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Lorenzo de Avila

Our Lady with a Rose

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Oil on panel

25,5cm × 17cm

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Description

A MADONNA OF THE ROSE BY LORENZO DE ÁVILA, THE ARTIST WHO INTRODUCED UMBRIAN RENAISSANCE PAINTING TO SPAIN

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There are works which, after meticulous restoration, reveal a pictorial quality that gives rise to the dilemma between either elevating to new heights the master traditionally held to have created them, or searching for a new and weightier attribution to match the excellence of their art; a field open to debate among scholars in Spanish and Italian Renaissance painting that should enrich the study of our masterpiece. (Fig.1)

This small panel attributed to Lorenzo de Ávila by Matías Díaz Padrón, Aida Padrón(1), Irune Fiz Fuertes(2) and Juan Carlos Pascual de Cruz(3), depicting a Virgin and Child of markedly Umbrian resonances, falls within this category of work as, on the one hand, it constitutes a paradigmatic example (unknown to date) of artistic quality as might befit a master whose scholars credit with having enriched the sober artistic environment of the Castilian Renaissance and its profound Flemish roots with the Italian sweetness of the school of Signorelli, Perugino(Fig.2) or Raphael(Fig.3); on the other hand, it also invites us to explore other attributions within the scope of influence of Umbrian painting from the first half of the 16th century.

Lorenzo de Ávila is a painter who was rescued from oblivion by J. Navarro Talegón (1980) (4) and Irune Fiz Fuertes (2003) and studied in depth more recently by Juan Carlos Pascual de Cruz in his 2012 monograph *Lorenzo de Ávila, una ilusión renacentista*. His work blossomed within the orbit of such acclaimed masters as Pedro Berruguete and Juan de Borgoña, evolving alongside the careers of Alonso Berruguete and Correa de Vivar, exuding an exaggerated Italianate style manifested in the sweetness of his figures, the meticulous design of his compositions and the masterful draughtsmanship. All of this led Pascual de Cruz to posit a hypothetical journey to Italy at the end of the 15th century, based on a gap in information on the work of Lorenzo de Ávila in Castile during that period, and the discovery of a document referring to an assistant of Luca Signorelli from Ávila, working with him in the abbey of Monte Olivetto Maggiore in 1499.

This hypothesis is borne out further by the insistence with which the documentary sources refer to his excellent drawing skills, something not expressly mentioned in the case for Fernando Gallego, Juan de Flandes, Pedro Berruguete or Juan de Borgoña, and mention him as a principal artist who made compositional drawings, only painting the main figures in his works, although he always kept a close eye on his collaborators to ensure the final results were of the highest standard. (5) This prevalence of the "disegno" as opposed to the pictorial execution, this consideration of the Master as being someone gifted with intellect, is a matter that in the late 15th century could only be assimilated in Italy. It is as such that his having been Luca Signorelli's assistant from Ávila might explain his undeniable talent for drawing as a vehicle with which to express his ideas, as well as his proven ability to set up a workshop

following models conceived of by him that could be easily replicated by his collaborators.

According to the testimony of a document dated 1570, which claims he was 97 (6), Lorenzo de Ávila was born in about 1473. Following Pascual de Cruz's theory, he would have embarked on his artistic career at the age of 15 as assistant to Fernando Gallego in Ciudad Rodrigo, going on some years later to collaborate with Pedro Berruguete when he was working on the altarpiece at the Santo Tomás [monastery in Ávila in 1494 or in Toledo in 1493 at the time the altarpiece was being carried out in the Sagrario chapel of the primatial cathedral. Having undertaken various projects in Ávila and Toledo, he may have travelled to Italy where he would have been impressed by the work of Piero della Francesca, Signorelli, Perugino and Pollaiuolo. On his return to Spain, his fame as a draughtsman must have continued to grow, given the importance of the commissions he is recorded as having been granted: three designs for the most visible part of the "manga" (Fig.4) embroidered cloth adorning the Corpus Christi processions, as commissioned by Cardinal Cisneros in 1507(7), and one year later the restoration of the frescoes at the entrance to the Sagrario chapel, painted by Pedro Berruguete possibly with the assistance of Lorenzo de Ávila in 1497(8). The importance of these two commissions has led us to maintain that Lorenzo de Ávila may have also collaborated as a painter/draughtsman on some of the frescoes in the chapterhouse of Toledo Cathedral and, in particular, on the scene depicting the Last Judgement, highly reminiscent of Luca Signorelli's San Brizio chapel and so different from the conventional style of Juan de Borgoña. Prominent among the works of this period is his involvement on various panels from the high altarpiece of Ávila Cathedral started by Pedro Berruguete in 1499(Fig. 5), which is recorded as being concluded by Juan de Borgoña in 1512, and the execution of the exceptional panel depicting Adam and Eve's Expulsion from Paradise(Fig.5) on the main altarpiece of the church of San Miguel in Pedrosa del Rey (Valladolid), whose stylistic parallels with our panel will be mentioned in due course . After undertaking a number of commissions in León in 1521, he is recorded as having worked with Andrés de Melgar and Antonio Vázquez on the altarpiece in the parish church of Santo Tomás in Pozuelo de la Orden (Valladolid), which was concluded in 1531(9 and 10). From that time on, now more than 60 years old, Lorenzo de Ávila chose Toro as the location for one of the most prolific and successful workshops in Castile, which would disseminate his Italianate style not just through Toro and the province of Zamora, but also throughout the bordering parishes of Castile and León. His work is recorded in a dozen altarpieces from Toro and Zamora, among which it is worth highlighting those from the monasteries of San Francisco (now lost) and San Ildefonso, the high altarpiece from the Toro collegiate, the Sedano altarpiece from the church of Santo Tomás Cantuariense in Toro, and those of the churches of Santa María de Arbás in Toro and El Salvador in Venialbo (Zamora). Proof of his enormous success as an artist is the fact that the city of Toro exempted him from paying taxes in 1556(11), and there are many witness statements from the lawsuit surrounding payment for the altarpiece of San Salvador church in Abezames that refer to him as an excellent painter "with regard to brush painting and drawing" (12).

It was the fruit of this ability to instil his collaborators with a coherent style, with pronounced Umbrian roots, marked by a Mannerist elegance expressed both in the gestures of the figures and the compositional balance, as well as in the tendency to imbue his virgins with an inner peace that contrasted with the lively gazes of his saints, in perfect alignment with the peaceful surroundings of limitless horizons and Renaissance architectures, that gave rise to one of the most singular oeuvres of Spanish Renaissance painting, whose works were for decades grouped together under the title of the Master of Toro(13). Thanks to new documentary discoveries and the comparative study of the quality of this broad catalogue of works, it has been possible to increase the number of paintings attributed to Lorenzo de Ávila, as the undisputedly leading artistic figure of the area, many of which were carried out in collaboration with other artists from his workshop, the most prominent of which was his assistant Juan de Borgoña de Toro, with whom we know for certain that he worked [in Toro for at least 13 years. This has made it possible to start to identify, in each work, the subtle differentiation between the figures carried out by the master and those executed by his most experienced collaborators, an exercise in "connoisseurship" not lacking in its own challenges, given the precarious state of preservation and successive restorations undertaken in practically all his works .

Our panel is intriguing in the excellence displayed by the artist in both the drawing and pictorial execution of the work which, due to its small size, was probably intended for private devotion(Fig.7). Although infrared imaging does not clearly show the underdrawing, it is easy to identify two pentimenti, one involving a correction to the ear of the Infant Jesus, and the other being a modification in the position of the fabric fold falling on the Virgin Mary's right hand(Fig.9). This constitutes one of the work's most remarkable aspects in that it could demonstrate that, as an outstanding draughtsman, Lorenzo de Ávila was already making use of drawings and preparatory sketches inspired by engravings of Italian masterworks, in much the same way as Alonso Berruguete, another master of creative drawing who expressed his ideas in "bosquejos " so that they could subsequently be more reliably rendered on panel, following a preconceived design that might then be modified during the pictorial process(14). This ability to combine designs taken from numerous sources through creative drawing is even more evident, in the Infant Jesus, whose portrayal largely reflects the artist's genius as a draughtsman and makes it extremely difficult to find any comparable examples in the repertoires of contemporary artists. The appearance, following restoration, of some beard bristles (typical of Lorenzo de Ávila) on the righthand side of the panel invites us to imagine that the work must have been trimmed at least on that side where St. Joseph ought to be.

The work's design ultimately takes inspiration from the compositions of Perugino(Fig.6), but moves away from the stereotyped designs of that master, by presenting more natural movement following the models of Raphael's Madonnas(Fig.8), with greater emphasis on the perfect harmony between Virgin and Child in order to move the viewer. Mary's absorbed gaze in contrast with the lively self-confidence of the Child, is one of the work's great accomplishments ; the Infant is turning towards Joseph (now disappeared), twisting his body into a spiral which only keeps balance thanks to the Virgin placing her left hand to support him with the upmost delicacy, and the foreshortened positioning of his solid left leg which is bent, resting on her lap, lending the movement the sense of gravitas necessary for the image not to appear unnatural(Fig.10). Here we are face to face with one of the artist's genuine tours de force, original in its conception, though clearly inspired by Berruguete. (Fig.11)

The virtuosity with which the Virgin and Child's carnations are painted makes it clear that we are dealing with a work entirely executed by the hand of the master; here it is worth highlighting the skill with which the painter renders volume, bathing the work in light from the side using a series of extremely well-measured brushstrokes, in some cases bold and elongated, following the dictates of his genius, in the "maniera moderna", as can be seen in the shading of the Infant Jesus' right arm(Fig.12) ; in other areas he applies a tighter and more meticulous touch aimed at lending the Child's body a unique "morbidezza", and the Madonna's face a virginal softness where one can even appreciate the facial hair(Fig.13). Mary's extremely Mannerist hands, both elongated and somehow artificial, which emanate a great spiritual charge, are a display of pictorial technique both in the way the master outlines the fingers through the accomplished use of chiaroscuro and in how he finishes them with such delicate transparent nails, heightened by a touch of light, reminiscent of Parmigianino.(Fig.14)

With regard to where we place this panel within the Lorenzo de Ávila catalogue, the striking influence of Raphael and somewhat Mannerist style lead us to date the painting to the beginning of the artist's Toro period in the 1540s, his most outstanding years in that area. From the point of view of the physiognomy and typology of the figures, the composition may be easily linked to his work during this period, though I find it harder to relate the care and sophistication shown in our work which is exceptional in the natural way the carnations are executed through the finest transparencies, with the somehow rough and ready pictorial technique of the works attributed to him from the Toro period. During this time what always seems to come to the fore is his facet as a draughtsman/designer rather than his qualities as a painter as such. Even his best works from this period seem somewhat primitive, flat and unnatural, a question which may be excused bearing in mind most of the panels have probably lost the freshness of the

master's final original brushstrokes and the subtlety of his glazes on account of the varnish oxidising and the succession of restorations. Furthermore, it is possible that Lorenzo de Ávila's artistic faculties really did fall within the scope, as mentioned earlier, of an established master, renowned for past accomplishments, who only took the time to make compositional sketches and, on occasion, paint the faces and hands of the main characters. This would explain why, in our painting, which only features the Virgin and Infant Jesus, the work acquires a qualitative coherence that allows us to focus exclusively on the brush of the master seen in all its splendour, thanks to the special care he gave to a commission intended for the prayers and devotions of an important private client.

Where we do find the quality and pictorial technique to match those of our panel is in certain exceptional works from circa 1500 recently attributed, with some controversy, to Lorenzo de Ávila by Pascual de Cruz, on account of which one could credit him with being the painter who introduced Italianate forms into Castile. We are referring particularly to the scene of the Last Judgement in the Toledo cathedral chapterhouse, the Ávila Cathedral high altarpiece's painting, Christ's Descent into Limbo and, most of all, the panel depicting the Expulsion from Paradise from the church of Pedrosa del Rey (Valladolid) (15) (Fig.15). In all of these, the artist displays a similar method of using light to model his figures, and though in these works, being from a previous period, he was still using a tighter brushstroke, with more clearly-defined outlines, far from the expansive lively touch and inherent Mannerism presented by our Madonna, it is worth highlighting the analogous way of painting the carnations, in particular when employing subtle shading to render volume, something that appears in a very particular fashion both in Adam's arm in the Pedrosa del Rey panel and in that of the Infant Jesus in our panel.

From the artist's Toro period there is a significant link with the panel depicting the Virgin Appearing to Saint Bernard (Fig.16) from the Assumption Altarpiece in the Sancti Spiritus monastery, in certain compositional elements such as the Infant Jesus turning quite naturally to address the saint and the way in which he bends his leg, but most of all, in the manner in which Mary's right hand has been executed; long, voluminous and with the index finger separated from the middle finger in an unusual fashion. The typology of the face of the Infant Jesus follows a model that is extremely widespread in Lorenzo de Ávila's work, as seen in the Epiphany from the main altarpiece of the church of Santo Tomas Cantuariense, recorded as being completed towards the end of the 1530s (16) and, although somewhat older, in the young man supporting the moribund Mary in the panel depicting the Death of the Virgin (Fig.17) from that same altarpiece. In this figure one can appreciate the striking manner in which the artist shades the face using sfumato, something we also note, though more subtle, in the carnations of our panel. With regard to the Virgin, she remains true to the Lorenzo de Ávila canon in expressing the state of reverie and profound recollection she experiences when communicating with God, as she contemplates the Infant Jesus, a feeling we also appreciate in the Virgin of the Epiphany from the main altarpiece of the church of Santa María de Arbás (documented in 1540), with both directing their gaze downwards, and also in his extremely beautiful Annunciation from the same altarpiece, whose Virgin presents similarly-rendered hair and a transparent veil that is similar to the one in our panel (17), and which we see once again in the Virgin from the stunning panel entitled Annunciation, Visitation and Birth of the Virgin (Fig.18) from the Museo Lázaro Galdiano. In its small dimensions this latter work is also an example of the painstaking care taken by our artist with works intended for private worship.

The intrinsic quality, powerful artistic stamp, intimate spirituality and striking beauty of this Virgin represent an endless source of artistic certainties that stand in contrast to the doubts generated by its traditional attribution to the Toro period of Lorenzo de Ávila, in any case embodying a very fine example of the transition towards European Mannerism that took place in the first half of the 16th century.

Its pictorial excellence may only be compared to that of a major Master close to the circles of Perugino and Raphael, with artistic attributes that are reminiscent of those of the Expulsion of Adam and Eve

from Paradise from the church in Pedrosa del Rey, one of the best Spanish Renaissance nudes, whose attribution to Lorenzo de Ávila should go hand in hand with his confirmation as the painter of the Toledo chapterhouse and the discovery of documents providing compelling evidence of his time in Italy.

WORK PUBLISHED IN:

- Díaz Padrón, Matías and Padrón Mérida, Aída. "Cuatro versiones de la Virgen con Niño por cuatro maestros Castellanos del siglo XVI", Boletín del Seminario de Estudios de Arte y Arqueología, Valladolid (1988), pp. 394-402.

- Fiz Fuertes, Irune. Lorenzo de Ávila, Juan de Borgoña II y su escuela, Centro de Estudios Beneventanos (2003), p. 84.

- Pascual de Cruz, Juan Carlos. Lorenzo de Ávila. Una ilusión Renacentista, Instituto de Estudios Zamoranos (2012), pp. 267-268.

NOTES

1 Matías Díaz Padrón and Aida Padrón Mérida, "Cuatro versiones de la Virgen con Niño por cuatro maestros Castellanos del siglo XVI". Boletín del Seminario de estudios de arte y arqueología (1988), pp. 394- 402.

2 Irune Fiz Fuertes. Lorenzo de Ávila, Juan de Borgoña y su escuela, Centro de estudios Benaventanos, Benavente (2003), p. 84.

3 Juan Carlos Pascual de Cruz, Lorenzo de Ávila, una ilusión Renacentista. Instituto de estudios Zamoranos (2012), p. 267.

4 Navarro Tategón, José. Catálogo Monumental de Toro y Alfoz (1980).

5 Pascual de Cruz. Op cit., pp. 87-94.

6 Testament drawn up on 30 August 1570 by the secretary of state for affairs with Germany, leaving a bequest to Philip II for his private chambers including an altarpiece by Lorenzo de Ávila de Toro, aged

7 Romero Ortega, Francisco. *La Manga del Corpus* (1989), p. 107.

8 According to the arguments expounded by Pilar Silva Maroto in her book, *Pedro Berruguete* (p. 53), these frescoes would correspond to those of the “outer chapel” for which Pedro Berruguete charged 36,000 maravedis in October 1497.

In 1549 Canon Blas de Ortiz commented that the Sagrario cloister was admirably painted.

Sadly today both the chapel and entrance paintings have been lost. At the time it was considered the Sistine Chapel of the Spanish Renaissance, as referred to by the Germany traveller Hieronimus Münzer in 1495 when there was still no vestibule.

9 Parrado del Olmo, Jesús María. “Andrés de Melgar en el retablo de Pozuelo de la Orden”, *Boletín del seminario de Arte y arqueología*, p. 256 vol. LXIV, Valladolid. Universidad de Valladolid, Junta de Castilla y León, 1998.

10 This altarpiece was particularly renowned by having given rise to the title the Master of Pozuelo, first conceived of by Chandler R. Post (1947), in whose catalogue of paintings Diego Angulo also includes all the works that Manuel Gómez Moreno attributed in 1925 to the Master of Toro. *Ars Hispanae* vol, XII (Madrid, 1954), p. 109.

11 Navarro Tategón, José. *Catálogo Monumental de Toro* (1980), p. 191.

12 Pascual de Cruz, *op cit.*, pp. 74-85. The lawsuit surrounding payment for the altarpiece of the church of San Salvador in Abezames. The excellence of Lorenzo de Ávila as a painter is attested to by Diego Villalta in 1590 in a manuscript included in Francisco Javier Sánchez Cantón’s *Fuentes Literarias*, (pages 295 and 297), enumerating outstanding painters such as Lorenzo de Ávila, Becerra, Luis de Morales, Juan Fernández “el Mudo” and the two Berrugetes. His hegemony as a painter in Toro led him to only sketch the composition and paint the faces of the main figures, as Perugino had done in Umbria. The rest was painted by Juan de Borgoña de Toro, who in turn is recorded as having subcontracted work to assistants. Lorenzo de Ávila appears in numerous documents as the contractor or principal artist carrying out the design of altarpieces, sketching the plans and overseeing their decoration, painting and the gilding and polychromy of their statues.

13 Gómez Moreno, Manuel. *Catálogo monumental de la provincia de León* (1925), p. 272.

14 The earliest documentary reference we have to Lorenzo de Ávila's drawing skills is to be found in the payment for the designs for the Corpus procession embroidery "manga", see Romero Ortega, op. cit., p.107. The 1540 contract for the altarpiece of the church of Santa María de Arbás expressly states that Lorenzo de Ávila was to undertake "the drawing..." See Navarro Talegón, José. Los pintores de Toro y Alfoz (1985), p. 12, with such references being confirmed in the 1553 lawsuit for payment of the altarpiece of the church of San Salvador in Abezames. Being a natural gift that was highly prized and closely linked to the intellectual part of the work, Lorenzo de Ávila only passed on his aptitude for drawing preparatory and compositional sketches to his son, Hernando, who is recorded as having been a great draughtsman and painter under Philip II. Not even Juan de Borgoña de Toro, his great collaborator with whom he worked in Toro for 13 years, is recorded as excelling in his skills at drawing.

15 Attributed by José María Caamaño Martínez to the Master of Pozuelo in 1964. In 1980 Julia Ara Ruiz and J.M. Parrado del Olmo ratified this attribution. In 2003, despite identifying a number of parallels with Lorenzo de Ávila, Irune Fiz Fuertes finally preferred not to attribute it to the Toro school. Juan Carlos Pascual de Cruz expresses no doubts that it is the work of Lorenzo de Ávila from prior to 1500.

16 Navarro Talegón, op. cit., p12. This work must have been executed prior to 1540, given that Don Cristóbal Aguilar's will and testament where he states that he owed Lorenzo de Ávila 10,000 maravedis for the work.

17 Lorenzo de Ávila signed a contract with Doña María de Avalos for painting and gilding the altarpiece. These panels are currently held at the collegiate of Santa María el Mayor in Toro.