



JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

Brazil
18th century

**SAINT BENEDICT OF
PALERMO**

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Saint Benedict of Palermo

Carved polychrome wood
Sgraffito and “estofado” work
Cross and halo in hammered and incised silver
36 x 20 cm
Provenance: Private collection

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St. Benedict of Palermo (San Fratello c. 1524 - Palermo 1589), also called Benedict the Black, Benedict the Moor or Benedict of San Fratello. In Brazil he is also called São Benedito das Flores. The son of African slaves, he was a hermit before becoming a Franciscan. It is thought his parents worked on a plantation near Messina where they had been brought from Africa. In around 1564 he entered the monastery of Santa María in Palermo and, despite not being able to read or write, due to his saintly character he was appointed guardian of the community, then vicar and master of services, and proved an inspiration to everyone, as he seemed to possess divine enlightenment. He subsequently went on to take responsibility for the kitchens, where he showed great humility and charity towards the needy. He died in 1589. He was beatified by Pope Benedict XIV in 1743, and canonized in 1807 by Pius VII. He has become the patron saint of African Americans and, in particular, black slaves.

Our beautiful and expressive free-standing sculpture of Saint Benedict the Moor, or Benedicto de Palermo as he is called in Brazil, is depicted standing on a plinth as a young man with exquisite and dulcet features that also allude to his African heritage. He is dressed in the long-sleeved Franciscan habit, secured at the waist with the typical rope belt, and a short cape or pelerine with a high neck and a triangular hood falling down his back. We can also observe the saint's attributes: the cross and bunch of roses.

Benedict's habit presents vertical folds towards the top, whereas the lower part is lavishly decorated and infused with movement, being hitched up at the front by his left hand, which is also holding a pot containing roses against his body. In his right hand he is holding a straight, simple and austere silver cross, which as mentioned earlier is one of his attributes. The saint boasts a head of hair with delicate and pronounced curls, crowned by a silver halo with rays of light featuring floral motifs. Under his habit we can make out two feet in sandals resting ethereally on a cushion.

It is worth highlighting the great expressiveness of the young face, with its half-open mouth and soft, deep gaze communicating both surprise and humility, perhaps in wonder at one of the miracles attributed to him. One of these is alluded to by the flowers the saint is hiding in the folds of his cloak; it was said he often gave the poor and meek food from the convent stores, and on one occasion was reprimanded by a superior. But, when he opened up his cloak, a bunch of roses fell to the floor.

The traditional Franciscan belt, consisting of a rope with three knots, is highlighted in gold to emphasize the saint's intercession in difficult births, a mediation he effected by means of his belt.

It is also worth mentioning the work's skilful gilding, along with the sgraffito and estofado work on the clothing, which combines beautiful floral motifs that



San Benito de Palermo, altar Lateral, Nossa Senhora de Hommens Pretos. Recife, Brasil, Siglo XVIII

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stand out against the expressive sgraffito of subtle lines executed with great dramatic effect. The lower hem of the cloak and the edges of the pelerine are also highlighted with gold leaf, and decorated with round punchmarks and both linear and plant ornamentation.

As mentioned earlier, attention is drawn to the saint's miracles through great use of polychromy, as may be seen in the bunch of roses with its varying tones of red, and in the gold leaf applied to the Franciscan belt with its three knots, which stands out against the dark Franciscan habit that attempts to simulate brown flannel.

Throughout the 18th century, Brazil underwent a major period of economic splendour due to the exploitation of its gold and diamond mines in the Minas Gerais region. This wealth attracted both European and local artistic talent, and gave rise to a Baroque era of great importance, with a particular blossoming of the art of sculpture. However, given the majority of works prior to the 20th century were unsigned, any attempt to attribute them faces various obstacles, though that has not stopped a number of names coming to the fore. It is important to point out that this artistic style did not reach the country until well into the 18th century, largely through Portuguese émigrés, and that it quickly adopted very particularly characteristics, above all in the wealthy Minas Gerais area, as mentioned above.

This sculpture belongs to the Brazilian school, as is clearly demonstrated by the saint's features.

One of the most important genres of viceregal art was the depiction, both in painting and sculpture, of black saints. Religion and slavery were two essential elements enabling the Portuguese crown to achieve



San Elesban, Brasil, segunda mitad del siglo XVIII
120 x 105 x 50cm. Iglesia del Rosario, Recife,
Pernambuco, Brasil



San Benito de Palermo, Lisboa, Portugal. Igreja do
Madre de Deus, siglo XVII- XVIII

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its goals in the colonization of the Americas. In various regions of Brazil, including Minas Gerais and the north-east of the country, confraternities were formed by and for slaves, whose worship centered on black saints of African origin. In the evangelical process throughout Africa and the Americas, one devotional object proved particularly efficient in the 16th century: the rosary. The devotion born of the appearance of the Virgin Mary to St. Dominic in 1218 spread among Europeans through the Dominicans, whose friars welcomed the blacks arriving in Lisbon. Nossa Senhora do Rosario dos Homens Pretos (Our Lady of the Rosario of Black Men) is one of the most widespread confraternities in Recife, whose church included altars dedicated to Sts. Elesbaan, Benedict of Palermo, Anthony of Catalagirona, Moses the Hermit, Iphigenia and Melchior, all of African origin. These brotherhoods of black men constituted privileged pockets of liberty, although not of equality with white men. Given the number of renowned Brazilian artists of African descent working during the colonial period, it seems quite feasible that the creators of sculptures depicting black saints might themselves be black or mixed race sculptors, although there is no recorded information on said artists.

Depicting black saints was one of the Catholic Church's strategies aimed at the sought-after catechesis and evangelization of the black slave population, recently arrived on the Portuguese colony. The combination of black saints with traditional ones also constituted a form of religious syncretism. The search for moral virtues in the lives of black saints contributed to combatting undesired habits and customs, which would generate social disorder. They sought to establish a profile for the faithful that cultivated humility and prayer, and to this end made use of the history of saints and developed hagiographies that would assist the good and faithful Catholics.

St. Benedict of Palermo was venerated, and his virtues, goodness, charity and excellence were exalted to illustrate the Christian predisposition of blacks and those of mixed race. In his hagiographies, much of the focus is on his poverty, obedience, chastity, proclivity for fasting, humility, prayer and also his many miracles, mostly aimed at children, and both rich and poor men and women. Particular emphasis is given to medical subjects such as the healing of the blind and his intercession in childbirth complications. In building up this Christian model based on a black saint from Sicily, the intention was to portray him as an example for the African population to follow, which would serve as a tool for their social integration.

Vivian Velar de Irigoyen

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