

JUAN BAUTISTA VÁZQUEZ THE ELDER

(Pelayos, Salamanca circa 1525- Sevilla, 1588)

Virgen con el Niño (Virgen de la Pera).

(Our Lady and the Child)(Our Lady and the Pear)

148 cms. X 52/55 cms. wide.

Art historians have frequently focused their attention on the great Masters of Spanish sculpture who have been given the role of creators of movements or styles and guides of the aesthetic tendencies of a period. The panorama, however, of our culture is wider and more complex because other Masters have also existed, endowed with an original and sharply defined personality who were able to create their own style which furthermore had a transcendent influence on the evolution and orientation of an aesthetic taste in future generations. Due to their artistic category and to their influence, they deserve to occupy an outstanding position in our sculpture.

This is the case of 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 only a personal relationship between Juan Bautista and Isidro could have inspired Isidro's widow to ask Juan Bautista to continue the altar-piece of the Cartuja de las Cuevas in Sevilla which remained unfinished at the death of Villoldo in 1558. Vázquez would have learned Villoldo's elegant technique which would have increased after his trip to Italy where there is documentary evidence of his presence in Parma, as indicated by Margarita Estella who imagined that he might have visited other places in Italy captivated by the gracious elegance of Parma's art.

Vázquez will become one of the most prolific sculptors of the Toledan area where he enjoyed great esteem among the Cathedral and Bishops circle, judging by the number of works he was commissioned and where he would have established contact with Alonso Berruguete and contributed in a decisive way to create a deeper and more refined interpretation of Berruguete's vibrating dynamism (which was followed closely by other sculptors connected with him) but, at the same time, affirming his own personality.

Vázquez' style was characterized by the elegance he manifested in composition and in the attitudes of his personages who avoid the extreme Laocontesque tension of Berruguete as well as his twitching gestures. There is a great quest for beauty with a special stress on the curving movements of the folds which give vitality to their flexible bodies. Their faces, however, tend more towards melancholy than towards expressionism.

Vázquez' departure to Sevilla, with the purpose of finishing the altar-piece of the Cartuja de las Cuevas, causes his becoming the real creator of the School of "Imaginería" of the city, in which he was assisted by the arrival of other Master sculptors from Avila and Toledo who were trained under him or were related to his way of making sculpture. His works begin to gain in monumental size, without losing their sense of rhythm or the elegance of their gestures. José Hernandez Díaz has valued the elegance of this Master and his role as founder of the School, indicating his capacity to create sensitive images of "Our Lady and the Child" in which he shows a great capacity to reflect the intimacy and mysticism of the subject:

The "Madonna and Child" we are here studying participates completely in these values, as would pertain to an altar-piece. The composition is apparently 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 a straight, fall down to her feet, that the internal vision is full of a rich variety of surfaces. It offers the natural appearance of the robes, combined with the studied artificial movement provoked by the constantly changing rhythms of the surfaces.

The Madonna presents the Child who scarcely leans on her left hand, which reflects artificial mannerism and is a way of emphasising the supernatural spirit of the scene which is not subject to the laws of gravity common to mortals. She offers him a pear with her right hand while the Child, corresponds offering an apple to his mother. The proximity of both fruits suggests the affectionate relationship between mother and child, and indicates to us the subtle way employed by the sculptor of demonstrating sentimental relations without being direct. In a similar fashion, Our Lady does not look directly at the Child, but her appearance shows a touch of melancholy which seems to foretell the tragic destiny of the Child. For this reason, the Child raises His eyes on high, as if He were observing Divinity, accepting His mission. That is to say that Vázquez does

not remain merely narrating the maternal story, but uses the scene to indicate subtly the idea of Redemption.

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 light material and allow wavy locks of fair hair to be seen, which does not occur in other Madonnas by Vázquez, such as "Our Lady of the Fevers", closely related in composition to this one. The tunic is visible on the right side of the sculpture, falling down to her feet and suggesting a thickness of texture which, on falling down in this way, lies facing different directions, forming hollow lumps and a variety of chiaroscuro surfaces which brighten up the scene. The treatment of the cloak is a masterpiece in its creation of the vitality of surfaces. It is gathered up at the waist in thick, complicated folds, it curls around her right arm and opening up falls down. All the front of the cloak avoids any rough levelling and its folds are pleated in different directions; the diagonal pleat which runs from the right side down to the opposite side at her feet is the most elegant.

Her face is composed of soft outlines, and has an oval profile. Her eyes are remarkably set in a rather slanting downwards inclination which draws attention to the melancholic reverie of the image very closely related to the face of the Giraldillo, the statue representing Faith designed by Vázquez to crown the Giralda tower. We observe the graceful long-fingered hands, full of sensitivity and related to the mannerist training of the sculptor.

The representation of the Child is very interesting, rendered in a supple position with his legs folded, though in different directions. His head turns following the movement of his body and while his arm which raises the apple makes a swaying circular movement towards Our Lady, his right arm rises straight up her shoulder. His hair has curly locks; His anatomy is remarkably robust and this we particularly notice regarding his sturdy back. There are echoes of Michelangelo, but mixed with Alonso Berruguete's interpretation of him. The general composition of his back with his arm raised may be related to the central figure in a drawing of the Academia de San Fernando, attributed to Berruguete, which contains influences inspired from the Punishment of Amán in the Capella Sixtina. But the composition and the way the Child's back is built are also close to other Berruguete interpretations, like a child figuring in the sepulchre of Cardinal Tavera, whose general anatomic treatment and, in particular, the

way of drawing his back, correspond to the same basic idea. We also wish 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, Gomez Moreno (in "Las Águilas del Renacimiento Español". Madrid, 1941 and 1983) suggested the participation of Vázquez himself in this work although, other scholars like Manuel Arias (Alonso Berruguete: "Prometeo de la escultura". Bilbao 2011, p.197) deny it since this author considered that as our sculptor was proposed at the final pricing, he could not be both judge and plaintiff. The fact, however, was that, in some way or other, during his stay in Toledo, Juan Bautista Vázquez must have known about this work and have taken notes on it, just as he could also have done so on the Transfiguration, a work which aroused much admiration in the Toledan zone. The face of the Child surprises us, as it is executed with greater realism than that of Our Lady.

The work can be considered among the best done by Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder because although it can be related to other works by the same author like, for instance "Virgen de las Fiebres" of the Magdalena Church in Sevilla, "Virgen de la Piña" in Lebrija, or the interpretations of the Virgin Mary in the altar-pieces at Lucena and Carmona, in this image we can admire, as in no other, the capacity of the sculptor to create such subtle shades in iconography and composition that may 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 her hips reaffirm the solidity of the sculptural block. The elegance of the gestures and the inner rhythmic cadences of the surfaces remove to a distance Sevillian sculpture from the academic "romanismo a lo Michelangelo" prevailing during those years in the schools situated in the north. 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 among which were painted with the tip of the paintbrush bunches of vegetation, characteristic of polychromies of the second half of the XVIth century.

Regarding the date of the work, if we bear in mind that there still exist Toledan reminders in the work, this might indicate that the work could

have been done a short time after the sculptor's arrival in Sevilla, probably during the 1560's decade of the XVIth century.

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