



JUAN BAUTISTA VÁZQUEZ THE ELDER

Pelayos c.1525-1588 Sevilla

Our Lady and the Child

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Art historians have frequently focused their attention on the great Masters of Spanish sculpture, bestowing on them the roles of creators of movements or styles, and that of guides of the aesthetic tendencies of a period. However, the panorama of our culture is broader and more complex because of the existence of other masters, endowed with original and sharply defined personalities who were able to create their own individual styles which moreover greatly influenced the evolution and orientation of aesthetic taste in the following generations. Because of their artistic calibre and influence, they deserve to occupy an outstanding position in the panorama of our sculpture.

This is the case for Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder. He was probably educated in Avila, where he lived with his family, and he may also have been a member of the circle of Isidro de Villoldo; for it is only a personal relationship between Juan Bautista and Isidro that could have inspired Isidro's widow to ask Juan Bautista to continue the altarpiece of the Cartuja de las Cuevas in Seville which remained unfinished at the death of Villoldo in 1558. Vázquez would have learnt Villoldo's elegant technique, and this element would have been bolstered by his journey to Italy where there is documentary evidence of his presence in Parma, as indicated by Margarita Estella who hypothesised that he might have visited other places in Italy, captivated by the elegance and grace of Parma's art.



Figs. 1-2 Juan Bautista
Vázquez the Elder
Our Lady and the Child
Polychrome wood
Hight, 148 cm
IOMR collection

Vázquez would become one of the most prolific sculptors of the region around Toledo, where he enjoyed great esteem in Cathedral circles and among the Bishops, if one is to judge by the number of works he was commissioned to execute, and where he would have established contact with Alonso Berruguete contributing in a decisive way in creating a deeper and more refined interpretation of Berruguete's vibrant dynamism, affirming his own personality and, at the same time influencing other sculptors connected with him.

Vázquez' style was characterised by the elegance displayed in his compositions and in the attitudes of his figures who avoid the extreme 'Laocontesque' tensions distortions of Berruguete, as well as his twitching gestures. We find a great quest for beauty with special emphasis given to the curving movements of the folds, which imbue the flexible bodies they cover with vitality. The physiognomies of the figures, however, tend more towards melancholy than expressionism.

Vázquez' departure for Seville, with the purpose of finishing the altarpiece of the Cartuja de las Cuevas, resulted in his becoming the real creator of the city's school of *Imaginería*, in which he was assisted by the arrival of other master sculptors from Avila and Toledo who were trained under him, or who were influenced by his way of making sculpture. His works begin to gain in monumentality, without losing their sense of rhythm nor the elegance of their gestures. José Hernandez Díaz has prized this master's elegance, and



his role as the founder of the school, highlighting the artist's ability in creating sensitive images of Our Lady and the Child in which he displays a great skill in representing the intimacy and mysticism of the subject (fig. 1).

Our Lady and the Child (figs. 1, 2, 3) we are studying here, is in complete accordance with these values, as an altarpiece should be. The composition appears balanced, full of an all-embracing serenity, but, at the same time, the rhythmic movement of the folds is so varied, with continual changes of direction, avoiding the straight, downward fall of the fabric to the feet, that the internal vision is full of a rich variety of surfaces. The natural appearance of the robes is combined with the studied artificial movement provoked by the constantly changing rhythms of the surfaces.

Our Lady presents the *Child* who barely rests on her left hand, an artificial mannerism that is a way of also emphasising the super-natural spirit of the scene which is not subject to the laws of gravity common to us mortals. *Our Lady* offers the *Child* a pear with her right hand, and the *Child* (fig. 4), reciprocates with the offer of a globe. The proximity of both symbols suggests the affectionate relationship between mother and child, and indicates to us the subtle way employed by the sculptor of indirectly representing an emotional relationship. In a similar fashion, *Our Lady* does not look directly at the *Child*, and her expression has a touch of melancholy which seems to foretell the tragic destiny of her *Child*. For this reason, the *Child* raises his eyes on high, as if he were observing the Divinity, and accepting his mission. That is to say, Vázquez does not merely relate the maternal story, but uses the scene to subtly allude to the idea of Redemption (fig. 7).

Our Lady wears a veil, a tunic and a cloak. The veil hangs down her right side and crosses at the top of her breast with fine pleats which suggest a light material which allows the wavy locks of fair hair to be seen, and this is something that is not observed in other Madonnas by Juan Bautista Vázquez, such as *Our Lady of the Fevers* (fig. 5), a closely related composition. The tunic is visible on the right-hand side of the sculpture, falling down to her feet, suggesting a thickness of texture which, by falling in this way, lies facing different directions, forming hollow lumps and a variety of chiaroscuro surfaces which brighten the scene. The treatment of the cloak is a masterpiece in its creation of lively surfaces. It is gathered up at the waist in thick, complicated folds, it curls around her right arm and as it opens, it falls. There is no rough levelling of surfaces in the entire front of the cloak, and the folds are pleated in different directions; the diagonal pleat which runs from the right-hand side down to the opposite side at her feet, is the most elegant of all (fig 4).

Figs.3,7 **Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder**
Our Lady and the Child, details
IOMR collection

Figs.4 **Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder**
Our Lady and the Child,
IOMR collection

p. 6
Fig. 5 **Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder**
Our Lady of the Fevers – Our Lady with
Child Jesus, circa 1560, Church of La
Magdalena, Seville

p. 9
Fig. 6 **Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder**
Giraldillo, Cathedral of Sevilla, from
the belfry of the cathedral

10



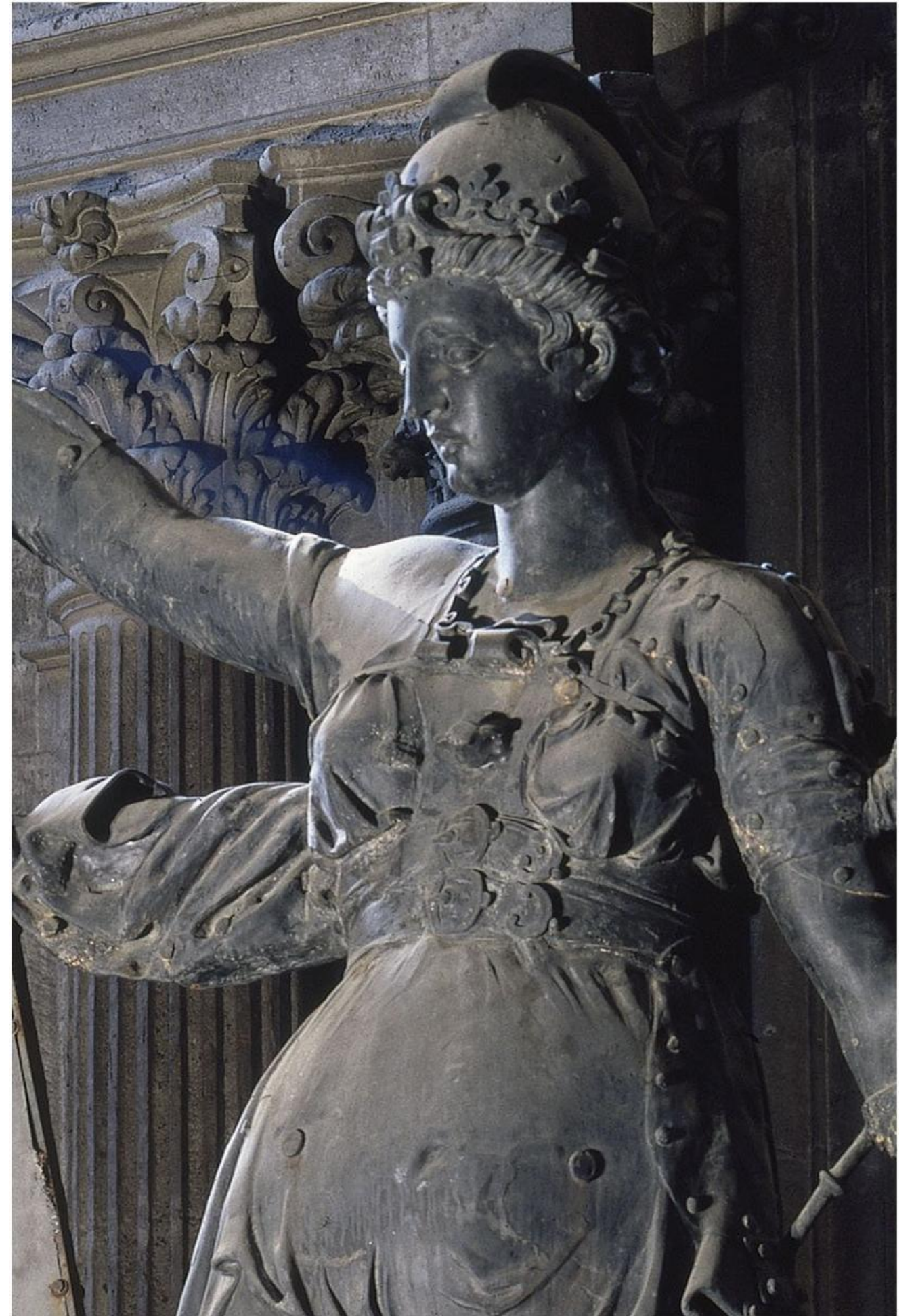
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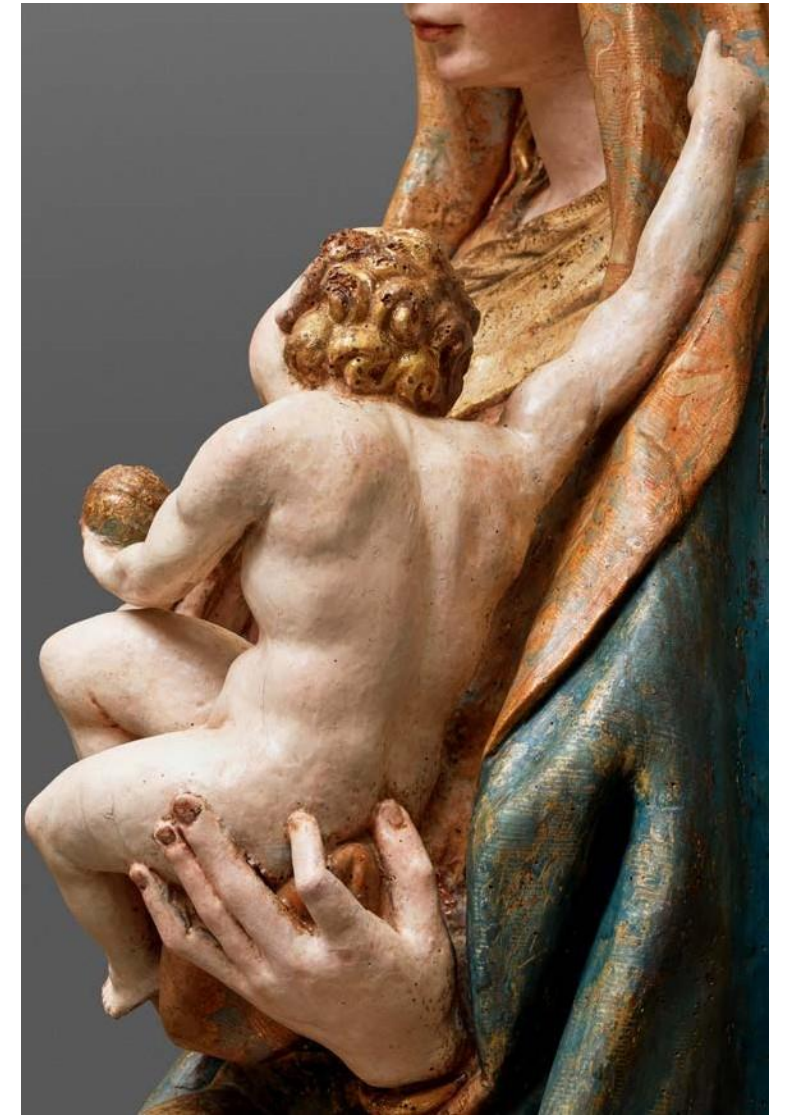


13









pp. 12-14
 Figs. 9, 10, 11 **Alonso Berruguete**
Sepulchre of Cardinal Tavera,
 1554 -1561, Hospital Tavera,
 Toledo

The Virgin's face is composed with soft outlines, and has an oval profile. Her eyes are remarkably set, slanting downwards, which draws attention to the melancholic reverie of the image and is very closely related to the face of the *Giraldillo* (figs. 7, 8), the statue representing Faith designed by Vázquez to crown the *Giralda* tower. Also to be noted are the graceful long-fingered hands, full of sensitivity and reminiscent of the sculptor's Mannerist training. The representation of the *Child*, rendered in a supple position with his legs folded but in different directions, is very interesting. His head turns following the movement of his body while his arm which is raised and holds the apple makes a swaying circular movement towards *Our Lady*, his right arm rising straight up along her shoulder. His hair has curly locks and His anatomy is remarkably robust, which is particularly noticeable in his sturdy back. There are echoes of Michelangelo here, but assimilated into Alonso Berruguete's interpretation of him (fig. 12). The general composition of his back

with his arm raised may be related to the central figure in a drawing in the Academia de San Fernando, attributed to Berruguete, which contains elements inspired by the *Punishment of Amán* in the Sistine Chapel. But the composition as a whole, and the way the *Child's* back is constructed, are also close to other figures by Berruguete, for instance the child in the sepulchre of *Cardinal Tavera* (figs. 10, 11), whose general anatomical treatment and, in particular, the way of drawing constructing his back, corresponds to the same basic idea. We would also like to point out the volumetric idea of two other children who figure on the sides of the *Transfiguration* on the Archbishop's Chair in the Choir of the Cathedral of Toledo. With regard to the Tavera sepulchre (fig.9), Gomez Moreno (in *Las Águilas del Renacimiento Español*. Madrid, 1941 and 1983) suggested the participation of Vázquez himself in this work although, other scholars such as Manuel Arias (*Alonso Berruguete: Prometeo de la escultura*. Bilbao 20, p. 197) are not in agreement, the latter considering that

Fig. 11 **Alonso Berruguete**
 detail, *Sepulchre of Cardinal Tavera*,
 Hospital Tavera, Toledo.

Fig. 12 **Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder**
Our Lady and the Child, detail,
 polychromy wood, circa 1560,
 IOMR collection

as our sculptor was proposed at the final pricing, he could not be both judge and plaintiff. The fact remains, however, that in some way or other, during his stay in Toledo, Juan Bautista Vázquez must have encountered this work and taken notes on it, just as he might have done for the *Transfiguration*, a work which aroused much admiration in and around Toledo. The face of the *Child* is surprising, as it is executed with greater realism than that of *Our Lady*.

This work can be considered to be amongst the best in Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder's oeuvre because, although it can be linked to other works by the same author such as for instance *Our Lady of the Fevers* in the Magdalena Church in Seville (fig. 6), the *Virgin of the Pine-cone* in Lebrija, or the interpretations of the Virgin Mary in the altarpieces at Lucena (fig 13) and Carmona, in this image we can admire, as in no other, the skill of the sculptor in creating such subtle shades in the iconography and composition as to reveal to us the elegance and monumental greatness of the story of the Virgin Mary. The sculpture has a rather elongated structure, but the ample folds of the draperies enveloping the *Virgin's* hips reaffirm the solidity of the sculptural block (fig. 2). The elegance of the gestures and the inner rhythmic cadences of the surfaces make this Sevillian sculpture far-removed from the academic *romanismo a lo Michelangelo* prevailing during those years in the schools situated in the north of the country. That elegance will later turn into the great Baroque sculpture of the Andalusian school.

The polychromy creates a beautiful effect with its *corladuras* and with *esgrafiado* slits in the blue and rose-pink tones of both the cloak and tunic, which were decorated with the tip of the brush with bunches of vegetation, characteristic of the polychromies of the second half of the XVIth century (fig. 14).

As to the date of the work, if we bear in mind that the work still displays reminiscences of Toledo, this might indicate that the work may have been executed a short time after the sculptor's arrival in Seville, probably during the 1560s.

Fig. 13 Juan Bautista Vázquez. *Anunciación de Lucena*, polychrome relief, high altarpiece of the church of San Mateo, Lucena, Córdoba.

Fig. 14 Juan Bautista Vázquez. *Our Lady and the Child*, detail IOMR



