

The Museum of Modern Art

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GIACOMO MANZU: Studies for "The Portal of Death"
March 18 - April 13, 1969

Wall Label

Giacomo Manzu. Italian, born Bergamo, 1908

Studies for The Portal of Death, St. Peter's, The Vatican, Rome, 1961-63.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Lester Francis Avnet, New York.

Until recently, four of the five protals of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome were still the wooden doors that had been installed -- supposedly temporarily -- centuries ago. In 1943, funds were willed to the Batican for the specific purpose of holding an international competition for the commissioning of bronze replacements. The donor, a canon of St. Peter's who in secular life had been a rich German nobleman, Prince Georg von Bayern, stipulated that unless the project were started within five years, the money would go to the naval academy in Bremen. After several years' delay, on July 1, 1947 the Vatican announced a competition for two doors. Manzù decided to participate.

On the basis of his first model, Manzù was among twelve artists invited the next year to submit designs for a second competition. For this, Manzù prepared a completely new project and two reliefs in actual size, The jury split in making its decision, owing to reluctance in some Vatican circles to assign the task to Manzù, who for several years had been the subject of strong attacks from government officials and other conservatives. The opposition to Manzù was due in part to his alleged ties with left-wing groups, and in part to the unorthodoxy of his iconography, particularly as manifested in an earlier series of reliefs on the subject "Christ in Our Humanity."

In the course of an intense press campaign pro and con, a brochure in favor of Manzù's project was published anonymously by his friend, Monsignor Giuseppe De Luca. In 1950, The Vatican finally decided to assign the execution of one of the portals to Manzù. It was not until January, 1952, however, that he received the official commission for the door, the theme of which was to be "The Triumph of the Saints and Martyrs of the Church." Two years later, he made radical changes in his original designs, but, preoccupied with many other projects, he worked on them only intermittently.

In 1956, through Monsignor De Luca, Manzù met another native of Bergamo -- Angleo Roncalli, then Patriarch of Venice, who two years later became Pope John XXIII. Manzù received the commission for the official bust of the new pontiff and in the course of working on it developed a warm relationship with the sitter.

In 1961, Manzù requested and received from the Pope permission to change the theme of the door to "The Portal of Death." According to Catholic faith, death represents the highest and last moment in human existence, signaling into eternal life. It was also discovered that the portal assigned to Manzù had once been called the Door of Death and had been used almost exclusively for the funerals of important personages.

The change in subject naturally involved extensive modifications in the designs. On the death of Monsignor De Luca in 1962, the Pope granted Manzù's request to dedicate the portal to his late friend. For the next eighteen months, Manzù worked intensively on the doors; but they were not completed in the lifetime of John XXIII, who died on June 3, 1963. The following year, on June 28, 1964, Manzù's Portal of Death was inaugurated by Pope Paul VI.

In the process of arriving at his final solution for the panels, Manzù made many sketches. Scenes of peaceful and violent death alternate; the deaths of saints and martyrs of the Church are shown side by side with those of the humble and anonymous. Also shown is a detail for the frieze on the reverse of the portal depicting the opening of the Second Vatican Council.