



**JAIME EGUIGUREN**

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**Luis de Morales**

(¿Badajoz?, ca. 1510-¿Alcántara?, 1586)

**ECCE HOMO**

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## Luis de Morales

(¿Badajoz?, ca. 1510-¿Alcántara?, 1586)

### *Ecce Homo*

Ca. 1565-1586

Oil on wooden panel

37.9 x 29.8 cm

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In the iconography of the painter Luis de Morales, the area surrounding Christ's Passion, along with other devote subjects, occupies a particularly prominent position, with the artist approaching it in an especially emotive manner. That explains his "Divine" nickname, and the fact that he would become quite renowned in his own lifetime. Although we are not sure of his place of birth, it has on occasion been suggested that he was from Badajoz in Extremadura. However, he must have been trained in Plasencia, as his presence there was subsequently documented, a city in which a multitude of artists of both Flemish and Spanish origin were working in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and among whom it was commonplace to use engravings as a source of graphic inspiration.

From an aesthetic and technical point of view, his work combines a profound knowledge of Flemish painting, from which he took the meticulousness and delicate detail of his characteristic brushstroke, with contemporary Italian models, from Titian to Sebastiano del Piombo, from whom he took inspiration in the expression of his figures, also drawing on Leonardo-esque *sfumato*, which infuses his works with a certain air of mystery and melancholy.

Before settling in Badajoz, the city that would become his biographical centre, Morales lived in Plasencia, at least between 1535 and 1537. Morales moved to Badajoz in 1539, probably on account of his marriage to Leonor de Chaves, whose family must have enjoyed a privileged position in the city. From that point on, the city would be the place where he led both his family and professional life, undertaking the various commissions that fell to him, and for which he established a burgeoning workshop. Life in the city revolved around the cathedral and its chapter. The minor nobility, the local bourgeoisie and, in particular, the chapter and the succession of archbishops appointed to the diocese, made up the prominent elites when it came to Badajoz's religious, social and cultural life, and they would become the artist's main customers. Morales adapted his painting to a varied clientele, made up most notably of the aristocracy of Extremadura, Andalusia and Portugal, the prelates of Badajoz and the local petit bourgeoisie.

The majority of his works therefore respond to spiritual, religious, devotional or meditative needs. Which explains the fact that a large proportion of his output involves the iconography of the Passion. During a major part of his life, Morales developed an active and intense artistic career that forced him to travel often, such as to neighbouring Portugal, either to finalise commissions, to undertake them or to oversee the workshop's execution of them.

From that time on, Morales would specialise in altarpieces, works for altars and devotional "pieças". In fact, references to Morales' main clients relate primarily to small-scale pieces of a private nature, "tablillas", or small panel works, or more often "pieças", for the many "gentlemen of the Kingdom" who, "have sent and continue to send [...] to this city (Badajoz) to carry out many works of painting [...] which have been well praised by all who have seen them, saying they are the best works to be seen now in the Kingdom [...] well finished and extremely natural".

These small-scale images with a repeatedly devotional subject matter became Morales' calling card, items made for their visual efficiency, bearing the painter's recognisable trademark. These are his most personal works, in which he was able to create original iconographic types, whose success is shown by the abundance of versions and copies carried out to satisfy the aforementioned demand.

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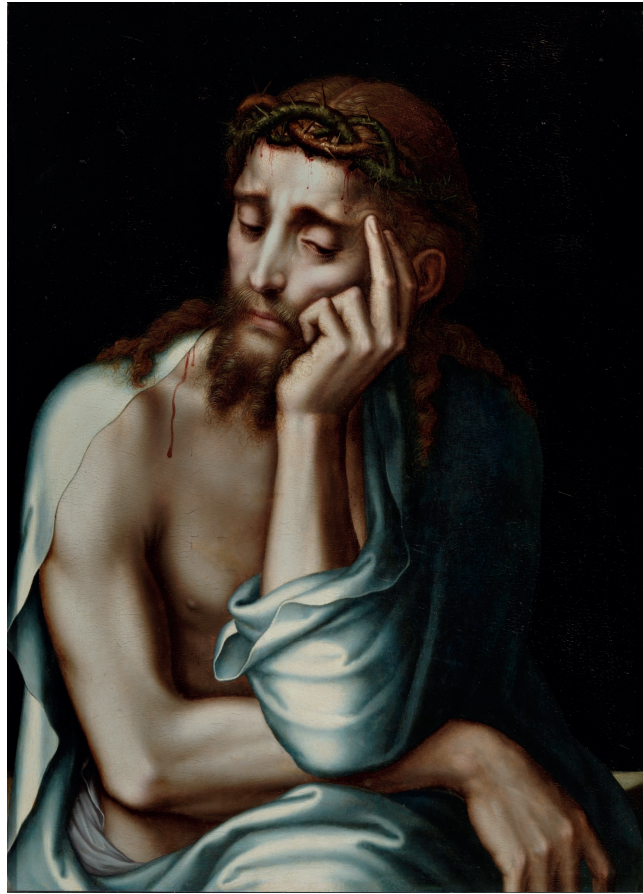


Fig. 1. Luis de Morales, *Vir dolorum Christ*, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



Fig. 2. Luis de Morales, *Triptych of Bishop Juan de Ribera*, Cádiz, Museo de Cádiz.

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In his biography of the artist, Palomino defines him perfectly when he says: “he was given the name *Divino*, because all the things he painted were holy things, because he painted heads of Christ with such skill and subtlety in the hair, that the most curious of art observers might feel tempted to blow on it to see it move, because it looks identical to real hair [...], and no painting of his has been seen of more than a head or half body; and always on panel with his accustomed delicate skill [...], but which he never took further or employed on large-scale works (although we know that he carried out a large number of altarpieces); there are many in royal houses and outside them, especially in oratories.”

These kinds of works were a continuation of a sort of output that had become popular collectors' pieces, as devotional plaques, from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in Castile and the north of Spain, coming through the ports of Cantabria. Exhibiting a clear flair for commerce, Morales adapted these traditionally Flemish objects for a broad clientele, using Extremadura as his centre of production for works of great quality, associated with Flemish tradition, but filtered through a prism of Italianising elements and models, as we have remarked. Furthermore, we should bear in mind the spiritual context of the Counter Reformation in which the painter lived, which he projected onto his devotional paintings. Simple in composition, sending clear messages for believers, and repeated time and time again due to their visual efficiency, on wooden panels whose dimensions adapted to private environs and to the different options provided by the market (they measured from between 30cm x 20cm and 90cm x 70cm).

The subject area used by Morales was extremely limited, although in many cases he included minor variations that might be in response both to the personal requirements of each customer or to the interests of the artist himself, in order to differentiate between his works. Within the category of works we are discussing, one of the painter's most often-repeated subjects was that of *Ecce Homo*. His depictions of *Ecce Homo* take on a range of modes throughout his oeuvre, but in almost all of them the head of Christ takes up nearly the entire pictorial surface, including the neck and shoulders, with the torso appearing in only a few cases. The completely dark background, as tends to be the case for the painter's works of this kind, on which the figure is monumentally projected, tells us that this is not a narrative scene, as Morales consciously omits any indicators of space and time, in order to build up a devotional image that will inspire feelings of empathy in the spectator, along with repentant remorse and contemplation, all the more so with the figure arranged right in the foreground.

This is an iconographic subject that the “Divine” painter tackled frequently on small-scale, half-length works (although there are also some notable full-length examples such as the *Ecce Homo* in the National Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon), aimed at private worship, which demonstrates the enormous popularity and effectiveness of these paintings with a specific clientele, as well as the sense of profound devotion this type of work accentuated in this period in which the Counter Reformation was now underway. The piece reflects Morales' repeated interest in ascetic values and spiritual retreat, associated with the thinking and religious approach of authors such as Friar Luis de Granada, evoking the suffering of the Passion, within a language of great visual eloquence that lends the composition a very special dramatic charge, yet structured in a language with a calculatedly serene effect.

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Proof of these works' success is the sheer volume of versions, repetitions and copies of them both by the master painter and his workshop. The piece we are studying here is a good example of this, reflecting one of the most traditional types from within the painter's output. Its excellent quality and the technical details it presents allow us to add it to the canon of original works by the "Divine" artist. Morales adopted a physiognomic type for the figure of Christ, always half-length or a bust which, by combining the different elements, he used indiscriminately for his *Ecce Homo* pieces as well as for his Christs carrying the cross or tied to a pillar. It matches the human stereotypes belonging to the artist's repertory, with pale, waxy carnations and highly stylised and pointed facial features, and yet with naturalist aspects of a Nordic origin, such as the detailed attention to the painstaking depiction of the hairs in his beard and on his head, as well as the long eyelashes covering his half-closed eyes like lace curtains. In fact, that meticulous detail is demonstrated, for instance, in the way that it is possible to differentiate the use of two shades of yellow for his hair, as is the case in many of his versions of this and other subjects, such as the *Virgin and Child* at the Prado. Furthermore, this Christ presents characteristic ringlets of hair and the peculiar Y-shaped cartilage inside the ear, copied from Sebastiano del Piombo.

As we commented earlier, Morales introduced minor variations in each of his versions, repetitions and interpretations. It is as such that the piece we are studying here is one of the few in which the stick and rope around Christ's neck seen in so many other examples are notably absent. We may therefore conclude that this panel, of great technical refinement and minutely detailed, is a good example of Morales' working practice, not hesitating to repeat or readapt his physiognomic models.

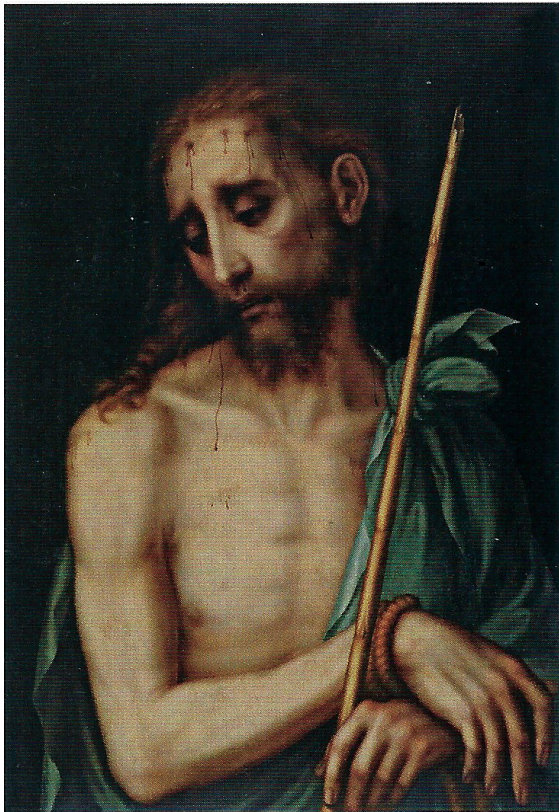


Fig. 3. Luis de Morales, *Ecce Homo*, El Pito (Cudillero), Fundación Selgas-Fagalde.

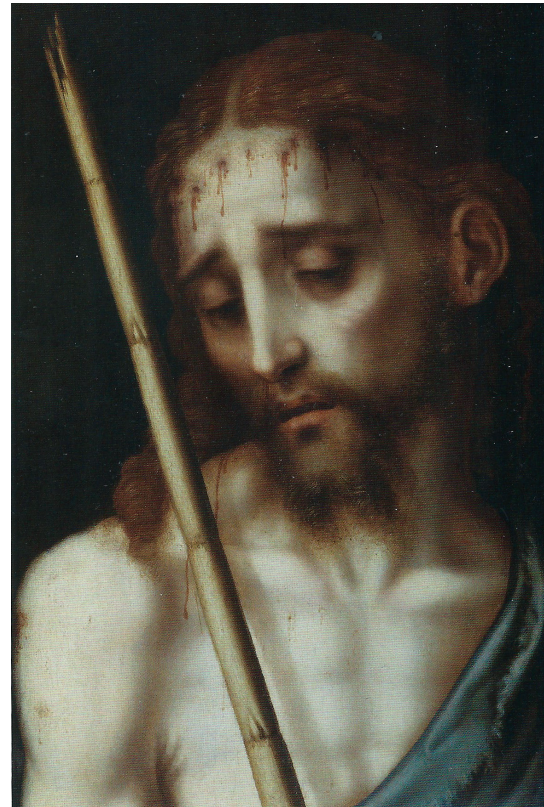


Fig. 4. Luis de Morales, *Ecce Homo*, Alana Collection, Newark, Delaware (US).

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Fig. 5. Luis de Morales, *Ecce Homo*, Private Collection, auctioned at Bonhams.

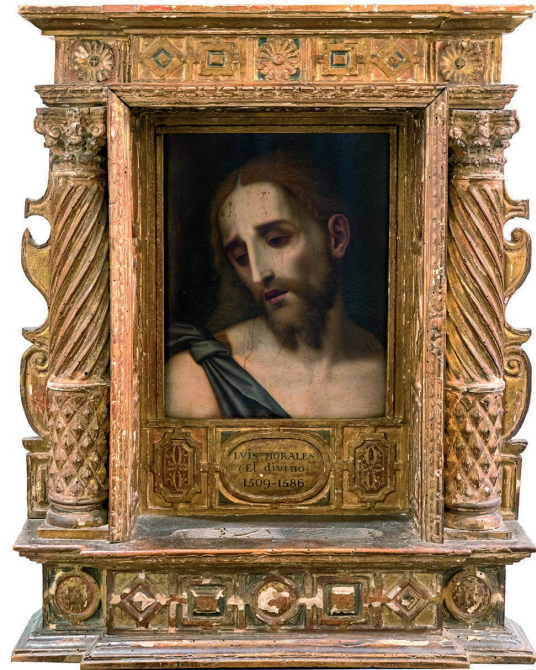


Fig. 6. Luis de Morales, *Ecce Homo*, Private Collection, auctioned at Fernando Durán.

It also presents one peculiarity, particularly characteristic of Morales, which is to depict *Ecce Homo* without his crown of thorns, but with just the wounds caused by it, with a forehead on which blood is running down. However, according to the Gospel story, the crown of thorns was not taken off Christ's head until he was dead. This artistic licence, like the variations in the colour of the chlamys in many versions (it should be red), earned him the reproach and criticism of Pacheco: "He took such licence that he painted some (*Ecce Homo*) without a crown of thorns, with just marks for the wounds, and in his Christs bearing the cross he also used his artistic licence to diverge from the historical". This peculiarity is precisely what we can observe in all of the known and accepted original works by Morales, as we note below.

The work is carefully finished with the chromatic economy characteristic of its cold tonality, as observed in the leaden blue chlamys. The figure is clearly delineated, combining with subtle *sfumato* effects for the face, which places it at Morales' artistic peak, after the 1550s. In general, the physical prototype of his *Ecce Homo* works became more marked towards the end of his career, to heighten the sense of drama, exaggerating the characteristics (with more pronounced cheekbones, more angular features, the mouth open more widely, and so on).

The piece we are studying here matches sweeter and more serene models, both expressive and suffering, yet without falling into sentimentality. Of the versions more directly related to this work, we should mention the fabulously beautiful *Christ, Man of Sorrows* at the Prado Museum (Fig. 1); that of the central panel from Bishop Juan de Ribera's triptych (Fig. 2); the one at the Selgas-Fagalde Foundation (Fig. 3); the one owned by the Alana Collection

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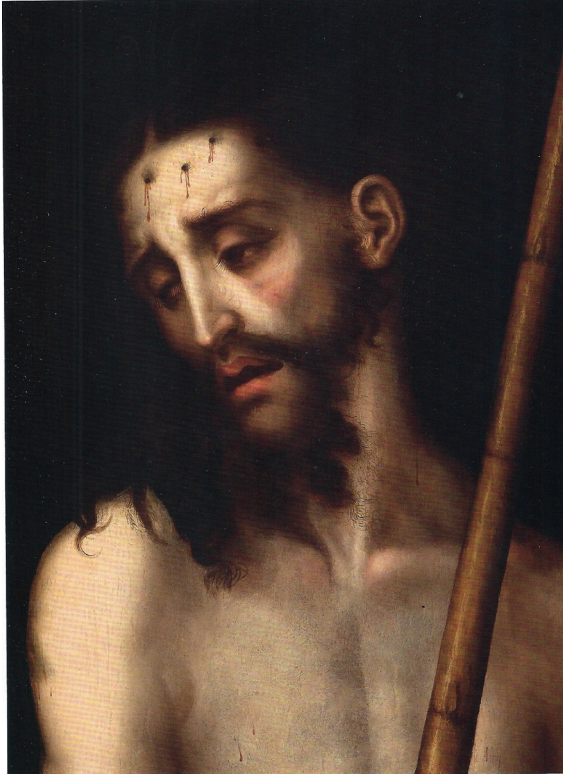


Fig. 7. Luis de Morales, *Ecce Homo*, Private Collection.



Fig. 8. Luis de Morales, *Ecce Homo*, Private Collection.

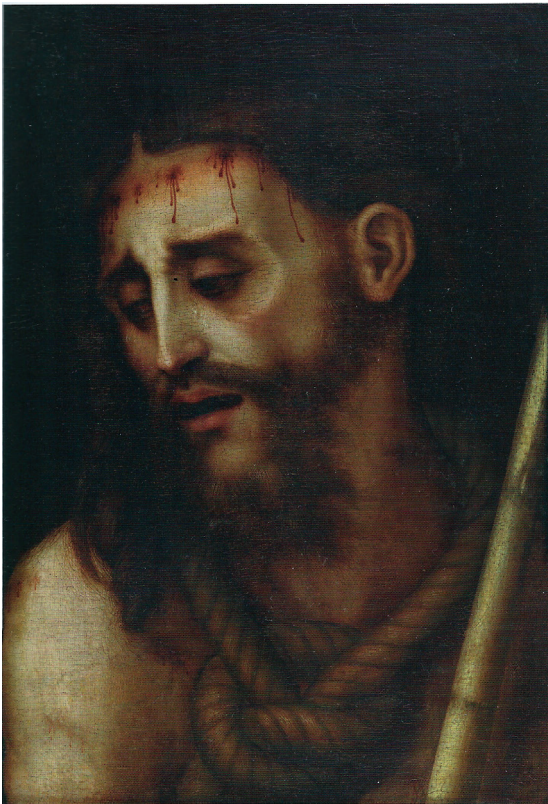


Fig. 9. Luis de Morales, *Ecce Homo*, Madrid, Collection of Julio Bobo.

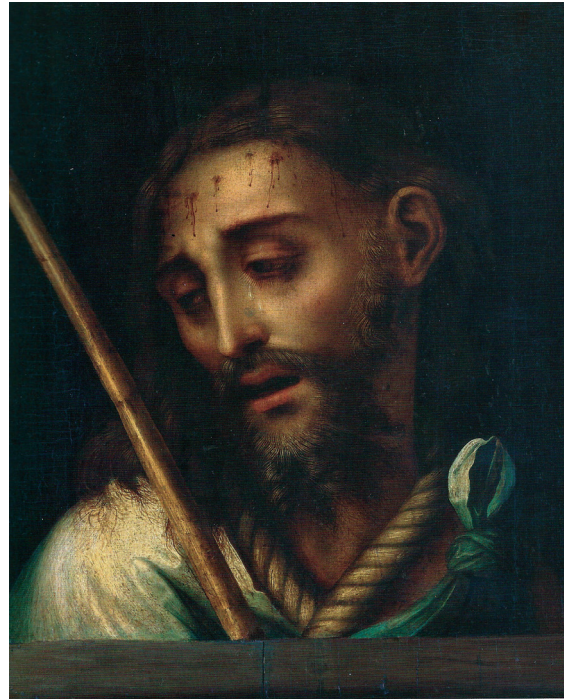


Fig. 10. Luis de Morales, *Ecce Homo*, Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister.



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Fig. 11. Luis de Morales, *Ecce Homo*, Private Collection, auctioned at Abalarte.

(United States) (Fig. 4); the one auctioned at Bonham's on 5 July 2015 (Fig. 5); or the one auctioned by Fernando Durán on 6 July 2017, virtually identical to the one we have before us here (other than in some minor differences in scale), and which at the time was accepted as an original by the specialist Isabel Mateo (Fig. 6). There is also a copy that was auctioned in Alcalá on 7-8 October 2015, which is clearly not of such high quality.

On the roll call of rather “dramatic” examples, it is worth noting the similarities with private collection works (Figs. 7 & 8); the piece in the Julio Bobo Collection (Fig. 9); the one in the Dresden Museum (Fig. 10), and the one auctioned by Abalarte (Fig. 11).

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