



Gabriel Joly (? Picardie , 1538 Teruel)

A Prophet or Saint Joseph of Nazareth

95 x 35 cm

XVI cent Aragonese school

Pine Wood

1532 / 1536

Essays

1. [Study by the IOMR](#)

2. By JM Parrado del Olmo

3. Book “Treasures of Spanish Renaissance Sculpture, The origin of the Spanish Manner”

Description

There are some artists who express better than others the spirit of their epoch so that their work shines out showing to us the different and frequently antagonistic artistic currents of the day. No doubt Gabriel Joly is one of the former group who were able to express in such a masterly way the international characteristics of the first European Renaissance. In Joly's work we perceive Franco-Gothic features due to his origin in Picardie, Florentine traces thanks to his unmistakable devotion to Italian art, and Aragonese influences since Aragon was the land of his adoption and where his most important works were created.

The sculpture we are now studying, recently rediscovered by the IOMR, due to the spiritual force it transmits, its elegant design, all imbued with a controlled sense of movement and a highly refined sculptural technique revealing a strongly impressionistic mood, it represents a magnificent example of the artistic genius of a sculptor and designer of altar-pieces who deserves deeper research. In this work lies the fusion of Alonso Berruguete's expressivity spread throughout Aragon from the 1530's onwards and, the “gravitas formentiana”, overflowing it all with the majesty and the pathos which only the finest works of Joly can produce like the high altar-piece of Teruel Cathedral, one of the most significant masterpieces of the Spanish Renaissance.

Gabriel Joly is an artist who arrives in Aragon during the first fortnight of the XVIth century bearing a clearly marked style of French origin rooted in a naturalistic but rather mannered gothic style which he moderates with an essentially Florentine classicism. Armed with these solid qualifications, Joly enters into contact with the sculptural tradition of Aragon, at that time dominated by Damián Forment; there is documentary evidence of this contact in 1514. It is most probable that they collaborated in the larger altar-piece of the San Miguel de los Navarros Church in Zaragoza (1518), in which is perceived a fluid composition revealing strong Italian tradition, no doubt, greater than what Forment was accustomed to do at that time. Joly certainly participated also in the altar-piece of the Pilar which was effected by Forment between 1508 and 1519 and where certain stylistic touches of Joly's are outstanding, specially in the figures of the Apostles who surround the central composition of the main body of the work. The interplay between these two great Masters constitutes one of the most rewarding artistic collaborations of our Renaissance inasmuch as, on the one hand, it propitiates in Forment a lighter representation in his compositions, a refinement which softens the rather sturdy shapes of his sculptures, and, on the other hand, in Joly, his works acquire an assurance, a corporal presence which will turn them into fundamental elements to confront, during the final years of his career, the impetuous mannerism of Alonso Berruguete.

If we perceive in Forment a colossal force which surges up from a unique genius who recalls both Sluter and Michelangelo, endowed with a certain trace of a rural “tardo gothic” personality, who carves his sculptures in solid blocks and crowds his compositions with many figures all together, Joly stand out due to the refinement and elegance of his style imbued with a subtle pathos which calls to mind soft memories of “la douce France”. The altar-piece of San Agustín de la Seo (at present in Santiago), 1520, and the altar-piece of Tauste, executed between 1520 and 1524, in which Joly collaborated with Gil Morlanes, are where Joly's principal characteristic and contribution as designer of altar-pieces is firmly established: his clear composition, also so outstanding in all his sculptural groups, leaves a lasting mark in Aragon, a region which still maintained strong tardo-gothic roots.

Joly's style does not reach its culminating point until the outset of the 1530's when the influence of the Spanish Renaissance eagles penetrates the artistic world of Aragon. We can hear echoes of the most Italian of our sculptors, the unfortunate Bartolomé Ordoñez who died at Carrara in 1520 and of Diego de Siloé, recently arrived in Burgos after his time in Naples where with Felipe Bigarni and Juan de Valmaseda they finish their work on the altars of the Capilla del Condestable, which bears the true

identity stamp of the Spanish Renaissance. It is, however, above all Alonso Berruguete, who appears in Aragon and La Rioja not only thanks to the fame of his compositions but also due to the polychromes of his collaborator, Andrés Melgar, whose designs for the sculptures of the principal altar-piece of Santo Domingo de la Calzada (1537) had a great influence in the zone. At that time Joly blossoms forth with passion and vigour and this is reflected in his art which is more powerful than in his previous works. His sculpture groups of the church of San Pedro, in its principal altar-piece (1533) and, to a lesser degree, in the altar-piece of Cosme and San Damián (1537), but specially, all the sculpture work effected for the principal altar-piece of Teruel Cathedral, contracted in 1532, according to the documents found by Cesar Tomas Laguía in 1959, and installed in 1536, indicate a strongly marked stylistic transformation, which is characteristic of a genius in a state of artistic spontaneity. His creations are full of Berrugueteque explosions which do not detract from the beauty and elegance of his forms. His personages have fiery expressions, ruffled hair, windswept beards, grasping hands and feet, all rendered in a much more agitated manner than usual, caused by a sudden impulse .

Joly, even in this fleeting moment of creativity, cannot abandon his Italo-French artistic tradition, nor renounce to his devotion to beauty, moderation and balance. The faces continue to be classical and the bodies are in accordance with stylised shapes, carved most skilfully by his gouge and they adopt attitudes with measured steady movement. Clothing is treated in a simple rhythmical, almost impressionistic manner. This had nothing to do with Berruguete, whose Saints and Biblical personages dart out from their niches like flames and whose compositions do not have any rational sequence but that conceived by his exaggerated genius. In Joly, on the contrary, control continues triumphant, even at the moment of the greatest exaltation of his creative spirit; this control which is absolutely his own, and acts as a defensive barrier against Berruguete's stormy influences and which, however, excessively enrages his genius beyond all possible limits.

The work recently studied by Carmen Morte and Jesús María Parrado del Olmo represents a biblical personage who, on account of his turban, typical in Joly, could easily represent a prophet, as indicated by Carmen Morte, but the discovery by our restorer of a hole in the base of the sculpture has induced JM Parrado to believe that it might be a Saint Joseph holding his stick, belonging to a bigger composition, probably a Nativity. The position of his head, leaning slightly downwards and to his right, as well as his noble features viewed in profile, with his classical cheek-bones and brow, all correspond to the canon of Italian beauty which Joly prefers to select when representing major figures of biblical iconography.

Its attribution to the best works by Joly is manifested by the excellent artistic skills revealed in the work which clearly correspond to the sculpture groups of the principal Altar-piece of the Cathedral of Teruel. The way the Master presents the Saint, concentrated in self-absorbed contemplation, blending admiration with a certain perplexity which the artist knows how to suggest by a slight shrug of laden shoulders; all this no doubt brings to mind michelangelesque analogies, typical of Joly in his Teruel period, now much more Roman than Florentine, which recalls attitudes of personages of the Capella Sistina. St. Joseph's meticulously rendered hair and beard, frame a countenance of great classical beauty which inspires respect and majesty. On his clear brow we observe a knot in the pine wood that has not been polychromed which reveals one of Joly's important characteristic: his capacity to make the veining of the wood synchronize with his sense of aesthetics and with the artistic message his sculptures transmit to all of us, in this case he gives to the Saint's face a force and an aura of divinity which Joly stresses even more making a series of grooves that surround his forehead like a whirlpool. The eye sockets which frame a Greek nose, sharpened with that touch of the sculptor's gouge which is the touchstone of his autograph works, along with long "mostachos", or whiskers, which hang down covering a half-open mouth and a swishing two-pronged beard; yet all this is supremely classical! However, the carving effected by his gouge, indicates spirit, vigour and courage which deepens the pathos of the work and carries us off to the models of the ancient Greeks. That is the reason why this work moves us so much, fundamentally due to its eternal beauty which is inscribed in our memory like a canon fusing for ever spiritual and human beauty.

Joly accompanies the movement of the head with a slight "contraposto" of the shoulders, followed by another forward movement of the legs in the opposite direction to the face. This design becomes homogeneous on covering the body with a tunic and cloak which reveal folds rendered in a sketchy, almost impressionistic manner, which marks correctly the "tempo" of the sculpture; we do not see any

scrolls except for the one hanging from his left shoulder and two “cordilleras” of a cloak which hang down from both arms and fall into lengthy and swaying folds giving a stylised appearance to the Saint’s figure. All this flows between the legs of the Saint who reveals strong muscles behind tight-fitting tunic. Here we encounter another of Joly’s special characteristic features observed in many of his saints specially those who crowd the Altar-piece of Teruel: the Master, on making the Saint’s legs move forward, makes the tunic cling to his body taking advantage of the grain in the wood and of the light which draws attention to the knees showing through the soft folds of the cloak, that hangs down due to its weight, thus giving the sculpture the sense of “gravitas formentiana”, which Joly never fails show us, even in his final works.

Joly dies in 1538 and Forment in 1541, the great artists of the Aragonese Renaissance; it seemed as if Aragon had remained an orphan if it were not for the genius of another sculptor who had come from the north, Arnau de Bruselas whose sense of majesty still pervades among the sculptures of the altar-pieces of La Población, Genevilla, St Maria del Palacio or The "trascoro" of la Seo of The "Cathedral Meropolitana de la Seo", Zaragora. The Art of these Masters will only be surpassed, though not in greatness, when it acquires, a mid-century later, a more dignified, rhetorical and dramatic tone, following the rulings of the Councilio de Trento, of the so-called “Romanismo”, which unified everything, with Ancheta and Becerra as its greatest exponents. The latter artists received, each in a different way, strong impacts from Michelangelo during their respective sojourns in Italy.

Viewed from a perspective granted by the passage of time, we consider that under Joly and Forment there lies a mood of melancholy which is true of sensitive, good and humble souls, of non-conflictive personalities, different from the stormy temperament of Castilian artists like Berruguete or Bigarni, continually involved in lawsuits and anxious to gain social recognition. Their art, in both cases, is the faithful reflection of these divergent sensitivities and, in Joly’s case, of a deeply spiritual sentiment.

Proof of the love and gratitude which the inhabitants of Teruel must have felt for him is their decision to bury him at the entrance to the Choir of the cathedral. His tomb was covered by a simple, but dignified stone tablet which represents him wearing a cloak and with his head resting on pillows: the words engraved in the tablet are as follows: “Que Dios perdone el cual hizo el retablo mayor de la presente”.

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