

# THE SCULPTURAL WORKS IN THE SPANISH GALLERY

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Attributed to Alejo de Vahía, *The Virgin Mary* (detail), c. 1495–1510 [cat. 3]

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‘The great demand for carvings has induced many first-rate artists in Spain to devote themselves to this branch of sculpture [...]. Their works have a startling identity: the stone statues of monks actually seem petrifications of a once living being; many others are exquisitely conceived and executed.’

‘[The Spanish] used [sculpture] to feed the eye of the illiterate many; to put before those who could not read, a visible tangible object, which realised a legend or a dogma; and there is no mistake in the subject which was intended to be thus represented; nothing was risked by trusting to the abstract and spiritual.’

Richard Ford, *Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain, and Readers at Home*, 1845



# Introduction

## Sculpture in the Spanish Gallery, Bishop Auckland

In October 2021 the Spanish Gallery opened to great acclaim in Bishop Auckland, County Durham, housed in a former bank building in the main square of the town [fig. 1]. The present publication focuses on the sculpture displayed there. The impressive public collection at Bishop Auckland consolidates and expands Spanish art already to be seen in North East England [fig. 2].<sup>1</sup> First and foremost, the Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle in County Durham has long been renowned for its rich collection of Spanish Golden Age paintings, including works by El Greco (1541–1614), Juan Bautista Maíno (1581–1649) and Francisco Pacheco (1564–1644).<sup>2</sup> Durham Castle and Cathedral, and nearby Ushaw College, likewise house significant works of art from Spain and Portugal.<sup>3</sup> However, the Spanish Gallery at Bishop Auckland is exceptional because of the extent of its holdings of Spanish sculpture, purchased by Jonathan Ruffer on the London art market from 2015 onwards. The present catalogue is the first scholarly study of these intriguing and sometimes enigmatic works of art. The sculptures complement and enhance the collection of Golden Age paintings in the Spanish Gallery, their iconography and chronological progression giving the visitor a panoramic view of Spanish art from medieval times through to the nineteenth century.

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1 Baron and Beresford 2014.

2 Conran et al. 1992.

3 Kelly 2015.

## Nationalities: Spain and other European countries

During the late fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries numerous artists travelled to Spain from elsewhere, notably the Netherlands and France, in order to gain commissions. Alejo de Vahía, the probable author of *The Virgin Mary* [cat. 3], is thought to have been a native of Northern Europe, perhaps the Lower Rhine, and to have moved to find work in Castile in the second half of the fifteenth century. Similarly, Arnao de Bruselas (c. 1515–1564), whose assistants probably produced *The Lamentation* [cat. 4], moved to Aragon from the southern Netherlands in the mid-sixteenth century and was involved in the creation of innumerable altarpieces in La Rioja and elsewhere. The style of these altarpieces is undeniably Spanish, and yet draws on Netherlandish traditions. At an earlier period, workshops that are now anonymous made sculptures for patrons across Europe; indeed, national borders which exist now did not always exist in medieval times. The *Sedes Sapientiae* [cat. 2], a small thirteenth-century figure of the seated Virgin originally holding the Christ Child on her lap, was thought at one time to be Catalan, but was almost certainly produced in Liège in the Mosan region (the area around the river Meuse in today's Belgium). Catalan artistic traditions were at times close to those of that part of the Netherlands in the Gothic period. Similarly the *Corpus from a Triumphal Cross* [cat. 1] at Bishop Auckland may have been carved by an artist working in the Pyrenees; it exhibits stylistic parallels with sculptures produced in what is today France, as well as in Catalonia.<sup>13</sup>

## Reproductions

The modern digital reproductions on the top floor of the Spanish Gallery were noted above. Another important and perhaps lesser-known facet of Spanish sculpture is the use of reproductive techniques at much earlier dates. The terracotta figure of the *Dead Christ* by Agapito Vallmitjana (1833–1905) [cat. 10] is a variant of the life-size marble version of this subject by the same artist, now in the Museo del Prado in Madrid [see fig. 10.2],<sup>14</sup> and numerous other terracotta versions survive. These were made in the years following the production of the marble figure during

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13 Cf. *Rhein und Maas* 1972, 93–127, and Castiñeiras and Camps 2008, 138.

14 1872, marble, 44.5 × 211 × 70 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, E000815.

## CAT. 1

### **Anonymous artist from the Spanish or Southern French Pyrenees *Corpus from a Triumphant Cross*, c. 1250–1300**

Willow/poplar (*Populus salix* family) with traces of gold, polychromy and gesso; fragments of textile

H. 202.5 cm; W. 138 cm; D. 31 cm

#### **Provenance**

'Property of a Lady', Christie's, London, 10 December 1996, lot 20; private collection, Dublin; Sotheby's, London, 10 July 2014, lot 13; Jonathan Ruffer, 2014.

#### **Literature**

Ruffer 2021, 38.

#### **Condition**

The corpus was dismantled and conserved by Plowden & Smith, London, in 2017. The conservators believed that the surface was subject to two paint schemes: an original layer and a subsequent one which may have been applied before the eighteenth century. The wood was infested with woodworm, degrading the structure. A number of deep cracks run through the piece on the front and the back. Strips of cloth applied to the joints were re-adhered. Water damage led to the loss of decorative layers, with only fragments of the original gesso and paint remaining. These were consolidated by Plowden & Smith in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Radio carbon dating carried out by Sotheby's in 2014 indicated a date range of 1045 to 1224; a sample was taken from the inside of the loincloth in April 2014.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Conservation report held in the archives of The Auckland Project, Bishop Auckland.

2 *Old Master Sculpture and Works of Art*, Sotheby's sale catalogue, July 2014. Radio Carbon Dating Measurement Report no. RCD-8228, prepared by G. Bird and W. Laing for RCD, East Lockinge.



Fig. 1.1 Detail of the head of the Christ figure



## CAT. 2

**Anonymous artist from the Mosan region (probably Liège)**

*Sedes Sapientiae*, c. 1220–50

Polychromed and gilt walnut with iron ring and nail

H. 54.7 cm; W. 17.5 cm; D. 17.5 cm

### **Provenance**

Galerie Orphée, Cannes, 1982; private collection, Antwerp, 1982-2011;

Daniel Katz Ltd, London, 2017; Jonathan Ruffer, 2017.

### **Literature**

*Les Antiquaires au Grand Palais* 1982, 558–59; Ruffer 2021, 38.

### **Exhibitions**

*Les Antiquaires au Grand Palais* 1982.

### **Condition**

The figure of the Christ Child is now missing, as are the forearms and hands of the Virgin, as well as parts of the back of the throne [fig. 2.1]. A crack can be seen on the left side of the Virgin's head, and another longer crack runs down the back of her head and headdress. Surface damage is evident in the polychromy and gilding, and it seems probable that some of the existing paint and gilding may have been refreshed. On the reverse, the lower part is completely decayed, probably the result of a combination of damp and beetle infestation. An iron nail fixed low down on the back at the Virgin's left side was probably inserted for fixing purposes.



## CAT. 3

Attributed to Alejo de Vahía

*The Virgin Mary*, c. 1495–1510

Polychromed and gilt wood

H. 112.5 cm; W. 51.5 cm; D. 36.5 cm

### Provenance

‘Private collection’, Sotheby’s, Munich, 17 March 1979, lot 93, as Hispano-Flemish; Sotheby’s, London, 7 July 1999, lot 59; art market, Germany, July 2012; Sam Fogg, London, 2012; Sir Michael Craig-Martin R.A., 2017; presented by Sir Michael Craig-Martin R.A. to The Zurbarán Trust, 2023.

### Condition

This half-length figure of the Virgin was almost certainly originally a full-length, life-size sculpture. The lower half of the body is now missing, and was probably removed shortly after the 1979 sale.<sup>1</sup> Underneath the figure is a modern resin layer, set over a metal stand. The hollowed out back of the figure is reinforced by a metal strut. The resin layer was probably added in 1979. Sir Michael Craig-Martin had the metal support inserted after he had acquired the sculpture in 2017. The visible underside of the base exhibits what seem to be saw marks, where the sculpture was presumably truncated. Small fragments of fabric can be seen on the lower edges of the Virgin’s robe; these are perhaps original, and if so, possibly once formed a stabilising overlay to the wood. The hands have been reattached, but could be original. A large hole at the back of the neck, about 2 centimetres in diameter, may have been used as a fixing point for the sculpture in its original position in the early sixteenth century. Although the polychromy and gilding have been refreshed, traces of original gilding and probably red bole remain, notably on the cuffs of the Virgin’s garment. On the inner surface, under the sculpture, blue pigment survives, perhaps original. The bodice of the Virgin, now a muddy olive brown, may once have been blue; traces of red suggest that pigment may also have been used for the Virgin’s drapery. A large hole at the top of the head could have supported a halo, or perhaps a crown. Woodworm holes

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1 Information kindly supplied by Matthew Reeves at Sam Fogg Ltd.



## CAT. 4

Attributed to the workshop of Arnao de Bruselas

*The Lamentation*, c. 1550

Polychromed and gilt oak on a later pine base

H. 80 cm; W. 81 cm; D. 22 cm

### Provenance

Private collection, Switzerland, c. 1900; Sotheby's, London, 5 July 2016, lot 20; Daniel Katz Ltd, London, 2016; The Zurbarán Trust, 2016.

### Literature

Ruffer 2021, 39.

### Condition

The sculpture was cleaned and conserved by K&S Conservation Ltd, London, in 2016, shortly before it was acquired by The Zurbarán Trust.<sup>1</sup> Two fingers are missing from the Virgin's right hand, while one finger is absent from the left hand of Saint John. The tips of three fingers of Nicodemus's left hand and part of the forefinger of his right hand are also lost. A yellowish-brown coating, probably dating from the nineteenth century, concealing what was apparently the original polychromy and gilding, was removed by the conservators in 2016. Some losses, retouchings and surface damage were found underneath. Despite these losses the original sixteenth-century polychromy and gilding are thought to have been unusually well preserved, especially the red glaze, so often faded. Here it retains a vibrant raspberry red hue, seen for example on the hemline on Nicodemus's gown. The only surface that has not survived so well is the area of green in the foreground. This is now brown and has significantly darkened in many places, a common if somewhat ungainly degradation of a moss green glaze. The original paint and gilding on the relief evince a range of Spanish polychrome techniques of the sixteenth (and indeed seventeenth) century, exemplified by the delicate *estofado* on the hemline

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1 Conservation report held in the archives at The Auckland Project, ref. K&S 169.

## CAT. 6

**Juan Bautista Vázquez the Elder**

*Saint Augustine*, c. 1563

Limestone with traces of polychromy

H. 109.2 cm; W. 41 cm; D. 48.5 cm

### **Provenance**

Monasterio de San Agustín (also known as the Casa Grande de San Agustín), Seville, c. 1550–1945; Christie's, London, 2 December 2014, lot 10; Jonathan Ruffer, 2020.

### **Literature**

Carmona 2007, 173; Ruffer 2021, 39.

### **Condition**

The relief has suffered some surface damage to the nose and beard. Traces of colour can be seen on the face, in particular red pigment around the eyes; what seems to be brown flesh colouring on the skin is also faintly visible. It is unclear whether the figure was originally polychromed, and if so, how extensively. The present colour may be a later addition. Originally a full-length figure, the lower portion of the stone block was separated from the present upper half, which shows the head and torso of the saint, after 1945. Two archive photographs by José María González-Nandín y Paúl of February 1945, now in the archives of the University of Seville, show the sculpture before the two halves were separated. The image of the lower portion was labelled as the lower half of Saint Augustine, and said to be in the Old Cloisters of the monastery [fig. 6.1].<sup>1</sup> The current location of the stone block is unknown, perhaps destroyed.

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1 Carmona 2007, 173.



## CAT. 9

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**Anonymous artist**

*Abundance, 1635*

Polychromed pine or cedar

H. 103 cm; W. 54 cm; D. 52 cm

### Provenance

'Private collection', Christie's, London, 7 December 2016, lot 60;

The Zurbarán Trust, 2016.

### Condition

The sculpture is hollow, constructed from six separate pieces of wood laminated together around a central core. A circular hole of 5.5 centimetres is on the underside of the base. Some surface damage is evident to the polychromy; repainting and discoloured varnish was found on the figure, although the grapes and bowl or basket held by the figure have not been overpainted. The grapes and basket of fruit may be later additions.<sup>1</sup> One of the buttons is missing from the front of the gown. Two vertical cracks are to be seen at the back. The irregular integral socle is slightly damaged. A small burn mark is visible on the right sleeve. Inside the figure is a rough wood plaque, maybe fragmentary, inscribed 'Yçose año de 1635', 'Yçose' an archaic form of 'se hizo' (it was made).<sup>2</sup> The graphic image of a circle and semi-circle in the inscription is uncertain, but the date 1635 is clear and corresponds with the style of carving and decoration.

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1 Conservation report by Plowden & Smith, April 2023, held in the archives at The Auckland Project. My thanks to Charlotte Baron and Emily Harris of Plowden & Smith for their comments on the condition of this sculpture.

2 I am most grateful to Javier Andrés Pérez and Miguel Ángel Marcos Villán for their advice on the translation of the archaic phrase in the date.





CAT. 10

Agapito Vallmitjana Barbany

*The Dead Christ*, after 1872

Painted terracotta

H. 22 cm; W. 86 cm; D. 29 cm



This book was printed in 2024,  
460 years after Arnao de Bruselas  
died from the plague.