

ARNAO DE BRUSELAS (Brussels? – Logroño, circa 1565)

Biblical scene.

86 x 85,5 cms.

Around 1556/1558

Polychromed walnut wood

Provenance: - Francisco Granados Collection (Madrid).

- Important Spanish private collection (2017).

We observe nowadays that there exists a constantly closer study of the process of execution of most XVI<sup>th</sup> century Spanish sculpture in which the workshops are directed by a person who contracts altarpieces and therefore has working for him sculptors who do not figure in the corresponding documentation because they are not directly responsible to the patrons. However, these sculptors, by their outstanding personal activity, may even impose their own personality on the style of the work. Such is the case with Arnao de Bruselas. This Master who comes from Brabant, like so many others who appear in Spain, was extraordinarily active in the bishopric of Calahorra-Santo Domingo de la Calzada among the workshops of Damián Forment, Andrés de Aroz, Guiot and Juan de Beaugrant, the last two being of northern origin.

Arnao first appears documented in 1536 when he initiates service under Damián Forment, according to a document referring to four years pay. At this time, he was already a trained sculptor who places his gouge at the service of the great Aragonese Master but we cannot confirm whether he was previously connected with other Castilian workshops. What is certain is that the exquisite technique of our sculptor adapted itself very well to such a refined workshop as Forment's one. When in 1537 Forment made a contract with Arnao to do the altar-piece of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, the Brabant artist, together with other sculptors like the Beaugrants, moved to Forment's studio to work on the altar-piece. That is how the active connection of our sculptor with the bishopric of Rioja must have begun, though under the authority of other contractors who had sufficient financial capacity to pay the expenses of these important orders. Arnao's name does not figure in any other work contract until he begins in 1553 the altar-piece of Santa Maria del Palacio de Logroño, in this case due to the death of Juan de Goyaz, the previous contractor, and when Arnao personally contracts the final works produced for his Aragonese clients, such as the altar-pieces of the chapel of San Bernardo, in the monastery of Veruela, which was contracted by Arnao in 1556, and the southern side of the trascoro of the Seo de Zaragoza, a work undertaken from 1557-1558. Then, after this, he again acts as a salaried sculptor for Pedro de Troas in the altar-piece of Aldeanueva de Ebro, priced in 1565, for which he carved five stories; this is the last known work undertaken by our Master.

Thus we have a sculptor trained during his adolescence and early youth in Flemish workshops, characterized by his impeccable technique favored by the fact the guilds supervised all the works produced so as to maintain the prestige of their workshops which would enable them to export bearing the stamp of quality. Later on, we find our Master sculptor in the workshop of Damián Forment, where Arnao could reaffirm his interest in well-finished work, deeply studied composition, as well as his care for leisurely movement, very akin to the taste of the great Aragonese sculptor, in which

there is always a classical air in his interpretation of sculpture, as also in the sequence of movements of the draperies which wrap around his figures in swirling movement.

We, however, also notice a factor which enables an attribution to him of the aforementioned altar-piece of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, namely, a greater inclination manifested in Arnao rather than in Forment towards expressionist mannerism, thanks to the use of the “serpentinata”, or spiral form, and the helical line, or human types full of a vibrating pathos, who manifest in their flowing beards and hair and in their elongated and twisted hands and feet extreme sensitivity. In this case, there is a clear trace of Castilian sculpture of the second quarter of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century and, in particular, of Alonso Berruguete. We cannot deny that Arnao may have known the aesthetic style of Berruguete, either in Valladolid, before his participation in Forment’s workshop, or in Toledo, with reference to the choir-stalls of its Cathedral. There is also another possible link in their connection, which is the painter Andrés de Melgar, regarding the polychromy of the altar-piece of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, since Melgar had in fact formed part of Berruguete’s workshop in Valladolid.

Arnao is thus a highly individualistic sculptor since his style is not Berrugetesque nor Formentian in a literal sense, but both these sources fuse together to form a very special way of interpreting and understanding sculpture, in which the elegance of the Aragonese artist softens the mannerist pathos of Berruguete.

The relief work we are at present studying shows us a scene taken from the Bible in which a personage appears on the right in a dominant position and addressing himself to another person seated wearing a regal crown and surrounded by his counsellors. In the background there is a building with a colonnade which perhaps represents a palace. The personages do not appear wearing attributes of their status, so it is difficult to identify the story which is further complicated by the fact that the relief lacks any corresponding explanatory context since it is not situated in the original altar-piece next to other scenes which might help to unravel the mystery. One hypothesis could be that it might be a representation of the prophet Nathan addressing King David.

The scene is composed of two different zones; the one on the right consists of the figure of the prophet and an assistant or servant, both standing and filling the space. The zone on the left is at a lower level, possibly as a sign of submission, representing the King seated with four counsellors. Arnao knows well how to unite the two groups by means of psychological tension, achieved by the looks exchanged by the king and the prophet indicating a diagonal and suggesting conflict. The human types represented by our sculptor are characteristically his own, with their elegant, expressive heads, remarkable straggly beards or unruly hair covering the forehead. Arnao always indicates his own style in his particular way of representing feet, in which he emphasizes elongated bones and tendons, adding further expressivity. Even more faithful to his expressionist style are his hands with long slender fingers resting in different positions, sometimes half open, sometimes folded, but always expressing strong sentimental emotion and accompanying human gesticulation.

The attitude of the persons represented is, however, fairly balanced, except for the rhythmic movement of the person we suppose to be Nathan who is endowed with an extraordinary measured pomposity since he stretches out his left arm and, at the same time, turns his head in the opposite direction, folding his right arm and resting his hand on his breast. The folds of drapery are represented more flattened out than what is characteristic in the central period of Arnao's production when they whirl around the bodies of the persons portrayed. Only the king's cloak indicates an enveloping movement.

And yet, the works carried out in Aragon by the sculptor reveal a tendency towards greater calm in the composition and human types represented with more controlled movement and in the sequence of folds of drapery which fall straight down to the feet, as shown by the supposed Nathan in this relief, which I find similar to the folds of the tunic and cloak of the "San Juan del Calvario en el trascoro de la Seo" or the reliefs of the aforementioned altar-piece at the monastery of Veruela. The dialoguing attitude of the prophet also links up with the sculptures of the saints in the choir-stalls of Zaragoza Cathedral. For this reason, it is possible to situate it on a date close to these Aragonese works, where we begin to notice an evolution which culminates in what may be considered the last altar-piece of Aldeanueva de Ebro, priced in 1565, which is practically turning towards an early "romanismo".

The relief is enriched with an excellent polychromy which is derived from those habitually made by Riojan polychromers of the time, specially according to Francisco Fernandez Vallejo's way of making them; the latter's manner of working is, in fact, very close to the one we are at present studying, though it presents even greater wealth of subjects in documented works, such as the altar-piece of Santa María de Palacio. There exists, however, the same exquisite technique, as observed in the splendid "corladuras". We notice that crimson-red, blue and green tones prevail in the collection of draperies, the fleshtones are pink, with touches of reddish colour on the cheekbones which give a sense of vitality to expressions. The fleshtone of the prophet is more pallid than that of the other personages, perhaps so as to indicate him more individually.

The "estofados" are treated with pointed paint-brush combined with an extraordinarily "esgrafiado" technique. The "corladuras" are impeccable. As begins to be habitual in the polychromy of the Rioja, there predominate branches of vegetation represented on cloaks and tunics, and the fringe at the bottom of the prophet's cape shows an extremely delicate decoration of rolls of vegetation mixed with petals and birds on a golden background.

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