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Francisco de Herrera el Viejo

(Sevilla, 1576 - Madrid, 1656)

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Oil on panel
118 x 101 cm

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Francisco de Herrera is one of the most representative and influential painters from the School of Seville. By observing his *oeuvre*, one can see the evolution that led to the transition from Mannerism to the Baroque period. He began his training at his father's workshop, the engraver Juan de Herrera y Aguilar. At first he made prints and engravings and soon after he started producing paintings, the first of which are documented in 1614-1616. These early works already show strong naturalistic tendencies, although in a style of clearly mannerist training. His most important disciple was Diego Velázquez, although he remained in his workshop for less than a year, apparently due to the irascible personality for which Herrera was known.

The paintings of his first period show the influence of the late Mannerism of Francisco Pacheco, of whom Herrera was disciple. In 1616 he produced a large series of paintings for the convent of Saint Francis. Towards the end of the 1620's, his style had evolved, defining the characteristics of his artistic maturity, showing loose brushstrokes and an inclination towards strong and expressive features in his characters. It is during this period when the main influence that his work had is more noticeable: that of Juan de Roelas, one of the most important masters of Sevillian painting of the time. The looseness that Herrera acquired in his brushstroke, with an origin in the Venetian painting tradition, came from the influence of this master, thus allowing him to develop a style of his own, combining compositions that were still mannerist but with a more fluent technique, anticipating the Baroque. During this period, he was established as one of the most important masters in Seville, receiving numerous commissions both in his own city and from other towns as well.

By the time Herrera approaches the paintings of the series of Saint Bonaventure in 1926 for the Church of the College of Saint Bonaventure in Seville, completed in 1929 by Francisco de Zurbarán, or *The Holy Kinship*, (Museum of Fine Arts of Bilbao), his art has reached full maturity, becoming an example for many of the artists that were in Seville at the time, among which of course was Zurbarán, who was influenced by the sculptural strength in many of the paintings by Herrera the Elder, as well as by his chromatic values and plastic ability to apply and model oil painting. Some of the works included in this series are: *Saint Bonaventure receiving the Habit from Saint Francis* (Museo del Prado); *Saint Catherine and the Family of Saint Bonaventure* (Bob Jones University, Grenville, U.S.A.); *The Child Saint Bonaventure presented to*

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Saint Francis and *The Communion of Saint Bonaventure*, both from 1628, in the Carvalho Collection in Villandry and the Musée du Louvre, respectively.

In 1639 he painted several canvases depicting the Apostles, kept in the Uffizi in Florence, the Museo del Prado and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, Madrid. In 1643, *St. Joseph and Child* (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest); in 1647, *The miracle of the loaves and fishes*, (Archbishop's Palace, Madrid); and in 1648, another *St. Joseph with Child* (Lázaro Galdiano Museum, Madrid).



Fig. 1 *Saint Francis*, ca. 1635, oil on canvas, 136 x 96.5 cm.
Private collection.

During the 1940's, the painter drifts away from his characteristic vigorous style, softening the shapes and expressions in his paintings. From this period is the *St. Francis* painted around 1635 (**Fig. 1**).

Around 1650 he moved to Madrid, where he continued painting until his death in 1654. During this period, he acquired an even more fluent and loose style, more in accordance with the Baroque movement that, under Flemish and Italian influences, was then in full development at the Spanish court.

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Prof. Alfonso Pérez Sánchez and Benito Navarrete, refer to the present painting in *Archivo Español de Arte*, nº 276, 1996:

"We propose a risky attribution to Herrera the Elder, of a beautiful canvas with the Baptism of Christ that appeared recently in the art market in Madrid. If it was by him, as we believe, it would correspond to a very advanced moment of his production, since the treatment of pictorial matter becomes extraordinarily fluent and the landscape seems already imbued with a certain "modern" tone, analogous to that of Murillo or Iriarte. But in the solid figure of St. John, in the way his flattened hair adheres to his ear, in the manner he models the face and resolves the nose with just one brushstroke of secure and dry precision and even in the bulky and angular drapery, despite the treatment that is softer than in his more typical and known works, we believe that the peculiar way of the master can be traced here. Surely, during his years in Madrid and after getting to know "newer" things, he must have softened his style, in adjustment to the taste of the period. The large feet and curve modeling of the right leg of St. John Baptist seem to repeat, still, those of Job at the Rouen Museum, where the mass of trees seems to anticipate what is depicted here."

As Prof. Valdivieso points out in his report (attached), the same treatment of the details of the landscape can be seen in the works *The Child Saint Bonaventure healed by Saint Francis* (**Fig. 2**) and *Job tempted by the Devil* (**Fig. 3**), as well as in *the Saint Francis* from ca. 1636, (**Fig. 1**): the thick mass of trees, the rocky ledges and the landscape that goes deep into the distance and the densely clouded skies.

Fig. 2: *The Child Saint Bonaventure healed by Saint Francis*, 1628, oil on canvas, 234 x 218 cm. Musée du Louvre



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Fig. 3: *Job tempted by the Devil*, 1636, oil on canvas, 214, 5 x 155 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen

Prof. Enrique Valdivieso Gonzalez

Biography:

- AE. Pérez Sánchez y B. Navarrete (Archivo Español de Arte, nº 276, 1996, p. 378, fig. 27)
- Enrique Valdivieso, *Pintura Barroca Sevillana*. Sevilla, 2003.
- Antonio Martínez Ripoll, *Francisco de Herrera 'El Viejo'*, Sevilla, 1978.

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