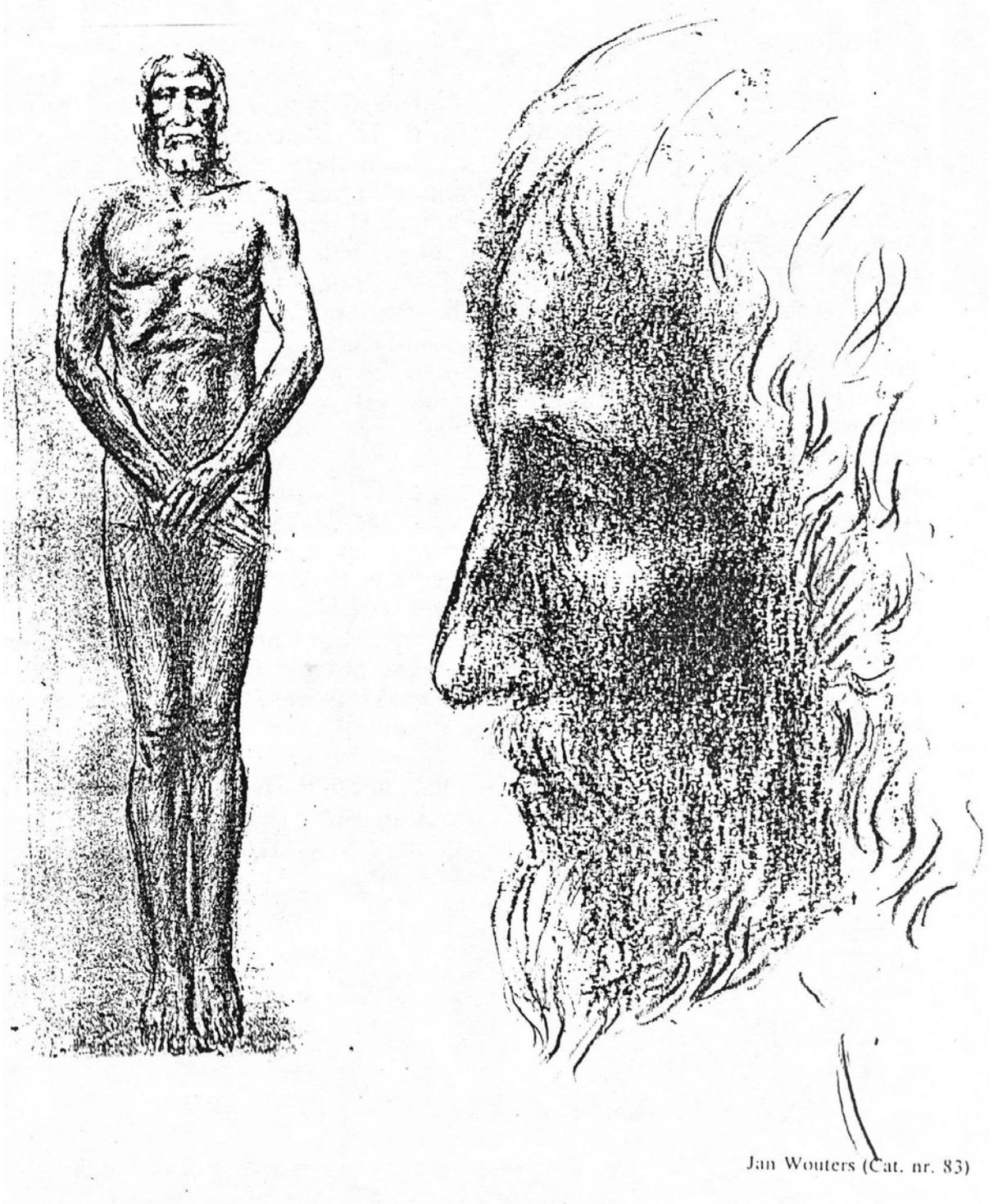
1929: A dream came true ... just accepted at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, a young artist dreamed about eternal fame and Art with a capital A.

The very same day, his sister, working at the Flemish Opera House of Antwerp, received from her friend, a harpist of the orchestra, a small photo-reproduction of the Pia photos of the face of Christ as on the Shroud of Turin. The young lady was very impressed. Coincidentally both youngsters came home at the same time. The girl showed her photo to her brother.

The young artist, Jan Wouters, who became later one of the best Flemish glass painters, was so profoundly touched by the sight of the face of Christ, that he never forgot the emotions he felt that moment. This face of Christ became a source of inspiration for many of his works. As he wrote himself: "This Christ is more than a beautiful representation. He speaks more to me than the 'Beau Dieu d'Amiens' (the beautiful God of Amiens). He radiates more nobility and divine beauty than the paintings of Michelangelo, da Vinci, Van Eyck, Memlinc, Rubens, Van Dijck and many of the finest painters from all times. From my first looking upon the Face on the Shroud I never tired of looking at the divine beauty of His face."

Fate brought Jan Wouters in direct contact with the Shroud of Turin. Shortly after the publication of the new Enrie photographs of the Shroud the artist visited Paris to see the glass windows by the French artists selected to be placed in the Notre Dame Cathedral of Paris. The exhibition was held in the ex-papal stand at the Paris World Exhibition. Entering the exhibition hall, Jan Wouters noticed at once two life-size reproductions of the Shroud of Turin, made from magnificent negatives of Enrie. On the walls were several detailed photos and documents on the report of results of the experts on the Shroud of Turin made by the French "Commission of the Cardinal of Paris". This report contained the findings and opinions of some of the most distinguished Shroud experts such as Paul Vignon, Dr Barbet, Ir. Cordonnier and also the testimony given by Chief Inspector Chiappe of the Paris Police Force.

Wouters was not the only one to be moved by the profound divinity and serene beauty of the Enrie reproductions. World famous authors such as Paul Claude! and Francois Mauriac became champions of the beauty of the man in the Shroud. Mauriac revoked his own conception about the ugliness and the infirmity of Christ, pointed out in his book *Le Christ*. After having seen the photos of Enrie, Mauriac wrote his book *The Face of Christ*. In this he wrote: "The artists who represented Christ as a beautiful man were right after all. This is not a picture, but a presence ..."



Jan Wouters (Cat. nr. 83)

## THE SHROUD IN FLEMISH ART (cont'd)

At that time Jan Wouters made a complete study of the stature and the face of Christ as presented on the Shroud of Turin. The likeness of his profile studies is similar to the representations of Christ found in the oldest Christian graves in the Roman catacombs. The studies of Wouters do indeed resemble very closely the sketches made by the British artist Thomas Heaphy who searched the Roman catacombs in 1830 - 1840. Because it is certain that Wouters did not know about the work of Heaphy, now kept in the Print Room of the British Museum, it is certain that both men did indeed draw the same person: Jesus Christ.

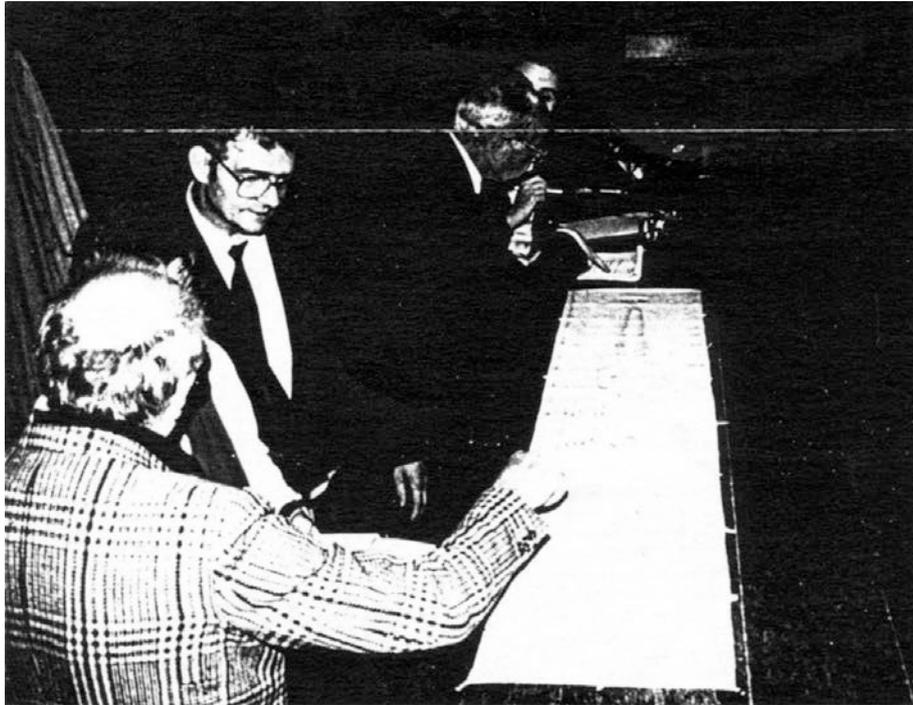
One may be sure that the representations of Christ found in the earliest Christian graves in the catacombs of Rome were made by men who had actually seen Christ in person or at least followed descriptions given by contemporaries of Christ. Unfortunately the paintings in the catacombs suffered greatly from the test of time: the breath of so many visitors and the touch of so many fingers became disastrous for many of the earliest representations of the Lord. Now only a very vague figure is left on the ceiling of the grave in the Domitillian catacombs. But the sketches of Thomas Heaphy, with his own notes, are still in good order, kept in the British Museum. Rex Morgan treated this subject in depth in his book *The Holy Shroud and the Earliest Paintings of Christ*.

Jan Wouters used several times his conception of Christ, following the Shroud of Turin in his glass paintings which were ordered by several churches and groups. The artist regrets that his results on glass were not always exactly what he intended them to be because work on glass is not very flexible for artistic impressions.

But the importance of the work of Wouters lies in the fact that an artist from our time did exactly the same as the oldest icon-makers did: representing the figure of Christ following the very first representation of the Lord, left by Himself for us on the Shroud we now know as the Shroud of Turin.

## Reference:

Rex Morgan, *The Holy Shroud and the Earliest Paintings of Christ*, Runciman Press, Australia, 1986



Belgian author, Remi Van Haelst (facing camera) discusses the 1516 copy of the Shroud at Lier, Belgium, attributed to Durer

