

Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder (Pelayos, Avila circa 1525 - Sevilla 1588)

“Virgin Mary with Child”

Polychromed wood.

Measurement: 148 cm. High.

Provenance: Important Catalan collection throughout various generations.

Purchased by IOMR in 2018.

With her cloak covering her head she allows her hair to be seen combed back with a central parting and slightly curled around her oval face. She offers a broad triangular shaped forehead due to the way her hair is combed under arched eye-lids which partially protect her eyes and give a pathetic expression. Rosey coloured cheekbones and delicious mouth suggesting a smile soften a straight long nose. A delicate veil crosses over her breast revealing a strong neck turning slightly to the right shows up above the round opening of her tunic.

The cloak falls straight down on the both sides of her head and her arm is holding up a pear in her elegant and delicately fingered hand ^(Fig. A3). On her left she clasps the naked Child with the palm of her hand and quite clearly bends her index finger away from her middle finger and her ring finger which are both pressed together and, with the assistance of the little finger, endeavour to support the weight of the Child. Under the figure of the Child the folds of the cloak are gathered together at the front with its tip tucked away under Our Lady’s right arm. As we can see, the above mentioned details of the layout of the clothing and the arrangement of hands are some of the details most often repeated in the artistic works of the artist Vázquez the Elder to whom this sculpture is attributed.

The Child offers to his mother a fruit (apple), thus corresponding to the maternal offer in an artificial composition which is emphasized by violent foreshortening of arms and legs. Facing the group the composition appears balanced, but if observed side-view we notice the tension of the Child’s posture who seems to be acting on an impulse to break away from the arms of Our Lady. The Child’s anatomy is correctly conceived, but a little thinner than what the sculptor usually represents in other Infants among the numerous models of this iconographic subject.

The sculpture corresponds to the features of the Spanish Renaissance and in a search for its possible classification we observed great similarity to the

images of the Virgin Mary carved by the sculptor Bautista Vázquez the Elder. Therefore in order to carefully attribute it to the latter Master sculptor, we deeply studied the numerous images of Our Lady set in this self same composition which echo succinctly the characteristics which define his style¹.

The Italianism in his work which, as Gomez Moreno describes in a masterly fashion, represents the reverse of Berruguete's Art, can be explained not only by the contacts which he effectively established with this Eagle of our Renaissance, but is also due to a very probable trip to Italy. It is highly probable that he was the Spanish Juan Bautista "incisore o bulino" quoted by Pietro Zani in his "Enciclopedia della Belle Arti" (Parma, 1820) which his stay Parma suggests. In fact, Vázquez' activity in the art of engraving, confirmed by the images who decorated the "Psyque", by Juan de Malara, one of whose copies is contained in the Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid². His possible departure to Parma would imply a new route for Spaniards different from the well known way to Naples. Finally we wish to point out that the Art of Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder directly reflects the influence of the mannerism of Parmigianino which, if it were not direct, that is to say due to Vázquez' probable stay in Parma, was certainly possible due to the spreading of his drawings and engravings. In fact, as a faithful representative of the Renaissance he practised his art in the field of wood, bronze and marble. According to Cean Bermudez he practised painting, although this is not sure, and left evidence of his knowledge of the art of drawing and engraving. It has even been suggested that he had some knowledge of architecture.

With these antecedents in mind, we have studied the abundant sculptural work which could reflect his training. The first work which Gomez Moreno attributes to him, the impressive "Piedad" in marble in Avila Cathedral, though not documented, is one of the best copies of the famous one by Michelangelo.⁴ Nevertheless, it is the only one of his works which fits completely into this Roman current, which in his remaining works seem to flow along a much smoother Florentine style. No other work has been discovered in Avila⁵ which could be more or less ascribed to him with certainty, but the attribution to him of "Virgen de Horcajo" is one of the sculptures of the Virgin Mary which repeats the same composition and is very close to the work we are studying.

In a deliberate revision of the numerous works which repeat the same sculptural models, a few documented works have been selected in which the details in style coincide with the sculpture we are now studying. The work which is closest to the style of our sculpture seems to us the “Virgen con el Niño” which crowns the Facistol of Sevilla Cathedral; a sculpture which has always been known as a work by Vázquez; a modern research study carried out at the time of its restoration has brought up to date aspects of great interest as they refer to Vázquez’ participation, to whom are not only commissioned the sculptures of the Virgin Mary and of the four Evangelists, but also the drawings of the reliefs which would be cast in silver by the great bronzesmith, Morel⁶.

We notice in this lovely Sevillian Virgin Mary the same way of laying her cloak over her head, letting her curly hair be seen which frames her broad triangular forehead and her strong neck leaning towards the left where the Child presses down on her forearm. The delicate figure of the Infant is more sturdy than the example we are now studying, but he appears in an awkward position wearing only a loincloth. One detail, however, surprises us in the indubitable likeness of this image of the Virgin Mary, attributed to Vázquez regarding the many documented examples of the Master: The soft expression which appears in the documented examples becomes rather harsher, more Berruguetesque and presents a face which is in some ways different from those we associate with various free-standing feminine figures of by Vázquez. We carefully revised other works by the sculptor in order to clarify this difference and we noticed an evident parallelism between Our Lady’ features and those of women portrayed in the altar-piece of the parish church of Santa Maria in Lucena (Cordoba), a documented work by Vázquez, or in the “Virgen de la Piña” in Lebrija (Sevilla). This likeness can also be seen in the example Horcajo, though we believe this sculpture has not yet been documented to date. The difference in expression is due to a different representation of eyes with half-closed eye-lids, but not wide open as in the figures at Lucena. Perhaps the recent restoration of the sculpture has increased the difference, though we do not believe that is an obstacle to the proposed attribution.

Summing up, we can safely declare, on the basis of stylistic examination and armed with the prudence advisable in cases of lack of documentation, that the work we are now studying is a beautiful sculpture whose fine quality permits it to be ascribed to the art of Juan Bautista Vázquez el Viejo, of approximate the same dates, of the documented the “Virgen

Mary and the Child” which decorates the “facistol” of the Cathedral of Sevilla (1565), Its Italianism is perceived in its elegant classical posture and in its direct reminders of various drawings by Parmigianino. Vázquez’ connection with Berruguete is appreciate in the forced position of the Child and which we also notice in other works by J.B. Vázquez the Elder, like the “Madonna of Almonacid” In the latter works we also observe how Berruguete’s striking art becomes softer and how in the works of the great sculptor J. B. Vázquez the Elder the artist hispanizes his Italianism.

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¹ GOMEZ MORENO Manuel .*Las Águilas del Renacimiento español. Bartolome Ordoñez. Diego Siloe. Pedro Machuca. Alonso Berruguete. 1517-1558.* Madrid Inst^o Diego Velázquez del CSIC. 1983 (reedición de la de 1941).-- HERNANDE DIAZ PALOMERO PARAMO ESTELLA

² ESTELLA. Op.cit.p. y ss. Lams.20—23

³ ESTELLA .Margarita.”Guglielmo Della Porta s early years and some of his works in Spain” in *Guglielmo Della Porta. A counter-reformation sculptor.* Coll Cortes 2012 . 14-31

⁴ GOMEZ MORENO

⁵ PARRADO ESTELLA.

⁶ LAGUNA (Coord.)

⁷ PORRES Jesús