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ART & ANTIQUES

Estéban de Ágreda (attr.)

Logrono (La Rioja), 1759 - Madrid, 1842

Saint Benedict of Palermo

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ca. 1807 - 1825

Carved, gilded and polychromed wood

43 x 21 x 20 cm

Provenance: Private collection, Spain

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Elena Pidal

Saint Benedict of Palermo is the name by which we know Benito Manasseri, an Italian religious of African origin, who was canonized in 1807. His parents were slaves on a plantation near Messina where they had been brought from Africa.

Benedict was liberated after his birth and earned a living as a shepherd. He then met a group of hermits who followed the Rule of Saint Francis, whom he joined, and a few years later entered the convent of Santa Maria de Palermo. His monastic life was defined at first by his illiteracy, which led him to be in charge of the kitchens. His piety, humility and miraculous healings brought him great fame, for which he became elected prior despite his colored skin and his illiteracy. After a long process, he was beatified by Benedict XIV in 1743 and canonized in 1807 by Pius VII.

The patron Saint of African-Americans is represented, as usual, as a relatively young man, with curly hair and dark skin, although his features are not particularly marked. He dresses in a Franciscan tunic tied with a simple cord with three knots and has bare feet as a sign of simplicity and humility. A hand is raised holding a cross to which he directs his gaze in a clear attitude of prayer; the other hand is also raised, although at a lower level, and could carry a Sacred Heart with the seven drops of blood that symbolize the seven virtues (the three theological and the four cardinal) or a bouquet of lilies.

This Saint Benedict must be related to Saint Francis of Assisi (Fig. 1) in the tomb, made by Esteban de Ágreda in the first quarter of the 20th century for the Capuchins of Patience, in Madrid, from there transferred to the Museum of the Trinidad, and today preserved in the Prado Museum (catalogue number E000578). Observing both figures, we see that the way of representing artistically the two saints is quite similar : there is a predominance of the line, marked by the sculptor's strong academic training in drawing, which makes the folds of the tunic almost vertical , marking the austerity and severity that the character requires, but endowing it with great elegance. The features are also the same in both sculptures; they are delicate, with a very straight nose, the same position of the eyebrows and the wrinkles on the forehead, in both the half-open mouth showing the upper teeth, in an identical expression of



Fig. 1 Estéban de Ágreda Ortega, Saint Francis of Assisi, carved and polychromed wood, 172 x 60 x 54 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Spain.

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mystical ecstasy. The model derives from Saint Francis of Assisi by Pedro de Mena (Fig.2) as it can be visualized in the static verticality of the figure, the slightly raised face, the folds and polychromy that have been simplified to the maximum, creating a sober and elegant ensemble.

Therefore, we see here the language of Esteban de Ágreda, a nineteenth-century sculptor and painter who received his first artistic teachings from his father, the architect Manuel de Ágreda. His formative beginnings were in drawing and architecture, perfecting himself in the School of Drawing in the city of Vitoria. Already in 1775, he entered the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in Madrid, where he continued training in drawing but also began with sculpture, an area in which he soon stood out, winning several prizes. This outstanding performance earned him an apprenticeship in the workshop by the French sculptor Roberto Michel. His ability for sculpture led him to work at the Buen Retiro Royal Porcelain Factory where he became director, combining this work with teaching at the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts, of which he was also appointed director in 1814, being reelected in 1821 and 1831.

Fig. 2 Pedro de Mena (Granada, 1628 - Málaga, 1688), *Saint Francis of Assisi*, carved and polychromed wood. treasury of the cathedral, Toledo, Spain.

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