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ARTS & ANTIQUES

Claudius Beissonat

Naples, Italy, second half of the 17th century.y

**CHRIST
ON THE CROSS**

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Christ on the Cross

Carved ivory, wooden cross.

Height from head to toes: 74 cm. / Height from hands to toes: 81 cm.

Signed: Claudius Beissonat, Fecit Neapoli



Fig. 1 Claudius Beissonat, *Christ on the Cross*, Naples, Italy, second half of the 17th century, carved ivory, wooden cross, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando.



Fig. 2 Claudius Beissonat, *Christ on the Cross*, Naples, Italy, second half of the 17th century, carved ivory, wooden cross, Private Collection.

Extraordinary ivory sculpture depicting a Crucified Christ

Two other, almost identical, copies are known, one of which can be found at the San Fernando Royal Academy of Madrid, and the other at the Monasterio de la Encarnación, also in Madrid (Fig. 1).

Claudius Beissonat was living in Spain around 1664, before moving to Naples, as many pieces of his works of art have been located on Spanish soil and were dated with older dates than the ones he sent from Italy to the Spanish Crown. The chronology of his sculptures is also known because some of them are mentioned for the first time in the Inventory of Doña Maria Ana de Austria, Queen of Spain, in 1696 (Fig. 2).

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Fig. 3 Claudius
Beissonat, *Christ on
the Cross*, Naples, Italy,
second half of the 17th
century, carved ivory,
wooden cross, Private
Collection.

The sculpture depicts a large-scale living Christ on the Cross, following the tradition of the so-called “agonizing” images, arranged on a two-tiered base typical of works showing Italian influence. The figure is presented secured by four nails to a flat cross (in line with works from the end of the 17th century), with his legs stretched out alongside each other, and the slight raising of his right foot on top of his left, where we can observe the way the wounds form folds of flesh to show the weight of the body hanging from the nails. His torso is slightly bent towards the right, in the interests of adapting to the material itself. His arms stretch out above horizontal (Fig. 3), and his head is seen raised and turned to the right, with an imploring gaze upwards and an expressive look with his half-open mouth where we can just make out his teeth and part of his tongue.



Fig. 4 Claudius Beissonat, *Christ on the Cross*, Naples, Italy, second half of the 17th century, carved ivory, wooden cross, Private Collection.

His beard is short, curly and with a parting down the middle, in accordance with traditional iconography. He wears a crown of thorns on top, carved in ivory. We do not observe any wounds other than those of the nails, thereby showing a clear interest in offering a body to satisfy Classical tastes. The way the nude anatomy is approached contrasts with the plasticity of the loincloth, which is held on with string, forming undulations and wrinkles in an attempt to generate volume and chiaroscuro, leaving part of the cloth free and flapping in a way reminiscent of the *Crucified Christ* by the same artist housed at the Monasterio de la Encarnación in Madrid. Apart from the figure of Christ and the cartouche with the Latin inscription IESVS NAZARENVS REX IUDAEORVM, very much in the artist's style, in the lower section of the Cross we find a skull and crossed bones (Fig. 4), as often appear in this sort of piece, and which make reference to the location of Christ's crucifixion, on the Mount of Golgotha, as well as to the symbolic figure of Adam, in accordance with tradition as popularised from the 13th century by the Golden Legend, narrating his expulsion from Paradise. On the back of the image, on the left hip, we can clearly read the inscription: CLAVDIVS / BEISSONAT / FECIT: NEAPOLI.

According to the core insights provided by Margarita Estella Marcos's study,¹ no documentary information has survived on

Beissonat. Although he would sign his works (generally found in Spain) as executed in Naples, his French surname suggests a possible Franche-Comté origin, while his sculptural style brings France to mind, although using clearly Italian models of great anatomical balance and plasticity of expressive content, quite in contrast with the greater pathos of traditional Spanish religious imagery, and more in line with the postulates of Classical aesthetics.

Note

1. ESTELLA MARCOS. M.M., *La escultura barroca de marfil en España*. Escuelas Europeas y coloniales. Madrid, 1984; and "Marfiles", in *La Historia de las artes aplicadas y decorativas en España* (1982)

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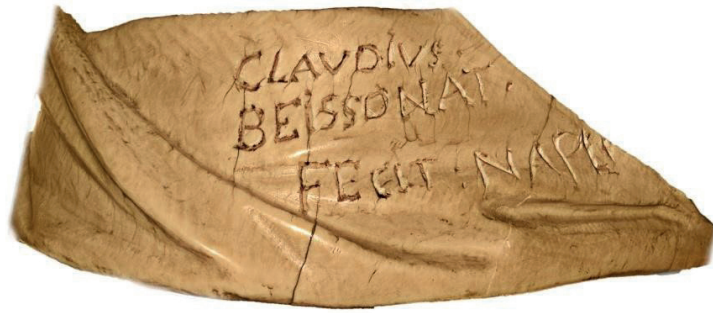


Fig. 5 Claudius Beissonat, *Christ on the Cross*, Naples, Italy, second half of the 17th century, carved ivory, wooden cross, Private Collection.

The discovery of a number of documents dealing with artists from the Franche-Comté region, such as Claudio David and Pedro Disses, working in Spain at the height of their powers, supports the Beissonat hypothesis, as it has also been shown that one of the above, David, left for Italy, where he worked in Rome in the field of ebony carving. In Estella's opinion, Beissonat may have arrived in Spain at about that time, around 1664, before moving to Naples, as many of his works have been found in Spain, and it is likely that these pre-date the pieces he would later send from Italy to the Spanish Court. According to the historian, his style matches that of Naples in the late 17th century, but his works also present a robustness and weightiness that reminds one of French ebony-carving, with sharp folds executed in his Christs, establishing parallels with those made at that time by Jaillot, a sculptor from Franche-Comté working in Versailles for the French Court. Both the Christ we are introducing here, signed on the left hip, and the Crucified Christ at Madrid's Monasterio de la Encarnación (signed on the back of the hip) (Fig. 5), and that of the Royal Academy of San Fernando, which were executed at roughly this time, present similarities in terms of composition, according Estella, to Alessandro Algardi's bronze Christ in the Chiesa della Carità in Bologna. She also points out that his work must have enjoyed considerable success, given the many others that would copy his models using a very similar style. In conclusion, our *Christ on the Cross* is, without doubt, a work of the very highest artistic quality.

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