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Pedro de Mena

Granada, 1628 – Málaga, 1688

Virgin of the Immaculate Conception



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Circa 1665

Parcel-gilt and polychrome wood

Height: 84 cm.

Provenance: Private collection

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On the basis of composition, style and quality, this figure of the Immaculate Conception, which belonged to the Olmedilla family¹ until the 1980s, can be firmly attributed to Pedro de Mena.

It is highly likely that Mena took his inspiration from the pre-existing models executed by Alonso Cano and his father, Alonso de Mena, who frequently represented the subject in defence of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which declared that the Virgin was conceived without sin. The elder Mena interpreted the subject in Granada, with the aid of the Carthusian friar and painter, Juan Sánchez Cotán and Pedro de Raxis. Meanwhile, Alonso Cano worked on the subject whilst in Seville, where he would have seen prominent models of the Virgin's iconography created by artists such as Francisco Pacheco, Diego Velázquez, Francisco de Herrera, Francisco Zurbarán and Juan Martínez Montañés.

Alonso de Mena's compositions of the Immaculate Conception can be classified into three groups. The first follows a triangular format, which suggests a Castilian influence. The second incorporates new, naturalistic elements with his previous compositions whilst the last group follows stylistic standards of the first half of the seventeenth century.²

Two stone examples, the Immaculate Conception in Granada (finished in 1631) and another version from the side doors of Jaen Cathedral (1640-1641) belong to this latter group and were most likely carved in collaboration with the apprentice sculptor, Pedro.

Cano's interest in the subject can be seen in the painted and sculpted versions he executed throughout his career, such as those made in Seville (between 1624-1637), Madrid (1637-1652 and 1656-1659) and Granada (1652-1656 and 1659-1667). However, the version that was to generate the biggest social and artistic impact was the statuette carved for Granada Cathedral, an image that has become synonymous with the art of Granada.

Cano established himself in Granada in 1652 and began two versions of the subject for the cathedral. The first version was a painting of great importance, commissioned for the royal chapel, and the second was sculpture for the choir lectern made of wood, gilded bronze and polychrome marble. According to the cathedral minutes from 6 March 1655, Cano had committed to finishing an "Image of Our Lady" for the lectern and a painting for the royal chapel³ within a year.

In sculpting this small Virgin, Cano created a new model of the Immaculate Conception: a spindle-shaped composition with the figure of a young Mary wrapped in a blue mantle. Although now worn away, the mantle was also once gilded and was likely conceived with gilded embroidery, as can be seen in some of the versions his followers executed. In the late nineteenth century, the figure was repainted by an unknown artist who covered the entire mantle in a slightly darker blue, perhaps in an attempt to harmonise the sculpture with the painting on the main altar. Mena might well have worked with Cano in the process of sketching, designing and carving this statuette, since he had already assisted his master in executing works for the Ángel Custodio convent in Granada. Mena thus would also have

1 Professor Jesús Urrea presented this sculpture in the national symposium, Pedro de Mena and his Times. Don Antonio de Olmedilla y Henao, councilor of Olmedo, bequeathed this sculpture to his granddaughter in 1744, according to his will. Given her early death, the sculpture never left the family oratory, and it is referenced in Gregorio de Olmedilla y Osorio's (Antonio de Olmedilla's son) 1766 postmortem inventory. Since then the sculpture is linked to the Olmedilla household. Urrea Fernández, Jesús: "Nuevas esculturas de Pedro de Mena", in *Pedro de Mena y su época*. Simposio Nacional, Granada and Málaga April 1989, Consejería de Cultura de la Junta de Andalucía, 1990, pp. 362-365. Palencia Cerezo, José María and Javier del Campo, "Inmaculada. Pedro de Mena", in *Espíritu del Barroco*. Madrid, 2008, p. 188

2 Which defined composition, expression and the treatment of the drapery.

3 AA.VV.: *Corpus Alonso Cano. Documentos y Textos...*, op. cit., pp. 317 y 342

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witnessed the council's praise and admiration for the piece, which was placed in the sacristy where the clergymen could worship it, and where it remains today.⁴

Cano presented a sensitive interpretation of the Virgin standing on a spherical mass of clouds. She is depicted with a beautiful oval face, her eyes modestly cast down, and framed by long chestnut coloured hair. The Virgin gazes down to the right whilst placing her hands on the opposite side. As such, Cano created a previously unseen rhythm and elegance with this composition. The figure's silhouette, which widens at the waist and narrows at the feet, adds to her ethereal character. In this lower part of the image, the tunic, mantle, clouds and cherubs form a mixture of shapes and forms that hide her feet and reinforce her mystic and celestial nature. Cano's representation of the Immaculate Conception in Granada was influenced by this small sculpture, and went on to be imitated by many artists, including Mena.

Months after Cano presented the statuette, the same councillor who had once praised Cano for his work discharged him from his post of racionero. Cano had resisted joining the priesthood, a mandatory requirement for this post. He left for Madrid in search of royal patronage and remained there until 1660. Mena thus only worked only four years with Cano (1652-1656); however, that was enough time for the young artist to absorb Cano's techniques and aesthetic concepts.

Among Mena's very first interpretations of the Immaculate Conception is the slightly smaller than life-size, version in the parish church of Alhendín, Granada dating from 1656. In contrast to his master's model, the Virgin's mantle is open at the front with each end falling over her arms and the corners falling down the sides. The Virgin's face is a more elongated oval shape than Cano's model, and the eyebrows are more acutely arched. Mena also incorporated three figures of angels on the cloud, as he would have seen Martínez Montañés and Juan de Mesa do in Seville. This composition stands in contrast to Cano's version for the lectern in which the stylised heads appear out of the clouds.

Cano's influence on Mena's Immaculate Conception is nevertheless clear. It can be seen, for example, in the general composition and handling of minor details.

Two years after the Alhendín Immaculate Conception, Mena made another version where he practically copied his master's composition with some minor alterations. She stands on a globe with angels floating around it—as in the Alhendín version—beneath which is a vanquished dragon. Made for the convent of Poor Clares in Granada, the statue was the pride of the young sculptor, who signed and dated the sculpture (1658), leaving no doubts over its authorship. Mena left his clear indicators of his style on the head and in the expression of the Virgin. No evidence exists that Mena approached this subject again until 1674 when he executed the now-lost version previously kept in the Brauner Collection.⁵

Two years later, he signed the version in the church of San Nicolás of Murcia and another lost version in Pueblo de Moros, Zaragoza.⁶ Mena signed and dated almost all his works in this decade, perhaps as a result of the recent prestige he earned around the country. He carved the next two versions for the Bishop of Córdoba, Fray Alonso de Salizanes. One was an over life-size Virgin for the cathedral first documented in 1679. The other, now unfortunately lost, was a slightly smaller version kept at the Santo Ángel convent in Málaga. This version bore four metal plaques including the coat of arms of the priest, the name of the artist and the date of 1680, all visible from old photographs.⁷

⁴ The admiration of the image by the cabildo catedralicio was so great that, from the beginning, they decided to assign it to a more important and noble place than the top tabernacle of the choir lectern. On the 27th of May 1656 it was agreed for it to be placed in the sacristy cathedral in a display case AA.VV.: *Corpus Alonso Cano. Documentos y Textos...*, op. cit., pp. 343-344

⁵ Francés, José, "Concepción. Colección de don Hugo Brauner, Valencia", in *Pedro de Mena, escultor, Homenaje en su tercer centenario*. Málaga, Sociedad Económica Amigos del País, 1928, s/p.

⁶ Abad, Francisco: "Una obra inédita de Pedro de Mena", *Archivo Español de Arte* (Madrid), 1949, pp. 170-171.

⁷ Romero Torres, José Luis: "Pedro de Mena, Pedro Roldán y el concurso artístico de Fray Alonso de Salizanes, obispo

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In the 1660s, Mena must have noticed the rise in demand for this subject. The rise was probably the result of a Papal bull Alexander VII gave to Spain in 1661, which favoured the belief in – and the cult of – the Immaculate Conception.

Examples from this time probably include the versions in the Jesuit church of Toledo⁸, the Church of San Antolín in Tordesillas and, most likely, the version presented here. They all belonged to this new period of devotional fervour achieved, no doubt, thanks to the great diplomatic efforts of the Spanish embassy at the Vatican.⁹

The present Immaculate Conception, as well as the version in Tordesillas, are two examples from the same period in which Mena developed an idea to glorify the Virgin as the Queen of Heaven. In these pieces, he represented her with an upright head and an imperturbable glance that gives her a sense of majesty. The Virgin's hands are shifted slightly from the central axis, just as in Cano's model. It is also comparable to the version in Pueblo de Moros (1676), particularly in the treatment of the globe, but judging from the style of carving which is visible in surviving archival photographs, it appears to have been carved after the present figure.

From 1670 onwards, Mena sculpted his Immaculate Conceptions with a more symmetrical composition aligning the head, gaze and hands with the central axis of the sculpture. In these versions, he also combined her mystical nature with a very human condition – as a young pregnant mother. This feature is visible in her swollen womb and wide hips, which, along with the heavy mantel, are the trademark compositional elements of Mena's Immaculate Conceptions.

Mena's figures generally measured between 60 and 100 centimetres except the versions in Córdoba and Marchena, which are more than two meters high. Following his death in 1688, Mena's Immaculate Conception commissioned by the Duke of Arcos for Marchena was still unfinished. His disciple Miguel de Zayas would eventually complete it.¹⁰

The present Immaculate Conception displays many of Mena's stylistic markers. These include the almond shaped head, arched eyebrows, long 'wet locks' of hair and porcelain skin. The smoothness of the skin in particular is achieved by a delicate sanding process, which removes any imperfections from the surface that might detract from her solemn expression. The figure stands on a downturned crescent moon, which echoes the curve of the globe that supports the entire composition. As was typical in Andalusian art, the feet are not visible from below the white robe, and the twisting snake beneath has been superficially modelled.

Mena's inclusion of the cherub heads on the base are a direct reference to Cano's plump faces from the lectern group.

They feature prominently throughout the Mena's oeuvre seen on the present piece and the version in the Santo Ángel convent in Málaga (1680). In the Brauner and Córdoba Cathedral versions, Mena reproduced complete cherubs dancing and celebrating the Virgin's status as the Queen of Heaven; however, with the present figure he opted for the heads alone, presumably not wanting to detract from the solemnity of the composition.

de Córdoba", *Laboratorio de Arte* (Sevilla), nº 24 (2012), pp. 252-274.

8 Nicolau Castro, Juan: "Una Inmaculada inédita de Pedro de Mena en Toledo", *Toletum. Boletín de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes y Ciencias Históricas de Toledo*, nº. 65 (Toledo, 1981), pp. 453-455.

9 Ravé Prieto, Juan Luis: "Notas sobre una obra póstuma de Pedro de Mena", in *Actas del Simposio Nacional Pedro de Mena y su época*. Málaga, Consejería de Cultura de la Junta de Andalucía, 1989, pp. 455-463.

10 This figure was wonderfully restored a few years ago and has been in several recent exhibitions dedicated to the Immaculate Conception in Cordoba and Seville (2004). The historian Jesús Aguilar erroneously dated this figure from Marchena to 1679, when it had not even been delivered in 1688. AGUILAR DÍAZ, Jesús: "Pedro de Mena (1628-1688). Inmaculada (1679)", in Pareja López, Enrique (comisario), *Inmaculada, 150 años de la Proclamación del Dogma*, Exh. Cat. Córdoba, Cajasur, 2004, pp. 346-348.

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