

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

FRANCISCO DE ZURBARÁN

(FUENTE DE CANTOS, 1598 - MADRID, 1664)

The Virgin Mary as a Child, Asleep

Oil on canvas, 40 9/16 x 35 7/16 in (103 x 90 cm)



PROVENANCE

Purchased in France in the mid-twentieth century.

LITERATURE

- Odile Delenda, "Zurbarán después de su IV centenario (nuevos documentos, obras nuevas)", *Archivo español de Arte*, no. 293, 2001, pp. 10-11, fig. 11;
- Enrique Valdivieso, *La Pintura barroca sevillana*, Seville, 2003, pp. 271-272, pl. 248, note 183 [best version known];
- Odile Delenda, *Francisco de Zurbarán, pintor, 1598-1664*, Madrid, 2007, pp. 123-125, illus.;
- Odile Delenda, "La Virgen niña dormida", *Miriam*, no. 351, May-August 2007, pp. 103-104, fig. 6;
- Odile Delenda, "Sapientiae laus. Images de la Vierge enfant chez Zurbarán", *Sedes Sapientiae*, no. 100, 2007, pp. 44, 47-48;

- Odile Delenda (with the collaboration of Almudena Ros de Barbero), *Francisco de Zurbarán, 1598-1664. Catálogo razonado y crítico*, vol. I, Madrid, 2009, pp. 654-656, no. 237, illus;
- Odile Delenda, « La questione Zurbarán, un aggiornamento », in *Zurbaran (1598 – 1664)*, Ignacio Cano, Gabriele Finaldi eds., exh. cat. Ferrara, Palazzo dei Diamanti, September 14, 2013 - January 6, 2014, pp. 36-47, 42, 46, fig. 16; Bruxelles, Palais des Beaux-Arts, January 28 – May 25, 2014, pp. 30-31, 40-41, fig. 12;
- Benito Navarrete, in *Zurbaran (1598 – 1664)*, Ignacio Cano, Gabriele Finaldi eds., exh. cat. Ferrara, Palazzo dei Diamanti, September 14, 2013 - January 6, 2014, p. 168, under no. 25; Bruxelles, Palais des Beaux-Arts, January 28 – May 25, 2014, p. 140, under no. 26;
- Odile Delenda, “The Virgin Mary as a Child, Asleep” in *Trois portraits par Simon Vouet, Pietro Martire Neri et Angelika Kauffmann, Tableaux bolonais, vénitiens et napolitains du XVI^e et XVII^e*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 2014, pp. 6-15;
- Odile Delenda, *Zurbarán, A new perspective*, exh. cat. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, June 9 – September 13, 2015, pp. 172-173, no. 56, ; exh. cat. Dusseldorf, Museum Kunstpalast, October 10, 2015 – January 31, 2016, pp. 208-209, no. 71;
- Angel Aterido, « Le siècle d’Or. Naissance et essor du *Bodegon* en Espagne », in *La nature morte espagnole*, Angel Aterido ed., exh. cat., Bruxelles, Bozar, February 23 – Mai 27, 2018, p. 70, cat. no.15;
- Michael A. Brown, in *Art & Empire. The Golden Age of Spain*, Michael A. Brown, ed., exh. cat., The San Diego Museum of Art, 18 May – 2 September 2019, pp. 160-161, 175, no. and fig. 92.

EXHIBITIONS

- *Zurbarán, A new perspective*, Odile Delenda – Mar Borobia, eds. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, June 9 – September 13, 2015 ; Dusseldorf, Museum Kunstpalast, October 10, 2015 – January 31, 2016;
- *Del Pontormo a Murillo. Entre lo sagrado y lo profano*, Mexico City, Museo Nacional de San Carlos, June 30 – October 1, 2017 (without catalogue);
- *Spanish Still Life 17th – 20th Century*, Brussels, Bozar, February 23 – May 27 2018;
- *Art & Empire. The Golden Age of Spain*, Michael A. Brown (dir.), The San Diego Museum of Art, 18 May – 2 September 2019.

Justly considered one of the greatest masters of the Golden Age of Spanish painting, Francisco de Zurbarán was born in Extremadura in 1598. While studying in Seville, between 1614 and 1617, he crossed paths with Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) and Alonso Cano (1601-1667), and began his career in 1618 in Llerena, where he opened a workshop to meet the demands of his native province. Summoned to the capital of Andalusia in 1626, he carried out important projects for various religious communities that were seeking to create or renew their pictorial decoration. He settled in Seville in 1629 as official painter, and for twenty-five years he received considerable commissions from the churches and especially convents of most of the religious orders there (1), swiftly becoming the most sought-after painter in the convents of Andalusia. His scrupulous adherence to the new dictates relating to religious art by the Council of Trent, but above all his tenebrist style, marked by striking realism and a transcendental, intense spirituality, define him without question as the most significant representative of Spanish religious art of the 1600s. During the 1640s his workshop also produced some important series of canvases for the burgeoning market of the American colonies. Alongside these grand decorative cycles, and especially after 1645, Zurbarán applied himself to more intimate religious subjects, conveying grace without excessive mawkishness, and revealing the great variety of his output. He became interested in themes less austere than the severe portraits of praying or ecstatic monks for which he was famed, successfully creating more appealing subjects such as beautiful, sumptuously-

dressed female saints. He also distinguished himself in moving depictions of holy children: Jesus as a little boy, for example, or the very young Virgin Mary.

Since the earliest Christian times, the brevity of canonical texts regarding the Virgin could not satisfy the touching curiosity of believers, and the discretion of the Evangelists was very soon overlaid by apocryphal texts, although certain of these were condemned as the result of excessively fertile imaginations. The definitive list of authentic texts, established by the Church at the Council of Carthage in 397, was accepted by the church fathers at the Council of Trent (1545-1563)(2). For pious narratives that might nourish popular piety, the Church was conciliatory: thus the *Proto-Evangelium of James* (c. 130-140) exercised a considerable influence on the devotion and iconography of the Holy Virgin. Notable among such stories are those concerning the circumstances of her birth and presentation in the Temple of Jerusalem by her parents Anna and Joachim. *The Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew*, a sixth-century reworking of the *Proto-Evangelium of James* for Western use, completes the story of the young Mary at the Temple. Artists could now paint the Virgin offering herself to God at the beginning of her condition of self-awareness.

Zurbarán depicted this “little sister” of the Song of Songs (Canticles 8:8) on a number of occasions. A delightful picture housed in the Cathedral of Jerez de la Frontera shows a *Sleeping Virgin Mary* (fig.1). The painting presented here is a new and beautiful autograph version, with variants, of that little dozing Virgin. At least one good workshop replica of this recently-discovered canvas was already known, a work published in 1996 by Alfonso Pérez Sánchez (Madrid, collection of the Banco Central Hispano; fig. 2).

Painted in a nearly square format and practically identical to the one in the Cathedral of Jerez de la Frontera, our painting differs sufficiently from that one to enable us to define it as a separate original composition, probably the painter's initial concept for a subject that was to garner keen success. If the pose and dress of the young girl are essentially the same in each picture, the dark blue mantle in Jerez is hemmed with gold braid, whereas this is not found in our canvas. On the other hand, in the work before us, the child is seated on a big dark red cushion adorned with red and gold tassels, whereas the cushion is hardly visible in the Jerez version. On the right of the composition, the variants are more distinct: flowers in the china bowl in different states of opening, the position of the pewter plate on the little table, and the placement of the drawer – to the left in Jerez and facing us in the present canvas.

Counter-Reformation writers accepted the attractive idea of Mary's consecration to God at the age of three. The Jesuit father Pedro de Ribadeneira, author at the very start of the seventeenth century of the very popular *Flos Sanctorum*, took up this tradition, citing the authority of Saint Jerome and Saint Ambrose (3), while Francesco Arias, another Spanish Jesuit, known for his rigour, proposed a meditation on the young Virgin seated in the Temple in his *Treatise on the Imitation of Our Lady*(4). Sister Maria de Agreda (1602-1665), who was granted visions of the life of Mary, provides a narrative of the Virgin's earliest years, specifying that “her prayer was continual. Sleep itself did not interrupt her, because understanding can take place without the benefit of the senses”(5), an evident reference to the verse from the *Song of Songs*, “I sleep but my heart is awake” (Canticles 5:2). The nun added that the Almighty poured a celestial light over her, the very one that envelops the little child Zurbarán paints here, asleep.

The lovely sleeping young girl seems to have come directly out of one of the many canticles or poems composed in Seville in honour of the Virgin during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: “I am a little brown-haired maiden, prettier than the iris and the rose and the flower of the lily”, sings the poet Diego Cortés (6). The only painter, no doubt, to represent the young girl at such a tender age, Zurbarán sees her haloed with seraphim, glowing with divine love. Mary here adopts the pose of the Virgin of Humility, seated on the ground and resting her face on her left hand, in the traditional pose recommended by Cesare Ripa for the figure of *Meditation* (7). The sculptural representation of the child seeks to combine

the expression of perfect beauty with that of humanity -- the sublime and the familiar. The diminutive sleeping child here brings the grace proper to infancy to its most exalted degree. As he always does in his most successful compositions, Zurbarán makes sacred an everyday scene, and with infinite poetry. The charm of this domestic interior, where peace and silence reign, is profoundly touching. This child, the very image of a little girl who has dozed off while reading, has the doll-like body one finds in other late paintings by the artist. We may imagine that the ageing painter captured the features of little María Manuela, born in 1650 to his third wife Leonor de Tordera. This is not a tenebrist painting but a nocturnal scene. The very soft modelling of the face, observed frontally and fully lit, the delicate, subtly modulated colouring, the intense rose-red one sometimes finds in Zurbarán's works after 1650, and the entirely characteristic rounded folds of the over-long robe, all support a late date, around 1655.

We know that Zurbarán, like most of his contemporaries, took advantage of engravings for the composition of his pictures, transcending the printed image by always infusing it with extraordinary vitality and reality. To create this moving subject, the painter may have asked his daughter María Manuela to pose, but he may equally have found inspiration in one or more examples provided by the inexhaustible series of devotional prints generated by the workshop of the Wierix brothers, engravers and famous publishers in Antwerp, whose dissolute life did not impede them from working with almost exclusively religious clients. Zurbarán's contemporaries cultivated images and metaphors, and such emblems – the fruit of a Christian, cultural or literary context – were easily understood by the literate public. In this case, the master no doubt used one of the illustrations from a series of eighteen emblems engraved in about 1585-1585 by Anton II Wierix so as to represent the working of the Christ Child within the heart of the believer (fig. 3) (8). This very popular print was to be revived, in reverse, by Hieronymus Wierix, accompanied on this occasion by the verse from the Song of Songs, "*Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat*" ("I sleep but my heart is awake"; fig. 4), which confirms our interpretation of the painting. Devotions to the Christ Child and to his Sacred Heart were newly-established in the sixteenth century, and the spread of these prints proves the success of subjects uniting the charms of early childhood and pious meditation.

Francisco de Zurbarán's patrons for these moving images of little girls at prayer or in gentle, ecstatic sleep remain unidentified. Nuns in Spanish convents, whatever their order, revered painted or carved images of the Christ Child (9), Saint John the Baptist or the Virgin as a child. No doubt the often highly cultivated confessors of these pious sisters took a favourable view of these tender devotions, considered as a foretaste of eternal beatitude. Zurbarán's touching pictures of the young Mary at the Temple could come from the cloisters of Seville, whose treasures were dispersed by Napoleonic troops in 1810.

Zurbarán excelled in representations of these states of Holy Childhood. An infinitely delicate painting, our *Virgin Mary as a Child, Asleep* is an intimate work in which precisely-observed nature is indissolubly tied to religious sentiment. As father and grandfather, the painter would have been aware of the ingenuous charm of early childhood, and could thus sensitively capture the exquisite, fleeting expression of this little sleeping girl, who seems to be dreaming of angels. But the dream is actually a prayer, as we are reminded by the book closed on her little lap. Her truly rosy cheeks play with the almost red tone of her simple tunic, which is only enlivened by some fine white lacework on her collar and cuffs. The beautiful dark blue mantle envelops the child's contour while accentuating its pyramidal form. Several Marian flowers – the lily, for innocence and purity, the rose, and the carnation, symbolic of pure, filial love – are arranged simply in a china bowl, set on a pewter plate with finely-observed reflections, and complete the deeper meaning of this delightful composition.

Odile Delenda, 30 November 2013

Notes:

- 1- See Odile Delenda (with the collaboration of Almudena Ros de Barbero), *Zurbarán. Los conjuntos y el obrador*, vol. II, Madrid, 2010.
- 2- Daniel-Rops, ed., *Les Apocryphes du Nouveau Testament*, Paris, 1952, p. 11.
- 3- *The Lives of the Saints, English*, various eds. of the 1620s and 1730; French ed., *La Fleur des Saints*, Vaillysur- Sauldre, 1984, vol. XI, pp. 359-364.
- 4- French ed., Rouen, 1630, p. 234.
- 5- Sor María de Jesús de Agreda, *Mística Ciudad de Dios*, 1st ed., Madrid, 1670, 3 vols.; modern Spanish ed., Madrid, 1970; French ed., “Résumé complet” by canon V. Viala, Saint Cénééré, 1976, p. 46.
- 6 “Soy niña morena / Y soy más hermosa / Que lirio ni rosa / Ni flor de azucena”, Diego Cortés, Madrid, 1592, cited by Francisco López Estrada, “Pintura y literatura: una consideración estética en torno de la Santa Casa de Nazaret de Zurbarán”, *Archivo Español de Arte*, XXXIX, 1966, p. 34. Cf. Jeannine Baticle, with the assistance of Odile Delenda et al., *Zurbarán*, exh. cat., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Paris, Musée du Louvre, 1987-1988, cat. nos. 47 and 60.
- 7- Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia, overo Descrittione di diverse Imagini cavate dall’antichità et de propria inventione trovate et dichiarate da Cesare Ripa... di nuovo rivista e dal medesimo ampliata di 400 e più Imagini*, Rome, 1603, p. 309; ed. Sonia Maffei, Turin, 2012, pp. 369-370.
- 8- See Odile Delenda, in *Zurbarán al Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya*, exh. cat., Barcelona, Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya, 1998, pp. 26-28 and 210-211.
- 9- In order to illustrate the *Revelations* of Saint Gertrude for nuns, Diego Cosío uses an engraving of the Christ Child sleeping in a heart that is very close to figs. 3 and 4 (*Insinuación de la Divina Piedad, revelado a Santa Gertrudis, monja de la Orden de San Benito*, Salamanca, 1603).