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Catalan Romanesque Calvary

Historical, Artistic and Curatorial Report

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1. Historical, Artistic and Iconographical Description

1.1. Introduction

This is a sculptural group of devotional art consisting of three polychrome sculptures: The Virgin, Christ and Saint John.

The sculptures come from a private collection in the city of Toledo, stored and not exhibited on the basis that they have been conserved and restored in detail under the care, attention and experience of experts as they have the status of exceptional historical pieces. The experts have managed to conserve these pieces of great historical and artistic value in great detail.

Although the sculptural group was part of a private collection in Toledo, our experts believe that it may have previously been part of a private chapel or a large altarpiece as an icon of worship in a sacred place in the time of Mendizábal, before the Spanish Civil War. The Civil War was one of the most momentous conflicts in all areas of Spanish history, which began with the coup d'état of 17 and 18 July 1936 that led to the outbreak of war. It was a religious, political, and social war¹, a universal conflict between fascism and communism that was fought for the first time in Spain. The violent episode ended with the victory of fascism and marked the beginning of Franco's dictatorship in 1939, which ended with the death of the caudillo in 1975.

During the Spanish Civil War, thousands of works belonging to museums and churches were plundered and handed over to people who were not their owners, for fear of being damaged by bombing or destroyed by the militiamen themselves.

Furthermore, the dimensions of the pieces are unusual for a house, which reinforces the idea that these works of art were created with the intention of being exhibited in a sacred place.

1.2. Artistic and Iconographical Description

The Calvary of the period is a sculptural ensemble commonly found in Romanesque-style churches and monasteries in Europe. It consists of a representation of the crucifixion of Christ, along with other religious figures such as the Virgin Mary and Saint John (Fig.1).

The Romanesque Calvary is composed of a group of three polychrome wooden figures. In the centre is the figure of Christ crucified. To his right is the figure of the Virgin Mary and to his left is Saint John, who witnessed the crucifixion.

¹ In the early stages, both from a military, human and territorial point of view, the forces were evenly matched, but with time the continuous aid given to Franco by the fascist powers, as well as the lack of coordination and international aid from the democracies in the republican zone, favoured the victory of the rebels. Little by little, Franco's army gained the upper hand until it managed to enter and conquer Madrid, making the fascist victory almost definitive.



Figure n°1, General photo of the Calvary

This sculptural ensemble is considered a very powerful representation of the Passion of Christ, and is often used as an icon for prayer in sacred places; chapels, churches, cathedrals..... In addition, Calvary is used as a symbol of human suffering, redemption, Christian hope in the resurrection and overcoming pain.

Christ Crucified:

The figure of the crucified Christ in Majesty is represented using 12th century Romanesque typology, which is characterised by showing a triumphant Christ, with no expression of pain and with a crown without thorns, as opposed to the Gothic style, which shows a Christ with signs of suffering and hardship.

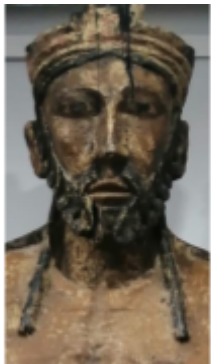


Figure n°2, Photo detail of the expression on Christ's face

The carving is made up of three pieces of wood, one main piece and two secondary ones. The main piece is the one that forms the whole body, from the head to the feet, with a height of 156 cm. The other two pieces constitute the arms and are integrated into the back of the figure by a nail. The sculpture is carved with a completely straight structure with no deviations or tilting, and the arms, legs and feet are parallel, indicating that it was produced before the 13th century. From the 1200s onwards the arms are not so horizontal, the body slowly breaks and the feet are displayed on top of each other. The face of Christ is shown with his eyes open and without any expression of pain, with a trimmed beard and long hair falling behind his ears and locks over his shoulders (Fig. 2). As for the clothing, it consists of a perizodium, characterised by a long purity cloth knotted at the waist and reaching down to the knees.

The cloth is executed with great perfection with beautiful folds, which undulate and give depth to the perizodium (Fig.3), these characteristics of the cloth of purity were used at the beginning of the 14th century. The torso of Christ is nude, where the ribs are conspicuously marked and a very depressed stomach is also depicted (Fig.4). The feet are parallel and nailed separately. Christ has four nails, one for each extremity. In this example we can see the absence of nails in the feet with the intention of eliminating the small signs of martyrdom (Fig.5)

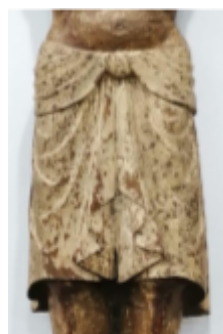


Figure n° 3, Photo detail of the perizodium.



Figure n°4, Photo detail of the torso.



Figure n°5, Photo detail of the feet.

The Virgin:

The image of the Virgin keeps the Gothic typology of the 13th century belonging to the transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic style, which is characterised by changing the face of pain typical of the Romanesque style for a face that expresses serenity. Moreover, in Gothic art the dimensions of the human body are more natural and depth is given by the folds of the drapery.



Figure nº6, Photo detail of the expression of the Virgin's face.

The Virgin is in keeping with the conventions of the period, depicted standing to the right of Christ. The carving is made up of a single piece of polychrome wood, 144 cm high. The sculpture is carved with a completely straight body structure, offering a slight arching of the Virgin's face to the left with her eyes looking straight ahead and her mouth twisted slightly downwards with a slight expression of hardship. The face expresses serenity rather than sorrow, which is typical of the transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic style as typical features of both periods are used (Fig. 6). The Virgin's hands are usually joined or intertwined, but in this case the hands have an unusual iconography, which makes it even more unique.



Figure nº7, Photo detail of the hands of the Virgin Mary.

The Virgin's hands are placed between her belly and chest and are crossed between them, a characteristic attitude of Byzantine origin which is interpreted as a symbol of her link to the sacrifice of Christ (Fig.7), which is a typical characteristic of the late 13th century.

As for the clothing, the Virgin wears a tight-fitting tunic that covers her from the neck to the waist and a cloak that covers her legs, leaving her feet uncovered, with several pronounced pleats in a wavy shape, which give the work a certain depth (fig. 8). The folds of the tunic give us information about the period of the Virgin's production, since in the Renaissance period the folds were completely straight, running vertically across the dress, while in the Gothic style the folds are angular in order to create a naturalness in the image of the Virgin. In addition to this, the Virgin has a capelin covering her head. The only surviving foot is visible underneath the drapery (Fig. 9). In our sculpture, one foot is destroyed and the other foot is very deteriorated. This is due to the fact that in the sculptural group "El Calvario" both the Virgin and St. John are usually resting on the ground, which produces a voluminous wear in the area of the lower extremities over time.



Figure n°8, Photo detail of the tunic and its folds.



Figure n°9, Photo detail of the Virgin's feet

San Juan:

The iconography of Saint John is part of the transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic style, more specifically of an early Gothic stage, which could be dated to the first half of the 13th century. We can know this because, despite the rigid position of the Romanesque style, they reveal a gentle movement, achieved by means of the expressions on their faces and the undulations of their clothing.

The carving consists of a single piece of polychrome wood with a height of 150 cm. The sculpture is carved with a completely straight body structure, Saint John is also standing, dressed in a tunic, which shows both linear and wavy folds, which indicates that the sculpture belongs to the transition between the Romanesque and Gothic styles, considering that the linear folds are characteristic of the Romanesque style and the wavy folds belong to the Gothic style (Fig.10). The tunic reaches to the ankles, revealing the saint's bare feet, which have deteriorated as a result of the fact that the figures of the saint and the Virgin were usually resting on the ground (Fig.11). Saint John is holding a book in his left hand, as a symbol of the Gospel he wrote, with his cheek resting on his right hand in a gesture of pain, which is not yet reflected in the gesture of his face (Fig.12).



Figure n°10, Photo detail of the tunic and its folds.

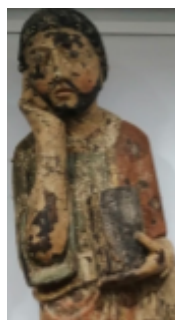


Figure n° 11, Photo detail of the expression on St. John's face.



Figure n° 12, Photo detail of the Virgin's feet

2. State of Conservation



Figure n°13, Photo detail of the original state of the sculptural group.

For this report on the state of conservation of this sculptural group we have had the collaboration of the expert Miguel Angel Torres, who has been in charge of the maintenance and restoration of the Calvary.

The main objective in the restoration of the piece is to restore it to its original state and to learn the techniques used in its creation so as not to lose the essence that the artist sought to convey. The pieces belonged to a private collection in Toledo, where the expert found them in a fairly sublime state of conservation thanks to the three thick layers of plaster protecting the polychromy of the sculptures (Fig.13).



Figure n°14, Detail of the before and after photo after removing the layers of plaster.

The sculptures were not plagued by xylophagous insects, only a light layer of dust. Due to the good conservation, the expert only needed to use a mechanical restoration with a scalpel to remove the layers of plaster (Fig. 14). Thanks to the layers of plaster and polychromes used in its preparation, the piece has been preserved in its original state without the addition of any repainting or any wooden parts that do not date from the period of production. Each layer of polychrome is 2mm thick and lime sulphate was used for the polychromy.

Previously, the piece had undergone two bad restorations in the 18th and 19th centuries, carried out by unqualified people in different places such as Italy and France, where two layers of polychromy were added that did not match the original ones. During the restoration, all the polychromy from the period of production was removed with the intention of maintaining the original (Fig. 15).



Figure n°15, Photo detail of the different layers of polychromy at San Juan

As for the sculptural compositions, based on the expert's knowledge, when a sculptural group is commissioned, there is a piece that is the main piece where everything we know is unloaded, the other two pieces are secondary, not so important. The Christ is the first piece that was made where all the energy was discharged, from the Christ the Calvary was formed. The Christ was the first image commissioned and then the next two were commissioned, as the collection is diverse and does not match the sculptures of the Virgin and Saint John, which were made later. It is possible that the author was a dealer or merchant.

Despite the good state of conservation of the works, it should be noted that without proper maintenance, surface dirt and the ageing of the materials

themselves can cause irreversible damage to the integrity of the work. That said, prior to the restoration work, the various pathologies present in the carvings were studied.

To begin with, several cracks and holes can be seen all over the surface of the Virgin, caused by the natural ageing of the materials. In addition to the above, the cracks were caused by the different transfers that the sculptural group has undergone due to the fact that it has belonged to numerous private collections (Fig.16), (Fig.17), (Fig.18).



Figure n°16, Photo detail of the cracks on the face of the face.



Figure n°17, Photo detail of the cracks of the hand



Figure n°18, Photo detail of the holes of the face

The most affected area of the piece are the feet, which show wear of the polychromatic layer and various disturbances, this is due to the fact that in the original version of the Calvary, the figure of the Virgin is resting on the ground, therefore it is the part of the carving that suffers most wear over time due to the friction of the wood against the surface where it was resting (Fig.19).



Figure n°19, Photo detail of the foot wear



Figure n°20, Photo detail of face cracks

Christ, like the Virgin before the restoration, had multiple cracks and perforations all around the image. The carving in question has suffered significant damage in the area of the face (Fig.20) and torso (Fig.21), which may be due to multiple factors. One of these is the passage of time, as the materials of which it is composed can weaken over the years and cause cracks or wear in the most exposed areas.



Figure n°21,
Photo detail of
torso cracks

It is also possible that the damage may have occurred during the various moves that the sculpture has undergone over time. Transporting a piece of this kind can be delicate and complicated, especially if it is an old or fragile work.

The most striking damage present on our Christ is the absence of the two arms (Fig. 22). The loss can have various reasons, one of the most frequent factors being the passage of time, as ancient sculptures can suffer wear and tear and damage over the years.

Another possible reason is that the arms of the sculpture have been lost due to traumatic events such as war, earthquakes, fires or other natural disasters.



Figure n°22,
Photo detail of
the missing arms.

Next, we must comment on the various injuries to Saint John before the restoration. Like the Virgin and Christ, Saint John has holes, in this case in the face (fig. 23) and in the tunic (fig. 24). He also exhibits a loss of the pictorial layer on the face and arms (Fig.25). Finally, the most affected area of this carving is the feet, since, like the Virgin, this sculpture was placed on the ground, which causes a great deal of wear in this area (Fig.26).



Figure n°23, Photo
detail of the face
holes



Figure n°24, Photo detail
of the holes in the tunic



Figure n°25,
Photo detail of
the loss of the
pictorial layer



Figure n°26, Photo
detail of the wear of
the feet

3. Scientific Data

The Calvary is currently undergoing various radiocarbon dating and imagery analyses at the hands of the Royal [Institute of Artistic Heritage](#). Carbon 14 tests will help us to date the period of manufacture of the sculptural group with greater precision..

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