

The Instruments of the Passion of Christ

Unknown Dutch

Oil on canvas

Spanish, 1591–1652

The Clues

What objects can you identify?

The Story

Do you think a symbolic rendering of Christ's passion is as visually powerful as a realistic portrayal of the scene?

The Picture Book

In recreating a picture of the passion, this artist employs two popular seventeenth-century painting genres—still life and vanitas. In these genres, everyday objects take on symbolic meaning; consequently, they become, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, "corporeal metaphors of things spiritual."

- The two flasks reference the wine served at the Last Supper.
- The purse and the 30 pieces of silver point Judas's betrayal.
- The lanterns and halberd call to mind those soldiers who arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- The bundle of sticks reminds us of Jesus's flagellation, while the scarlet robe, the broken reed, the crown of thorns, and the parchment (with Pilate's inscription) all refer to the crucifixion.
- The brass pan alludes to the receptacle in which the wine was mixed with gall. The basin may also reference Pilate's hand washing after releasing Jesus to be crucified.
- The dice are reminiscent of those used by the Roman soldiers to gamble for Jesus's clothing.
- The hammer and nails reference the act of crucifixion, while the pliers point to the deposition of Jesus' body from the cross.
- Finally, the spear symbolizes the one with which a Roman soldier pierced Jesus's side following his death.