

Caylus



MAESTRO ALEJO

(Ca. 1490-1530)

The Agony in the Garden

Palencia, 1515-1525

Oil on panel

96.5 x 64 cm

PROVENANCE:

Private collection, France

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This panel depicts the episode of the Agony in the Garden (Matthew 26, 36-46; Mark 14, 32-42; Luke 22, 39-46), which takes place immediately after the Last Supper in the Gospel account and directly before the Taking of Christ or the Kiss of Judas. Christ is shown kneeling in the centre of the composition, surrounded by rocks and trees that offer a free interpretation of the olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane. He wears a dark tunic and mantle of brown and greyish tones which reveal one of his bare feet at the lower edge. The mantle has a simple gold edging executed with mordant gilding, the technique also employed by the artist for the halo with its fleur-de-lys motifs. Christ looks upwards to the sky where an angel among scalloped clouds appears to him, bearing the chalice and cross that are clear allusions to his forthcoming Passion. The angel's presence indicates that the artist followed the account in Luke (22, 43), which recounts that as Christ was kneeling in prayer an angel appeared to comfort him.

In the foreground, three of the Apostles are shown sleeping and suffering from the effects of an excessively large supper. Two of them are easily identifiable: one is Peter, who holds the sword that he will later use to cut off Malchus's ear, and the other is John the Evangelist reclining peacefully in the lap of his companion who partly covers him with his mantle. The face of the third Apostle is not visible nor does he have any specific attribute but the Gospel texts indicate that he is James the Greater. He is shown from behind in a similar position to that of the same saint in *The Agony in the Garden* in the altarpiece for the church of San Lázaro in Palencia by Juan de Flandes (Museo Nacional del Prado), and in

the painting on the same subject in the *Saint Peter Altarpiece* for Montealegre (Valladolid) by the Master Benito.¹ The three Apostles have delicate haloes of gilded rays executed with the same technique as Christ's. James and Peter wear blue tunics and red mantles with gold borders while John's tunic is dark green. The artist also took considerable care in depicting the vegetation and the rocks scattered across the ground.

In the background, a large, woven wicker fence encloses the Garden of Gethsemane. The roofed gateway is being opened by a group of soldiers wearing armour and equipped with lances and pikes. They are led by the traitorous Apostle Judas whose intensely bright yellow clothing makes him stand out from the group. Further back in the pictorial space is a landscape and the walls of Jerusalem, all enveloped in a blueish tone that suggests dusk and blending harmoniously into the greenish clouds in the sky.

All the figures including Christ have very distinctive faces with angular, pronounced features, pink cheeks and globular eyes. Their hands reveal the work of a skilled, meticulous master who has also paid close attention to the depiction of the vegetation and the natural setting, as evident in the moss on the rock at the upper left. Also striking are the highlights and gradations on the leaves of the trees, particularly the one to Christ's left. The composition makes use of an approximately pyramidal structure culminating in the angelic vision. The proportions of the bodies are appropriate despite some small defects and exaggerated gestures, such as the movement of James's head as he turns away from the viewer. In contrast, Peter's left hand holding the sword is much better resolved and almost achieves an effect of foreshortening.

The panel has not retained its original, gilded wooden surround but the black areas on three sides would have been covered over by the decorative moulding and pinnacles. With regard to the work's attribution, there is no doubt that it is by Master Alejo. The painting includes all the characteristics that define the style of this artist,² a master with a profoundly late Gothic pictorial idiom who reveals interesting connections with the work of Fernando Gallego. This issue, which has not yet been sufficiently studied, could help to explain Master Alejo's training. The connection is evident in the present panel, which reveals clear parallels with compositions by Gallego. In addition, the type of halo, the expressionist, angular faces and the treatment of the folds of the clothing recall those found in various works by that artist. In turn, an exploration of these connections could

1. See, respectively, SILVA 2006, pp. 434-437; WENIGER 1999, p. 147, fig. 3.

2. Established in SILVA 1990, vol. III, pp. 913-918.

explain the chronology of Alejo's earliest creations such as the altarpiece for Monzón de Campos (Palencia), dated by Silva to around 1490, and the principal altarpiece for Villalcázar de Sirga, which that author places around 1500-05.³

Alejo's works include figures that are notably expressive and gestural, with very defined and distinctive, almost individualised faces. They have bulging globular eyes, large straight noses and bright red, fleshy lips. Their round pink cheeks are another characteristic trait of the artist, as are the high broad brows. The hands are generally delicate although in some cases the fingers are too long or assume unnatural positions. The clothes are always painted in bright tones with abundant broken folds that cluster together at the bottom.

Master Alejo is an artist known from an autograph panel depicting *The Prophet Moses* that was in Josep Gudiol's collection [Fig. 1]. The fact that it is signed has allowed for a reconstruction of this painter's personality and for a catalogue of his works to be compiled.

⁴ This corpus includes works previously attributed to the Master of Sirga, a painter active in Palencia between the late 15th and early 16th century.⁵ Nonetheless, art historians are not entirely in agreement regarding Master Alejo as some consider him to be an artistic personality distinct from the so-called Master of Calzada⁶ while others, including Isabel Mateo, suggest that the two are a single figure.⁷ Those supporting the first hypothesis consider that the Master of Calzada (ca. 1500-1530) would have trained with Master Alejo (ca. 1485-1515). The present author agrees with the second proposal and considers the two figures to be a single artist.⁸

Among Master Alejo's output are the two altarpieces for the church of Santa María la Blanca in Villalcázar de Sirga (Palencia), the one for the high altar dedicated to the Virgin and the other to Saint Anthony of Padua.⁹ The former includes a panel that is fundamental for the attribution of the present work. This is an *Agony in the Garden* which is very similar to the Caylus painting, albeit with some compositional variations [Fig. 2]. These similarities

³ SILVA 1990, vol. III, p. 911.

⁴ GUDIOL 1955, p. 379, fig. 324; SILVA 1990, vol. III, pp. 919-920, fig. 347.

⁵ POST 1947, pp. 480-488.

⁶ POST 1950, p. 434; SILVA 1990, vol. III, pp. 908-911; SILVA 1996.

⁷ MATEO 2015

⁸ As argued in VELASCO 2019, p. 43, no. 139.

⁹ The face of Saint Peter in the present panel has features comparable to Saint Andrew's in the *Saint Anthony of Padua Altarpiece* for Villalcázar de Sirga. Reproduced in MATEO 2015, p. 117.

include the faces of Peter and John, which have the same features.¹⁰ Among the iconographic details that also coincide is the presence of Judas's bag of coins,¹¹ while in both paintings he wears yellow (gilded, in the panel in Villalcázar de Sirga), a colour traditionally associated with Christ's betrayer in the Middle Ages.¹²

Another *Agony in the Garden* that reveals evident similarities to the present panel is the one in the *Saint Michael Altarpiece* for Melgar de Arriba (Valladolid).¹³ Here the treatment of Christ is extremely comparable, including the greyish-purple tone of his clothes. The Apostles in that work are also grouped together in the foreground and the composition includes the angel and the rocky elements and plants, which are all depicted with a similar approach. Some of the above-mentioned iconographic details are also the same.

It should also be noted that the style of the present work coincides with that of *The Prophet Moses* formerly in the Gudiol collection. Furthermore, the position of Christ's head and neck is the same as in the *Saint Francis of Assisi* auctioned by Balclis (Barcelona) on 16 December 2015 (lot 1286), which should undoubtedly be attributed to Master Alejo, as should the *Saint Anthony of Padua* offered in the same sale (lot 1283).¹⁴ Another comparison is the panel of *Saint John the Baptist and a Bishop Saint* (identified as Saint Ambrose of Milan) recently sold at Fernando Durán (Madrid; 28 December 2018, lot 754, 75 x 112 cm), which can be attributed to Master Alejo and in which the second of the two saints has a face of a similar type to that of Saint Peter in the present work.

The physical features and characteristics of the Apostles also match those to be seen in a *Dormition of the Virgin* (private collection) recently attributed to the Master of Calzada¹⁵ which includes figures with locks of hair falling over their foreheads in a way comparable to Saint John in the present panel. Christ's face in the Caylus painting is very similar to the Apostle on the left of Saint John the Evangelist in the *Dormition*, while both figures are kneeling in a similar way and both reveal one foot. From the same altarpiece as the

¹⁰ MATEO 2015, p. 112.

¹¹ SILVA 1990, vol. III, p. 929. This detail is also present in one of the panels of the altarpiece that Fernando Gallego executed for Zamora cathedral (SILVA 2007, p. 43, fig. 20), and in the one in Ciudad Rodrigo by the same artist and his workshop (DOTSETH-ANDERSON 2008, p. 281).

¹² PASTOUREAU 1989.

¹³ SILVA 1996, p. 183, fig. 7.

¹⁴ Dimensions of both: 55 x 32.5 cm.

¹⁵ COMPANY-PUIG 2015, fig. 1.

Dormition is a *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia) in which Joachim's profile is similar to that in the present *Agony in the Garden*.¹⁶

As in the case of the principal altarpiece for Villalcázar de Sirga, for *The Agony in the Garden* the artist based himself on Martin Schongauer's print on the same subject¹⁷ although introducing numerous modifications, undoubtedly because he knew the model through intermediary sources. The coincidences are evident in the essential composition and also in the presence of a mound of rocks in front of Christ, the way Christ raises his head to look at the angel as it appears to him, the presence of Judas and the soldiers behind the central rock, and the location of the Apostles in the foreground. Schongauer's composition had a notable influence on Castilian painters in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, as evident in the case of Fernando Gallego and his workshop, which produced similar compositions for the altarpiece for Zamorra cathedral (subsequently removed to Arcenillas),¹⁸ for the one in Ciudad Rodrigo (Salamanca)¹⁹ and the one in Trujillo (Cáceres).²⁰

It is not known which altarpiece the present panel belonged to. Its measurements are relatively comparable to those of the above-mentioned *Dormition* (98 x 80 cm), *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* in the Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia (96 x 80 cm), and a panel of *Christ before the Doctors* in a private Valencian collection (98 x 80 cm), which were all part of the same altarpiece.²¹ The fact that the dimensions do not totally coincide does not mean that a direct connection cannot be established between the present work and these scenes. Their style is certainly similar, as a result of which the date established for them, around 1520, could serve for the present panel. The principal altarpiece for Villalcázar de Sirga has been dated around 1510, as has the *Saint Anthony of Padua Altarpiece* in the same church, while a *Saint Peter "in cathedra"* that was recently on the art market (Jaime Eguiguren, Buenos Aires, 2015) has been dated around 1525.²²

These speculations are reaffirmed by some reliable data that helps to establish the chronology of both the work and the artist's activities. This is the date present on the beam

¹⁶ COMPANY-PUIG 2015, fig. 3.

¹⁷ LEHRS 2005, p. 124, cat. 19.

¹⁸ SILVA 2007, p. 43, fig. 20.

¹⁹ DOTSETH-ANDERSON 2008, p. 281.

²⁰ SANZ 2009, p. 208, ill. 136.

²¹ COMPANY-PUIG 2015; SILVA 1996, p. 174, fig. 14.

²² For the chronology of these works, see MATEO 2015.

that supports the altarpiece in Calzada de Molinos. Despite the poor condition of the inscription the date of 1523 is clearly legible, which helps to precisely date the completion of the altarpiece and by extension to know for how many years the painters of the work were involved in its creation.

Another interesting issue that should be singled out is the collaboration between Master Alejo and the Master of Paredes. Post indicated that the first work by the latter artist was the *Saint Marina* (or *Saint Margaret*) *Altarpiece* for the church of Santa Eulalia in Paredes de Nava [Fig. 3].²³ Subsequent research has revealed this to be a collaboration with Master Alejo, who executed two panels for it.²⁴ This was not in fact the first occasion on which the two artists had worked together and they would do so again for the above-mentioned altarpiece for Calzada de Molinos (now Museo Diocesano, Palencia), the work that would give the Master of Calzada his name [Fig. 4].²⁵ In that case the collaboration between the artists was divided exactly between the two in terms of the number of panels each painted. The Master of Paredes is considered to have painted *The Birth of the Virgin*, *The Assumption*, full-length figures of *Saint Barbara* and *Saint Agatha*, and three prophets for the predella: *Solomon*, *Moses* and *Habakkuk*.²⁶ *The Birth of the Virgin* for this altarpiece includes faces that are comparable to those of the soldiers in the present *Agony in the Garden*, while the prophets' faces recall those of the sleeping Apostles, although they are of lesser quality.

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²³ POST 1947, p. 445. Isabel Mateo also attributed the altarpiece for Horcajo de la Sierra to this artist (MATEO 1991). On the Master of Paredes, see VELASCO 2019, pp. 36-38 and 160-167.

²⁴ Shortly after this, and following Angulo's opinion, Post admitted that the *Saint Marina Altarpiece* was in fact a collaborative work by the two masters. See, ANGULO 1945, p. 231 and POST 1950, p. 434. The panels attributed to Master Alejo-the Master of Calzada are the saint's beheading and the scene of her caring for her flock. (SILVA 1996, p. 174).

²⁵ POST 1950, pp. 434-435, figs. 184-186. Cf. SILVA 1996, p. 168, note 19; SANCHO 1999, pp. 202-205.

²⁶ SILVA 1996, p. 168, no. 19.



Fig. 1. Master Alejo, *The Prophet Moses*, José Gudiol collection (as reproduced in José Gudiol, *Pintura Gótica, Ars Hispaniae*, vol. IX, p. 377 / Madrid: Plus Ultra, 1955).



Fig. 2. Master Alejo, *Main Altarpiece in Santa María la Blanca* (detail of *The Agony in the Garden*), ca. 1510. Oil on panel, Villalcázar de Sirga, Palencia.

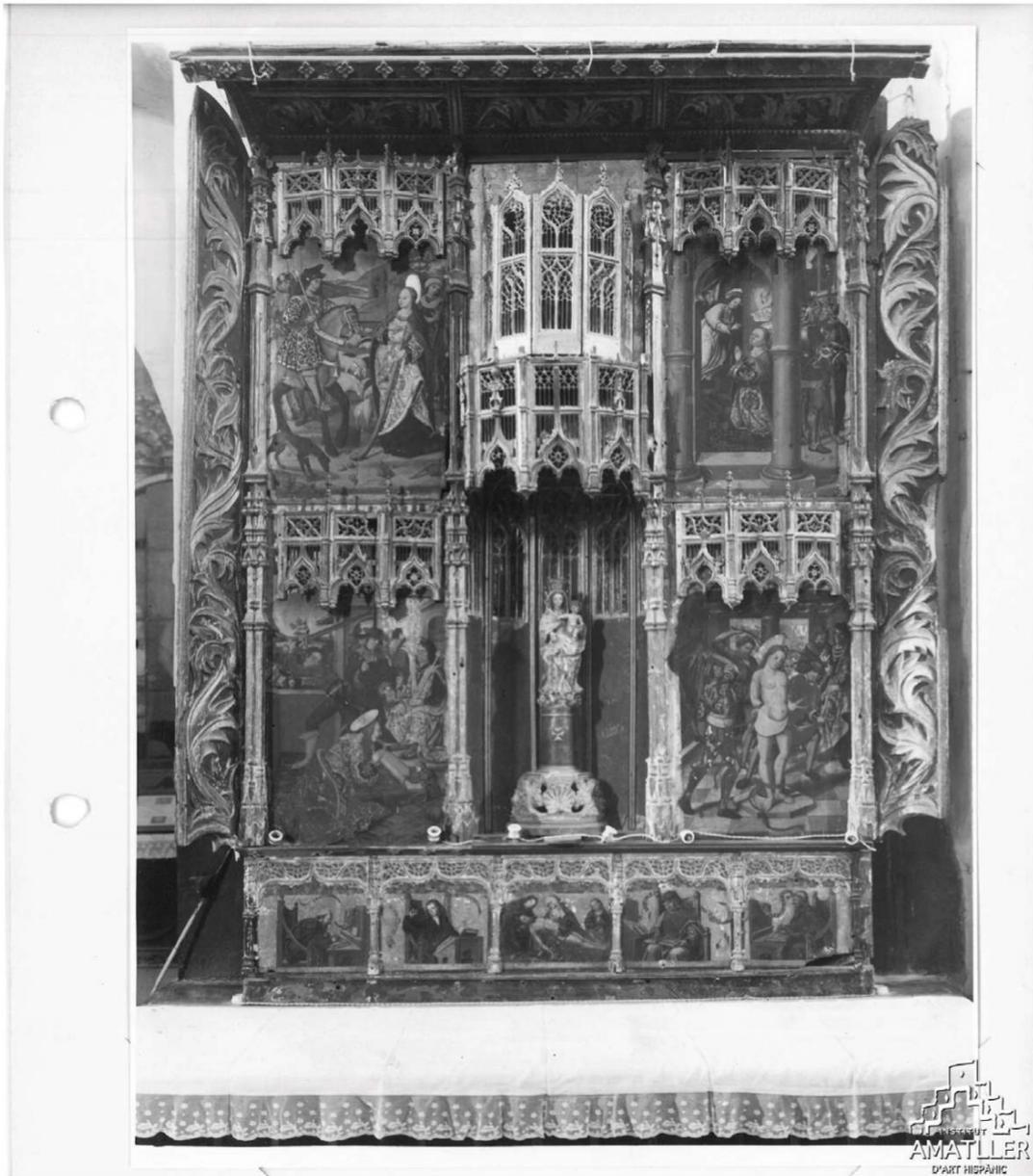


Fig. 3. Master Alejo, *Altarpiece of Santa Marina (or Saint Margaret)*.

Oil on panel, s. m., Paredes de Nava, Palencia. Image courtesy of Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic.



Fig. 4. Master Alejo, *Altarpiece of Calzada de Molinos*. Oil on panel, Museo Diocesano de Palencia.