

Caylus



JERÓNIMO JACINTO DE ESPINOSA
(Cocentaina, Alicante 1600 – Valencia 1667)

Saint John the Baptist

Ca. 1640-1660

Oil on canvas

95.5 x 113 cm

PROVENANCE:

Count of Ybarra, Seville.

Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa was one of the leading figures in the remarkable Valencian school of the first half of the 17th century although the outstanding quality of his work has not received the recognition it merits. This may partly be due to the fact that his career coincided with those of the great artists of the Spanish Golden Age who inevitably overshadowed him (Zurbarán, Ribera, Velázquez, Alonso Cano, etc) and also because despite an extensive documented oeuvre, much of his work has been lost or has survived in poor condition. Espinosa's output reveals an evident predominance of religious compositions and an outstanding ability as a portraitist but is also characterised by little development: the artist remained faithful to naturalism and tenebrism and remote from the innovations being assimilated in cities such as Seville and Madrid as they moved towards the High Baroque.

Espinosa trained with his father, Jerónimo Rodríguez de Espinosa, a modest painter in the Mannerist tradition from Valladolid. He probably moved with his family to Valencia around 1612, the date when his father received a commission for the church of Santo Domingo, according to Luis Tramoyeres.¹ A small panel signed by Jerónimo Jacinto dates from that year, indicating the early date at which he embarked on his career. Aged 16 Espinosa was already registered with the Colegio de Pintores in Valencia and in 1623 he signed his first important work, *The Miracle of Christ of the Rescue*, which clearly reveals the future direction of his style.

The decisive figure in Espinosa's formative period is undoubtedly Francisco Ribalta from whom he acquired the tenebrist naturalism that he retained throughout his career, a remarkable use of colour and an ability to depict the textures of objects. Ribalta's son Juan Ribalta, an exact contemporary of Espinosa although more aesthetically advanced, was also an influence, as was Pedro de Orrente, from whom he derived a typically Caravaggesque crepuscular light and an ability to single out the everyday within religious scenes through the significant presence of the landscape and animals. The two Ribaltas died in 1628 and Orrente, who was much given to "new horizons" as Jusepe Martínez expressed it, had moved to Toledo. Espinosa thus became the most important painter in Valencia, working

¹ PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ A. *Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa*. Madrid: CSIC, 1972, p. 13.

for the principal religious orders and houses and the local nobility. Dating from this period is a splendid portrait of *Father Jerónimo Mos* which reveals his outstanding ability to capture his sitters' inner characters. There are no documentary references to Espinosa between 1640 and 1647, suggesting a possible trip to Madrid or Seville to complete his training. Some authors have argued that he established contact with Zurbarán at this point², due to the close relationship between works such as Espinosa's *The Death of Saint Luis Beltrán* and Zurbarán's *The Presentation of the Body of Saint Bonaventure*. However, there is no documentary proof of any trip nor any sign in Espinosa's work of the most advanced trends to be found in those two cities. *The Communion of Mary Magdalene*, which Pérez Sánchez considered his most beautiful work, dates from between 1660 and 1665, the years of Espinosa's artistic maturity and the height of his powers. Espinosa died in Valencia in 1667 and was buried in the church of Santo Domingo, in accordance with his wishes.

A previously unpublished work, this curly-haired *Saint John the Baptist* is shown kneeling by a spring to collect water in his bowl. A monumental presence in the foreground, the saint wears only his camel hair garment, allowing the artist to concentrate on his body. The young Baptist looks attentively at the clear water, surrounded by a wild and sweeping landscape of rocks and vegetation. Next to him is a lamb that alludes to Christ, its tightly curled coat painted in a naturalist manner. Hanging from a tree are the Baptist's attributes of a red mantle and cross with a scroll twined around it that reads "Ecce Agnus Dei". The scene is bathed in a dusk light that singles out the saint's beautiful, youthful body and once again reveals Espinosa's familiarity with Caravaggesque painting.

This work dates to the central years of the artist's career, between 1640 and 1660, but cannot be dated more precisely due to the stylistic uniformity and lack of evolution evident in surviving works from this period. There is another very similar version in a private collection in Madrid [fig. 1]. Traditionally attributed to Orrente, it was included in the *Exhibition of Art Treasures* held in Manchester in 1857 and it was not until 1972 that Pérez Sánchez proposed an attribution to Espinosa, which was unanimously accepted. Of very similar size (99 x 113 cm) and almost identical composition, it seems to demonstrate the taste for and commercial success of such depictions of saints alone in the countryside in penitence, meditation or contemplation, which was undoubtedly one of the most popular themes within Counter Reformation iconography.

² PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ, A. *Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa (1600- 1667)*. Valencia: 2000. p. 29.



Fig. 1. Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa. *Saint John the Baptist*. Circa 1640-1660. Oil on canvas, 99 x 113 cm. Private collection, Madrid.

RELATED LITERATURE:

FERRÁN SALVADOR, V., “A propósito de las pinturas de Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa en el Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia”. *Archivo del Arte Valenciano*, 1961.

PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ A. *Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa*. Madrid: CSIC, 1972.

PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ A. *Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa (1600-1667)* Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, 2000.