

The Museum of Modern Art

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Eleven bronze relief studies by the Italian sculptor Giacomo Manzù representing one of the stages in the realization of The Portal of Death, now installed at St. Peter's Basilica, The Vatican, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from March 18 - April 13.

Executed in 1961-63, the bronze panels depict scenes of violent and peaceful death. Martyrs and saints of the Church and the humble, anonymous people of everyday life are shown side by side unified in death, the highest moment in human existence and entry into eternal life, according to Catholic faith. The exhibition includes bronze studies of mankind's first murder victim, Abel, beaten to the ground by Cain; the death of the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen, killed by stones; the figure tumbling through the sky in the panel Death in Space; the hanging of a partisan observed by a horrified woman; the slumped body of Christ on the Cross (the body of Christ is in a different position in the final version); and the serene, seated figure of St. Joseph at his death with his head bowed.

GIACOMO MANZU: Studies for "The Portal of Death" was directed and installed by Renée Neu, Assistant Curator of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture. The bronze sketches have been lent by Mr. and Mrs. Lester Francis Avnet.

The steps in the development of the work from the donation of funds by a canon for bronze doors at St. Peter's in 1943 to the inauguration of Manzù's The Portal of Death on June 28, 1964 by Pope Paul VI are outlined in the exhibition wall label.

Son of a Bergamo cobbler and church sexton, Manzù submitted designs for the doors in an international competition announced by The Vatican in 1947. In a second competition, he was among twelve artists to be considered for the task by the Vatican jury. The sculptor's alleged left-wing political position and his unorthodox

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Iconography became the subject of an intense public controversy as the jury deliberated. A brochure in favor of Manzù's designs anonymously published by his friend, Monsignor Giuseppe De Luca, was distributed at this time.

In 1952 the Vatican finally commissioned Manzù to execute the bronze doors, the original theme of which was to be "The Triumph of the Saints and Martyrs of the Church." In 1961 Manzù obtained permission from the Pope to change the theme of the project to "The Portal of Death," and after Monsignor De Luca died in 1962, Manzù was permitted to dedicate the portal to Pope John.

With renewed interest and a new theme, Manzù worked feverishly on the doors (the 11 reliefs on exhibit are among the many sketches produced during this period), but did not complete them before the death of Pope John XXIII on June 3, 1963. The original plans for the panel Death in Water were discarded, and Manzù created a moving portrait of Pope John XXIII in prayer, and incised the date of his death in the final version on the panel Death of St. Joseph (in this group of studies, the date is incised on the panel Death of St. Stephen).

Other panels in the exhibit in addition to those mentioned are: The Death of Mary, The Death of Gregory VII, and Death on Earth. A detail study for the frieze on the inner side of the portal, showing the first Negro Cardinal -- the African prelate Rugambwa -- kissing the ring of Pope John XXIII, is also included.

In 1966 John Rewald, the well-known scholar, published a major book on all of Manzù's work, which was created, Mr. Rewald points out, "in completely harmonious co-operation between the sculptor, the publisher and the author." The affection and understanding that developed during the sittings between the Pontiff and the artist are the subject of a recent book An Artist and the Pope by Curtis Bill Pepper, based upon the personal recollections of Giacomo Manzù.

A color film "The Door of St. Peter's by Giacomo Manzù," a study of Manzù at work during various stages of the project and on the finished portals, will be shown at the Museum on April 2 at 12:00 noon. Produced in Italy by Dino De Laurentiis, the film was written by Carlo Levi, and is narrated in English by John Huston.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Joan Wiggins, Assistant, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.