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Felipe Bigarny attr.

Langres (France), ca.1475-Toledo (Spain), 1542

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Virgin and Child

Alabaster

22 x 19 cm

36.6 x 33.6 cm (original wooden frame with inscription)

Provenance: Private collection, USA

Rosario Coppel

Art Historian

The composition of the scene is inspired by the representations of the *Madonna and Child* that emerged during the Quattrocento in Northern Italy.

Donatello (1386-1466), the great Renaissance sculptor, created a model of the *Madonna and Child* that had a great impact on the sculptors of his circle. Represented half-length, it began to appear in Florentine funerary monuments attached to the wall, within tondos situated in the tympanum, as in the monument of the anti-Pope John XXIII, made in collaboration with Michelozzo in the 1420s in the Baptistery of Florence; or the monument of Leonardo Bruni, by Bernardo Rossellino, in the church of Santa Croce; the Masurppini, by Desiderio da Settignano, in the same place; that of Count Hugo of Tuscany, by Mino da Fiesole, in Badia; or the tomb of the Cardinal of Portugal, in San Miniato al Monte, by Antonio Rossellino. Very soon, this iconography appeared in free-standing reliefs for chapels or oratories for domestic use, such as the *Pazzi Madonna*, in marble, preserved in the Bode Museum in Berlin, the first to gain great popularity when reproduced in polychrome stucco (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Donatello, Madonna Pazzi, 1425-1430, marble, 74,5 x 69,5 cm, Berlín Museo Bode.

The iconographic model of the *Virgin and Child* arrived in Spain with the Italian artists who responded to the call of the leaders of the time, first the Catholic Monarchs and then the monarchs of the House of Austria. It can be admired in an oval tondo located in the upper part of the monument of Cardinal Mendoza in the Main Chapel of the Cathedral of Toledo, made by Domenico Fancelli at the beginning of the 16th century, or later in that of the bishop of Scala, Baltasar del Río, sculpted by Gian Giacomo and Guglielmo della Porta in Genoa for the Cathedral of Seville (Fig. 2). But more definitive was the importation of the models by the Spanish sculptors who trained in Italy, Alonso Berruguete in Florence and Rome, Diego de Siloe and Bartolomé Ordoñez in Naples.



Fig. 2 Gian Giacomo y Guglielmo della Porta, Tomb of Baltasar del Río, Bishop of Scala, Genoa, 1536-1539, Marble, Catedral de Sevilla.



Fig. 3 Diego de Siloe (attr.), *Virgin with Child*, c. 1519-1528, alabaster with traces of polychromy and traces of gilding, 27 x 20 cm, London, Victoria and Albert Museum



Fig. 4 Gregorio Pardo (attr.), *Virgin with Child*, alabaster with polychromy and traces of gilding, Burgos, Museo Catedralicio



Fig. 5 Diego de Siloe or Felipe Bigarny (attr.), *Virgin with Child*, c. 1520-1530, alabaster, New York, The Metropolitan Museum.

However, although the relief of the *Virgin and Child* presented in this study derives from those mentioned and has in common with them the excellent technique, iconography and classical idealism, it presents some important differences, such as the material, alabaster instead of marble, and the smaller size.

On the other hand, as Harold Wethey pointed out in a pioneering article on the subject, the fact that the Infant Jesus was dressed denotes the conservatism that existed in Spain at that time, which led to an aversion to nudity in art. This historian, who was a pioneer in the field of research into Spanish sculpture, published a relief of the *Virgin and Child* that is preserved in London at the Victoria and Albert Museum (Fig. 3) as a work by Diego de Siloe, from which the versions in Burgos Cathedral (Fig. 4) and the Metropolitan Cathedral would be derived. Museum in New York. (Fig. 5) In his opinion, the London version is the first of a series that were later produced by other sculptors from the Burgos school

close to Felipe Bigarny. The most important characteristic that he highlights is the melancholy conveyed by the London version, which, in his opinion, is not present in the others.¹ However, the comparative study that he carried out to suggest the attribution to Diego de Siloé, can equally be applied to his contemporary and collaborator Felipe Bigarny or to his son Gregorio Pardo.

In 1528, Diego de Siloé left Burgos to move to Granada, while Bigarny remained in the city, although he also had a workshop open in Toledo where he carried out the last works of his life. Both in the carvings sculpted by Bigarny in the altarpiece of the Constable's chapel, and in the alabaster and wood works of the Toledo cathedral, we find the stylistic characteristics that have led to the attribution of the relief presented here to him, as will be seen.

Felipe Bigarny (Langres, France, ca. 1475-Toledo, 1543)

Felipe Bigarny came to Spain from the French region of Burgundy to walk the Camino de Santiago, but after passing through Burgos he stayed in the city and became one of the most prestigious sculptors of the Renaissance.²

Diego Sagredo described him in 1526 as a “most singular craftsman”,³ and shortly afterwards Cristóbal de Villalón in 1539 praised him in the following way: “*In statuary, our Spain has Master Felipe and Siloe, whose excellence illuminates and enlightens our age, because neither Phidias nor Praxiteles, great ancient statuary artists, can be compared with them.*”⁴ Later, Juan de Arfe referred to him as an innovator in the subject of the proportions of the human body.⁵

Ceán Bermúdez, who collected the quotes from previous chroniclers, proclaimed that Felipe Bigarny: “*restored good taste in sculpture, and corrected the symmetry of the human body, adding a third more to the nine faces in height that Pomponio Gaurico had indicated to him.*”⁶

The first surviving document places Felipe Bigarny in Burgos in 1498, the year in which he was commissioned to make the relief of the *Way of the Calvary* for the altarpiece of the cathedral's ambulatory. But the starting point for his professional success was provided by Cardinal Cisneros when he turned to him in 1499. From then on, contracts followed one another, among the most important being the Altarpiece of the chapel of the University of Salamanca, or the sculptures of the main altarpiece of the cathedral of Palencia, which he made in Burgos between 1505-1509.

1 H. Wethey, “A Madonna and Child by Diego de Siloe”, *Art Bulletin*, XXII, 1940, pp. 190-196.

2 On Felipe Bigarny see JM Azcárate, *Sculpture of the 16th Century, Ars Hispaniae*, Madrid, 1958, p. 227; M. E. Gómez Moreno, *A Brief History of Spanish Sculpture*, Madrid, 1935 (reed. 1951, 2001), pp. 79 and 93; J. Camón Aznar, *Sculpture and Ironwork in 16th Century Spain, Summa Artis*, XVIII, Madrid, 1961, reed. 1981, p. 207; and the monograph by I. del Río de la Hoz, *The sculptor Felipe Bigarny (c. 1470-1542)*, Junta de Castilla y León, Valladolid, 2001.

3 Diego del Sagredo, *Roman Measurements*, Toledo, 1526, ed. Facsimile of Toledo of 1549, Madrid, 2000. Introduction by F. Marías and A. Bustamante.

4 Cristóbal de Villalón, *Ingenious comparison of the ancient with the modern*, Valladolid, 1539, in FJ Sánchez Cantón, *Literary Sources for the History of Spanish Art*, vol. 1, pp. 21-33 (the quote on p. 29).

5 Juan de Arfe, *De varia Commesuración para la Sculpture and Architecture*, Seville, 1585-1587. Ed. Albatros, 1979.

6 A. Ceán Bermúdez, *Historical dictionary of the most illustrious professors of fine arts in Spain*, Madrid, 1800, ed. Facsimile Madrid, 1965, vol. V, pp. 228-231.

As proof of the close relationship that Bigarny maintained with Cardinal Cisneros, there is the magnificent alabaster portrait, originally oval, measuring 33 x 25.5 cm, which was polychromed by Hernando del Rincón. (Historical Heritage, Complutense University, Madrid). It is a masterpiece that already reveals many of the characteristics of the sculptor's style. Made around 1518, it is directly inspired by models from the ancient world that were taken up in Italy from the portraits that appeared on coins and from the series of emperors and other Roman figures. In particular, the *Portrait of Cardinal Cisneros* recalls those of *Plato and Aristotle* that were widely distributed in the first half of the 16th century. In this work, Bigarny was able to combine classical influence, incorporating grotesque motifs in the dalmatic, with religious themes, by depicting on the circular brooch a small relief with the *Imposition of the Chasuble on Saint Ildefonso*, emblem of the archbishops of the primate see of Toledo⁷ (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Felipe Bigarny, *Portrait of Cardinal Cisneros*, c. 1516, polychromed alabaster by Hernando del Rincón, Madrid, Patrimonio Histórico de la Universidad Complutense.

The only evidence that Felipe Bigarny made the obligatory training trip to Italy comes from a comment he made at the end of his life in which he referred to a stay in Rome in his youth. However, contact with Spanish sculptors who had trained in that country may have been sufficient for the evolution of his style. In this sense, it should be noted that he worked in Zaragoza, on the tomb of Cardinal Selvagio, with Alonso Berruguete; in the Cathedral of Burgos with Diego de Siloe; and in Granada, on the altarpiece of the Saints Juanes and in the Royal Chapel with Bartolomé Ordoñez. The three sculptors were so aptly called by Manuel Gómez Moreno "The Eagles of the Spanish Renaissance."⁸

In any case, Bigarny already enjoyed great prestige when he joined forces with Alonso Berruguete to carry out the tomb of Chancellor Selvagio in 1519. He was Master of the cathedral of Burgos and had workshops open in several Spanish cities. He had made the altarpiece of the cathedral of Haro; that of the University of Salamanca; the chapel of the tabernacle of the cathedral of Palencia; and, together with Andrés de Nájera, the choir stalls of the cathedral of Burgos. Precisely in this city, which was where he settled by buying a house next to the palace of the Moneda, he joined forces with Diego de Siloe, who had recently returned from Italy in 1519. Together they made the magnificent altarpieces of the chapel of the Constable in 1523,⁹ where later Bigarny would execute the tombs of D. Pedro Fernández de Velasco and D^a Mencía de Mendoza, which are a masterpiece in their genre.¹⁰ Furthermore, his admiration for Damián

⁷ At the same time he made the portrait of Antonio de Nebrija that has not been preserved and is only known from engravings.

⁸ M. Gómez Moreno, *The Eagles of the Spanish Renaissance. Ordoñez, Siloe, Machuca, Berruguete*, Madrid, 1941. Ed. Madrid, 1983, edited by Agustín Bustamante.

⁹ M. Estella Marcos, Exh. Cat. *The imagery of the altarpieces of the Constable's Chapel*, JC Elorza (com.), Burgos, 1995.

¹⁰ From the River of the Sick, 2001, cit.

Forment, the other great sculptor of the time, was evident when he sent his son Gregorio Pardo to the Zaragoza workshop to complete his training by learning the alabaster technique.¹¹

Bigarny acquired in the creation of his models can be admired in the carvings of the main altarpiece of the Purification, in the Chapel of Constable of the Cathedral of Burgos. The Virgin of the group of the Birth, and the Presentation in the temple, in polychrome wood, are a precedent of the beauty that he knew how to infuse into his female figures, very similar to those of Diego de Siloe in the movement of the folds and the arrangement of the hair. However, one of the works that we are most interested in highlighting here is the relief of the *Altarpiece of the Descent*, in the Cathedral of Toledo, made between 1523-1527 in white alabaster from Cogolludo (Guadalajara). The main group presents the *Imposition of the chasuble of Saint Ildefonsus*, with the Virgin and the titular saint, five full-length angels and cherubs at the feet (Fig. 7).

In 1536 Bigarny had finished the choir stalls of the Monastery of San Clemente (Toledo), of which only two choir stalls remain, since most of them were destroyed in a fire in 1561. In one of them, the Annunciation, he already showed himself to be an innovative sculptor with a harmonious composition and idealised images in which the importance of the clothing, the hair and the outstretched hands with sharp fingers stands out.¹² That same year, 1536, he commissioned the tombs of the Bishop of Tuy, Diego de Avellaneda, and of his parents, for his funeral chapel in the Jerónimo monastery of San Juan Bautista and Santa Catalina de Espeja de Marcelino (Soria). Currently in ruins, the Bishop's tomb and some fragments of that of his parents are preserved in the Chapel of San Gregorio, in the National Museum of Sculpture, Valladolid.¹³ There he resorted to the decoration of the tondos in the upper part of the monument with the image of the (Fig. 8). In addition, one of the little angels that was situated standing, in the lower part of the



Fig. 7 Felipe Bigarny, Altar of the Descent, *Imposition of the Chasuble on Saint Ildefonsus*, 1523-1527, alabaster, Toledo Cathedral.



Fig. 8. Felipe Bigarny, *Virgin with Child*, 1536-1546, alabaster, Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura, from the tomb of the parents of the Bishop of Tuy, Diego de Avellaneda, in the Monastery of San Juan Evangelista and Santa Catalina de Espeja de Marcelino (Soria).

11 MC Morte, Damián Forment. *A Renaissance Sculptor*, Zaragoza, 2009.

12 From the River of the Sick, 2001, cit., pp. 266-267, figs. 33-36.

13 JM Cruz Yábar, "The High Altarpiece of the Jerónimo Monastery of Santa María de Espeja. An old image and a new vision", *Spanish Art Archive*, vol. 84, 2011.

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monument of the parents of Avellaneda, which is preserved in a private collection, also bears an astonishing resemblance to the model of the Child Jesus in our relief. He has a similar pose, and both the way of sculpting the hair, the hands and the feet, as well as the enveloping folds of the cloak, denote that they were made by the same artist (Fig. 9).

In his last work, the *Choir Stalls of Toledo Cathedral*, which he carved jointly with Alonso Berruguete and was completed by his son Gregorio Pardo, Bigarny again resorted to a similar female model in the image of the *Queen of Sheba*, a powerful, full-length figure of great plastic beauty¹⁴ (Fig. 10).

One of the recently attributed works, *Bust of a Veiled Woman* (Private Collection) perfectly defines the style of Felipe Bigarny. It is a 43 cm high marble, inspired by Roman portraits, which contains the characteristics of the artist's style¹⁵ (Fig. 11).



Fig. 9. Felipe Bigarny, *Angel with a Pilaster*, 1536-1546, fragment from the tomb of the parents of the Bishop of Tuy, Diego de Avellaneda, in the Monastery of San Juan Evangelista and Santa Catalina de Espeja de Marcelino, Soria. Private collection.



Fig. 10. Felipe Bigarny, *The Queen of Sheba*, wood, choir stalls of Toledo Cathedral.

14 A. Franco Mata, *Upper choir stalls of the Cathedral of Toledo, Abrente*, 42-42, 2010-2011, pp. 113-165.

15 It was in the collection Matthiessen, London, 2009, from the Caylus Gallery in Madrid. I del Río de la Hoz, ex. Cat.

The Relief of the Virgin and Child

The most original features of Felipe Bigarny are present in this unpublished relief of the *Virgin and Child*. The female model has an oval face, a broad forehead, and facial features common to most of his works, as well as an enigmatic expression. The way the robe is sculpted and gathered, which falls up behind the head enveloping the figure, with deep folds and fastened with a round brooch, the hands with long, thin fingers, and the hair laid out in soft but deep waves, with a smaller lock in front of the ear, are the distinctive signs of his creations.

The *Child* is standing, held tightly by his mother's arms, touching his chin with his left hand and holding an apple with his right hand (traditionally related to the fruit of the Tree of Wisdom, alluding to his future redemption of humanity from Original Sin). He is dressed in a round-necked tunic with the sleeves rolled up, revealing muscular arms and legs from the knees up. He is perched on the wings of a cherub, of which only the head is visible, and whose features are identical to those of the *Child Jesus*.

The model could have been the starting point for the series of small oval alabaster medallions attributed to Diego de Siloe, Felipe Bigarny or Gregorio Pardo (Burgos, c. 1513-Toledo, 1552). The latter was able to assimilate and continue his father's style, as can be seen in one of his most important works, *The Imposition of the Chasuble on Saint Ildefonsus* installed in 1548 in the archiepiscopal chair in the choir of Toledo Cathedral (Fig. 12).

Regarding the alabaster reliefs of the *Virgin and Child*, the small differences that can be seen between Felipe Bigarny and his son Gregorio Pardo are the following.

In Pardo's works the scene is more elongated and the relief less deep. In addition, the head of the Virgin always appears more inclined towards the Child, very close to each other, although there is no communication between them. Another important detail is that the models of the Virgin designed by Gregorio Pardo usually wear a narrow diadem adorning their forehead.

Among the best versions of the reliefs are those already



Fig. 11. Felipe Bigarny, *Female Bust with Veil*, marble, 43 cm, private collection.



Fig. 12. Gregorio Pardo, *The Imposition of the Chasuble on Saint Ildefonsus*, alabaster, installed in 1548 on the Archbishop's throne in the choir of Toledo Cathedral.

The Mystery of Faith. An eye on Spanish sculpture, 1550-1750, Matthiesen Fine Art LTD and Coll & Cortés Fine Art, Madrid, London, 2009, pp. 190-197, no. 19.

mentioned in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London¹⁶ (Fig. 3), and the Cathedral Museum of Burgos¹⁷ (Fig. 4). Metropolitan Museum of New York¹⁸ (Fig. 5), and the Diocesan Museum of Valladolid¹⁹ (Fig. 13). There are some others, of lower quality, in the National Museum of Warsaw,²⁰ the Parish Church of St. Nicholas, in Toledo,²¹ the Museum of the Basilica of Colmenar Viejo (Madrid),²² and, finally, the only one of larger size and in a different material, since it is made of wood, which is in a private collection.²³

Most of the works were partially gilded and show traces of touches of color in some areas. There are only a few minor iconographic differences between them, such as the inclusion of a book on the Virgin's lap in the Valladolid and London versions, but in all of them, except the latter, cherub heads appear, either to support the Child, to rest the Virgin's hand on, or to fill in the corners.

A few years ago, we attributed two unpublished alabaster reliefs with the theme of the *Virgin and Child*, one to Felipe Bigarny that included *Saint John* (oval 30 x 24.5 x 4) (Fig. 14) and another to Gregorio Pardo (rectangular, 21.5 x 18 cm)²⁴ (Fig. 15). The importance of the discovery (to which we refer to expand on some aspects of the subject), lay not only in making them known but also in having the opportunity to study them together directly, to know and establish the differences existing between both sculptors.



Fig. 13. Gregorio Pardo (attr.), *Virgin with Child*, second quarter of the 16th century, alabaster, 41.5 x 33.8 x 6 cm, Valladolid, Museo Diocesano y Catedralicio.

16 Wetthey, 1940, cit.

17 Dated c. 1530, it preserves the original oval wooden frame and the base with the Velasco family crest. It comes from the Constable's Chapel. D. Pedro Fernández Velasco, fourth Constable of Castile, donated it, as stated in an inscription on the back. M. A. ZALAMA, "Medallion of the Virgin and Child" in ex. Cat. Kings and Patrons. The Catholic Monarchs-Maximilian I and the beginnings of the House of Austria in Spain, F. CHECA CREMADES and R. DIÉZ DEL CORRAL GARNICA (Coms.), Toledo, Museo de Santa Cruz, 1992, pp. 340-341, no. 72; Del Río, 2001, cit. fig. 3.

18 *Madonna and Child*, alabaster, 28.6 x 21.6 cm, from a model by Diego Siloe, or by Felipe Bigarny, c. 1520-30, Metropolitan Museum, New York. (inv. 31.33.7).

19 J. Urrea Fernández, (com.), exh. Cat. The Diocesan Museum of Valladolid, 1987; M. Arias, "The Virgin and Child", exh. Cat. *Another Renaissance. Spanish Artists in Naples at the Beginning of the Cinquecento*, A. Zezza, R. Naldi (eds.), Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2022, no. 75, pp. 324-326.

20 J. Bialostocki, "A Madonna and Child from Felipe Vigarni workshop", Bulletin du Musée National de Warsaw, vol. XII, 1973, n°3, pp. 49-53.

21 J. Nicolau, Nicolau Castro, J., "Two reliefs from the circle of Gregorio Pardo in the parish of Santa Leocadia and in the monastery of Santa Clara in Toledo", Spanish Archive of Art, 224, 1983, pp. 416-418.

22 *Restoration of a relief of the "Virgin and Child" attributed to Gregorio Pardo*, Community of Madrid, (online).

23 58 x 36 cm. Fechada ca. 1548-1550. I. del Río de la Hoz, Isabel del, en Cat. Ex. The Mystery of Faith. An eye on Spanish sculpture, 1550-1750, Matthiesen Fine Art LTD and Coll & Cortés Fine Art, Madrid, London, 2009, pp. 206-213.

24 R. Coppel, *From father to son: two alabaster reliefs of the Madonna and Child by Felipe Bigarny and Gregorio Pardo*, Jaime Eguiguren -Studies-no°3, Artes Gráficas Palermo, 2018.



Fig. 14. Felipe Bigarny (attr.), *Virgin with Child and Saint John the Baptist*, alabaster with traces of gilding, 30 x 24.5 x 4 cm, with original pinewood frame, private collection.



Fig. 15. Felipe Bigarny (attr.), *Virgin with Child*, alabaster, 22 x 19 cm, with original wooden frame: 36.6 x 33.6 cm. Private collection.

The mastery of the alabaster technique, the idealisation of the models, the very personal way of making the hair in thick, regular and deep locks, the importance of the hands as a means of expression, and the prominence of the fabrics to wrap the composition, are the characteristics of Felipe Bigarny's style that we find in this magnificent relief, through which he has managed to convey the sweetness and complicity between the two figures, Mother and Son, contributing to providing a valuable object of devotion, so sought after and appreciated in Spain at that time.

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