

## **San Jerome penitent**

Juan de Valmaseda (circa 1487/1493-circa 1560).

Polychrome walnut wood.

About 1530

Private collection.

Measurements: 72 x 40 x 30 cms.

The sculpture represents San Jerome in the desert when in about 375 he abandoned Antioch and retired to live a hermit's life in the Calcis desert, in Asia Minor. He appears in a cave, surrounded by rocks and slabs of slate. He is half-naked and carries in his hand a stone with which he hits his body in sign of penitence.

Juan de Valmaseda is a mysterious sculptor included in the panorama of Spanish sculpture of the first half of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, on account of the scarcity of bio-data on him available to us, and also due to his style characterised by his vigorous personality in which the lacerating expressionism offered to us in his works rises from its deep roots sunk in a tardo-Gothic tradition. His harsh, dramatic, deformed spirit, distant from the ideal beauty of the Italian tendency manifested by other masters of his generation, such as Berruguete or Siloe, prefers a direct "mise en scène" in which he captures suffering and passion infused with deep religious sentiment.

We suppose that he was born at Valmaseda, a place situated in the Biscayan Districts. We know nothing about his early education; perhaps it was connected with some work-shop of northern origin. His definite training, however, must have taken place in Burgos, where he appears at least in 1514 regarding work on the tomb of the Gumiel family at San Esteban ,Burgos, in collaboration with Nicolás de Vergara, the Elder. Here he enters in contact with Felipe Bigarny and Diego de Siloe, by whom he is influenced specially in the types of woman he represents, though he does not capture Siloe's idealization and when he interprets the latter's models he always covers them with his hard expressionistic style; this, no doubt, is what gives Valmaseda his distinct and independent artistic personality.

Once settled in Palencia, after carrying out works in Oviedo and León, from 1530 onwards, Valmaseda receives influence from Berruguete as observed in a few scenes of the altar-piece of San Ildefonso, in the chapel of Don Alonso Fernández of Madrid, Archdeacon del Alcor, situated in the cathedral of Palencia; this work was begun on a date close to 1530 and was finished when the polychrome operations ended around

1549. In the relief work of San Jerome on the bench of this altar-piece, the body of the lion is very similar to the sculpture we are studying, though the composition is different. The fine parallel folds of drapery are also similarly related. The type of beard reminds one of San Pablo's from a medallion in the first group of the altar-piece. We don't have scarcely any more information about the sculptor regarding his residence in Palencia and are not even sure of the date of his death. For this reason the series of works which are now assigned to him are attributions, due to the exceedingly characteristic personality his works reveal, which indicate to us that his style was highly appreciated by the circle of bishops of Palencia; this may be due to Valmaseda's manner of expressing directly religious drama clothed in an existentialist humanity. We cannot forget that the above-mentioned Archdeacon del Alcor was a profound follower of Erasmus who sought personal human experience in the Christian faith and selected Valmaseda to undertake the altar-piece for his chapel, from among other contemporary sculptors.

The sculpture of St Jerome has an elongated shape, with a "serpentinata" composition and an unstable position. Its anatomy is clearly evident regarding both bones and muscles. The muscles are sinewy and stylized which gives them their characteristic harsh pathos. The cloth hangs in long parallel folds which fall down to the pelvis where it is gathered back to the rear of the body. It offers a very expressive head, with lean features on which the high cheekbones and arched eyebrows stand out. His hair consists of short locks of straight hair, ending in slight waves close to the head, with a characteristic little wisp of hair on his forehead. He wears a long straggling beard which reaches down to his right side. As this is a sculpture intended for an altar-piece all the back part has just been smoothed down.

Although the sculpture is influenced by Alonso Berruguete's style in its elongated shape and spiral composition, there is maintained a distinct expressionism of Gothic origin, which differs from Berruguete's Italianate mannerism. Similarly there is a distant echo from the St Jerome which Diego de Siloe carved for the altar-piece of San Pedro in the chapel of the Condestables, Burgos Cathedral. Deformation of the posture of feet and hands, the outline of bones and sinews and the type of long straggly beard are related to the style of other works by the sculptor, such as the altar-pieces of Villamediana (Palencia), San Cebrián de Campos, or the above-mentioned Archdeacon del Alcor. It is confirmed that Valmaseda appealed to direct sentiment, avoiding the intellectual pretensions of other Masters.

The sculpture is an original and indubitable work by Juan de Valmaseda, and lies amongst the best works produced by him.

- JESUS MARÍA PARRADO DEL OLMO -

#### ESSENTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AZCARRATE, J M<sup>a</sup>: *La escultura del siglo XVI español*, Volumen XIII ARS Hispanal, 1958.

- CAMÓN AZNAR, José: *La escultura y la rejería del Renacimiento español*. Espasa Calpe, 1975

- GÓMEZ MORENO, Manuel: *La escultura del Renacimiento español*, Firenze-Barcelona, 1931.

- GÓMEZ MORENO, Manuel: *Las Águilas del Renacimiento Español*, Madrid, 1941.

PARRADO DEL OLMO, Jesús María: "Testamento y otros datos de Juan de Villoldo". *Publicaciones de la Institución Tello Téllez de Meneses*, 1979, nº 42, pgs. 133-152.

PARRADO DEL OLMO, Jesús María: "Evolución artística de la catedral de Palencia a través del gobierno de los obispos del Renacimiento (1525-1594)". En *Jornadas sobre la catedral de Palencia*. Valladolid, 1989, pp. 159-161.

PARRADO DEL OLMO, Jesús María: "San Jerónimo penitente". En Cisneros. 1517-2017. Arquetipo de virtudes. Espejo de prelados. Toledo, 2017, p. 444.

PORTELA SANDOVAL, Francisco José: *La escultura del Renacimiento en Palencia*. Palencia, 1977.