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Gregorio Fernandez
Sarria, Lugo, 1576 - Valladolid, 1636

Immaculate Conception

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Polychrome wood
60 x 36.5 x 36.5 cm
Provenance: Private collection, Argentina

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Art Historian

The *Virgin Mary* is represented almost as a child, with her head uncovered and her very long hair falling in fine wavy locks over her shoulders and back. Her hair is parted in the middle and she has a fringe made up of three small locks on each side. Her eyes and mouth are small, as are her hands, which are joined together in a praying attitude in front of her chest. She wears a single white flowered dress held in place by a belt and a large blue cloak with gold stars and a border with flowers on the edges, which covers her completely, falling symmetrically on both sides. The carving is worked in the round and at the back it has a fold with a gathering in the cloak. She rests on a small base made up of a half moon and three cherub heads. The square pedestal, with curved projections on the sides, painted blue with gold stripes, is original.

Since the Counter-Reformation, the Protestants' rejection of the figure of the Virgin led to Marian exaltation among Catholics, which in Spain was spread mainly through the writings of Teresa of Jesus in her Carmelite foundations and by Saint John of the Cross, and inspired by the Apocalypse of Saint John.[1]

Francisco Pacheco dedicated more than two pages to defining the iconography of the *Immaculate Conception*, as follows:

> *"Therefore, in this most apt mystery, this Lady must be painted in the prime of her life, from twelve to thirteen years old, a most beautiful girl, with lovely and grave eyes, a perfect nose and mouth and rosy cheeks, her beautiful long hair, golden in color; in short, as much as is possible for the human brush. / The white tunic and blue cloak must be painted, as this Lady appeared to Doña Beatriz de Silva, a Portuguese woman, who later went to Santo Domingo el Real in Toledo to find the religion of the Immaculate Conception, which was confirmed by Pope Julius II in the year 1511."[2]* (Fig. 1)

The artists of the Andalusian school, Murillo, Zurbarán, Sánchez Cotán, Alonso Cano, Alonso and Pedro de Mena and Martínez Montañés, followed Pacheco's guidelines, creating a prototype that was highly successful and was continued by both painters and sculptors during the 17th and 18th centuries.

The other great artistic centre of the period, Valladolid, had the mastery of Gregorio Fernández, the greatest representative of the Castilian school.

Fig. 1. Francisco Pacheco, *Immaculate Conception*, 1610, oil on canvas, Archbishop's Palace, Seville

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1 Chapter 12, 1-3: "A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed in the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars."

2 "Painting of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady", F. Pacheco, *The Art of Painting,* Seville, 1649, ed. B. Bassegoda, Madrid, 1990, pp. 575-576.

As defined by Maria Elena Gomez Moreno:

> *"The appearance of Gregorio Fernández in 17th century Castilian sculpture is as difficult to explain as that of Berruguete in the previous century. / Gregorio Fernández owes much more to the spiritual environment of his time than to its artistic one. / A religious exaltation…a consequence of the struggle of the Counter-Reformation. / In that environment, religious sculpture had to try to move hearts, softening them with tears of pain and contrition."*[3]

Gregorio Fernández was a practising and fervent Catholic, as can be seen from the few details that have come down to us about his biography. Based on his profound religiosity, he was able to create realistic and sincere sculptures, with great sensitivity, whose contemplation deeply affected the faithful. Fernández maintained a large workshop in Valladolid for thirty years, which spread throughout the Basque Country, Galicia, León, Extremadura and Madrid, thanks to the demand that came mainly from the new religious orders and penitential brotherhoods.

His activity was directed towards the construction of altarpieces for church altars, individual images and processional floats, taking charge of coordinating all aspects of the works, architecture, assembly and sculpture, as well as directing the painters who were in charge of the polychromy, an aspect to which he attached great importance. His main collaborator in this work was Diego Valentín Díaz (1586-1660).[4]

Representations of the *Immaculate Conception*

Gregorio Fernández incorporated the image of the Virgin Mary as the central figure in some of the altarpieces he made, such as the largest one in the new cathedral of Plasencia (Cáceres), where the image of the *Assumption*, which he placed in a huge frame surrounded by cherubs, announces the prototype of his *Inmaculadas* (1623-1634) ; (Fig. 2-3) which can be admired in the church of San Miguel de Vitoria (1624-1632), (Fig. 4) or in the smaller altarpiece of the Convent of the Conception, also called Santa Teresa, in Valladolid (1623). (Figs. 5-7)

The model created by Gregorio Fernández differs in some aspects from both the previous ones and those of his contemporaries. Although he followed Pacheco's instructions by presenting the Virgin at an age of around 15, the differences with the Andalusian school can be seen in the frontal point of view, the symmetrical trapezoidal shape and the immobility. The face is presented from the front and the gaze is sometimes high and sometimes low, but always serene, and with extremely long hair, which falls symmetrically over the cloak in the form of long wavy strands that continue down the back. A singular characteristic is the locks of hair stuck to the body that seem to be wet. In addition, the cloak has metallic-looking folds at the bottom that are another of the most personal signs of Fernández's technique, such as the folded fold at the back. In contrast, the Andalusian model is more classical, less frontal and presents more grace and movement.[5]

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3 ME Gómez Moreno, *Sculpture of the 17th century, Ars Hispaniae,* vol. 16, Madrid, 1958, pp. 53-54.

4 Diego Valentín Díaz was a painter, scholar and patron, a great friend of Gregorio Fernández, who was in charge of the polychromy of several of his sculptures. He collaborated with Francisco Pacheco by sending him portraits of some artists for publication. He is the author of the only surviving portrait of the sculptor (ca. 1630), which is kept in Valladolid, in the National Museum of Sculpture.

5 Exh. Cat. *Gregorio Fernandez and Martinez Montanes. The new art of making images,* Jesus Miguel Palomero and Rene Jesus Payo (coms.), Metropolitan Cathedral of Valladolid, 2024.

Fig. 2. Gregorio Fernández, Main altarpiece, 1623-1634, polychrome wood, new cathedral, Plasencia, Cáceres

Fig. 3. Gregorio Fernández, *The Assumption, detail of the main altarpiece*, 1623-1634, polychrome wood, new cathedral of Plasencia, Cáceres
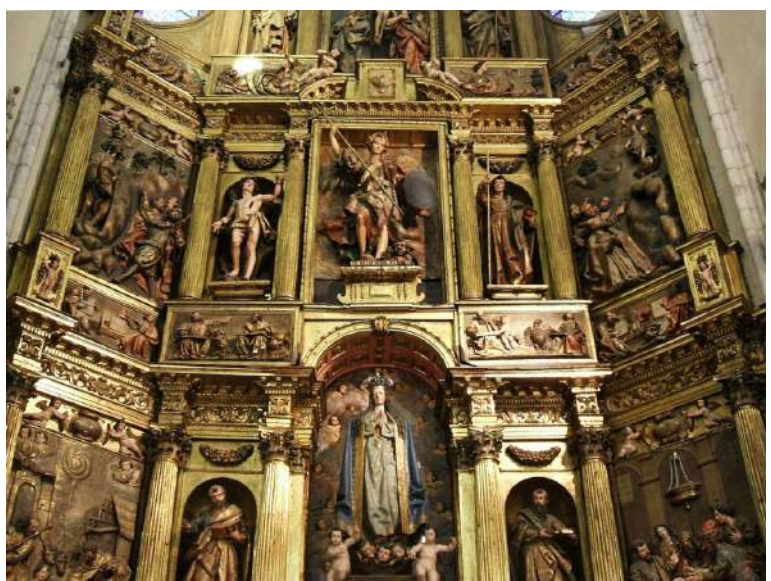

Fig. 4. Gregorio Fernández, Altarpiece of the church of San Miguel, 1624-1632, polychrome wood, Vitoria

Fig. 5. Gregorio Fernández, *Immaculate Conception*, ca. 1620, polychrome wood, Convent of the Conception also called Santa Teresa, Valladolid.

Fig. 6. Gregorio Fernández, *Immaculate Conception* (detail,) ca. 1620, polychrome wood, Convent of the Conception also called Santa Teresa, Valladolid.

Fig. 7. Gregorio Fernández, *Immaculate Conception (*detail,) ca. 1620, polychrome wood, Convent of the Conception also called Santa Teresa, Valladolid.

Among the individual carvings, the model closest to the *Immaculate Conception* that we present in this study is the one preserved in the cathedral of Astorga (1627), where the Virgin Mary is represented with the characteristics that we have just mentioned (Figs. 8-9).

As for the base of the Immaculate Conception, the sculptor made two versions, one with three cherub heads among clouds (like the example from the convent of Santa Teresa in Valladolid and ours), and the other with a demon in the form of a dragon (like the one in Astorga) and, in both cases, with the crescent moon.

The polychromy is achieved using solid colours: white for the tunic, with large spring flowers, and blue for the cloak with smaller motifs and a wide stripe running along the edges with medallions, very similar to the one preserved in our version.

Jesús Urrea has published some of the small-format sculptures. Among them, an Immaculate Conception that was found in an antique shop in Seville in 1973 and had been attributed to Pedro de Mena. The author identified it as coming from the Valladolid workshop of Gregorio Fernández, due to his typical face and iconography, classifying it as a juvenile work due to the soft clothing, without the metallic-looking folds.[6] The same researcher located a similar work in a private collection in Seville, describing it as: "*small in size, but extremely exquisite due to the finish and detail that the figure offers.*"[7] The first has a dragon at the base, while the second is on three little cherub heads, similar and in the same position as the one in this study. In addition, the latter has a wooden pedestal with the same curved projections on the sides. It only differs in some details, such as the hair, which is a little shorter, and in the decorative motifs of the polychrome.

Conclusion

The *Immaculate Conception*, despite its small size, presents all the characteristics of Gregorio Fernández's style. The

Fig. 8. Gregorio Fernández, *Immaculate Conception*, 1627, polychrome wood, Astorga Cathedral (León)

Fig. 9 Gregorio Fernández, *Immaculate Conception* (detail), 1627, Astorga Cathedral (León).

6 "On Gregorio Fernández", *Bulletin of the Seminar on Art and Archaeology,* University of Valladolid, no. 39, 1973, pp. 245-260 (p. 258, plate III, fig. 4.

7 J. Urrea, *The sculptor Gregorio Fernández, 1576-1636 (notes for a book),* University of Valladolid, 2014, pp. 239-240 with photographs.

model, with the almost childlike beauty of the physiognomic features; the expression of serenity and concentration absent of drama; the treatment of the long hair, the heavy clothing, made with a perfect technique and very characteristic of the sculptor based on rigid and cardboard folds with a metallic appearance, in addition to the original fold of the back; the heads of the cherubs, similar to those that appear in other works of his; the rich polychromy with sgraffito and brush tip, and the pedestal, demonstrate that it is an autograph work made by the expert hands of Gregorio Fernández for the private devotion of an important client.

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