

ISIDRO DE VILLOLDO (¿- Seville born about 1556)

Prophet.

33-24 cms diameter.

About 1536-1544.

Polychromed wood.

The present medallion is a work of high quality. It represents a biblical personage, perhaps a prophet, but without an attribute which would permit its identification, and is inscribed on a medallion. He is dressed in a tunic and a short cloak which wraps around the top of his head like a turban and reveals a precious stone set at the front with the intention of characterizing the person in oriental style.

The sculptor dominates the space by means of a composition which seeks to emphasize the solid mass of the figure imposed on the circular frame of the medallion not only due to its volume but above all thanks to the oblique movement of the head, counteracted by the contrary movement of his arm which is situated in the foreground. As a result of these devices the sculptor gives the figure a vital dynamism, thus solving a difficult problem, since a bust situated in a medallion offers fewer possible solutions than the figure of a complete body. We are thus facing an artist endowed with great ability for composition, inspired by the Berrugueteque models of the altar-piece of the Epiphany of the Church of Santiago in Valladolid and the upper choir-stalls in Toledo.

The influence of Berruguete is also evident in the treatment of the face, in which we can observe a series of facial characteristics which are solely found in the great Spanish sculptor, such as the oblique setting of eye-brows and eye sockets, straight noses, half-open mouths, and strands of beards mixed with dishevelled and tangled locks of hair. All this creates a passionate interpretation submitted at the same time to anguished and melancholic pathos which is characteristic of the expressive mannerism imposed by Berruguete. On the other hand, in the carving of clothes and the arm, an impressionist feeling reigns which reduces shapes to the essential, without giving details although reflecting correctly anatomy, as may be appreciated in the delicate and elongated fingers, full of sensitivity.

We are therefore facing a work which can only be assigned to an excellent disciple of Berruguete who must have been in direct contact with the Master and who in turn has left us works of supreme quality. Of all his disciples, the sculptor Isidro de Villoldo is the artist whose work is most similar to his Master. Little is known about the life and training of Villoldo except the fact that he appears mentioned for the first time in 1538 by Cornieles of Holland as working on the choir-stalls of the Cathedral of Avila whose general lay-out and assembly Cornieles had been contracted to make; in fact, the latter's activity in the Valladolid area between 1530 and 1532 is adequately documented. We would like to imagine that Berruguete and Isidro de Villoldo may have known one another in Valladolid and that when Cornieles contracts the Avila choir-stalls he would have proposed Villoldo as principal sculptor (in Spanish terminology "imagero") of this work, though Villoldo abandoned the Avila project and collaborated as one of the main assistants of Berruguete in the upper choir-stalls of Toledo Cathedral. On his return from this work, he reappears around 1543-1544 at the Avila choir-stalls. From this time onwards, Villoldo is in charge of carrying out the principal projects of the

Cathedral in a style which, after concluding the Toledan choir-stalls, is developing towards a more rhythmic beauty following Berruguete's own and his Toledan School's stylistic tendency.

At this point the relief we are studying manifests an intense artistic obsession similar to the one shown in the carving of the Avila choir-stalls, both in its first and final stages of the work, that is to say, at the top and on the covering of the pillars. We must point out that the way of conceiving a turban as headdress is habitual in the Avila school, which is a sign linking the work with this school, but also the expressive nervousness and the high quality technique correspond to Villoldo's art at that time and allow us to date the work in a period ranging from 1536 to 1544 when his style was fully integrated in the highly dynamic and passionate trail of Berruguete. The relationship of this work with the principal relief of the aforementioned altar-piece of the Epiphany of the church of Santiago in Valladolid, where Villoldo could have collaborated under the direction of Berruguete, is what makes me give an earlier date to the medallion, putting back to the year 1536 the date when this extraordinary work was initiated.

It may be added that Villoldo was an absolute Master in knowing how to adapt the composition to a frame in the shape of a medallion, as may be appreciated in the relief-work of Bonilla de la Sierra, or the medallion of the documented altar-piece of San Antolín in Avila Cathedral, both illustrating Our Lady with the Infant Jesus and the child San Juanito.

This relief-work was probably part of an altar-piece, and thus it has been noticed that the use of medallions in the *áticos* of altar-pieces is very common in the Avila School, such as El Barraco, in which Villoldo himself participated together with the sculptor Pedro de Salamanca, or in the altar-piece of Lanzahita. The latter and also Juan de Frías, collaborated with Villoldo in the alabaster works, carried out in Avila, as the altar-pieces of San Segundo and San Bernabé. The polychromy of the medallion is very worn so that one can hardly notice the *carnaciones* and regarding the clothing and the borders of the medallions they are gilded, but not *estofados*, which is indeed a characteristic of Berruguete's work, that is, to leave ample space just for gilding in his polychromes.

Essential Bibliography

PARRADO DEL OLMO, Jesús María: *Los escultores seguidores de Berruguete en Ávila*. Ávila, 1981.

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