



**Luis Tristán (1580/1585 - 1624)**

**Saint Matthews**

Oil on canvas

Measurements: 107 x 77 cm

Spanish XVII century

Painted about 1613

[Download Comparative study with images by Carlos Herrero Starkie](#)

**Description**

Apostle Saint Matthews? Saint Jude Tadeo?, Saint Matías ? or Saint Thomas ?

### AN APOSTLE BY LUIS TRISTÁN: RELATIONSHIP WITH EL GRECO, RIBERA, VELAZQUEZ AND THE NEW ITALIAN NATURALISTIC CURRENTS.

The work we are studying represents an apostle in all his splendour and monumentality, whose iconographic identification is doubtful since the only attribute appearing is the halberd which is common to various apostles. Saint Matthews, creator of the first Gospel and Saint Jude Tadeo, also represented by El Greco with a halberd, are the most probable; San Matías is less probable due to having been martyred with an axe; and Saint Thomas, although the attribute does not correspond, since he died pierced by a lance, also could be the apostle represented due to his close relationship to the composition with the Saint Thomas of the Apostles by El Greco (El Greco Museum, Toledo) and the Saint Thomas by Velazquez (Orleans Museum). The painter certainly did not wish to centre his attention on an individualized identification of the saint, but rather on his general symbology as apostle: the halberd or lance with regard to his martyrdom as a form of death, the heavy tunic, with imposing folds, referring to his mighty task of spreading the Gospel continuously for the Church and the strong expression on his face in allusion to his tenacious character and indomitable conviction needed to accomplish his mission.

The work can be attributed to the best work of Luis Tristán, and due to its quality may be considered a masterpiece carried out just on his return from his journey to Italy, in about 1613 when his spirit was still teeming excitedly with the ideas gathered in El Greco's workshop and his contact with the modern Roman naturalistic currents shared with the young José Ribera. We are, in fact, facing a picture which surpasses by a long way the credit as a painter which Luis Tristán has enjoyed up to now and can raise him to the level of the great masters, to the point of considering him the vertex of various currents to some extent antagonistic, but which, nevertheless, in this work combine exceedingly well. These currents run from El Greco to the new Italian naturalistic currents, passing by the Caravaggism of the young Ribera and culminating in the Sevillian Velazquez. In this sense, the work deserves a detailed study of its intrinsic qualities which according to the words of the restorer of the Prado Museum, Rocío Dávila, surprises us for not showing errors in its execution, undoubtedly an uncommon occurrence even in the most prestigious works.

In the first place, true to our consideration of Tristán as a great draughtsman, the work displays a drawing which is exact and correct and which follows to a great extent that of El Greco, above all in the shaping and movement of the robe whose folds are occasionally the same as those of the Cretan Master, but which also receive the influence of the Escorialense masters and late Roman Michaelangelesque artists. In this respect, the drawing is manieristic in the sense that the folds are not at all naturalistic, but rather respond to a symbolic and artistic intention; the hands are rather out of proportion, above all in relation to the head; the right hand is powerful, sculptural and reminds us of the hands of the Moses of Michelangelo; the left hand is supremely beautiful, elongated and fine, reminding us of the apostle Saint Andrew's right hand by El Greco (El Greco Museum, Toledo) and of those painted by Titian in his portrait of Cardinal Paul III (Museum of Capodimonte, Naples); the head is surprisingly small, due to the elongation of the figure, so characteristic of the manierists and of their Master El Greco, but tremendously powerful.

The composition is perhaps the most valuable element of the picture; its significance is due to its

influence on Velazquez and specially on his "Saint Thomas" (Museum of Orléans). It is without any doubt magnificently executed.

A diagonal line, formed by the halberd, runs obliquely across the picture, linking up its fundamental parts: the head of the apostle in profile showing his ear, sign of authenticity in Tristán, has an irate expression, reminding us of Michaelangelo's prophets in the Sistine Chapel; his tremendously powerful right hand, which symbolizes his mighty evangelizing strength and his extremely elongated left hand which merely rests on the lance, evoking moderation, prudence and sensitivity, virtues equally necessary for the Church. This diagonal connects and separates elements of opposing symbolical importance and visually gives a sensation of symmetry, separating the two chains of folds which constitute the sleeves of the robe endowing, as a whole, the apostle with a greatness fundamentally Michaelangelesque. These three elements, head, right hand and left hand, treated in an exceptional manner, together with the monumental folds of the robe, constitute altogether the personality of the work.

This composition, which is essentially an original conception of Tristán, has its antecedents in the Moses and the prophets of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and in the Saint Thomas by El Greco in the sense that in the latter picture the hands, without the need of a lance, represent the diagonal. Thus, although Tristán could hardly have known this work, the Apostle Saint James the Greater (in the Prado Museum), painted by Rubens in 1613 for the Duke of Lerma, has also his hands in a similar position.

The significance of this new way of conceiving a work is great as it converts the diagonal line in one of the signs of identity of Velazquez's compositions in his Sevillian period. The connection between this picture and Velazquez's Saint Thomas is specially evident to everyone who knows how Velazquez, on occasions, uses other pictures by great Masters as a source of creative inspiration. As Palomino indicates "the paintings which seemed most harmonious to Velazquez were those by Luis Tristán because they were similar to his Velazquez's spirit, strange thoughts and lively concepts and, for this reason, Velazquez declared himself imitator of Tristán and ceased to follow the manner of his "Master Pacheco". This same influence may also be appreciated in the "Aguador" of the Wellington Museum (London) where from the tall patrician figure of the water-carrier, represented in profile in the Roman style, there rises a diagonal line which links the fragile glass goblet to a smaller pitcher on which rests a smooth white glazed cup. Crossing it, there is a second diagonal linking a rough youth of vague introspective expression to the bigger pitcher made of rough material which stands out due to its three-dimensional nature. Here again the diagonals form axes which unite subtly through opposing tactile sensations, with assuredly symbolic references, and closely follow the academic taste of his Master Pacheco and contemporary collectors.

Regarding the composition, it is worth while devoting special attention to the masterly way Tristán displays the Apostle in space. The figure forms an integral part of this space in a more classical way than do the Apostles painted approximately in 1612-1613 by his travelling companion José Ribera (Apostles of Cosida – Roberto Longhi Foundation), the magnificent Santiago (110 x 77,5 cm – Rome, private collection) and the Prophet (Catania, Museo Cívico of Castello Ursino). These figures dominate almost all the space and address the viewer in a more Caravaggesque and decidedly Baroque manner. In our Apostle, the pictorial space is shared in a well balanced way by the figure and the space, and the latter acquires a special prominence as occurs in many of Velazquez's works after his journey to Italy. Here Tristán, as does subsequently Velazquez, creates a sensation of air which fixes the figure in space and gives a sensation of a full sense of reality and the force of gravity. No doubt, this sense of space is given by the halo of light which surrounds the apostle's head and spreads in shades progressively over the space of the picture. This technique, as evident as it is exceptional, since it is used by Tristán only in this work, is taken from El Greco, who gives with it the sensation of divinity to some of these figures (Saint Thomas, Saint Peter, Saint Bartholomew, Saint Philip – El Greco Museum,

Toledo). In this sense, it is due to the relationship between Tristán and Ribera that this same technique appears in many of the first

Apostles by Españaoleto, as in those of Cosida or in the Prophet (Museo Civico di Castello di Ursino, Catania) and even in his first Roman works, 1609-1610, Cristo Redentor (Nivillac – Church of Saint Pierre).

Velazquez adopts this pictorial technique which appears already in his Saint Paul (Museo d'Art, Cataluña), extending clearly its effect when he creates the sensation of space culminating in "Las Meninas" with his representation of perspective in the most natural way ever done before, where the air seems to circulate around the figures which are perfectly fixed in space, without any need of resorting to artificial lines or vanishing points. Space is determined only by introducing in the scene a series of points of light.

This artistic novelty which Tristán takes to Italy, will indirectly influence many Italian painters who will break with the definite Caravaggesque lines separating colour and light, due fundamentally to the importance of José Ribera in the Italian artistic world and the universality of Velazquez. Thus a way is opened towards new and modern formulas which were less sensational, yet equally pictorial.

The colouring, though Tristán uses in this picture a restricted chromatic scale consisting of earthen and ochre tones, surprises us by its luminous effect. This light, which seems to give a special sparkling effect to the colour, in some ways reminds us of the way El Greco's figures emanate flashes of light, as do certain Apostles of Ribera and notably the Saint Thomas of Velazquez.

This luminosity so inherent in the work is the result of a masterly pictorial technique which is distinguished by a combination of liquid and thicker strokes of paint, always executed in a free and vigorous fashion, with great and ample strokes in the folds of the robe and fine, freely drawn ones when shaping the face; yet all of them follow faithfully the drawing which has marked the pattern of the composition.

The technique attains even greater virtuosity when in an evident "tour de force" the artist paints the Apostle's ear in a masterly way, as only Tristán can do it, combining ochres, earthen colours, shades of white and vermillion and using a greyish brown to indicate the expression of eyes and the wrinkles of the face.

The way Tristán treats hair is a supreme gem in picture painting, creating the sensation of old hair, weakened by age. This impression is shown in many of Velazquez' portrayals of old persons belonging to his first Sevillian epoch and already expresses his initial preoccupation as a painter for how things are seen. (The luncheon – Budapest; The Adoration by the Wise Kings- Prado Museum; Saint Paul – Catalonia Museum). This technique is only Caravaggesque in that it reminds us of Orazio Borgianni (1574-1616) in a few aspects, and the Milanese Tanzio de Varallo (?-1633). Here Tristán tries to depict the visual sensations of the painter, without previous judgement, regarding what things essentially are, assuming an anticipation of Velazquez' naturalism and obsession regarding how light transforms visual sensations and how objects appear to us.

Another sign for attributing this work to Tristán is the way he treats the apostle's jugular muscle freely and with "bravura", expressing an exceptional tension, often represented in many of his saints (Holy Family with Saint Ann – Seville, private collection; The Holy Supper – Prado Museum; Saint Jerome and the Adoration of the shepherdess – Convent of Santa Clara, Toledo). The muscle is literally nailed to a triangle whose vertex unites both sides of the cloak, revealing the edge of the tunic. This triangle is another of the artistic virtues of the work since it enriches the range of colours with a dark greyish brown which facilitates the transformation in the earthen colours of the cloak to the light ochre tones of the face and, on the other hand, setting firmly the saint's magnificent head on his classical and monumentally robed body. We acknowledge again this feat which is, to a certain extent, transfigured in the Saint Thomas of Velázquez.

How is it that Luis Tristán manages to create a work so perfect in its execution and which unites so successfully opposing tendencies in an epoch so convulsed artistically and which even has an impact on the young Velázquez? Paraphrasing Fernando Marías and Bustamante one might ask: How is Tristán converted in a modernized reincarnation of the art of the old Cretan Master along the path of naturalism? Does he seem to have been converted into an early reference announcing the art of Diego Velázquez?

Luis Tristán is the result of his circumstances. When he was only thirteen years old he entered the workshop of El Greco who we know greatly appreciated him as he gave him the copy of the "Lives of the Artists" by Vasari which Zuccaro had given him. In that workshop Tristán remained various years until he embarked on a journey to Italy in about 1606 and assuredly during this first study period in Toledo got to know Borgianni who in 1598 had already introduced Caravaggesque figures in Spain and had returned to Italy in 1605, just before Tristán left for Italy. Therefore it is certainly possible for us to think that Borgianni could have introduced Tristán in Roman artistic circles. According to Giuseppe Martinez, Tristán made this journey in company with the young Ribera and, thanks to the annotations written by Tristán himself in the book by Vasari, we certainly know that he embarked on the trip to Italy and was at least in Rome and Milan and probably also in Florence. This would explain the influence exerted on his work by Michaelangelo, the Caravaggesques and the Venetian-Lombardian painters.

The interplay between this picture and the Apostles of Cosida by José Ribera is evident, but not absolute. Even though Tristán paints persons belonging to the common people as Ribera does, nevertheless, and most specially in this work, he gives the impression that he raises them to the level of Fathers of the Church, presenting them in a distant, solemn and majestic way, very different from Ribera's Apostles who are rough, with peasants' hands and are always looking directly at the spectator. In this sense, if Ribera is much closer to Caravaggio, Tristán is inspired fundamentally in Michaelangelo and Titian, though he does not fail to be imbued in the naturalistic influences of the moment.

On the other hand, the pictorial technique of this picture is likewise different from that of Ribera and most of the Caravaggesque artists. Although Tristán may only be considered as an incipient naturalistic painter, since there still remains in him a certain mannerism; this naturalism, which appears principally in the countenance of our Apostle, is based on painting reality just as we see it, with a light, free touch, with only few transparencies ("veladuras"), in a modern manner, and in a certain early impressionistic way. These qualities already appear in El Greco's work after 1600; in Roman Caravaggesque circles we only encounter them in Borgianni; Tristán could also have developed them due to his connections with Milanese painters belonging to Cardinal Borromeo's circle such as the rather melodramatic and manieristic artists Gian Battista Crespi, "il Cerano" (1575-1632), Morazzone (1573-1626) and G.C.

Procaccini (1575-1625) or the decidedly Caravaggesque Tanzio da Varalo. This special naturalistic style is in a way closely linked to Velazquez's art renovated by his trip to Italy, when he culminates the process of diffusing lines and likewise raises humanity to a universal level in his magnificent portraits and also converts what is natural in a purely instantaneous vision in his Villa Medici landscapes – (Prado Museum).

- CHS

**Literature:**

Published in the catalogue of the "L'Exposition Velazquez Grand Palais", Louvre 2015 (pag. 138 cat. 23 fig. 15 text and image).