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Ramón Solà II

(doc. 1431-1484)

**MAN OF SORROWS, THE VIRGIN
AND ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST**

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Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist

Girona, ca. 1450-1475

Painting in tempera on panel

57 x 59 cm

Provenance: Private collection, Barcelona.

Bibliography: VELASCO 2020, p25, Fig. 2. 'Catàleg de pintura antiga', Museu del Cau Ferrat. (reproduced)

DESCRIPTION AND ICONOGRAPHY

The panel presents a depiction of *Christus Patiens* emerging from his tomb, flanked on the left and right by the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist (**Fig. 1**). Christ appears in the middle of the composition, his arms crossed, and his head tilted to his right (**Fig. 2**). He is dressed solely in a *perizonium* with abundant parallel folds. He shows clear signs of the martyrdom suffered during the Passion, explicit in the blood flowing from the wounds to his hands and, particularly, to his side (**Fig. 3**). His body is robust and rounded, with ample ribcage and the ribs highly pronounced. He wears the crown of thorns on his head, which has caused the cuts from which a few drops of blood are trickling down his forehead and face. He also presents a nimbus with rays of light, executed using *pastillage* technique and gilt plaster. He has a long head of straight hair, which falls down over his shoulders and back. As regards his face, it is that of a corpse. His eyes are shut, and wrinkles reinforce his expressivity. His eyebrows are thin and delicate, drawn with two simple brown lines. His cheekbones are prominent and hint at the bone structure, covered by a fairly sparse and trimmed beard. His mouth, slightly open, does not reveal any teeth.



Fig. 1: Ramón Solà II, *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist*.
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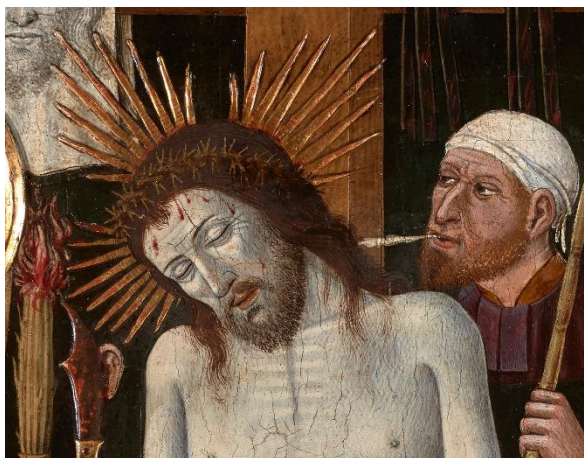


Fig. 2: Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (detail). Colección Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques.



Fig. 3: Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (detail). Colección Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques.

We observe Our Lady of Sorrows just to his right, her hands clasped together in prayer. She wears a white widow's headdress and a red robe with generous vertical folds. Her cloak, with a dot-marked trim, is blue on the outside and orange on the inside. It covers her whole body, including her head, and falls into long, tube-shaped folds like those of the robe. Mary's face is delicate, with a mournful expression, heightened by her looking down towards the ground (Fig. 4). Her brown eyes are half open while her fleshy lips are firmly closed. There is a pink blush to her cheeks, where we can appreciate the greyish lines commonly found in tempera painting. Behind her head she has a round golden nimbus, executed in gilt stucco relief. It includes a number of circumferences and the inside is made up of floral motifs with fleshy leaf shapes surrounded by deep punch marks.



Fig. 4: Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (detail). Colección Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques.

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St. John the Evangelist, meanwhile, appears on Christ's left. He is wearing a brown robe with a reddish cloak on top, covering his left arm, whose shape we can just make out under the volume of the garment. The inside of the latter is of a yellowish hue, much like the robe as we intuit from the neck area. The Saint's body language denotes sadness and concern, as may be appreciated from his face and the gesture of his right hand, which is holding his somewhat distraught face by the chin (**Fig. 5**). The furrowed brow, the downward gaze and half-open mouth heighten this image of despair. He is pictured with a highly prominent ear and ruffled curly blond hair, with multiple reflections. Behind his head there is a gold nimbus in gilt relief much like the one we saw with Mary.

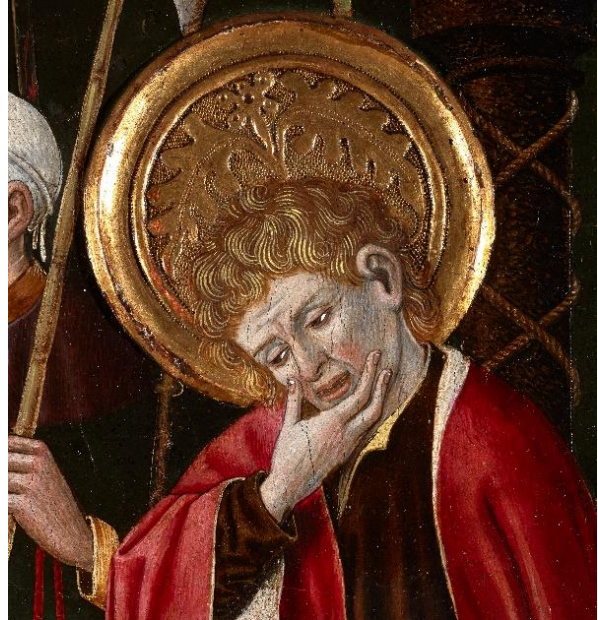


Fig. 5: Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (detail).
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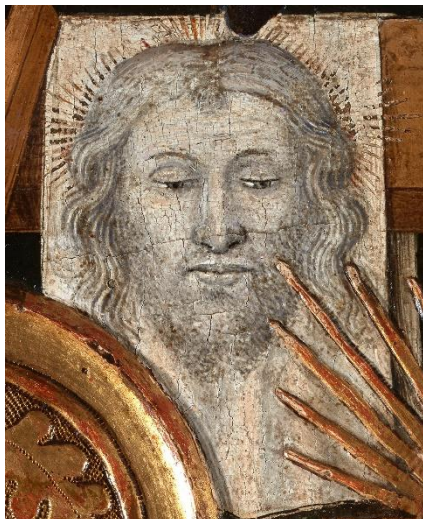


Fig. 6: Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (detail).
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The tomb is a red-colored sarcophagus with a mottled look, giving the material the appearance of porphyry. Some of the *Arma Christi* are arranged on top of it, specifically the hammer, pliers and a nail towards the front, with the dice and jar of vinegar behind them. The rest of the Instruments of the Passion are pictured towards the back, around the cross of martyrdom, which is crowned by the *titulus* "INRI" (Ihesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum). The transom of the cross features the two nails that secured the hands of the Son of God, and which are still bloody. It also has a ladder leaning against it, as well as the delicate Veil of Veronica, executed in grisaille (**Fig. 6**) and the flagellation whips.

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On the left we see the Spear of Longinus, while towards the center we observe some canes, one of the torches that guided the Roman soldiers to the Garden of Gethsemane, and the ear of Malchus, alongside the knife with which St. Peter cut it off. Of particular note is the tormentor, or Jew, with a pseudo-grotesque face and prominent nose, carrying a cane. It is surprising to observe how he spits at Christ, something not at all common in this sort of depiction (Fig. 7). He also appears to be holding the bag of 30 pieces of silver paid to Judas Iscariot. Above St. John's nimbus a sort of axe or pick seems to be sticking out, along with a long stick, without doubt used to pass the vinegar-soaked sponge up to Christ's mouth. Finally, on our right, we see the Column at which Christ was flogged, with the whip cords wound around it and, on top, the lantern with which Judas lit the soldiers' way to the Garden of Gethsemane.



Fig. 7: Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (detail). Colección Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques.

Both the square format of the panel along with the iconography confirm that this was the central compartment of an altarpiece predella. Another aspect bearing this out is the original existence of gilt cresting at the top, which has since been lost, but whose impression can still be discerned.

From a technical point of view, it is worth noting the presence of an incised drawing on the front of the panel, which would have been used by the painter to outline the main elements making up the composition. We can see this clearly in the area where the two shafts of the cross meet, as well as in the outlining of the figures and some of the *Arma Christi*. If we turn our attention to the back (Fig. 8), we observe that the compartment was made up of two similarly-sized panels arranged horizontally, something often found in altarpiece predella compartments. The joint between the two was secured with adhesive paste, and then strengthened with fabric, which was aimed at combatting the relative swelling and shrinking of the wood that would take place in accordance with the surrounding humidity levels due to its hygroscopic nature. This fabric, along with other elements used in the preparation of panels, served to minimize such effects, which could end up leading to the appearance of cracks on the painted surface.



Fig. 8: Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (back of panel). Colección Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques.

We can also observe that, over the entire surface of the back of the panel, remnants remain of a preparation made up of plaster, animal glue and vegetable fibers, the purpose of which was also to lessen the effect of potential expansions and contractions in the wood. As such, the back surface was covered with a plaster paste, undoubtedly using animal glue as a binder, onto which burlap was applied, which explains the presence of vegetable fibers. The aim here was much the same, to ensure the stability of

the joint between the two panels in the event of the wood shrinking or swelling. It was a system that proved extremely popular in Hispanic pictorial workshops in the early middle ages. Finally, in order to strengthen the general structure of the compartment, the joiner or carpenter attached a vertical cross-piece, now lost, but whose mark can still be made out in the central area. Said cross-piece was secured using nails inserted into the front of the panel, and the end of the nails were bent back over once they had gone through the cross-piece at the back. Once the cross-piece was lost, the nails were sheared off, though their presence is still observable at first glance.

Iconographically, works depicting the *Vir Dolorum* or *Christus Patiens* were well-known in the Hispanic world, often being used for the middle compartments of altarpiece predellas or tabernacles containing the Holy Sacraments. As a result, the Eucharistic connotations of these *imago pietatis* are quite clear, given the blood flowing from Christ's body is transformed into a symbolic exaltation of the Eucharist. Meanwhile, the image of Christ emerging bloody from his tomb heightened the message of other scenes such as the Crucifixion, the episode concluding the story of Man's salvation and redemption.¹ The awareness those commissioning works had regarding the Eucharistic value of this sort of image of the bloody Christ can be identified, for instance, in the contract signed by the painter Lluís Borrassà in 1415 to undertake an altarpiece for the church of Sant Andreu de Gurb (Barcelona). Said document specified that the painter include "prop del tabernacle (...) la image de Jesús tanent un títol en la mà en lo qual aurà escrit «hoc est corpus meum» e ab l'altre mà signant en ves lo tabernacle, e de l'altre part, en la casa prop del tabernacle, farà lo dit Luys sant Johan Babtiste ab la una mà signant al tabernacle e en l'altre tanent un títol en lo qual aurà escrit «Ecce agnus Dei»".²

Christ's death in Golgotha was the perfect complement to the Eucharistic or Salvation-oriented spirit of images such as the one that we are presenting here, accompanied by

¹ MOLINA 1999, p. 127.

² GINEBRA 2000, pp. 141-171.

the Instruments of the Passion.³ In the same terms we mentioned earlier, redemption is embodied by the blood flowing from Christ's wounds. On occasions, the blood would pour into a chalice, making the relationship between the representation and the Eucharist all the clearer.⁴ These images were intended to evoke piety in the faithful, seeking their emotional engagement, within the parameters of empathic piety, as set out by *devotio moderna*. These became widespread in the Crown of Aragon from the mid-14th-century and, around 1400, in the Parisian context, a variation emerged which acted as the source for the one we see here, that of Christ supported by angels.⁵

One of this panel's most striking iconographic aspects is the importance given over to the *Arma Christi*. Their presence was common in depictions of the Man of Sorrows, although they did not always appear in such detailed and exhaustive fashion as they do here.⁶ What really grabs our attention is the vehemence and brutality of the male face disrespectfully spitting at Christ. The Gospels provide ample textual basis for this sort of image, as Mark, Matthew and Luke all describe certain Jews spitting at Jesus.⁷ It is as such, therefore, that the violence and brutality of the tormentors is clearly established in the Gospels, something that would be addressed by a number of subsequent Christ-centric sources, some even going so far as to compare said tormentors with animals.⁸

We ought to point out that, although there are other known depictions of this figure, such as the one we see in the frescoes Fra Angelico painted for the cells of the Convent of San Marco in Florence (around 1439-1443), the image of the Jew spitting at Christ is

³ The Man of Sorrows tends to be accompanied by the *Arma Christi* from the Passion, and some documents from the period emphasize the association. This is the case for the 1407 contract signed by Lluís Borrassà to undertake an altarpiece for the monastery of Sant Miquel de Fluvià, where he was asked to paint "la Pietat ab les armes de Jhesucrist, so es, la creu, les corregades, la lansa e la esponga" in the central compartment of the predella (MADURELL 1950, pp. 164-167, doc. 150). For a link between these elements and the evocative images of Christ and his worship, see MÂLE 1908, p. 91 et seq.

⁴ For more on these matters, see VETTER 1963; LA FAVIA 1980; GARCÍA 1997; MACDONALD-RIDDERBOS-SCHLUSEMANN, 1998; MOLINA 2001, pp. 89-105.

⁵ VALERO 2009.

⁶ Regarding the *Arma Christi*, see the studies included in COOPER-DENNY-BROWN 2014.

⁷ "Then some began to spit at him, they blindfolded him and struck him and said: Prophecy! And the guards beat him" (Mark 14: 65). Cfr. Matthew 26: 67, Matthew 27: 30 and Luke 18: 32.

⁸ MARROW 1977.

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not part of the most common repertoire of Passion instruments. Focusing on the case before us here, the individual's head, seen in profile, clearly presents us with someone with the negative connotations used to depict prominent-nosed Jews. This negative overtone is heightened by the cloth or cap on his head, as this absurd item makes one think of the fool who denies the divine nature of the Son of God.⁹ The image therefore contains a clearly anti-Semitic message, and establishes a link between our work and the markedly anti-Jewish nature of a good proportion of Medieval society.¹⁰ In short, details such as the one we have just described served as the perfect complement for a pious painting that aimed at moving the person praying before it. Christ's battered and bloody body, added to the cruelty and violence to which he was subjected in the Passion, were tools with which to awaken emotional engagement and empathy in the faithful.¹¹

⁹ See PHILIP 1953, pp. 267-293.

¹⁰ Regarding the image of the Jew spitting at Christ, see BALE 2006, pp. 145-168. For more on anti-Semitic iconography in the Crown of Aragon see, among others, RODRÍGUEZ 2008.

¹¹ MARROW 1979.

ATTRIBUTION: RAMÓN SOLÀ II, PAINTER FROM GIRONA

This panel should, without a shadow of a doubt, be attributed to the painter Ramón Solà II, active in the Girona area (Catalonia, Spain) from the mid-15th century. Comparison of our panel with other works attributed to the master is conclusive. A similar depiction is found in the altarpiece tabernacle preserved at the Museu del Cau Ferrat in Sitges (Barcelona) (**Fig. 9**),¹² where we find Christ in a similar anatomical make-up and pose, wearing an identical crown of thorns and, moreover, entirely concomitant solar ray nimbus executed in plaster *pastillage*. We even find similarities in the arrangement of the cross, the way in which blood flows from Christ's wounds, or the sarcophagus molding level with Jesus' hands. Also highly reminiscent is the type of depiction of the Virgin and St. John seen in the side compartments of said Eucharistic tabernacle, where we find each has a golden nimbus to which exactly the same stucco relief has been applied.

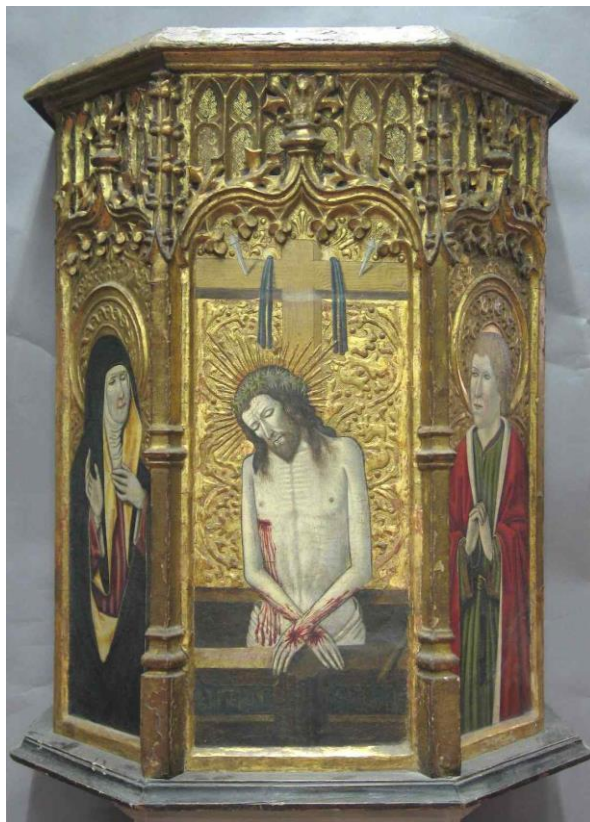


Fig. 9: Ramón Solà II.
Eucharistic Tabernacle.
Museu del Cau Ferrat,

¹² GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 182, cat. 510, Fig. 886; VELASCO 2020.

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Another parallel that helps to support our panel's attribution to Solà is the central compartment of the altarpiece predella of the parish church of Púbol (Girona) (**Fig. 10**), dedicated to the Virgin and lost during the Spanish Civil War,¹³ where we see a Christ that is identical to ours. The parallels can once again be observed in a number of aspects such as the position of the figure, the nimbus with its golden rays, as well as the important role played in the iconography by the Instruments of the Passion. We find the same kind of face in the Christ from a *Calvary* preserved in the treasury of Girona Cathedral (**Fig. 11**), part of the altarpiece dedicated to Sts. Benedict and Scholastica.¹⁴ That same *Calvary* also features another detail that helps us to support our attribution, as we see Mary pressing her hands together piously in a similar way as she does in our panel (**Fig. 12**). St. John's facial features are also similar in both cases (**Fig. 13**), while the carnation work on the perfectly highlighted pink cheeks is reminiscent of what we find on two figures from the *Annunciation* currently preserved in the treasury of Girona Cathedral (**Fig. 14**).¹⁵



Fig. 10: Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows*. Detail from the lost altarpiece of Púbol.

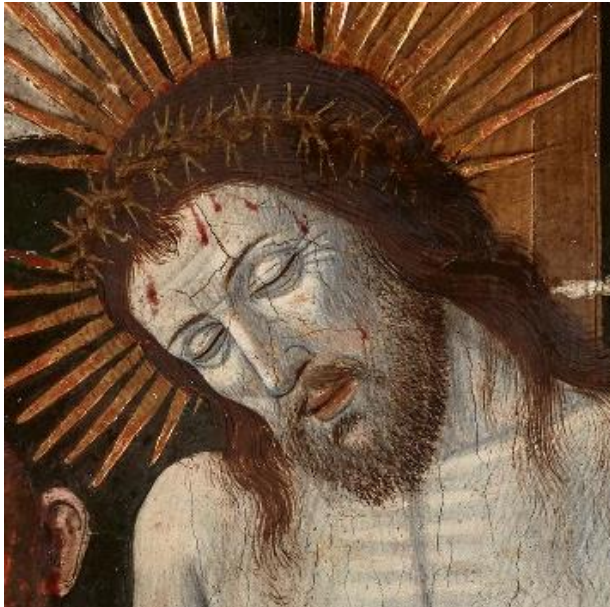
¹³ PUJOL 2004, p. 190.

¹⁴ GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 182, cat. 508, figs. 880-883.

¹⁵ GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 182, cat. 507, figs. 84-85.

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Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (detail).
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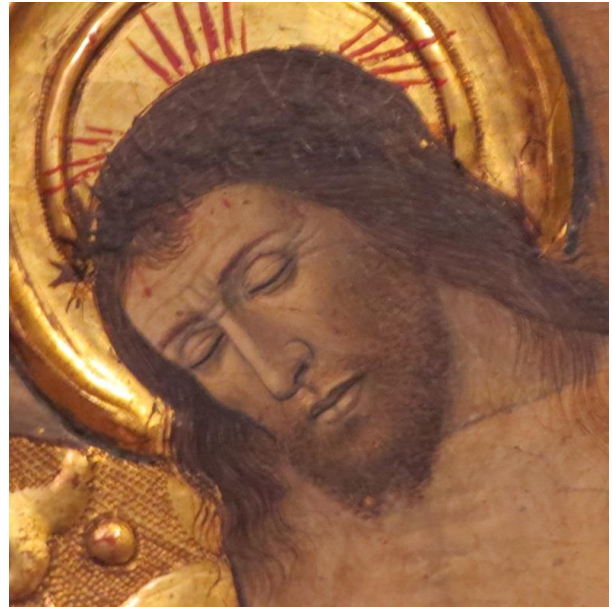


Fig. 11: Ramón Solà II, *Calvary* (detail) Girona Cathedral treasury.



Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (detail).
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Fig. 12: Ramón Solà II, *Calvary* (detail) Girona Cathedral treasury.

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Ramón Solà II. *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist (detail)*.
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Fig. 13: Ramón Solà II, *Calvary (detail)* Girona Cathedral treasury.



Fig. 14: Ramón Solà II, *Annunciation*. Girona Cathedral treasury.

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One odd aspect is the way the outer nimbus rings are executed, matching up entirely with what we find in a number of works by the painter. We refer, here, to the two outer concentric rings to be found in the majority of paintings by Ramón Solà II, such as the aforementioned compartments from the *Altarpiece of Sts. Benedict and Scholastica* (Fig. 15), as well as in a series of predella compartments depicting varying saints, one of which, showing St. James the Great, was recently purchased by the Museu d'Art in Girona (Fig. 16). These compartments belonged to the same predella as the Eucharistic tabernacle from the Museu del Cau Ferrat, and were identified by Chandler R. Post at a time when they were divided up between a private collection in Barcelona and the Madrid antiques dealer Apolinar Sánchez.¹⁶



Fig. 15: Ramón Solà II, *Sts. Benedict and Scholastica*.
Girona Cathedral treasury.



Fig. 16: Ramón Solà II, *St. James the Great*. Museu d'Art, Girona.

As regards the painter, Ramón Solà II is one of the masters who best represent the late Gothic in the Girona area. He is first documented in 1431, when he was tonsured while

¹⁶ POST 1938, p. 382, Fig. 137; GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 182, cat. 510, figs. 884-887.

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still a child. This has led us to believe he was born shortly after 1420.¹⁷ There are quite a lot of records documenting his professional career.¹⁸ He initially appears as working alongside his father, also a painter, under whom he must have trained. The documentation bears witness to commissions completed in the Girona area, whether in the capital, working for the Cathedral and the monastery of La Mercè, or in smaller towns such as Fornells, Verges, Lloret, Julià and Palafolls. He collaborated with other painters, such as Miquel Torell, Pere Terri, and Esteve Rovira, who was his brother-in-law. His style, along with the fact that his brother Esteve joined the workshop of Jaume Huguet in 1467, has led some historians to suggest a possible collaboration between Solà and the latter,¹⁹ which might be understood within the context of his stay in Barcelona, where he is recorded in 1465, working on the decoration of the royal palace, just when Huguet was undertaking the famous Condestable altarpiece, housed in the chapel of Santa Àgata.²⁰

Among the works that, until recently, were included in the Ramón Solà II catalogue, are those that were once associated with the Master of Gerona.²¹ Following close examination, however, it has been observed that these pieces were the work of a number of different artists.²² In recent years, this ensemble of paintings has been re-catalogued by Joan Valero, attributing to Ramón Solà II the two panels depicting the Annunciation housed at the Girona Cathedral treasury, perhaps his only documented work (**Fig. 14**);²³ the main panel from the *Altarpiece of Sts. Benedict and Scholastica* (**Fig. 15**) and the *Calvary* (**Fig. 17**), also in the Girona Cathedral treasury, as well as two narrative compartments in private collections; the aforementioned lost altarpiece from the parish church of Púbol; the Eucharistic tabernacle from the Museu del Cau Ferrat (**Fig. 9**), and

¹⁷ VALERO 2008, p. 64.

¹⁸ These are included in GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, pp. 181-182; FREIXAS 1983, pp. 182-186; VICTOR 1997, pp. 177-179; FREIXAS 1997, pp. 202-205; FREIXAS 2001, pp. 237-241; VALERO 2008, pp. 61-72.

¹⁹ GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 182; RUIZ 2000, pp. 12-16; RUIZ 2003, pp. 55-56.

²⁰ MOLINA 2006, p. 134; MOLINA 2008, p. 54

²¹ POST 1938, pp. 376-388; GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, pp. 182-183, cat. 507-518.

²² MOLINA 2008, pp. 54-55.

²³ SUTRÀ 1964, p. 43; VALERO 2008, p. 66.

the four predella compartments, also mentioned above, making up part of the same ensemble (Fig. 16); and, finally, a central section from an altarpiece depicting the Virgin and Child and crowned by a Calvary, also preserved at the Girona Cathedral treasury, becoming the last work to be included in the artist's catalogue.²⁴ Valero did not, however, include one other work some specialists attribute to him, the *Virgin and Child* housed at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias, from the Colección Masaveu (Fig. 18).²⁵



Fig. 17: Ramón Solà II, *Calvary*. Treasury of Girona Cathedral.



Fig. 18: Ramón Solà II, *Virgin and Child*. Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias.

In recent years, the figure of the Master of Girona, quite plausibly identified with Ramón Solà II, has been the subject of new reappraisal on the part of other specialists. In addition to Valero's proposal, we ought to mention a study by Rafael Cornudella addressing our painter along with the Master of Cruïlles, a newly-created figure who

²⁴ VALERO 2008, p. 66. Cfr. CORNUDELLA 2009, p. 13 and FAVÀ 2014, p. 65, Fig. 11.

²⁵ RUIZ 2000, p. 15; FAVÀ 2014, pp. 65-66, Fig. 12.

should be directly linked to Solà's context.²⁶ Taking a similar approach to that of Valero, Cornudella has removed from the catalogue of works attributed to Solà (who he still calls the Master of Girona) a series of pieces he believes to be by the Master of Cruïlles, meaning that the identity of our painter has become much more clearly defined. To this we should add an interesting study by César Favà, revealing a new work by Ramón Solà II, the upper section of an altarpiece dedicated to St. Cyricus, whose current location is unknown, and whose existence is recorded in old photos.²⁷ It is particularly tempting to wonder whether this work might not be the altarpiece dedicated to the Saints Cyricus and Julitta that Solà senior and Solà junior were undertaking in the town of Verges in 1460.²⁸

With regard to the origin of the panel we are dealing with here, we do not know what church it was intended for, but clearly for one in the Girona area. Nor can we directly link it to any of the ensembles currently attributed to the painter. In any case, its dimensions are not entirely dissimilar to those of the compartments of the *Altarpiece of Sts. Benedict and Scholastica* (Figs. 15 and 17). The main panel of said ensemble, housed in the Girona Cathedral treasury, measures 170 x 112 cm, while the *Calvary* that presided over the altarpiece measures 111 x 110 cm. We also have the measurements of one of the altarpiece's two known narrative compartments, the one showing St. Benedict supervising the construction of a temple, whose dimensions are 80 x 65 cm.²⁹ The dimensions of the second compartments, the one with St. Benedict destroying the idols, are unknown. Although we do not claim to establish a direct link between the panel we are studying here and the compartments of the *Altarpiece of Sts. Benedict and Scholastica*, we should not rule out the possibility that they all belonged to the same ensemble work, all the more so given that some of the panels making up the original altarpiece appeared on the art market and are currently in private hands. It is as such that one must bear in mind the hypothesis once put forward by Cornudella, who posited

²⁶ CORNUDELLA 2009, pp. 10-15.

²⁷ FAVÀ 2014: 67-68, Fig. 13.

²⁸ FREIXAS 1983, p. 184 and 206-207, doc. LVI.

²⁹ The measurements are annotated in GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 182, cat. 508.

that the Museu del Cau Ferrat Eucharistic tabernacle (**Fig. 9**) and the four predella compartments included in the same ensemble with it (**Fig. 16**), might have made up the predella of the *Altarpiece of Sts. Benedict and Scholastica*, taking into account the existing similarities in the decorative architectural features and giltwork.³⁰ This possibility, of course, would rule out the panel we are studying here being part of the altarpiece in question.

Finally, an additional possibility that should be considered regarding the origin of our panel involves another ensemble preserved in Girona Cathedral, the aforementioned central section from the altarpiece depicting the Virgin and Child with a Calvary at the top. Its dimensions (122 x 64 cm) mean it has a width similar to that of our *Man of Sorrows, the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist*, and as such we should not rule out the works having shared the same origin.

Alberto Velasco González

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³⁰ CORNUDELLA 2009, p. 13.

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