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Alonso Berruguete

(Paredes de Nava, c. 1488- Valladolid, 1561) Second quarter of the $16^{\rm th}$ century

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (A pair of busts)

Yellow pine or Scots pine wood, gilded and polychrome $53 \times 37 \times 24 \text{ cm}$ and $54 \times 37 \times 28 \text{ cm}$

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We see here two male portrait sculptures represented to shoulder-length and carved in polychrome wood. They are *Joseph of Arimathea* and *Nicodemus*, characters found in Christian hagiography, specifically in iconography on the *Burial of Jesus*, alongside the *Virgin Mary*, *Saint John*, *Mary Magdalene* and one other of the sainted women, known as *Mary of Clopas*.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme court. As narrated in the Gospels (John, 3, 1-21), Nicodemus visited Jesus one night to learn about his doctrine. Later, he would take part in the Burial of Jesus alongside *Joseph of Arimathea*, also a member of the Sanhedrin and a rich and respected man who as soon as the death of Jesus took place went to Pilate, the Roman governor, to obtain permission to bury the body. Once permission was granted, he wrapped the body in a canvas and placed it in a new sepulcher which was guarded by Roman soldiers, as arranged by Pilate. (Matthew 27, 57-60; Mark 15, 43-46; Luke 23, 50-55; John 19, 31-42).

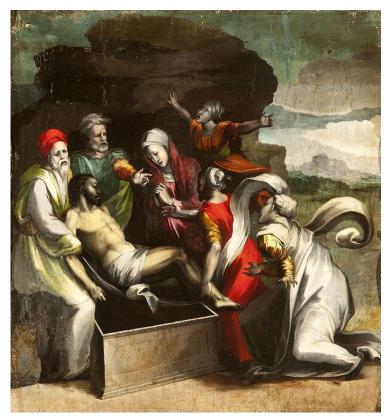


Fig. 1. Alonso Berruguete, *The Entombment of Christ*, oil on canvas, 1530-1540, church of San Pedro, Fuentes de Nava,

In representations of the Burial of Jesus, both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus stand out from other characters by their Eastern attire. The former appears richly dressed, his head covered, as opposed to the latter who looks more modest. Generally, Joseph of Arimathea is placed holding the top half of the body while Nicodemus holds his legs. (Fig. 1) However, in scenes from the Crucifixion and Lamentation over the Dead Christ, both appear in the background as spectators of the tragic moment, looking serious and worried.

These two portrait sculptures were created as a decorative element in the architectural structure of an altarpiece in a church. Representation of Biblical characters was common in 16th Century iconographic programs. Given their dimension, larger than natural size, and their position, looking in opposing directions, they must have been placed at the ends of a large altarpiece, complementing a Calvary.

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From a technical point of view, the busts were carved from a pine wood trunk, one block for each bust, partially leveled on the back, and so are very heavy. The back is left uncarved in both pieces, proving they were created to hang from a vertical surface. Abundant grains and knots are visible on the back.

The polychrome carried out using the *sgraffito* technique: different plain colors are applied over a continuous layer of polished gold leaf with an egg binder, making the gilt reappear using a boxwood brush. Flesh tones are painted in tempera and polished, making the reddish cheeks and the moustache and beard stand out, grey in the case of *Joseph of Arimathea* and brown in the case of *Nicodemus*. In both cases, the iris in their eyes is painted in dark grey and with a two different tones of blue, respectively, while their eyebrows are painted grey in the former and brown in the latter. The importance of the clothes that cover them stands out, imitating rich fabrics with different motifs.

Joseph of Arimathea wears a red cape with adorned hood and gilded trimming with arabesques and, below it, a bluish grey turban appears with some gilt and dotted remains.

Nicodemus covers himself with a light grey turban with blue stripes, dots and gilded trimming, presenting a mounted stone at the center and folded over a brown coif that simulates leather. Over the turban, he wears a red bonnet with gilded arabesques on the side of which hangs a gilded tassel. The tunic is light in color with a wide border at the neck, decorated in similar fashion and held with a button at the center.

Considering both the model and style, and the techniques used in their creation, as well as the polychrome, these carvings fall within the artistic production of Alonso Berruguete.

Alonso Berruguete (Paredes de Nava, h. 1488- Valladolid, 1561) introduced Mannerism in Spain. After a long stay in Italy, on his return to his home country, he was forced to adapt the secular principles of Italian sculpture to the Spanish artistic spirit, where religion permeated everything. His creativity was such that he became an artist of great personality, creating a style based on proportion, the importance of drawing and, especially, the distortion of figures. He used the stretched ten-face standard and came up with stylized and nervous-looking models that demonstrate his fast manner of working, more concerned with expression than with the perfection of shape.

The models created by Alonso Berruguete are very realistic and very expressive. Their physiognomic features are repeated across many of them. They have elongated faces, slanting and sunken eyes placed at an angle, a furrowed brow with arched eyebrows, marked cheeks, the nose high and thin, and a small mouth. We find all of these characteristics in the busts of *Joseph of Arimathea* and *Nicodemus*, although the mouth in the former is closed, his expression a grimace of deep sadness, and is open in the latter, showing his top teeth, with a yearning expression. In regard to their moustache and beard, they are

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carved in thick, wavy locks that are identical to those found in other representations of Prophets, Patriarchs or Saints created by Berruguete. The way the models are presented, the bust to the front and their head turned slightly to one side, frontality broken by the turned face, is one of the artist's most original characteristics and is palpable in the two pieces presented here.

Furthermore, the incorporation of busts in the structure of his altarpieces was a decorative resource frequently used by Alonso Berruguete. Inspired by Italian art, in turn taken from the ancient world, more specifically from Roman mosaics, sarcophagi, medallions or in the several reliefs of emperors and characters in ancient times, they were commonplace among Renaissance artists. Berruguete included it in the altarpiece of San Benito el Real in Valladolid, undertaken between 1526 and 1532, which is housed, disassembled, at the Museo Nacional de Escultura (National Sculpture Museum). This gigantic work was composed of paintings, reliefs and imagery with scenes from the life of Christ and Saint Benedictine, to whom the altarpiece is dedicated. The image of Christ that formed part of the Calvary is three meters tall, while the Virgin and Saint John are almost two meters tall. Many other saints, prophets and patriarchs appear in the altarpiece but what we wish to point out here are the *Busts of the Prophets* that emerged from roundels in the end panels, contemplating the scenes from above with great realism. (Figs. 2a, 2b)

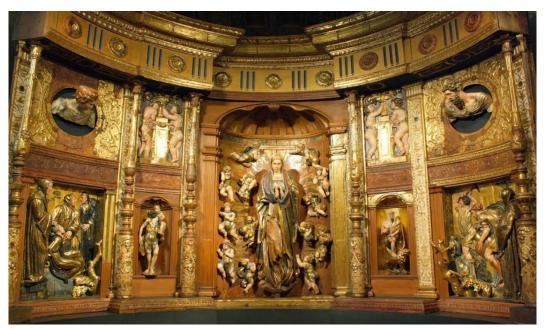


Fig 2a. Alonso Berruguete, altarpiece of San Benito el Real in Valladolid

A few years later, in 1535, Berruguete again included two *Male busts* looking to the front within roundels at the ends of the central panel of the altarpiece in the chapel of Colegio de Santiago el Mayor

¹ There used to be four but only three remain at the Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.

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Fig 2b. Alonso Berruguete, *Busts of the Prophets*, altarpiece of San Benito el Real in Valladolid

(also known as Colegio del arzobispo Fonseca) at the University of Salamanca.² (Figs. 3a, 3b, 3c) He would do the same again two years later, in 1537, in the altarpiece of the Epiphany, undertaken for the parochial church of Santiago Apóstol in Valladolid. Again we find here two medallions with busts inscribed in laurel wreaths, *Saint Peter* and *Saint Paul*, which despite being placed at great height to both sides of the pinnacle are finished to perfection.³ (Figs. 4 and 5)



Fig 3a. Alonso Berruguete, altarpiece in the chapel of Colegio de Santiago el Mayor, University of

² 1535. They have been connected to those that appear on the facade proposed by Filarete in his *Tratado de Arquitectura*, as all the other designs in the altarpiece. M. Arias Martínez, *Alonso Berruguete, Prometeo de la Escultura*, Palencia, 2011, p. 123.

³ They are housed on site at the La Haya family's chapel. Their dimensions are 117 x 80 x 20 cm.

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Fig 3b. Alonso Berruguete, *Saint Peter*, altarpiece in the chapel of Colegio de Santiago



Fig 3c. Alonso Berruguete, *Saint Paul*, altarpiece in the chapel of Colegio de Santiago





Fig 4. Alonso Berruguete, altarpiece in the chapel of Colegio de Santiago el Mayor

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Figs. 5 Alonso Berruguete, **Saint Paul and Saint Peter**, Medallions with Busts, 1537, Altarpiece of the Epiphany, Iglesia de Santiago Apóstol, Valladolid.

Furthermore, in the small altarpiece of Saint Anne in the chapel of Juan Pablo Oliverio at the convent of San Benito el Real in Valladolid, installed in 1540, there are four *Bust*s inside small squares placed at the pilaster bases.⁴ (Fig. 6a, 6b, 6c) Lastly, this is also the iconographic resource used in the choir stalls in Toledo cathedral, where *Heads in scallop shell niches* decorate the seats. (Fig. 7)



Figs. 6a, 6b, 6c. Alonso Berruguete, altarpiece of Santa Ana (detail), 1540, chapel of Juan Pablo Oliverio, convent of San Benito el Real, Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid...



⁴ 1540. Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.

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Fig. 7a. Martínez, Domingo, Toledo. Choir stalls from the Cathedral. Ca. 1859. Etching and engraving. Monumentos arquitectónicos de España, Academia Colecciones.



After this tour over most of the altarpieces created by Berruguete, it is noteworthy that the first one he undertook, in Mejorada de Olmedo (1523-1526), didn't include these motifs. (Fig. 8)

Fig. 8. Vasco de la Zarza y Alonso Berruguete, Altarpiece of la Mejorada de Olmedo, (Valladolid), 1523- 1526, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.

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Even if the draft of the Mejorada altarpiece may have been by Vasco de la Zarza (active between 1508 and 1524), better known than Berruguete at the time and with whom he shared the commission, the fact that he died shortly after signing the contract meant that all later work presented features of Alonso Berruguete's style. This, together with the similarity in styles and polychrome, lead us to think that the Busts of *Joseph of Arimathea* and *Nicodemus* identified herein may have been part of this altarpiece.

There is an outpouring of imagination in the eight reliefs that illustrate the lives of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ in the Mejorada altarpiece, both in how the scenes are composed and the models that comprise it, directly inspired by Classic sculptures. In these reliefs Berruguete used facial expression and posture to convey expression, creating scenes that are full of life in which the polychrome, with an abundance of red and gilt in the clothing, adds narrative strength and where his genius and most personal characteristics are on full display. (Figs. 9, 10 and 11)



Fig. 9a, 9b. Alonso Berruguete, *The Birth of the Virgin*, altarpiece of la Mejorada de Olmedo (Valladolid), 1523-1526, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.

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Fig. 10a, 10b. Alonso Berruguete, *The Agony in the Garden*, altarpiece of la Mejorada de Olmedo (Valladolid), 1523-1526, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.



Figs. 11a, 11b. Alonso Berruguete, *The Resurrection* (detail) altarpiece of la Mejorada de Olmedo (Valladolid), 1523-1526, Museo Nacional de Escultura.

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The same can be said about the small medallions on the predella surrounded by plant wreaths representing *Saint Catherine* and *Saint Jerome in his study accompanied by a lion* (Fig.12). The panel is completed with scallop shell niches with small sculptures and the family crest of those commissioning the work on the sides. The piece is adorned with baluster pilasters, griffons, figureheads and cherubs placed among dense plant decorations comprising laurel leaves, fruit and double lyres, all over a red background with abundance of gilt (Fig. 13). The use of color in the polychrome is specific to his creations and must have been carried out immediately after finishing the work as the motifs used in the *sgraffito* correspond to those used at the start of the 16th Century.



Fig. 12. Alonso Berruguete, *St Jerome in his study*, altarpiece of la Mejorada de Olmedo (Valladolid), 1523-1526, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.



Fig. 13, Alonso Berruguete, *Ornamentation* detail, altarpiece of la Mejorada de Olmedo (Valladolid), 1523- 1526, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.

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Fig. 14. Alonso Berruguete, *Saint Jerome*, church of Santa María la Real de Nieva, Segovia.

Saint Jerome in penitence, identified in the church of Santa María la Real de Nieva (Segovia), could be among the sculptures that may have belonged to the Mejorada altarpiece. With stark, nervous features full of inner strength, it reminds us of the sculptures of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. (Fig. 14)

Changes were introduced during the Baroque era that altered the altarpiece set, especially in the central panel where a niche was added. In the 19th Century, after properties were seized from the church, it went to the church of San Andrés, also in Olmedo, where it remained until it was transferred to the Museo Nacional de Escultura in Valladolid, where an attempt has been made to reconstruct it to its original state.

The altarpiece can be seen in old photographs of the San Andrés church. Although at the time it wasn't in its original state, these photographs served as templates for setting it up. This was also helped by a document detailing expenses from Francisca de Zúñiga, widow of Álvaro de Daza, commissioner of the altarpiece, which amounted to 15,000 maravedis

paid to Berruguete for "some items that must be placed in the altarpiece, on the pinnacle and the pilasters." Among such items, two candlestick holders placed at the pinnacle and a pair of children holding hanging drapes on the pilasters which were included after its restoration. However, it is unknown if the large scallop shell niche that crowns it is the original, which would predate the model found in the altarpiece at San Benito. It is in that place, on both sides of the half circumference that crowns the Calvary, where the busts of *Joseph of Arimathea* and *Nicodemus* may have been placed. (Fig. 15)

The evolution in Alonso Berruguete's style can been observed in the magnificent sculptures of the altarpiece in San Benito. They are very similar to those of the Mejorada altarpiece and the busts of *Joseph of Arimathea* and *Nicodemus*. As can be seen, it is in the faces of *Abraham* from the sculpture of *Sacrifice of Isaac* (Figs. 16a, 16b), *Saint Christopher* (Fig. 17), *Saint Jerome* (Fig. 18), or in one of his magnificent reliefs, the *Circumcision* (Fig. 19), where his style reaches the height of its splendor.

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Fig. 15. Photography of the altarpiece of la Mejorada during the transfer to the church of San Andrés, Olmedo.



Figs. 16a, 16b. Alonso Beruguete, The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1526-1532, altarpiece of San Benito el Real, Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura.

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Fig. 17. Alonso Berruguete, *St Cristopher*, 1526-1532, altarpiece of San Benito el Real, Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.



Fig. 18. Alonso Berruguete, *St Jerome*, 1526- 1532, altarpiece of San Benito el Real, Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.



Fig. 19. Alonso Berruguete, the Circumcision, 1526-1532, altarpiece of San Benito el Real, Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.

Lastly, we would like to draw your attention to the scene in the relief on the *Nativity* located in the altarpiece of the Epiphany in the church of Santiago in Valladolid, where the figure of *Saint Joseph*,

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especially, defines Berruguete's style, his reliance on the ancient world and the great expression he was able to carve out of his models. **(Figs. 20)**



Fig. 20, Alonso Berruguete, **the Nativity**, 1537, altarpiece of the Epiphany, church of Santiago, Valladolid.



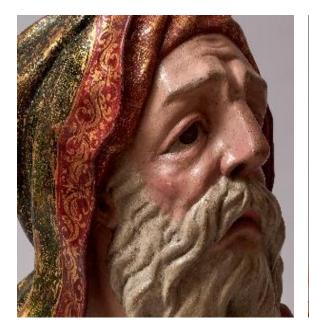
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Nicodemus



Saint John the Evangelist (detail), the altarpiece of San Benito el Real in Valladolid



Joseph of Arimathea



Saint John the Evangelist (detail), the altarpiece of San Benito el Real in Valladolid

Rosario Coppel

October 2019

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Technical Study

The state of preservation is generally very good. With reference to the support, the Scots or Yellow Pine (without bleeding) is in a completely stable state and without any woodworm orifices. The support or preparatory layer of plaster to absorb the polychromy was applied using calcium sulfate (matt gesso) and animal glues.

The different types of polychromy used were as follows:

The polychrome execution is exceptionally well-preserved. The polychrome layer should be divided into two clearly-differentiated areas, the clothes and the skin tones or carnations. Their state prior to restoration was extremely uneven. The clothes were subjected to a change of design at a date subsequent to execution, probably in order to arrange the busts high up on an altarpiece or in its attic.

It is worth bearing in mind that when these two magnificent sculptures were executed, in the second quarter of the 16th century, and during the entire Renaissance period, carving and altarpiece workshops were perfectly well-regulated in each of the guild's professional aspects, from the design of the outline and organisation plan to polychromy.

The polychrome processes involved in these works were generally out-sourced to specialised workshops and were extremely expensive due to the materials used, such as gold, silver and varying pigments. Although each master carver had his preferences, a bidding and examination process would be undertaken among the best master polychromers to choose who would end up decorating the carvings in their natural state and breathe life and splendor into the sculptures. These polychrome executions, which were then extremely highly prized, were normally undertaken on a piece-by-piece basis at polychrome workshops and studios, before they were put together and arranged in churches by joiners.

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Clothing:

As tended to be the case in this period, due to fashion or perhaps to match colors with other sculptures included in the altarpiece for which these busts were intended, the original estofado design of the clothes was replaced by what we see today. Judging by their style and drawing, these changes were carried out in the last quarter of the 16th century. They were undertaken in the traditional "estofa" style; different plain colors were applied over a continuous layer of polished gold leaf to which egg binder

was added, allowing the gilt drawings to emerge using a boxwood brush.

Having carried out all the relevant tests and studies, we can assert that the original polychromy can be

found under the late 16th -century "estofado".

Carnation effects:

At first glance the skin tones appear to be in a terrible state, covered in a blackish coat of animal glue and a range of partial repaints that have undergone serious deterioration. Following examination using a binocular microscope, it was possible to observe that this dirt was made up of three perfectly-differentiated layers: the original carnation made of binder and polished; a layer of oxidised glue on top of the original carnation; and a series of rough oil repaints over pretty much all of the surface, as

well as other dirt deposits, solidified dust and smoke from candles.

The removal of this dirt and additional repaint material, oxidized glue and subsequently-applied oil paint was carried out layer by layer, with the help of powerful lenses, alternating chemical and

mechanical methods. The result is the 95% recovery of the original polychromy.

Nicodemus:

Light grey turban with dots and gilt trimming over a sort of coif simulating leather. On top of the turban he wears a red bonnet with gilt arabesques, down the side of which a gilt tassel is hanging. His tunic is of a light color with a border of gilt decoration and a gilt button in the middle. He has pink carnation, reddish cheekbones, a dark brown beard, and darkly-painted eyes and eyebrows.

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Joseph of Arimathea:

A cloak covering the entire bust, with a hood, vermillion red with gilt arabesque decorations. Under the hood we can see a grey-blue turban similar to the one worn by Nicodemus. Reddish cheekbones, light grey beard and moustache. Eyes and eyebrows painted black.

The wood from which the sculptures are carved is Yellow Pine or Scots Pine, and each bust is constructed out of one solid block, partially planed at the back. At the time, in order to source these noble wood, pine trees were cut down in the first moon of January or February, depending on the area and year. They would let the wood dry, with the tree top facing down on the hillsides. By doing so they ensured the wood was full of resin, in other words pine of an extremely high density, very much like the oak that was imported from the north of Europe. The grain of the wood at the back of the busts is extremely visible as it was never polychromed.

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Partial Selective Cleaning: Outstanding Results



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Recently we had proceeded to a partial removing of the late 16th century polychromies of the Busts and as we have anticipated, the original polychromies of the first half of the 16th century had appeared and are in an excellent state of conservation. (Figs. 1 and 2).

In this partial cleaning, some areas with the polychromies of the late 16th century had been removed and the original renaissance motifs, "esgrafiados and estofados" done with red "cochinilla" lacquer and gold leaf can be seen.

The red lacquer was made with the colorant of the insect red cochinilla that came from the colonies in South America in the first half of the 16th century. The polychromies have an extraordinary quality and the reason of the amazing state of conservation is that the original polychromies had been covered by a later polychromy done in the end of the 16th century, this painting had preserved the original polychromy.

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Cochineal Red Lacquer

The most brilliant crimson red dye was obtained from a group of scale insects of the superfamily Coccoidea. In America this deep crimson color was extracted from Dacylopius or Coccus, an American species of the family of the Coccoidea that yields more red colorant than any of them. Both cultivated and wild forms of the tiny American parasite, called Cochineal, feed on moisture and nutrients from the fruit bearing prickly pear cactus plants; native in tropical and subtropical areas of Mexico and South America. To make cochineal red, the colorant is extracted from the dried bodies of the female insects. A mordant is required to help bond this dye to the textile fibers. This practice was artfully executed by Andean dyers in the highlands of Perú, Bolivia and Ecuador in the centuries before the Spanish conquest. This procedure was described in 1653 by Spanish Jesuit missionary Bernabé Cobo who lived in Mexico and Perú from 1599 to 1657. Cochineal red was known as a dye in Mexico and South America at least as early as the second century BC and was used profusely by the Pre Columbian people. It colored special rituals and ceremonial textiles worn by rulers in Mexico and Peru. What remains in the Andean areas, rare examples of dyed featherwork, textiles are evidence of the use of cochineal as pigment. In Mexico the cochineal red was used in painted native codices, maps and tribute documents. Spaniards as Bernardino de Sahagún and Gonzalo Gomez de Cervantes documented the cultivation, harvesting and drying of cochineal insects in Mexico. In the Andes of South America, cochineal was called "magna" or "macnu" by the Quechua and Aymará. The Spaniards noted its presence as soon as they put foot in the region in the 1530. The Spanish crown had decreted that luxury cloth such as silk and velvet could not be produced in the Americas. The quality and color of the cloth one wore indicated one's status and identity. For centuries the color purple had carried royal connotations. By the end of the 15th century on the eve of the discoveries of the Americas the famous shellfish purple dyeworks of antiquity had all disappeared due to overproduction. In 1464 Pope Paul II finally officially changed "Cardinal's Purple" to red which could be produced from insects rather than shellfish. By that time the source of the crimson color so prized for luxury cloth and artworks would have been Cochineal from the Americas which have been slowly replacing the kermes or grana from Spain, Sicily and the Armenian or Polish insects that Venetian traders brought from the East.

In 1523 the Spanish King Carlos I ordered Hernán Cortés to inform him at once whether and how much kermes, at first Spaniards incorrectly thought the American insects to be identical to the European grana, had been found in New Spain and to "cause as much as possible to be collected with diligence"

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By the first half of the 16th century the Spanish flotillas that travelled annually between the Americas and Spain were bringing literally tons of the dried insects to Europe. Shipments of Cochineal landed in Seville and later in Cadiz, then the Cochineal were traded to the North, to the Netherlands and France. At the same time Cochineal from the Americas was shipped in the Manila Galeons. In the first period of international cultural exchange from the 16th century to the 18th century Cochineal was used in works of art in areas as far flung as the remote mountainous regions of Uzbekistan and the Indonesian archipelago.

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Post Partially Cleaning Results

When these later polychromies had been removed, the red Cochineal lacquer, monochrome red, blue and green and gold leafs "estofados "and "esgrafiados" appeared. The motifs and drawings are the same as some sculptures of Alonso Berruguete. (Fig. 3 and 4).



Fig. 3. Alonso Berruguete, the Circumcision, 1526-1532, altarpiece of San Benito el Real, Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.



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The best sculptors and altarpieces makers went to work to Castilla in the 16th century. Castilla was very rich so the best artists from France, Flandes and Italy established their workshops in this region being the dioceses of Calahorra la Calzada one of the most important centers of Castillian sculpture with many altarpieces workshops working in that moment.















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