

# Inscription on the Votive Painting of Vladislaus II

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## ABSTRACT

The votive picture of Vladislaus II in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest is an outstanding work of the Jagiellonian court art. The panel, attributed to the court painter of Emperor Maximilian I, Bernhard Strigel, shows Saint Ladislaus recommending Vladislaus II and his children under the protection of the Virgin. The historical source value of the work is reduced by the fact that the facial features of its characters have become victims of iconoclasm. Previous research considered the inscription of the scroll wrapped around the axe of St. Ladislaus to be illegible. The partial reading of the heavily worn inscription published here confirms its supposed votive nature and suggests that the person who commissioned the panel – as opposed to the assumptions that it would be a commission of Maximilian I – was Vladislaus II himself.

**KEYWORDS:** scroll inscription, Strigel, Vladislaus II, Saint Ladislaus, Patrona Hungariae

The votive painting of Vladislaus II, King of Hungary and Bohemia is kept in the collection of the Szépművészeti Múzeum (Museum of Fine Arts), Budapest.<sup>1</sup> As a work attributed to

<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Strigel (Memmingen, 1460/1461 – Memmingen, 1528): *Saint Ladislaus of Hungary Interceding with the Virgin for Vladislaus II, King of Hungary and his Children*. Ca. 1512–1515. Tempera and oil on limewood panel, 43 × 30.8 cm. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Old Masters' Gallery, inv. 7502. *Collection Cat. Budapest 1967*, 669–670, *Summary Cat. Budapest 2003*, 128.

Bernhard Strigel, the court painter to Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor, it represents without doubt a court commission of the Jagiellonian era. Since its emergence in the 1910s in a Hungarian art collection, it has been an essential part of discourse on Hungarian art history.<sup>2</sup> Its presence at the museum's permanent exhibition is a must, it is included in the summary works written about the Jagiellonian era and it was lent to all Hungarian and international exhibitions presenting the Hungarian Renaissance or the end of the mediaeval Kingdom of Hungary.<sup>3</sup> The increased interest of the last decades in the era of the Jagiellons – which is obviously related to the politically motivated intentions of presenting the common history of the Central European region and the cooperation between Poland and Hungary – resulted in the fact, that the picture's appearance in exhibitions has multiplied.<sup>4</sup> Recently it was exhibited in Vilnius in 2022 and 2023, and it will travel to Krakow for the next exhibition in the fall of this year.<sup>5</sup>

However, the historical source value of this picture is significantly reduced by some factors. The circumstances of its commission and the identity of its commissioner are unknown, the picture has survived in a severely damaged state of preservation and the inscription on the scroll shown in the picture is almost completely worn off. In this article, we attempt to read at least a part of the inscription, which has been considered completely illegible by previous research.

The location of the scene is the throne room of a royal palace. To the left, under a crimson canopy, stands an empty throne chair with a pillow on it. To the right, a richly profiled

2 First Lázár 1917 and Lázár 1918.

3 *Maximilian I.*, Innsbruck, Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, 1 June–15 October 1969, *Matthias Corvinus und die Renaissance in Ungarn*, Schallaburg, 8 May–1 November 1982, *Maria van Hongrije*, s'Hertogenbosch, 11 September–28 November 1993, *Renaissance Paintings from the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts*, Tokyo, Tobu Museum of Art, 7 April–5 June 1994, Okayama, The Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art, 10 June–10 July 1994, Fukushima, Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art, 16 July–28 August 1994, Yokohama, Sogo Museum of Art, 3 September–10 October 1994, Kochi, The Museum of Art 3 November–11 December 1994, *Hungaria Regia (1000–1800)*, *Fastes et défis*, Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 8 October 1999–9 January 2000, *Magyar szentek tisztelete és ereklyéi*, Esztergom, Keresztény Múzeum, 17 June–1 October 2000, *Bayern – Ungarn Tausend Jahre*, Passau, Oberhausmuseum, 8 May–28 October 2001, *Kaiser Ferdinand I. 1503–1564. Das Werden der Habsburgermonarchie*, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 15 April–31 August 2003, *Habsburg Mária, Mohács özvegye*, Budapest, Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, 30 September 2005–9 January 2006.

4 *Europa Jagellonica. Art and Culture in Central Europe under the Reign of the Jagiellonian Dynasty 1386–1572*, Kutná Hora, Galerie Středočeského kraja, 19 May–30 September 2012, Warsaw, Zamek Królewski w Warszawie and Muzeum Narodowe, 9 November 2012–27 January 2013, Potsdam, Haus der Brandenburgisch-Preußischen Geschichte, 1 March–16 June 2013, *Közös úton. Budapest és Krakkó a középkorban / On Common Path. Budapest and Kraków in the Middle Ages*, Budapest, Budapesti Történeti Múzeum Vármúzeum 18 March–24 July, 2016, Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa 5 June–20 August 2017.

5 *NERūpestingas amžius. Vaikystė Lietuvos Didžiojoje Kunigaikštystėje / An UNtroubled age. Childhood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania*, Vilnius, Nacionalinis muziejus Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės valdovų rūmai, 13 October 2022–15 January 2023, *Obraz Złotego Wieku / Image of the Golden Age*, Kraków, Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, from 14 September 2023.

window opening offers a view of a hilly landscape and a castle on the waterfront.<sup>6</sup> In front of the throne, as if descending from it, kneels King Vladislaus II, followed by his two children, Louis and Anne. All three clasp their hands in prayer. While the little Louis looks ahead, Vladislaus and his daughter fix their eyes on the apparition visible in the window opening. The figure of the Virgin holding the Child appears in a dark cloud in the sky. The Virgin is surrounded by a golden mandorla, she wears a wreath of roses and a crown on her head. Between the earthly and heavenly spheres, Saint Ladislaus of Hungary, the patron saint of the king and his predecessor on the Hungarian throne is the mediator. He embraces the king with his right hand, and points to the king with his left, offering him to the protection of the Virgin. The blessing gesture of the Child indicates the acceptance of the offering.

Vladislaus does not have a crown on his head, his attire – the coat with its fur collar (*Schaube* in German) – is also bourgeois in its nature. The clothing of the royal children is similarly modest. At the same time, the king can clearly be identified by the Polish and Hungarian-Dalmatian-Bohemian coats of arms visible in the right corner, which refer to the king's origin and his kingdoms.<sup>7</sup> Saint Ladislaus does not appear as a knight, but as a king, so he is not wearing his usual armour, but a green velvet dress and a red cloak.<sup>8</sup> He wears the crown missing from the Hungarian coat of arms and holds his attribute, the battle axe, in his hand.<sup>9</sup> The scroll with the blurred inscription is wound on the handle of his axe.

The age of the royal children is the surest clue to date the picture. Anne was born in July 1503, while Louis in July 1506. In the picture, Anne looks to be ten to twelve years old, while Louis six to eight years old, so the picture can be dated to around 1512-1515. However, Vladislaus was clearly portrayed by the painter as too young. At that time, the king was already in his late fifties, ailing badly, and died in 1516. His presence here as a young king is an idealized representation.

We should mention here the significant damage to the picture, as a result of which the faces of the figures have not been preserved. As the picture was restored in 1982, it became clear that the faces of the two children, of the king, and even of Saint Ladislaus were deliberately destroyed with cross-shaped cuts. The motivation of the iconoclast is unknown, but it was hardly directed against Christianity, as it did not hurt the Virgin and the Child. The most scratched face is that of Vladislaus, his face was perhaps repainted as early as the 17th

6 The landscape consists of Strigel's characteristic landscape elements. Lázár 1918 naively assumes Visegrád in the waterside castle. This is rightly rejected by later research, see *Cat. Vienna 2003*, Cat. II.14.

7 The Polish coat of arms is inaccurate, the eagle looks to the right. It is also strange that the Dalmatian coat of arms is heraldically placed before the Bohemian coat of arms. However, the unusual use of glaze in the Dalmatian coat of arms is not without precedent, other 15–16th century depictions also have the golden leopard heads in a red field. Körmendi 2013, 393.

8 The woodcut of the *Thuróczy Chronicle* (Brno, 1488) also depicts Saint Ladislaus as a king wearing a robe.

9 The transfer of the crown from the coat of arms to the head of the saint was noticed by Végh 1972, No. 34–35.

century. The other damaged faces were retouched only in the 19th century. Except for the damage to Vladislaus' head, the rest of the repainting was removed in 1982, but the faces were not reconstructed for the sake of historical authenticity. They can thus be seen today in a ruined state, while the old reconstruction remained on the face of Vladislaus.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that at the time the painting was destroyed, the backgammon board, seen to date, was painted on the back of the panel.

Research unanimously considers Bernard Strigel (Memmingen, 1460/1461 – Memmingen, 1528) to be the master of the picture.<sup>11</sup> Bernhard Strigel belonged to a successful family of artists in the South German town of Memmingen. He was the court painter to Emperor Maximilian I, in whose service he repeatedly journeyed to Vienna, Augsburg and Innsbruck. This attribution was already raised before the picture appeared in Hungary. Based on the label on the back of the panel, it was in the possession of the German painter Ernst Oppler (1867–1929) at the beginning of the 20th century, where it already bore an attribution to Strigel.<sup>12</sup>

While the attribution seems certain, the circumstances of the commission of the work are unknown. Emperor Maximilian I and King Vladislaus himself can be supposed as the commissioner. In any case, it seems clear that the picture is a political allegory, which is related to the question of succession to the Hungarian throne and the future fate of the Kingdom of Hungary.<sup>13</sup> In 1506, Maximilian and Vladislaus agreed on a reciprocal succession treaty between the Habsburgs and the Jagiellons. This treaty was confirmed by the First Congress of Vienna, held in 1515, attended by the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I and the Jagiellonian brothers, Vladislaus II, King of Hungary and King of Bohemia, and Sigismund I, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. It was then that the double wedding that sealed the agreement took place. Vladislaus's son, Louis, married the emperor's granddaughter, Archduchess Mary and in the name of his grandsons, Archduke Charles or Archduke Ferdinand the Emperor Maximilian married Vladislaus' daughter, Anne.<sup>14</sup>

The painting is in connection with the iconography of four historical persons: Vladislaus II, Louis, Anne and Saint Ladislaus. Due to the extensive destruction of the faces, the question of what models Strigel followed and how authentic the portraits themselves can be considered is unanswerable. Earlier it was suggested that Strigel borrowed the facial features of the young King Vladislaus and of the little Louis from the miniature that can be seen on the coat of arms of János Pethő Gersei, made in Buda and dated in 1507.<sup>15</sup> However, a direct

10 Conservation report by Klára Deák, 1982. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Old Masters' Gallery.

11 Otto 1964, 64-65. and Cat. 53, Stange 1970, No. 953.

12 The inscription on the label reads as: *Ernst Oppler. w. 62. / 125°. Kurfürstenstr - / Strigel*. Ernst Oppler lived in Berlin from 1904, her studio apartment here was on the Kurfürstenstrasse. Based on the collector's seal on the back of the panel, the picture was held in the collection of King Charles VII of Naples in the 18th century. The inscription on the seal reads as: +I[- - -]++[- - -]C (?)R+E(?) del - Regno d[*felle?*] Due Sicilie.

13 *Cat. Budapest 2005*, Cat. I-4 (Zsuzsa Urbach); Kubíková 2019, 272.

14 This wedding was in fact an engagement, Anna later married Archduke Ferdinand on 26 May 1521.

15 Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, Dl. 86051. *Cat. Budapest 2005*, Cat. I.-18 (Géza Érszegi).

borrowing would presuppose Strigel's stay in Buda, which we do not know of and which is in fact very unlikely.<sup>16</sup> However, the round head type of Louis is a remarkable feature and seems to be authentic. It appears in the same way on the Buda miniature as well as in Strigel's portrait of Louis made after 1515.<sup>17</sup> As a mirrored image, the same representation of the young Louis can be seen in Strigel's group portrait representing the family of Emperor Maximilian I – obviously the two portraits are based on the same study.<sup>18</sup> He can be seen with shorter hair but with a similarly round head in the anonymous picture from the collection of the Ambras castle, apparently based on the representations by Strigel.<sup>19</sup>

The depiction of Saint Ladislaus fits into the history of extensive portrait iconography of the saint. His depiction as an older man with long hair and a bearded face corresponds to the canon of representations of the saint, which started to dominate from the end of the 14th century, in contrast to the previously typical youthful, bare-faced type.<sup>20</sup> The standard example of this energetic, masculine type is the Saint Ladislaus head reliquary in the Győr Cathedral. Strigel could not have known the herma kept in Nagyvárad (today: Oradea, Romania) at that time, but this is of no particular importance. Strigel's small-scale picture did not provide an opportunity to accurately reproduce the physiognomy of the figures, and it was possible to depict the general facial features on the basis of any media. Here, we do not necessarily have to think of a pictorial source, the appropriate character type could be described in a few words.

Zsuzsa Urbach suggested that the portrait-like representation of Saint Ladislaus can be interpreted as an identification portrait. She thought she recognised Maximilian's features in the face of Saint Ladislaus, so she considered the emperor as the commissioner of the picture.<sup>21</sup> Her proposal, which she considered only as a hypothesis, turned into a certainty in her later publications.<sup>22</sup> However, the physiognomic similarities she described are not very convincing. Maximilian's depictions always show the emperor beardless, Strigel himself portrayed him in this way in other works.<sup>23</sup>

16 Urbach 1994, Note 3.

17 Bernhard Strigel: *King Louis II of Hungary as Child*, tempera and oil on limewood panel, 29 cm × 22.2 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie inv. 827.

18 Bernhard Strigel: *The Family of Emperor Maximilian I*, tempera and oil on limewood panel, 72.8 cm × 60.4 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie inv. 832.

19 South German or Austrian Master, ca. 1515–1520: *King Louis II of Hungary as Child*, tempera and oil on panel, 43 cm × 39 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie inv. 4453.

20 Marosi 1987, 239–240., Marosi 1995, 74–75.

21 Urbach 1994 and *Cat. Japan 1994*, Cat. 45.

22 *Cat. Vienna 2003*, Cat. II.14: „Sein politisches Programm ist am Thron im Hintergrund abzulesen und daran, daß der hl. Ladislaus **unverkennbar** die Gesichtszüge des Kaisers trägt.“ and *Cat. Budapest 2005*, Cat. I-4: „A közvetítő szent király arcvonásai **minden kétséget kizáróan** Miksa jellegzetes profilját mutatják.” / ‘The facial features of the mediating holy king **undoubtedly** show Maximilian's characteristic profile.’ (Emphasis by Miklós Gálos).

23 Urbach herself intended to resolve this contradiction by stating that the beard is so characteristic of the iconography of Saint Ladislaus that it could not be omitted, so Strigel used a mixed type of representation. (Urbach 1994, 21.). Apart from the fact that there are a lot of late mediaeval ex-

Urbach's suggestion that we should see an identification portrait in Saint Ladislaus, although he did not mention Urbach's name, was also accepted by Jiří Fajt.<sup>24</sup> However, Fajt saw the actual appearance of Vladislaus himself in Saint Ladislaus and accordingly, believed that the picture was created in 1515, when Strigel had the opportunity to personally contact the king. The depiction of Vladislaus in Prague in the fresco of the Saint Wenceslas Chapel in Saint Vitus Cathedral, Prague (1508) corresponds to Strigel's Saint Ladislaus in its general characteristics, however, the conclusions drawn from the small and heavily damaged face, which gives little opportunity for individual characterization, remain highly hypothetical.

The key to the person of the commissioner, but also to the interpretation of the whole depiction, could be rendered by the inscription on the scroll, which, however, is worn to the point of illegibility.<sup>25</sup> Hopes that the IR photographs taken during the 1982 restoration could help also vanished.<sup>26</sup> The only fairly legible expression in the text, *effecta*, allowed us to conclude that the text is in Latin and written with minuscules.

Briefly summarizing what is given: the opposite side of the quadruple-folded scroll shows a mostly illegible inscription; at first sight only a few distinct, scattered characters give a relatively certain impression that we can see some text at all.

Reviewing the whole inscription field, we can see three lines of text, probably ca. 130-150 characters long. The two sides of the scroll present a somehow conspicuously different view; this dichotomy also affects the legibility of text.

Unfortunately, the left side of the scroll is even more damaged than the right one; here the inscription's letters are expressly blurred, as though it had been exposed to some resolutive agent – perhaps during previous restoration processes.<sup>27</sup> The surface also appears to be more even in this area, so that only some ascenders of letters remained distinguishable, while on the right area the deeper layer preserved the inscription in a considerably better condition; here the aforementioned word *effecta* and several other letters can be read. On the other hand, the varnish is rather cracked, causing disrupting concurrences in both the vertical and horizontal letter elements, especially tending towards the right edge of the scroll, where the inscription utterly vanishes.

For these reasons, it was difficult to take usable photographs of the scroll, so during the examination we mostly relied on the traditional method of using a strong magnifier, often changing the inspection angle and distance to eliminate distracting refractions.

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amples representing Saint Ladislaus beardless, this goes against the essence of the identification portrait itself. For the portraits of Maximilian by Strigel see Otto 1964, Nos. 54–60.

24 *Cat. Kutná Hora 2012*, Cat. I.48.

25 „Der Text des Schriftbandes ist abgerieben und nicht lesbar.“ Urbach in *Cat. Vienna 2003*, Cat. II.14.

26 Urbach 1994, Note 3. Although the 1982 IR photographs are lost, the IR photographs taken by András Fáy in 2016 show the same result.

27 Based on the photographs taken before the only documented restoration of the painting in 1982, the inscription was not damaged then. However, an overcleaning of the painted surface could have happened during previous undocumented restorations.

It is apparent at first glance why this inscription has hitherto remained neglected: there is obviously little hope of providing a well-founded reading – unless the text was a biblical or other quote, which could be completed by filling in the gaps. This, however, is rather unlikely in our opinion: the genre and positioning of the scroll suggest that its text is about the presented scene of the royal family with Saint Ladislaus, the Virgin and the Child. And it is precisely this context, accompanied by the mysterious eeriness of the damaged faces that makes the inscription worthy of examination.

Our examination resulted in the following transcription:

*[- 5 -] [- -]++++ +++++sum (?) ad hu(n)ç<sup>28</sup> M[-]+++<sup>29</sup> |*

*nunç(?) [- - -] [re]gjna (?) effecta +sa ṀOD+++ (?) |*

*W[l]adišlau(m) Hung(arie) ṗerserveš (?)*

This reading, though far from satisfactory, confirms the presumption of a unique inscription, expressly written for this painting: even these few (and certainly questionable) legible syllables suggest a votive inscription,<sup>30</sup> obviously about the scene depicted above.

In his monograph, Otto gives images of 170 Strigel paintings,<sup>31</sup> 74 of which have inscriptions, 29 of which are on the same type or similar scroll<sup>32</sup> as the image under examination. Thus, it is common for the artist to illustrate and explain a painted theme in this way.

Examining the typography used on these scrolls unfortunately provides little more certainty: we can observe capital, antique and humanistic fonts, both in Latin and German, but certainly written by several hands. The identification of Strigel's handwriting on a sample of this size and type therefore seems impossible.

According to the testimony of the IR photographs, there is no other, older version under the inscription. Theoretically, therefore, we can consider the following possibilities: the inscription is original and is in Strigel's handwriting; the inscription is contemporary, but written by a different hand; the inscription is much later.

As we have seen, we cannot expect a definite answer about the first option; the second is the most likely. The typography argues against the third option: an early humanist type-

28 *ha(n)c* ?

29 *Maria? Mater?*

30 Lázár 1918, 3. gives the same impression: „Szent László bárdjára alul szalag tekergőzik, melyen kibőtűzhetetlen szöveg mintegy az ajánlást látszik jelezni, melylyel Szent László Szűz Mária oltalmába ajánlja a királyt és két gyermekét.” / ‘At the bottom of Saint Ladislaus’ axe there is a scroll with an illegible text, which seems to indicate the recommendation, with which Saint Ladislaus offers the king and his two children to the protection of the Virgin.’

31 See Otto 1964, catalogue.

32 9 of which uses the same 3- or 4-lined layout.



face that corresponds to the age of the creation of the painting.<sup>33</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that in Strigel's other pictures we cannot observe these characteristic slightly right-leaning, distinctly rounded letters.

Of course, our partial reading does not allow us to draw far-reaching conclusions. At the same time, it seems to confirm certain hypotheses previously raised about the painting. Based on the offering scene in Strigel's picture, Ernő Marosi classified the picture as one of the testimonials from around 1500 in which Mary appears as *Patrona Hungariae*, i.e. the patron saint of Hungary.<sup>34</sup> Clear evidence of the *Patrona Hungariae* cult of the times of Matthias and Vladislaus II are the gold forints of Matthias after 1467 and of Vladislaus II, with the enthroned Virgin and Child on the obverse and Saint Ladislaus on the reverse. The expression *regina effecta* of the scroll seen on the axe of Saint Ladislaus suggests that Strigel's image is indeed a work of outstanding importance in the history of the late medieval cult of *Patrona Hungariae*.

Perhaps the most important result of our reading is that the name of Vladislaus is clearly mentioned on the scroll. This previously unknown detail speaks for the authenticity of the inscription. The votive nature of the inscription makes it likely that the picture was commissioned personally by Vladislaus II.<sup>35</sup> He had the opportunity to order it in 1515, during his stay in Vienna. There is good reason to assume that the mediator between the artist and the king was Johannes Cuspinianus (Schweinfurt, 1473 – Vienna, 1529), humanist and councillor of Maximilian I, instead of Emperor Maximilian.<sup>36</sup> Cuspinianus was sent for numerous diplomatic missions to Hungary for the preparation of the Congress of Vienna and thus knew the king well, as well as Bernard Strigel, who painted the portrait of his family.<sup>37</sup> ■

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33 Or it could even be somewhat earlier if it was not completely impossible.

34 Marosi 1995, 82–85.

35 There are no traces of Emperor Maximilian's name and titles in those parts of the inscription that are to some extent legible, and it is also difficult to imagine them in the illegible parts.

36 See *Cat. Utrecht–s-Hertogenbosch 1993*, Cat. 24 (Jacqueline Kerkhoff).

37 Bernhard Strigel: *Portrait of Johannes Cuspinian, with his Second Wife Agnes, and his Sons from his First Marriage Sebastian Felix and Nicolaus Christostomus*, 1520, tempera and oil on limewood panel, 71 x 62 cm, private collection. Otto 1964, 74–75., 104–105., No. 77.; *Cat. Vienna 2003*, Cat. II.20 (Karl Schütz).



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## II. Ulászló fogadalmi képének felirata

II. Ulászlónak a budapesti Szépművészeti Múzeumban őrzött fogadalmi képe a Jagellókor udvari művészetének kiemelkedő jelentőségű emléke. Az I. Miksa császár udvari festőjének, Bernhard Strigelnek attribuált képen Szent László ajánlja II. Ulászlót és gyermekeit a Madonna oltalmába. A festmény történeti forrásértékét csökkenti, hogy szereplőinek arcvonásai képrombolás áldozatává váltak. Az eddigi kutatás a Szent László bárdjára csavarodó mondatszalg feliratát is olvashatatlannak ítélte. Az erősen kopott felirat itt közölt részleges olvasata megerősíti annak feltételezett votív jellegét és arra utal, hogy a kép megrendelője – eltérően azoktól a feltételezésektől, melyek a képben I. Miksa megbízását látták – maga II. Ulászló lehetett.

**KULCSSZAVAK:** mondatszalg, Strigel, II. Ulászló, Szent László, Patrona Hungariae



1. Bernhard Strigel: *Saint Ladislaus of Hungary Interceding with the Virgin for Vladislaus II, King of Hungary and his Children*  
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest® (Szépművészeti Múzeum) 2023





**2. The scroll with the inscription**

*Museum of Fine Arts®, Budapest (Szépművészeti Múzeum) 2023*



**3. IR photograph of the scroll**

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(Szépművészeti Múzeum) 2023*