

GREGORIO BIGARNY (OR PARDO) (BURGOS, C. 1513 – 1551)

VIRGEN CON EL NIÑO (VIRGIN AND CHILD)

Alabaster

Height: 10.24 inches

Width: 9.84 inches



This small and delicate alabaster piece intended for worship must be classified among the Italian-inspired models carried out by Spanish Renaissance sculptors in the cities of Burgos, Valladolid and Toledo in the first half of the 16th century. In fact, this piece reminds of the Florentine Quattrocento prototypes and the models by Donatello o Mino da Fiesole and, above all, to those by the Della Robbia family (Lucca, Andrea, Giovanni, etc.) that become very popular in mid-15th century. From this Virgin and Child prototype a great number of pieces in enameled terracotta were created, also intended for worship and with slight variations mainly related to the different positions and attitude of the child and how the Virgin holds him (fig. 1).

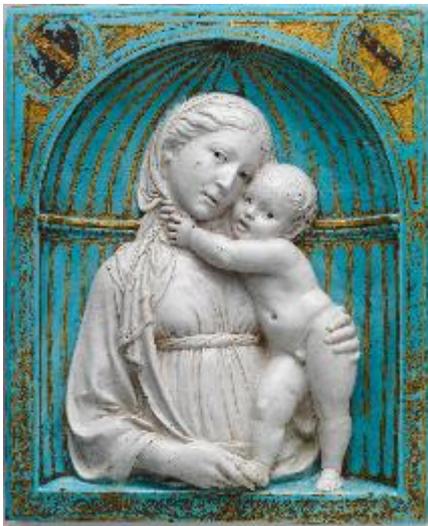


Fig. 1. Virgins with Child belonging to the Della Robbia family Louvre, Bargello, Metropolitan, etc.



These aesthetic and composite models were introduced in Spain by Spanish artists who visited Italy and brought back the new techniques and trends seen there and revolutioned the work done in the peninsula until then. Regarding sculpture, the most important artists were Diego de Siloe, Alonso Berruguete, Bartolome Ordoñez and Gaspar Becerra. Felipe Bigarny excelled among the foreigners, though his work was commissioned by the Monarchy.

As we will see, several, very similar pieces with type of relief are kept. They are related to the work of Diego de Siloe, Felipe Bigarny and, above all, with the latter's son, Gregorio Bigarny (or Pardo) with whom, both because of the composite, aesthetic and technique similarities, are directly related to the work now being discussed. In fact,

sometimes the characteristics of such reliefs have been alternatively used by one of the three artists.

The piece of work we are analyzing now undoubtedly show high-quality skills a careful technical performance in the carving of the stone and also a search for refinement and Italian-style artistic beauty. The result is a serene, elegant and balanced composition: The winding carving gives movement and depth by using relief gradation and there is also the suggestive little angel standing out under the Virgin's mantle on the lower part of the piece. Like all the works of this type, it shows an intimate character linked to its use for private worship in small prayer rooms where delicacy, beauty, the feeling of sleepless intimacy and the deep expression of mother-son love are the main features.

Sculptor Gregorio Bigarny, also known as Gregorio Pardo since he took her mother's last name (she belonged to an aristocrat family of Burgos), was the son of the Flemish sculptor Felipe Bigarny. Gregorio was born in 1513 in the city of Burgos where he started his apprenticeship along his father. In 1532, aged 19, his father sent him to increase and improve his skills in Damian Forment's workroom in Zaragoza. This shows the high esteem and consideration he was held by the Aragonese Master. A contract was signed with Forment for two years. Gregorio would get a salary and work as Forment's official assistant. It seems pretty sure that Pardo would learn to work the alabaster with Forment, who was carving the spectacular altarpiece of the Huesca Cathedral at that time.

When he returned to Aragon, Pardo would make several works for several churches such as San Nicolas de Bari and La Merced. In 1537 he wed architect Alonso de Covarrubias' daughter —Covarrubias was the Master of the Toledo Cathedral. This opened up the doors to important sculpting commissions in the cathedral and the city. Years later, he would work in the seating of the cathedral chorus along with his father and Alonso Berruguete. At that time he carved a series of sculptures for the Capilla de la Torre front door at the Toledo Cathedral.

He performed important works in Madrid derived from his close relationship with Covarrubias. There is documentary evidence of a relief of the Assumption (commissioned by Don Alonso de Castilla, Archbishop of Calahorra) in polychrome alabaster for the front piece of the disappeared Santo Domingo el Real monastery. Gregorio made it under his father's and Damian Forment's supervision between 1539-1541, and today is kept in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Gregorio Bigarny. *Asunción de la Virgen*, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid (Spain).

The similarities between this work and the small relief under consideration can be appreciated in the proximity of the Virgin's face with a characteristic thoughtful gesture and a melancholic expression (typically Siloe's) and also in the skillful carving of the folds. Some of the more famous works in the Toledo Cathedral correspond to this time period, and the reliefs of Santa Leocadia's story on the Chapineria gate, *La Coronación de la Virgen* on the inside of La Puerta de los Leones. Years later (1549) he would carve in wood the decoration of the wardrobe drawers of the Cathedral Chapterhouse Room. At the same time, his father Felipe Bigarny was sculpting the impressive seating of the Cathedral chorus together with Alonso de Berruguete. Felipe suddenly died in 1542. Don Diego de Ayala, a humanist and expert art connoisseur, commissioned Gregorio to continue his father's unfinished work. From that moment on, Gregorio performed many

of the sculpting works for the Cathedral signing as Gregorio Bigarny and taking care of his father workshop in Toledo.

One of Gregorio Bigarny's major works is precisely the alabaster relief on the chorus Archbishop seat representing *La imposición de la Casulla a San Ildefonso*, a genuine Toledo topic (fig. 3) made in 1548 and inspired in the altar piece on the same subject matter created by Felipe Bigarny for the Descension chapel in the same temple. In this work, Gregorio logically shows himself as his father's debtor but he is also imbued with Alonso Berruguete's peculiar mannerism —whose works Gregorio knew very well first-handedly. The notion of volume, the movement of the small folds and the full fabric are very close to what we can see in this small alabaster piece. The unique detail of winged-headed angels sticking out from the Virgin's mantle is almost identically repeated.

Gregorio's premature death in 1551 cut short this brilliant and rising career. He was working his last commission, Don Fernando de Cordoba's tomb. Cordoba had the high rank of *clavero* at the Calatrava Order. The tomb was to be placed in the monastery founded by him, Santo Domingo, in Almagro (Royal City). It was finished by Covarrubias in 1555 with the help of Nicolas de Vergara the Old and Juan Bautista Vázquez.



Fig. 3. Gregorio Bigarny. *Imposición de la casulla a San Ildefonso*, Toledo Cathedral (Spain).

Regarding works of identical subjects and similar size, as pointed out before, the references to Felipe Bigarny, Damiant Forment and Diego de Sileo are compulsory as the logical result of Gregorio's training. Firstly, the fundamental point of reference is no doubt the beautiful twin circular marble ornaments of the Virgin and the child crowning the pair of tombs belonging to Don Diego de Avellaneda, Bishop of Tuy and his father that was commissioned by the same Don Diego to Felipe Bigarny in 1536 to be placed in the Jeronimo Monastery of San Juan Bautista and Santa Catalina de Espeja (Soria). Both are kept in the Museo Nacional de Escultura in Valladolid (though Felipe's work is very fragmented) (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Felipe Bigarny. *Virgen con el niño*, tombs belonging to the Avellaneda family, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid (Spain).

However, Felipe Bigarny's serene classicism clearly noted in these works was transformed by his son —whose style tends to a greater expressiveness and movement from the late Renaissance with a powerful influence of Berrugute. Likewise, the skilled carving of alabaster and the vivacity and delicacy learnt from Forment's models can be observed, as noted in *Nuestra Señora del Coro* from a private collection (fig. 5); *Virgen con el Niño* at the Museo Frederic Marés in Barcelona (fig. 6); the *Santa Ana, la Virgen y el Niño* group from a private collection (fig. 7); *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves* at the

Salvatierra de Esca parish church (Zaragoza) (fig. 8), or the *Virgen con el Niño* found in an antique seller shop in 2011 (fig. 9).



Fig. 5. Damian Forment. *Nuestra Señora del Coro*, private collection.



Fig. 6. Damian Forment. *Virgen con el Niño*, Museo Frederic Marés, Barcelona (Spain).



Fig. 7. Damian Forment. *Santa Ana, la Virgen y el Niño*, private collection.



Fig. 8. Damiant Forment. *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves* at the Salvatierra de Esca parish church (Zaragoza, Spain).



Fig. 9. Damian Forment. *Virgen con el Niño*, shop.

Finally, as I have previously indicated, many of the Virgin and the Child reliefs are very similar and share numerous characteristics with the piece already studied regarding face treatment, folds, movement, composition, and so on. Among them, the alabasters of the Burgos Cathedral, alternatively attributed to Diego de Siloe and Felipe Bigarny are worthy of mention (fig. 10), also the work piece at the Museo Diocesano y Catedralicio in Valladolid (fig. 11); the one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art of Nueva York (fig. 12); the one at the Victorian and Albert Museum in Londres (fig. 13); the two pieces at the Santa Leocadia parish church and at the Santa Clara de Toledo monastery, and the wood carving from a private collection (fig. 14). All of them show very similar notions and share details such as the unique way of carving the ring finger and the middle finger of the Virgin's left hand bonded. All of these reliefs have been directly attributed to Gregorio Bigarny, who created a personal style in which the teachings of Felipe Bigarny and Damiant Forment regarding the precision of shape and polished technique are combined with a more expressive spirit from Alonso Berrugute's late Renaissance inspiration.



Fig. 10. Diego de Siloe e Felipe Bigarny. *Virgen con el Niño*, Burgos Cathedral (Spain).



Fig. 11. Gregorio Bigarny. *Virgen con el Niño*, Museo Diocesano y Catedralicio of Valladolid (Spain).



Fig. 12. Gregorio Bigarny. *Virgen con el Niño*, Metropolitan Museum, New York.



Fig. 13. Gregorio Bigarny. *Virgen con el Niño*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 14. Gregorio Bigarny. *Virgen con el Niño*, private collection.

There are few of Gregorio Bigarny's works known today —because of his early death and the destruction of the ones remaining. Therefore, it is very important that new works authored by him can be found in order to extend their cataloguing. It would help to deepen the knowledge of the art of this fine exponent of the Spanish Renaissance sculpturing.

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ÁLVARO PASCUAL CHENEL