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***Luisa Roldán “La Roldana”***

Seville, 1652-Madrid, 1706

**Saint Joseph**

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*Luisa Roldán “La Roldana”*  
Seville, 1652-Madrid, 1706

**Saint Joseph**  
1689-1706  
Polychrome terracotta  
59 x 21 x 38 cm  
Provenance: Private collection

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## *Rosario Coppel*

Art Historian

The figure, identified as Saint Joseph, was part of a group depicting the *Flight into Egypt*, along with the Virgin, Child, donkey and perhaps an angel, which were destroyed in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War. Joseph is depicted walking, with his right leg forward, while his left leg is positioned far behind. He rests his left arm on a stick, and with his right arm extended he is pulling the donkey with a rope.

This iconography of the *Flight into Egypt*, based on the Gospel of Matthew, appears in an engraving by Dürer (c. 1503-1505) that was widely distributed (Fig. 1). There is a similar composition in a painting by El Greco made during his first stay in Venice, c. 1570. It is a small oil on panel, 15.9 x 21.6 cm, which is kept in the Museo del Prado from the collection of Gaspar Méndez de Haro, 7th Marquis of Carpio (Fig. 2).

As early as the 17th century, the painter and art theorist Francisco Pacheco described the subject as follows:

*“Our Lady seated on her donkey, with her blue cloak, pink clothes, a headdress and a palm hat on the Child wrapped in her arms, revealing part of his face, Saint Joseph in front, his skirts wrapped<sup>1</sup> in ribbon, with his staff, leading the donkey with his right hand and an angel flying in front showing them the way.”<sup>2</sup>*

Devotion to Saint Joseph was revived during the 17th century thanks to pious texts, which portrayed him as younger and more approachable than in previous periods when he appeared as a venerable old man. This can be seen in the paintings of Zurbarán, at the end of the 1630s (Seattle Art Museum) (Fig. 3), and of Murillo between 1647-1650, (Detroit, Institute of Arts Museum) (Fig. 4).

The characteristics of the terracotta revealed in this study, both in terms of technique, style and model, point to Luisa Roldán, known as La Roldana, as the author.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 1. Albrecht Dürer, *The Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1503-1505, engraving.



Fig. 2. El Greco, *The Flight into Egypt*, Venice, c. 1570, oil on panel, 15.9 x 21.6 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

1 Part of the clothing gathered in front where something can be carried.

2 F. Pacheco, *The Art of Painting*, Seville, 1656, ed. by B. Bassegoda, Madrid, 1990, p. 625.

3 The first monograph on Roldana was the doctoral thesis of Elena Amat Calderón, *Luisa Roldán, LA ROLDANA. Her life*

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Fig. 3. Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Flight into Egypt*, late 1630s, oil on canvas, 150 x 159 cm, Seattle Art Museum (USA)



Fig. 4. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Flight into Egypt*, 1647-1650, oil on canvas, 209.6 x 166.9 cm, Detroit, Institute of Arts Museum (USA)

On 28 February 1689, Luisa Roldán, who was thirty-six years old and had already established a reputation as a sculptor (gained in her hometown of Seville and during her stay in Cádiz), began a new stage in Madrid accompanied by her husband, the sculptor Luis Antonio de los Arcos. She had been summoned there by Cristóbal de Ontañón, aide-de-chambre to Charles II and protector of artists.<sup>4</sup> With her first commission, *Saint Michael the Archangel*, a monumental image in polychrome wood that was made for El Escorial, she reflected one of her most original characteristics: the capture of suspended movement in a fleeting instant (Fig. 5).<sup>5</sup>

In 1692 she was appointed Chamber Sculptor, with a salary of 100 ducats a year retroactive to her arrival in Madrid, a position that, upon the death of Charles II, was confirmed by his successor Philip V.<sup>6</sup>

Although during her time in Madrid she produced some life-size



Fig. 5. Luisa Roldán, *Saint Michael the Archangel*, Madrid, 1692, polychrome cedar wood, 264 cm, Madrid, Museum of Royal Collections, from the monastery of El Escorial.

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and works. *Essay on them*, 2 vols., Madrid, 1927. It remains unpublished, although it can be consulted in the Library of the Museo del Prado and is currently in the process of being published.

4 J. L. Romero Torres, "Don Cristóbal de Ontañón y Enríquez, protector of the sculptor Luisa Roldán and other artists of the court of Charles II", *Notebooks of the Friends of the Museums of Osuna*, no. 17, 2015, pp. 30-36.

5 It is 264 cm high and is currently on display in Madrid, in the Gallery of Royal Collections.

6 A. Ceán Bermúdez, *Historical Dictionary...*, Madrid 1800, vol. IV, pp. 235-240

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Fig. 6. Luisa Roldán, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Diego de Alcalá*, Madrid, ca. 1690-1695, polychrome terracotta, 36 x 54 x 31.5 cm, London, Victoria and Albert Museum



Fig. 7. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Holy Family with the Little Bird*, ca. 1650, oil on canvas, 144 x 188 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

wooden images, Luisa Roldán specialized above all in small format works, in baked clay, in which polychrome played an important role. These pieces, intended for private devotion, both in oratories and convents, soon provided her with a significant clientele.

These are small compositions whose iconography is made up of scenes from the childhood of the Virgin and the Child Jesus, inspired by the paintings of their time (Fig. 6). The small groups generally appear in a triangular shape, decorated with garlands of flowers and little cherub heads, while the models have oval faces, with slanted eyes, and a very characteristic attitude that conveys serenity, sometimes joy, but always a great tenderness that has been associated with Murillo (Fig. 7).

Luisa Roldán used a very detailed technique for her terracotta pieces, which consisted of modelling each figure separately and, before placing them in the oven, joining them on a base also made of clay.<sup>7</sup> They were then polychromed, an important task that fell to her brother-in-law Tomás de los Arcos (act. 1665-1700), which consisted of matt tones and natural oil colours, in white, blue, red, pink, brown and green, with touches of gold (Fig. 8).<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 8. Luisa Roldán, *The Child Virgin with Saint Joachim and Saint Anne*, between 1692-1706, polychrome terracotta by Tomás de los Arcos, 34 x 51 x 38 cm, Guadalajara Museum, from the Benedictine monastery of Sopetrán (Hita), where it was donated by Philip V.

<sup>7</sup> C. García Ballesteros, "An approach to the sculptural technique of Luisa Roldán through the works restored in the National Museum of Sculpture", Exh. Cat. *Luisa Roldán*, MA Marcos Villán and PF Amador Marrero (coms.), Valladolid, National Museum of Sculpture, 2024, pp. 120-135.

<sup>8</sup> PF Amador Marrero, "On cartouches, polychromies and the idea of a workshop. Exploring other aspects of the production of Ms. Luisa Roldán", Exh. Cat. *Luisa Roldán*. 2024, cit., pp. 106-119.

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The first work of this type documented in Madrid, in 1691, was precisely a theme in which Saint Joseph had an important role, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, a group of which he sculpted at least two replicas. One, from the old Güell collection, is in the collection of the Marchioness of Ruiseñada, Saint Sebastian;<sup>9</sup> the another is preserved in New York, The Hispanic Society of America.<sup>10</sup> In these groups, Saint Joseph presents a model identical to ours, with the same physiognomy, moustache, beard, long hair over the shoulders, clothing with puffy folds and sandals (Fig. 9).

In addition to the paintings presented above, it is worth highlighting other works by painters from the Roldana area in Madrid. Precisely his protector, Cristóbal de Ontañón, had a Flight into Egypt Painted by Luca Giordano between 1670-80, according to an inscription on the back, it belonged to: “Don Xp<sup>o</sup> de Ontañón de la Orden de Santiago, procedente de Nápoles donde Ontañón fue intermediario del Rey (Don Xp<sup>o</sup> de Ontañón of the Order of Santiago, from Naples where Ontañón was the King’s intermediary)”. During the 16th century it was in the main oratory of Buen Retiro, so it was certainly known and studied by Roldana. It is currently in the Palace of Aranjuez (Fig. 10).

Another artist, Francisco de Solís (Madrid, ca. 1620-1684), painter, engraver and collector,<sup>11</sup> used the same model of Saint Joseph in *The Flight into Egypt*, a canvas of 210 x 285 cm, which is preserved in the Prado Museum from the Museum of the Trinity (Fig. 11). A similar model also appears in the *Sagrada Familia*, by Claudio Coello who in 1683 had been appointed Chamber Painter to Charles II. It is preserved in Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, dating from the second half of the 17th century (Fig. 12).<sup>12</sup>

The model of Saint Joseph, young, with a beard and long curly hair, covered by a tunic and a wide cloak,



Fig. 9. Luisa Roldán, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, c. 1689-1706, polychrome terracotta, New York, The Hispanic Society of America.



Fig. 10. Luca Giordano, *The Flight into Egypt*, Naples, 1670-1680, oil on canvas, 247 x 180 cm, National Heritage, Aranjuez Palace, from the Buen Retiro Palace, Madrid.

9 Güell, Le Comte de, *La Sculpture Poychrome Religeuse Espagnole Une Collection*) Paris, Desjardins, 1925. MV García Olloqui, *La Roldana. New biography*, Strasbourg, 2000.

10 B. Gilman Proske, *Catalog of the Sculpture (sixteenth to eighteenth century) in the Collection of the Hispanic Society of America*, New York, 1930.

11 According to Antonio Palomino, *Vidas*, ed. N. Ayala Mallory, Madrid, 1986, pp. 271-272, he held an academy at home for many years and wrote a biography of artists with plates of their portraits, now lost.

12 A. Pérez Sánchez, *Baroque Painting in Spain, 1600-1750*, 6th edition (updated), Madrid, 2010.

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Fig. 11. Francisco de Solís, *The Flight into Egypt*, oil on canvas, 210 x 285 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, from the Museum of the Trinity.



Fig. 12. Claudio Coello, *Holy Family*, second half of the 17th century, oil on canvas, Budapest Museum.

appears in the sculpture of *Saint Joseph*, by Pedro Roldán, in the cathedral of Seville, with the appearance of an emotional face, with a monumentality achieved by the wide cloak, and where the pose and the hands play an important role in achieving expressiveness (Fig. 13). His daughter Luisa was probably inspired by this work. the images of *Saint Joseph and Saint John the Baptist*, from the church of San Antonio de Padua, Cadiz, between 1687-1689, when she moved with her husband to that city. There are replicas<sup>13</sup> of *Saint Joseph with the Child* of Roldana in the Convent of San Antón de las Madres Capuchinas, Granada, the church of San Lucas, in Jerez de la Frontera and Santa María la Blanca, Seville, among others (Fig. 14).<sup>14</sup>

It is the same prototype that appears in another of Roldana's most emblematic pieces, *The First Steps of Jesus*, c. 1692-1706, polychrome and gilded terracotta, 34 x 28 x 33 cm, preserved in the Museum of Guadalajara, from the monastery of Sopetrán (Hita), where it arrived as a donation from Philip V. Although on this occasion Saint Joseph is seated, it is an identical model, both in expression and in the brown tunic and sandaled feet,



Fig. 13. Pedro Roldán, *Saint Joseph*, polychrome wood, Seville Cathedral.

<sup>13</sup> Roldana, José Luis Romero Torres and Antonio Torrejón Díaz (Coms.), Real Alcázar, Seville, 2007, pp. 105-125.

<sup>14</sup> Pleguezuelo Hernández, Alfonso, "Luisa Roldán in Seville and Saint Joseph with the Child: attributions and iconography", *Laboratorio de Arte*, 29, 2017, pp. 377-396.

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Fig. 14. Luisa Roldán, *Saint Joseph with the Child*, Santa María la Blanca, Seville.



Fig. 15. Luisa Roldán, *The First Steps of Jesus*, between 1692-1706, polychrome terracotta, 34 x 28 x 33 cm, Guadalajara Museum, from the Benedictine monastery of Sopetrán (Hita), where it was donated by Philip V.



Fig. 16. Luisa Roldán, *Nativity*, polychrome cedar wood by Tomás de los Arcos. Seville, private collection.

outstretched arms and wrinkled sleeves (Fig. 15).<sup>15</sup> In addition, another polychrome terracotta of 23.5 x 18 cm is preserved in the Magnin Museum in Dijon (France), with the image of Saint Joseph seated, which has been titled *Saint Joseph Addressing the Children*.<sup>16</sup> It is closely related to the Guadalajara group, the face and the clothing are very similar, just like in the image in our study.

One of the most representative artistic facets of Roldana's production cannot fail to be highlighted: the Nativity scenes, which were already praised in the texts of Palomino and Ceán, although there is only documentation of the one made for the Duke of Infantado between 1702 and 1705, which consisted of 169 pieces (disappeared). It is known that he made several convents such as that of El Paular (Segovia) and others.<sup>17</sup> They

have been studied by Alfonso Pleguezuelo, who also published the *Cabalgata de los Reyes Magos*, in cedar wood, preserved in Valladolid, in the Museo Nacional de Escultura, except for the *Virgin, Saint Joseph, the Child and a Page*, which are in a private collection (Fig. 16).<sup>18</sup>

15 Exh. Cat. *Shaking hands. Sculpture and colour in the Golden Age*, M. Arias Martínez (com.), Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2024, p. 130, fig. 3.1.

16 P. Lenaghan, "Luisa Roldán's Career in Madrid: Intimate Masterpieces in Terracotta", *Luisa Roldán. Court Sculptor to the Kings of Spain*, Coll & Cortés, Madrid, 2016, pp. 20-41.

17 C. Hall-van den Elsen, *Luisa Roldán*, London, 2021, pp. 116-120.

18 A. Pleguezuelo, "Four unpublished nativity scenes from La Roldana", *Ars Magazine*, nº9, 2011, pp. 80-93; Ibidem, "The Four Wise Men of Luisa Roldán", *Ars Magazine*, nº30, 2016, pp. 106-118.



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*Saint Joseph and Child*, in polychrome wood, measuring 50 x 56, has recently appeared on the antique market, which has been dated to the Madrid period, between 1689-1702.<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 17) As noted, the smiling face of St. Joseph is identical to that of the group *The First Steps of the Child Jesus*, in the Guadalajara Museum, while the figure of the Child is similar to the angels in the *Marriage of St. Catherine of the Hispanic Society* (Fig. 18).



Fig. 17. Luisa Roldán, *Saint Joseph with the Child Jesus*, c. 1689-1706, polychrome wood, 50 x 26 x 28 cm, Private collection.



Fig. 18. Luisa Roldán, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, c. 1689-1706, polychrome terracotta, New York, The Hispanic Society of America.

## Conclusion

We are faced with an exceptional, unpublished piece that expands the catalogue of Roldana's sculptures. It is a special case - since it is unfortunately incomplete - but it presents the most original characteristics of her style. It is a figure made of baked clay, polychrome with smooth matte colors, stylized, very similar to *Saint Joseph* from the group of the *Flight to Egypt* of the Hispanic Society. Represented in action, at the moment of advancing towards his destination, Egypt, to safeguard the life of his Son. The treatment that the artist gives to the subject is also very special: instead of presenting a man distressed by the situation he has to live, leaving his place of residence to move to an unknown country, he is shown to be happy and confident, almost excited to carry out this mission. This is a definitive feature of Roldana's small sculptures; they are friendly and optimistic, presenting everyday scenes with great normality.

The size of *Saint Joseph*, larger than usual in the clay groups of the Roldana, indicates that it was an important commission since, together with the other figures, the Virgin, the Child, the donkey and surely the angel, it could have doubled the dimensions of those preserved.

<sup>19</sup> MA Marcos Villán, Exh. Cat. Luisa Roldán, 2024, cit. pp. 180-181, no.21.

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