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Indian Paintings from Mission San Fernando: An Historical Interpretation

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NEAR Los Angeles, in the museum of Mission San Gabriel Archangel, hang a series of remarkable paintings, the *Via Crucis*, or Stations of the Cross, depicting Christ's tragic journey from Pilate's judgement hall to Mount Calvary.¹ Presenting a theme common in European Catholic art, the fourteen paintings would not necessarily warrant special attention had they not been created by an Indian artist, thus affording us a rare glimpse into the mind of a mission neophyte.

Painted shortly after 1800 at Mission San Fernando Rey de España, located 25 miles northwest of San Gabriel, the Stations were removed from the mission in the 1850s and stored for several years in the old church of Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles. Exhibited in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, they returned to Los Angeles and were displayed at a Chamber of Commerce exhibition in 1902. For a number of years they were stored in a basement near Saint Vibiana's Cathedral until they were finally taken to Mission San Gabriel for permanent display. Unfortunately, for two decades they hung in an outside corridor until moved inside the museum (Weber 1965:7-9; Webb 1952:243).

The paintings were created at a mission that rested within the linguistic boundaries of a people who spoke Gabrielino, a division of the Shoshonean subfamily of the Uto-Aztec

language stock. To the immediate north were the linguistically unrelated Chumash, speakers of a Hokan-Siouian language. Possessing an artistic tradition that preceded the arrival of the Spanish by hundreds of years, the Chumash were the prolific creators of perhaps the most impressive abstract polychrome rock paintings in North America. According to the foremost authority on this art:

The Chumash paintings were done in as many as six colors though the usual range was red, black, and white, with many of the sites in red alone. The basic styles are abstract linear and abstract polychrome. With both styles, bizarre and striking anthropomorphic and zoomorphic beings occur with endless variety of purely abstract shapes. A constantly recurring theme is the circle, with every conceivable variation of spokes, rays, cogs, and curious appendages. The abstract polychrome paintings often have circular designs with multiple outlines of contrasting colors to give a basically simple shape great richness. In almost all instances, the craftsmanship is excellent [Grant 1967:107].

The exact meanings of these symbols remain a mystery, but it is thought that they represent concepts rather than things. And since the concepts probably dealt with good and evil, important religious ceremonies must have been held at the rock shelters where the paintings are located (Grant 1965:92-93).

By happy coincidence, the padres at Mission San Fernando (as well as those at the Chumash missions of Santa Inéz and San Buenaventura) apparently were more artistically liberal than those at most of the other establishments and selected certain neophytes to decorate the mission with murals and designs (Baer 1959:30-32; Webb 1952:240).² From azurite, malachite, ochre, diatomite, and oxide of manganese, acquired through trade, quarried locally, or imported from Mexico, the neophyte manufactured blue, green, purple, yellow, red, and black pigments (Webb 1945) and over doorways and windows painted vines, flowers, double and zig-zag lines, and rows of triangles. These designs indicate that the artists were given a good deal of freedom and drew heavily upon traditional motifs and patterns (Christensen 1950:35; Webb 1952:240-241).

Also created at San Fernando were two murals containing themes that have no precedent in the traditional art of the region. One consisted of eight Indians picking grapes from two monstrous trees. The other was of a hunter, disguised in a pelt, stalking a deer. An arrow has found its mark, and blood drips from the side of the animal (Baer 1959:32-35). Since the traditional art of the region was abstract, these representational efforts, along with the *Via Crucis*, indicate a definite shift in artistic styles. In fact, they suggest a return to a style that was perhaps used by the first people to arrive in the area.

It has been postulated that aboriginal artistic styles tend to evolve from the naturalistic through the stylized to the abstract as a people change from a nomadic to a sedentary existence (Grant 1967:18). The first people to arrive in California were certainly nomadic, but those who settled along the southern coastal belt found the abundance of marine and land food resources conducive to a sedentary existence. The abstract rock paintings that dot the region, therefore, may represent a stage in an artistic evolutionary

process. And if this theory holds, then the Spanish intrusion, at least at some of the missions, allowed the reemergence of naturalistic painting.

Although the Stations of the Cross are the most important examples of early, post-contact Indian naturalistic painting in California, little is known about the painter, except that he may also have been an artisan. For many years a prominent family in the San Fernando Valley is said to have possessed a crucifix adorned with a crown of thorns and tufts of feathers, supposedly fashioned by the painter of the Stations (Holway 1922:103-104). He has been tentatively identified as Juan Antonio (Sugranes 1921:76-77; Baer 1959:33), and the San Fernando register books do list a neophyte by that name who was baptized on June 13, 1798 and died on July 24, 1808 (Weber 1965:11fn). Since the paintings are thought to have been created sometime between 1806 and 1807 (Baer 1959:31), this puts him at the mission at the proper time.

Let us assume that this Juan Antonio was indeed the painter of the Stations. Because he undertook the task eight years after he was baptized and because he was baptized one year after the founding of the mission, he had to have been at least nine years old when he began painting. It is unlikely, however, that the padres would have given this responsibility to someone so young. Accordingly, Juan Antonio must have entered the mission having lived some part of his life as a member of a traditional Indian social unit, most likely one that was located in or near a region with a rich religio-artistic heritage.³ Since San Fernando incorporated Indians from three distinct language divisions (Engelhardt 1927:26), perhaps Juan Antonio was Chumash.

Once converted to Christianity, Juan Antonio probably had little difficulty transferring his artistic inclinations from one religious context to another. On first glance, his paintings tell us only that here was a deeply religious individual who, with obvious sincer-

ity and compassion for his subject, depicted the tragedy of Christ's day of execution. Unmistakeable is the artist's love for his Savior. Unmistakeable also is his hatred of Christ's persecutors. This point was not lost on an early commentator, who wrote: "What could have given us a clearer idea of the red man's sense of the injustice of the occasion, the righteous indignation of feeling at the cruel wrongs heaped upon the Sorrowing One, as He bore His cross through the streets, than the looks and actions of the women who strove to remove the burden from His shoulders? It was, indeed, an indignation strong enough to have slain the persecutors on the spot—every one of them and leaves no doubt of that intention in the portrayal" (Mills 1901:769-770).

What this writer failed to understand, or at least to appreciate, however, is that the persecutors are not Romans but Spaniards. Of course, it was common practice for European painters to dress their Biblical subjects in contemporary costumes. And evidently the artist used as his model woodcut illustrations from a religious book (Weber 1968:37), so he probably copied the clothing fairly accurately.⁴ But the facial characteristics of his subjects surely must result from his own experiences and imagination. Generalizing for all Indian mission painting in California, one authority has stated: "The independent spirit of the Indian is clearly manifest in these few remaining canvases. That he was influenced and inspired by models and guided by the padres, is granted. But so individualistic are these works that in them something of the personality of the artist is revealed" (Baer 1959: 37). One might add that the Stations of the Cross reveal not only the artist's personality but some of his views as well.

Wherever non-white peoples came under European political, economic, or cultural domination, there was often some kind of indigenous artistic response. For example, in 1799 when British soldiers stormed the palace of Tippoo Sahib at Seringapatam, India, they

found a life-size wooden carving of a tiger mauling an officer of the British East Indian Company. Obviously, the carver was achieving symbolically through art what was militarily impossible at the time—the destruction of the foreign invader. In other cases, the artist merely poked fun at the intruder, as with a carving from Angola of a dejected-looking, jungle-exhausted Portuguese being carried in a hammock by two sturdy, healthy, indifferent Africans (Burland 1968:27, 89). Commenting on the incorporation of European subjects into the artistic milieu of the colonized, one anthropologist has stated: "The peculiar illustrations of foreigners from Europe . . . show us . . . that the coloured man has seen through the white man's world, that he understands its weaknesses and faults, and that he is beginning, tentatively at first, to consider his own strength" (Lips 1937:58).

Perhaps the artist of the Stations of the Cross was beginning to consider his own strength and was issuing a statement about the system under which he was confined. In the huge, unintelligent eyes and sinister, grotesque, almost moronic expressions of many of the soldiers (especially in Stations Three, Five, Seven, and Eight), Juan Antonio may have been demonstrating an anti-Spanish bias. That he could get away with such audacity, under the very observation and even guidance of his superiors, probably stemmed from the padres' inability to realize that neophyte defiance could be manifested with such cleverness. The fathers saw in the paintings what they wanted to see—visual proof of the success of their missionary endeavors. The neophytes, however, probably had no difficulty in comprehending the artist's true intentions.

In several paintings, Juan Antonio went further than just turning Romans into Spaniards. He also metamorphosed some of the citizens of Jerusalem into Indians. In Station Six, for example, those bare-chested, beardless men with the fleshy bodies, lifting the cross from Christ, resemble California Indians

to such a degree that no other interpretation seems possible. Moreover, Veronica, with her long black hair and simple clothing, also looks Indian, especially when compared to the heavily-robed, madonna-like women found to her right and in several of the other Stations. And those men assisting Christ in Station Four (perhaps those in Two, Five, Seven, and Eight as well) may also be Indians.⁵ For a neophyte artist to assign this role to fellow Indians is not difficult to understand, but why would he have Indians tormenting Christ, as they are in Station Nine?

The answer may lie in the nature of the mission itself. Hierarchical in structure, with the padres and a few Spanish-speaking artisans (the so-called *gente de razon*, or people of reason) representing the social and political elite, the mission allowed for only marginal advancement of a few neophytes. Those with special aptitudes became musicians, singers, and artists, while others served the padres as pages, servants, and *alcaldes*, or special mission officials. Yet even these privileged few were ultimately prevented from joining the very group they sought to emulate and please. As a result, they experienced more frustration with the system than the majority of inmates who made no effort at upward mobility.

This frustration is most clearly evident in the actions of the *alcaldes*, who were free with the lash in the performance of their duties and who in turn were disliked and even hated by their fellow Indians (Phillips 1975:29-30). It is just possible, therefore, that since Juan Antonio was painting not for us but for his contemporary neophytes, the two Indians tormenting Christ were meant to be viewed as *alcaldes*.

In most of the other paintings, we see the juxtaposition of cruelty and compassion, love and hate, but in Station Nine evil, personified by both Indians and Spaniards, predominates. This painting definitely stands apart from the rest and may be the artist's most direct personal statement. But taken as a whole, the

Stations reveal the artist's ambivalence regarding Spanish culture and colonization. A passionate convert to their religion, he was nonetheless critical of their system. In this sense, Juan Antonio exhibits a personality trait commonly found among those colonized peoples who adopted and admired aspects of European culture yet found it impossible to fathom its contradictions and inconsistencies.

San Diego, California

NOTES

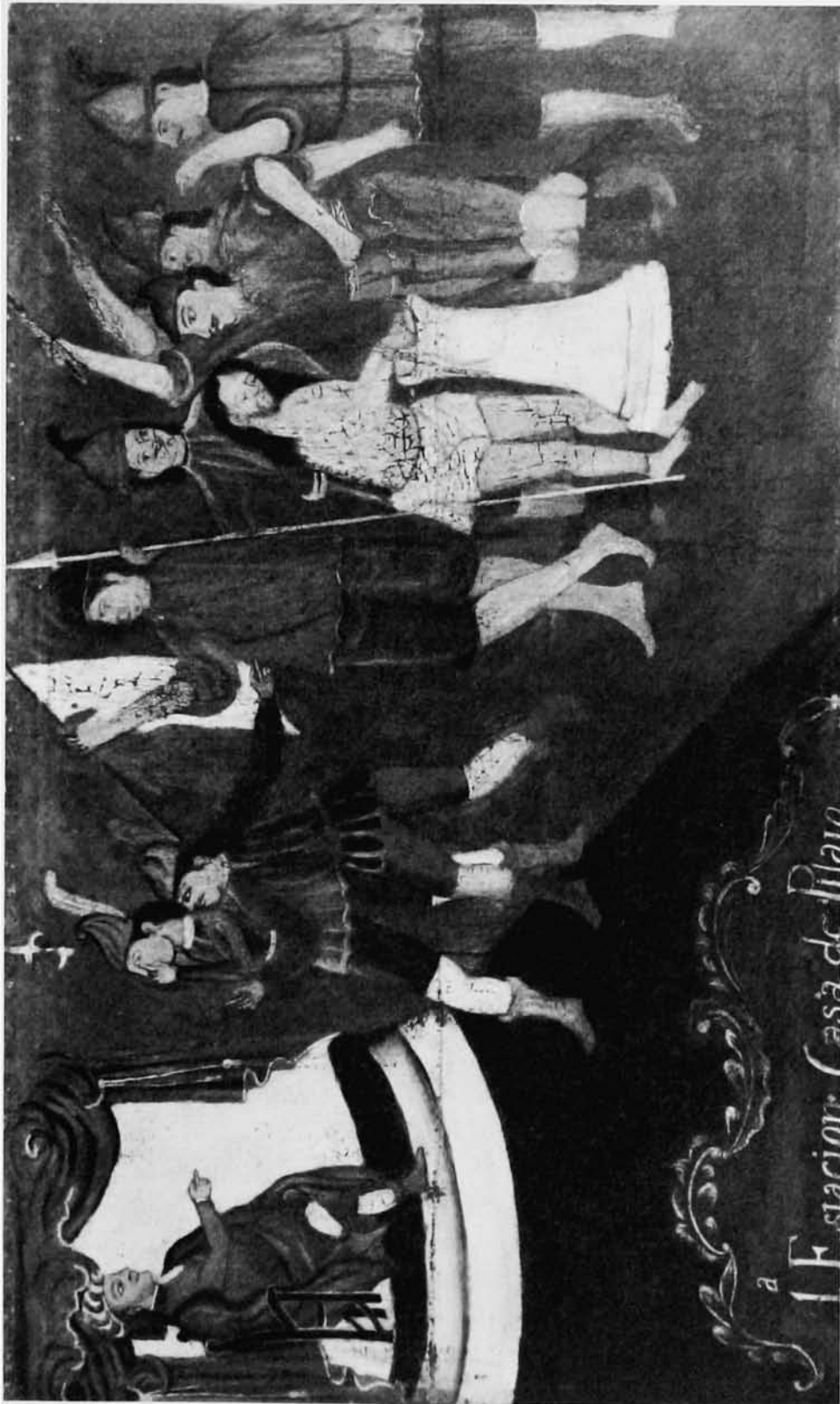
1. These paintings invite further research, and the best starting point would be a paper by Ferdinand Perret entitled "Spanish Colonial Art in North America," which contains, according to Kurt Baer (1959:33fn), extensive descriptive and historical material on the Stations. I have not been able to locate the paper, which may never have been published and which may now be with the materials Perret donated to the Smithsonian Institution.
2. Discovered under layers of whitewash and restored in the mid-1930s at government expense, these murals and designs have again disappeared under a fresh coat of whitewash or plaster. One can only conclude that the present administration of the mission is just as insensitive to Indian art as were past administrations.
3. According to Auguste Wey (1892:515), a Catholic priest suggested as early as 1892 that the paintings be studied not as art but as archaeology and that they might be compared with the pictographs of the Santa Barbara region and with the winter counts of the Dakotas.
4. If the book the artist used could be located, we would be able to see just how far he deviated from the original illustrations. And this would allow us to gain more insights into his motivations. If the book still exists, it may be in the archives at Mission Santa Barbara.
5. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine* of October 11, 1936, Kenneth Crist wrote that the Stations "give a clue to the deeper things in Indian life—even to Indian vindictiveness. Spanish robes and Spanish hats adorn the figures shown as persecutors of the Christ . . . and whenever the

Christus receives assistance, it's invariably a red man who helps Him!"

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Station 1: Jesus is Condemned.

NOTE: The photographs of the fourteen Stations of the Cross reproduced here are copies of the original paintings now hanging in the museum of Mission San Gabriel. Permission to copy the paintings was generously given by Father Leo Mattheck. (All photographs by Jon Bosak).



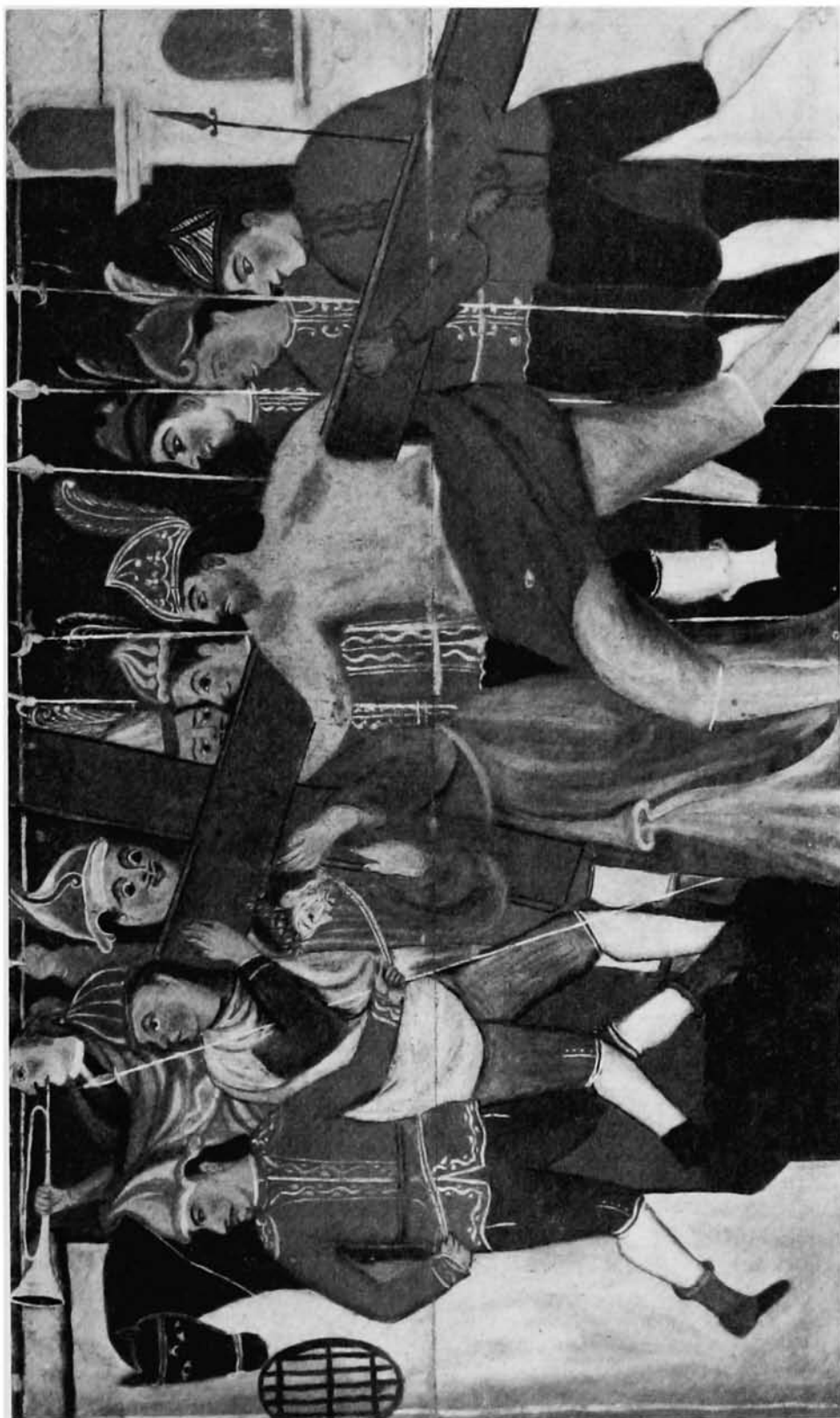
Station 2: Jesus is Made to Carry the Cross.



Station 3: Jesus Falls for the First Time.



Station 4: Jesus Meets His Mother.



Station 5: Simon of Cyrene Helps Jesus.



Station 6: Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus.



Station 7: Jesus Falls the Second Time.



Station 8: Jesus Meets the Weeping Women.



Station 9: Jesus Falls the Third Time.



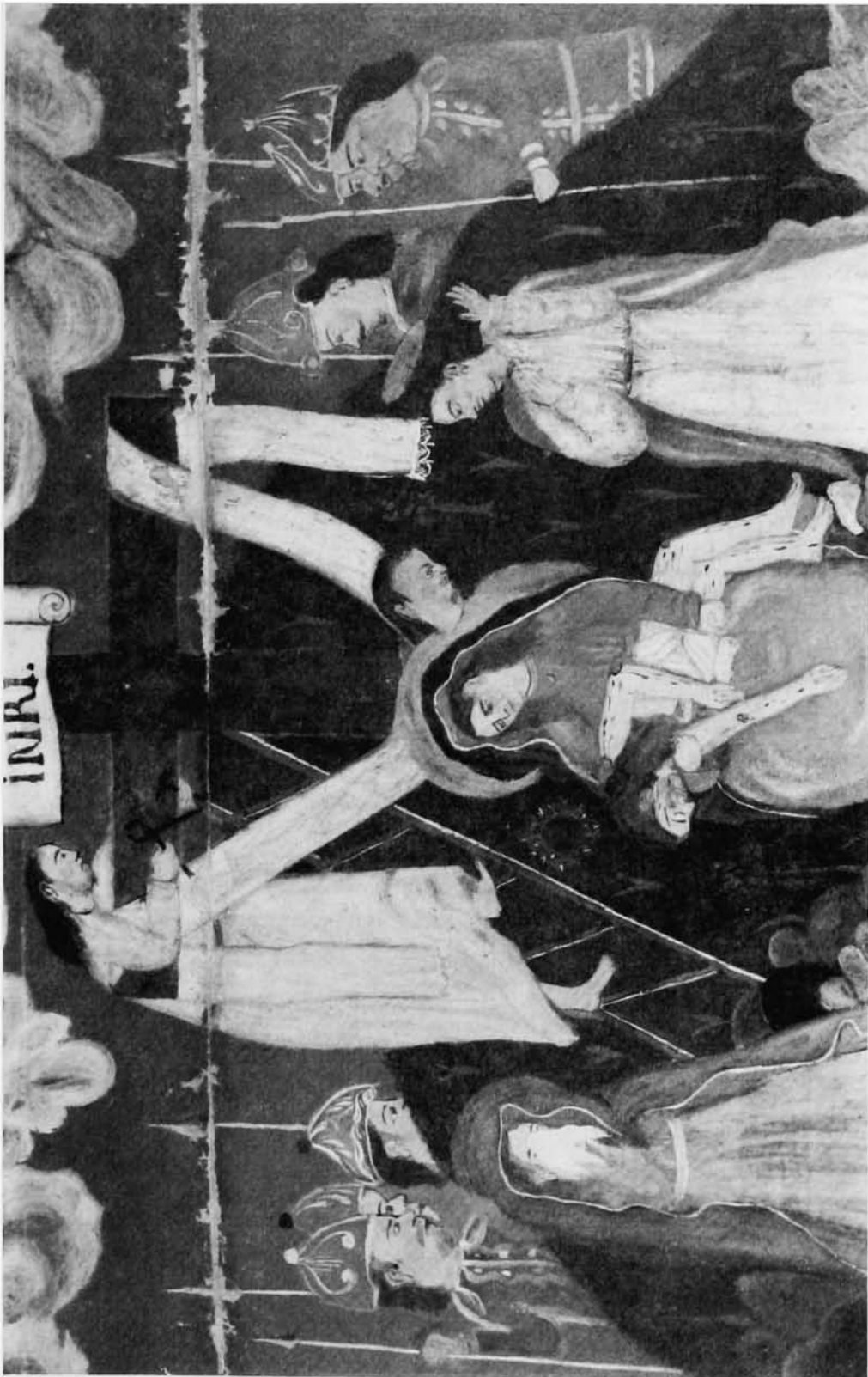
Station 10: Jesus is Stripped of His Garments.



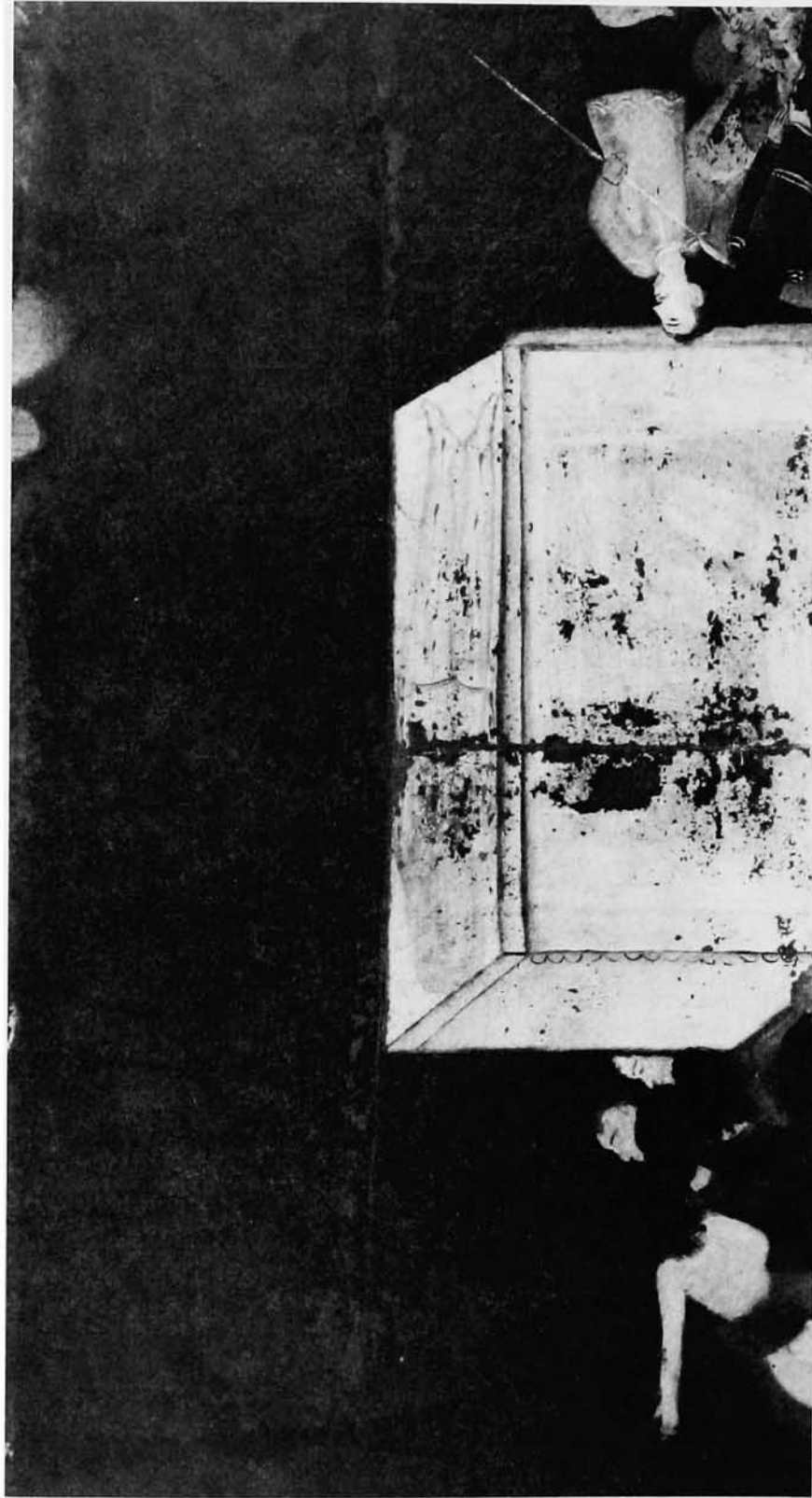
Station II: Jesus is Nailed to the Cross.



Station 12: Jesus Dies Upon the Cross.



Station 13: The Body of Jesus is Removed from the Cross.



Station 14: Jesus is Laid in the Sepulchre.