

Fashionable Mourners: Bronze Statuettes from the Rijksmuseum

by Amanda Mikolic, Curatorial Assistant

Cleveland's celebrated early fifteenth-century alabaster tomb mourners are part of a major exhibition at the renowned Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam this fall (fig. 1). In exchange, the Cleveland Museum of Art has the rare opportunity to exhibit four bronze mourners—traveling to North America for the first time—from the tomb of Isabella of Bourbon (1436–1465) (fig. 2). The original carvings are attributed to Jan Borman the Younger and the casting attributed to Renier van Thienen.

Figure 1. *Mourners from the Tomb of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (r. 1363–1404), 1404–10.* Claus de Werve (Netherlandish, 1380–1439). Vizille alabaster; avg. h. 41.4 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of Leonard C. Hanna Jr., 1940.128, 1958.66–67.



Figure 2. *Mourners from the Tomb of Isabella of Bourbon*, c. 1475–76. Attributed to Jan Borman the Younger (Netherlandish, active 1479–1520); casting attributed to Renier van Thienen (Flemish, active 1460–1541). Brass copper alloy; avg. h. 56 cm. On loan from the City of Amsterdam, BK-AM-33-B, I, D, F.



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Figure 3. *Portrait of Isabella of Bourbon*, c. 1500. After Rogier van der Weyden (Flemish, c. 1399–1464). Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France. © Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon / Photo: François Jay.

Very fashionable women of the fifteenth century used a razor to create a higher artificial hairline. Hair was then braided or confined with a decorative net and often topped with an extravagant headdress. They also shaved their eyebrows. For the first time in fifty years, ears were exposed.



Little is known about the life of Isabella of Bourbon, daughter of Charles I, Duke of Bourbon (1401–1456) and granddaughter of the powerful John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy (r. 1404–19) (fig. 3). Isabella grew up at the court of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy (r. 1419–67) in Brussels and was a favorite of her uncle; she received precious gifts and was often seated at his side in a place of honor at banquets. She became the second wife of Charles the Bold, future Duke of Burgundy (r. 1467–77). Although the marriage was politically motivated they were often celebrated for their faithful love. Together they had one child, Mary of Burgundy (r. 1477–82), who became duchess when her father died.

On her eighteenth birthday in 1475, Mary commissioned the finest artists in Brussels to design and construct her mother's tomb in Saint Michael's Abbey in Antwerp. They included bronze founder Renier van Thienen, a man of considerable standing in Brussels. A counselor, tax collector, and burgomaster, he often worked with the Burgundian court and was likely responsible

for overseeing the construction of Isabella's tomb in addition to casting the bronze mourners from wooden models attributed to carver Jan Borman, who often worked with Van Thienen and was known in Brussels as a master of figural sculpture.

When radical Protestants vandalized Catholic churches and monasteries during the "Iconoclast Fury," or *Beeldenstorm* (roughly meaning "statue storm" in Dutch), of 1566, the tomb of Isabella was mutilated. The vandals removed all of the mourners, angels, and coats-of-arms, destroying the hands of her effigy in the process; her face still bears scars from their axes (figs. 4, 5).

Figure 4. *Effigy of Isabella of Bourbon*, c. 1475–76. Bronze. Our Lady's Cathedral of Antwerp. Photo: Alamy.

Isabella lies with her head on a cushion and her (replacement) hands folded in prayer. She is richly clothed in luxurious fabrics and jewelry. At her feet are two small dogs, a symbol of her fidelity to her husband and common on Burgundian tombs.



Figure 5. *Effigy of Isabella of Bourbon* (detail), c. 1475–76. Bronze. Our Lady's Cathedral of Antwerp. © www.lukasweb.be, Art in Flanders vzw. Photo: Hugo Maertens.

In 1691 Amsterdam officials purchased ten statues they believed represented various Netherlandish counts and countesses, and in 1887 the statues were moved to the Rijksmuseum. It was not until 1951 that their significance and importance were realized: these ten figures were actually the lost statuettes of the tomb of Isabella, and part of the distinguished lineage of Burgundian tomb design.

Burgundian tomb traditions have a long history, beginning in 1381 with the building of an elaborate tomb for Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (r. 1363–1404) near Dijon, and continued through the fifteenth century with tombs for subsequent dukes and their families (fig. 6). Their predominant feature was a long procession of realistic mourning figures located beneath the effigy. Over time, these figures became less generic and more like portraits representing the deceased’s distinguished ancestors, such as those from Isabella’s tomb.

Historical records reveal much about Isabella’s tomb—including its original form, created in typical Burgundian fashion. We



Figure 6. *Tomb of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (r. 1363–1404)*, 1381–1410. Claus Sluter (Netherlandish, c. 1360–before 1406) and Claus de Werve (Netherlandish, d. 1439). Gilded alabaster, black marble; 360 x 254 x 243 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France. © Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon / Photo: François Jay.

know that twenty-four figures surrounded her effigy, of which only ten survive. The figures themselves were modeled after another tomb commissioned by Philip the Good and located in Lille (fig. 7). Eight of the surviving mourners from Isabella’s tomb are mirror images of those in the Lille tomb.

Roman numerals are scratched into the bottom surface of each figure. These are marks consistent with workshop practices of fifteenth-century architecture and can help us to determine the order of the remaining statuettes. Two mourners have consecutive marks and likely stood next to each other in the original tomb (figs. 8, 13). From these location marks we can also determine that the surviving figures alternated between male and female in their placement around the tomb.

The Burgundian court was known for its sumptuous attire, an outward indication of rank, wealth, and power; Isabella’s mourners wear the fashionable dress of the early 1400s. Although not true portraits, the statuettes are instead idealized images of Burgundian noblemen and ladies.

Figure 7. *Tomb of Louis of Mâle, Margaret of Brabant, and Their Daughter Margaret of Flanders in Lille*. Engraving from A. L. Millin, *Antiquités Nationales*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1795).

Although the original tomb was lost, written accounts, engravings, and pen and ink drawings of the tomb and all of its figures survive. From these we can determine that eight of the surviving ten mourners from Isabella’s tomb are actually mirror images of those on the Lille tomb.



However, from historical records and the mourners' detailed costumes, we can identify one of the opulently dressed figures as Albert I, Duke of Bavaria (1336–1404), depicted with the Order of Saint Anthony suspended around his neck (fig. 8). Albert wears a *houppelande*, a voluminous garment with wide sleeves worn with a tight belt around the waist to create uniform, fluted pleats. Embellished with a fur collar, cuffs, and trim, it also has bag sleeves, a feature seen only in male costume that



Figure 8. *Mourner from the Tomb of Isabella of Bourbon*, c. 1475–76. Attributed to Jan Borman the Younger (Netherlandish, active 1479–1520); casting attributed to Renier van Thienen (Flemish, active 1460–1541). Brass copper alloy; 56 x 24.5 x 13.5 cm. On loan from the City of Amsterdam, BK-AM-33-B.



Figure 9. *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife*, 1434. Jan van Eyck (Dutch, c. 1390–1441). Oil on oak; 82.2 x 60 cm. The National Gallery, London, inv. no. NG186. © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.

went out of fashion by the mid-1400s. He wears the sleeves two ways: one hand occupies the larger sleeve opening, allowing the fabric to hang down like a long bag; the other emerges from the traditional lower opening. Indicated by a pattern of finely engraved lines, a fur hat completes his fine ensemble, emulating the height of fashion, as also seen in Jan van Eyck's renowned painting of Giovanni Arnolfini (fig. 9).

The other male figure wears a longer, more traditional *houppelande* with padded shoulders, or *mahoîtres*, popular in Burgundy in the mid-1400s (fig. 10); in the next decade *mahoîtres* would become monstrously exaggerated on male costume. On his head is a *chaperon* with a *bourrelet* or ring-

shaped turban with a trailing streamer. Favored by French and Burgundian courtiers as a sign of prosperity, those worn by nobility used more fabric to create a larger *bourrelet*, as seen in the portrait of Philip the Good, originally painted by Rogier van der Weyden and widely copied (fig. 11). The mourner also wears a long fur-lined robe with wide, deeply scalloped fur-trimmed sleeves (fig. 12). The robe, belted tightly at the waist, features a long slit up the front that reveals his hosiery.



Figure 10. *Mourner from the Tomb of Isabella of Bourbon*, c. 1475–76. Attributed to Jan Borman the Younger (Netherlandish, active 1479–1520); casting attributed to Renier van Thienen (Flemish, active 1460–1541). Brass copper alloy; 55 x 22.5 x 12.5 cm. On loan from the City of Amsterdam, BK-AM-33-D.



Figure 11. *Portrait of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy*, c. 1400s. Studio of Rogier van der Weyden (Flemish, c. 1399–1464). Oil on wood; 31.5 x 22.5 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France, inv. no. 3782. © Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon / Photo: François Jay.

A chaperon was a type of hood popular in the Middle Ages. In the court of Burgundy, the addition of a bourrelet to the hood gained favor. Streaming out of the top of the round ring is a liripipe or tail.



Figure 12. *Regime des Princes* (detail), fol. 7, c. 1450. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Fr. 126.

Both figures wear fur-trimmed houpelandes of different lengths. The garment on the right is enhanced with bag sleeves and contrasting hosiery. They also wear chaperons with modest bourrelets.

The female attire is even more opulent. One figure wears a long houppelande, the excess fabric pooling onto the floor—a sign of wealth (fig. 13). She has a similarly long cloak fastened across her shoulders, the ends of which are held up over her arms, allowing her to stride forward. The simple hood placed over her braided hair features a trailing veil. A similar cape and hairstyle can be seen on Saint Barbara in Hans Memling’s altarpiece (fig. 14). The Burgundians were known for their love of jewelry; the mourner’s cross-shaped pendant, likely made of gold, includes large semiprecious stones.

Another lavishly dressed female figure wears a striking turban atop her partially shaved head (fig. 15). The extravagant headgear, held in place with a chin cloth, is decorated with rows of pearls. Its centerpiece is an ornate brooch much like that shown on a turban in a Burgundian painting that features members from Philip the Good’s court (fig. 16). The mourner’s long outer garment is trimmed with fur, features wide sleeves, and is belted tightly above the waist—common in women’s at-



Figure 13. *Mourner from the Tomb of Isabella of Bourbon*, c. 1475–76. Attributed to Jan Borman the Younger (Netherlandish, active 1479–1520); casting attributed to Renier van Thienen (Flemish, active 1460–1541). Brass copper alloy; 55.5 x 20.5 x 13.5 cm. On loan from the City of Amsterdam, BK-AM-33-I.



Figure 14. *Altarpiece of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist* (detail), c. 1430/40–1494. Hans Memling (Netherlandish, c. 1430/40–1494). Oil on wood, triptych central panel: 173.6 x 173.7 cm. Memling Museum, Sint-Janshospitaal, Bruges, Belgium, inv. O. SJ175.1. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

Figure 15. *Mourner from the Tomb of Isabella of Bourbon*, c. 1475–76. Attributed to Jan Borman the Younger (Netherlandish, active 1479–1520); casting attributed to Renier van Thienen (Flemish, active 1460–1541). Brass copper alloy; 56 x 21 x 13.5 cm. On loan from the City of Amsterdam, BK-AM-33-F.



Figure 16. *The Presentation at the Temple* (detail), c. 1440–50. Anonymous (French). Oil on wood; 88 x 53 cm. Musée des Beaux Arts, Dijon, France, inv. no. 3765. © Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon / Photo: François Jay.

Although great attention to detail is seen in the garments of Isabella’s mourners, what is lost in the translation to bronze is the varied color palette popular in the Burgundian court.

tire. Unlike the previous figures her fur collar is turned down, a trend gaining in popularity at the time, especially in France. Her dress, although mostly hidden, bears wide fur cuffs and pleats associated with a houppelande.

Although little is known about Isabella of Bourbon’s life, her surviving tomb figures testify to the lavish lifestyle, power, and wealth of the Burgundian court. The lasting legacy of Burgundian memorial art cannot be exaggerated, nor can the importance of Isabella’s tomb within this tradition.

Further Reading

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