‘Descent from the Cross’ c1435 Rogier van der Weyden

AO1

- Single point perspective only reached Northern European artists in the late 15th century, as before that time, they had other priorities than the Italian painters. Only in the second half of the 15th century did Northern painters come across Italian ideas of single-point perspective,
- Rogier van der Weyden, pupil of the Master of Flémalle, produced in his workshop a large number of works which test the boundaries of the picture plane.
- In the Descent from the Cross all figures are arranged parallel to the picture plane in a box-like space, like a painted version of a carved altarpiece.
- The shallow space serves to emphasise the intense emotion of the scene, while Rogier’s ‘graceful linear abstractions’ produce a painting which does not purport to depict reality. Instead it is a sophisticated two-dimensional painting pretending to be a three-dimensional carved altarpiece.
- This tension between the picture surface and the illusionistic space so evident in Rogier’s painting was something that Panofsky used to characterise the evolution of painting in the Netherlands in the first half of the 15th century, suggesting that artists were thinking along the same lines as the Italians about the limitations of the picture plane.
- One of the most dramatic religious paintings ever executed.
- It was held in the collection of Mary of Austria who was governing the Spanish Netherlands on behalf of her brother Charles V of Spain. Such political and cultural significance secures the painting a long and relatively protected life.
- It was commissioned by the Greater Guild of Crossbowmen of Leuven, for their Chapel of Our Lady outside the Walls. (The Virgin was their patron saint). The group was the most important militia company in the Duchy of Brabant, also enjoyed great notoriety. Rogier was then city painter for Brussels, suggesting the connection between the guild and artist and a showing therefore a possible motivation for the Crossbowmen’s commission of Rogier’s Deposition.

AO2

- Rogier van der Weyden does not use single point perspective hence why the figures in the scene are not realistic.
- Instead he uses sophisticated 2D paintings pretending to be 3D creating a depth in the background behind the figures to give the sense that the scene pops out.
- The feeling of pain and grief is portrayed in different degrees from the crying of the nun on the left, the fainting Mary, the sorrowful priest on the right.
- The skin tones for each figure are different, the women paler and pink, the men a darker brown. The Virgin’s white face shines out against her dark cobalt blue dress.
- A light illuminates the tortured limb body of Christ, which carefully descends onto the ground almost floating with his extended arms.