Caylus

ANDRÉS DE MELGAR
(León, ca. 1500 – Santo Domingo de la Calzada, La Rioja ca. 1555)

The Descent from the Cross

Oil on panel
152 × 110.5 cm

PROVENANCE:

María Teresa González-Conde y de Borbón (1919-2005), Madrid

Painted by Andrés de Melgar around 1550, this panel reveals the complex manner in which the circulation of prints, paintings imported from northern Europe and artists' training and their travels influenced the final result of a work.

The name of Andrés de Melgar is well known in the art-historical literature as he is documented as an assistant in Alonso de Berruguete's studio in Valladolid around 1523, [1] and also from his participation in the paintings for the altarpiece in the retro-choir in the cathedral in Santo Domingo de la Calzada, [2] where the artist settled in 1530 and lived until his death in 1557. Despite this information it was only a few decades ago that it became possible to define his style and establish a catalogue raisonné on the basis of the discovery of the payments for the principal altarpiece in the church of Santo Tomás in Pozuelo de la Orden (Valladolid), executed by Lorenzo de Ávila, Antonio Vázquez and Melgar in 1528, a work that is now installed on the high altar in San Isidro in León. [3] This discovery revealed Melgar's collaboration in the most typically 16th-century panels in the above-mentioned altarpiece for the retro-choir in Santo Domingo de la Calzada, for which the artist is documented alongside the painter Alonso Gallego, as well as for other altarpieces painted in La Rioja on which the two collaborated. [4] Knowledge of this output has allowed for the definition of a style dependent on Florentine Mannerism, the logical consequence of Melgar's training with Berruguete, but also of his own particular identifying traits, as this *Descent from the Cross* reveals.

In line with this Mannerist approach, the figures that fill the artist's compositions are characterised by their dynamism created by the open poses of some of the figures, as well as the predominance of lean faces and bodies, hands with long fingers, and thin

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1 José Martí y Monsó, *Estudios histórico-artísticos relativos principalmente a Valladolid* (Valladolid-Madrid, 1898-1901), pp. 136, 280 and 285.

2. José Manuel Moya Valgañón, *Documentos para la historia del arte del archivo de la catedral de Santo Domingo de la Calzada (1433-1563)* (Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 1986), nos. 32 and 42.

3 Jesús María Parrado del Olmo, "Andrés de Melgar en el retablo de Pozuelo de la Orden: Las relaciones entre pintores en el medio castellano del primer tercio del siglo XVI", *Boletín del Seminario de Arte y Arqueología,* 64, (1998), pp. 256-270. Moya Valgañón already pointed to this direction in his attempt to distinguish between the hand and Melgar and that of Gallego, basing himself on their greater or lesser degree of affiliation with Mannerist formal traits. José Gabriel Moya Valgañón, "Aspectos del arte riojano en tiempo de Navarrete". *V Jornadas de arte riojano,* Logroño, 1995, p. 25.

4 For the most complete catalogue of his attributions in La Rioja, see: José Gabriel Moya Valgañón, *Alonso Gallego y Andrés de Melgar, pintores* (Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2013).

undulating folds in the drapery. All these elements function to heighten the dramatic tension of the scene depicted, as in the case of the present work which is also paradigmatic with regard to its colour and lighting, both used to create a theatrical atmosphere. In order to achieve this, the painter gave most emphasis to warm, saturated colours with an occasional use of shot tones. A good example is the clothing of the kneeling holy woman who closes the composition at the lower left. Here the prevailing red and green are complemented with blue and gold brushstrokes. These striking combinations also serve to create contrasts and a sense of distance from the background landscape, painted with a cooler, less saturated palette.

It is in fact in the landscape that the artist's abilities are most clearly revealed. His depictions of the distant horizon are unmistakeable due to the emphasis on blue-grey rocky crags almost devoid of vegetation. There is no equivalent in Spanish painting but rather in Flemish art, and albeit with some differences these rocky landscapes recall those of Patinir.

Landscape is almost non-existent in Berruguete's pictorial output, for which reason Melgar must have trained in this genre elsewhere, although there seems no need to explain this by positing any travels by the artist but rather by the fact that he had the opportunity to see Flemish painting in the Iberian Peninsula where it was omnipresent. This would have occurred at the outset of his training as similar landscapes are to be seen in his earliest works, for example the above-mentioned principal altarpiece in Pozuelo de la Orden and the panels of the retro-choir for the cathedral in Santo Domingo de la Calzada.

This approach has become more sophisticated in the present work, in which the artist locates a series of outlined buildings in the middle-ground, applying golden highlights with the tip of the brush, and in this respect Melgar's activities as a polychromer should be borne in mind. He was entrusted with the gilding and *estofado* of the principal altarpiece for the cathedral of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, made by Damián Forment. This commission helps to explain the careful depiction of the ornamental motifs on the clothes of some of the figures in the present *Descent from the Cross*, for example the two exquisite lengths of cloth used to support Christ's body, as well as the gold border on Joseph of Arimathea's green tunic, which has grotesque decoration with curious, axially-aligned and facing hybrid creatures. This motif is painted in a similar manner to the polychromy for the altarpiece in Santo Domingo de la Calzada,

on which Melgar was working in the 1550s; his last documented work and the period to which the present panel should also be assigned.

The origin of these decorative elements to be found in Melgar's work can be related to his use of engraved sources, although it has also been associated with his knowledge of the pictorial decoration of Francisco de los Cobos's palace in Valladolid, undertaken in the 1530s by the painters Alejandro Mayner and Julio de Aquiles, [5] given that Melgar's presence is documented in the city after he settled in La Rioja, indicating his familiarity with the latest stylistic innovations. [6] Various drawings of grotesque motifs housed in museums and collections have been attributed to his hand, works that now provide an extremely valuable record of the lost decoration of the palace in Valladolid. [7]

The subject of the Descent from the Cross represented in this panel is one of the most widely depicted in Christian art, particularly from the late Middle Ages onwards. At this point artists began to emphasise the emotional elements in the episodes from the Life of Christ which encouraged an intense relationship between the viewer and the sacred event, despite the fact that this episode is not a central one in the Christian liturgy.

With the increasing emphasis on this theme, artists added more figures in their depictions and as a result it became a challenge in terms of resolving a complex composition, hence the reason that they turned to engraved sources for inspiration. One of the most commonly used in the Renaissance was *The Descent from the Cross* engraved around 1520 by Marcantonio Raimondi after a drawing by Raphael. Raimondi made use of two ladders leaning against the cross in order to organise the composition vertically.

Melgar partially used this device by copying the triangular position of the ladders and the two figures standing on the ladder on the right. Other figures in the scene may be derived from other engravings by Raimondi, such as the woman who closes the composition on the left and who is closely related to the figure of the Virgin next to Christ in the engraving of *Christ between the Virgin and Saint John with Saint Paul and Saint Catherine*.

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[5] Nicole Dacos, "Giulio Aquili, Andrés de Melgar et leurs qrotesques: Rome, Valladolid, Santo Domingo De La Calzada" *Dialoghi di Storia dell' Arte,* 4-5, December (1997), pp. 24-33.

[6] In the 1540s the artist moved to Valladolid for reasons of the court case he was engaged in with the Chancellery in which he was claiming his status as a member of the minor nobility. María Victoria Sáenz Terreros, "Pinturas y pintores de la primera mitad del siglo XVI en Santo Domingo de la Calzada", *Boletín de la Institución Fernán González,* 197 (1981), p. 406.

[7] These attributions, and the state of the issue regarding their possible attribution to Melgar, in Pedro Luis Echeverría Goñi, "La pintura "al romano" del Primer Renacimiento en el retablo calceatense: procesos y modelos internacionales" in *La catedral calceatense desde el Renacimiento hasta el presente,* ed., Eduardo Azofra Agustín (Logroño: Gobierno de La Rioja, Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2009), pp. 69-114.

A particularly striking element is Christ's limp, broken body, the pose of which is very comparable to the one in the panel of *The Lamentation* painted by Melgar for the church of San Pedro in Enciso (La Rioja). In both cases the artist very probably looked to the same source. Berruguete is relevant here and one reference might be *The Burial of Christ* painted for the church of San Pedro in Fuentes de Nava (Palencia), in which the figure of Christ has a pose similar to Michelangelo's *Pietà* in the Vatican. Melgar undoubtedly knew that work by Berruguete given that the burial scene in the right middle-ground of the present panel is a simplified version of that work. It is also, however, possible that for the figure of Christ he made use of Antonio Salamanca's print of the Vatican *Pietà*, engraved in 1547, which he also seems to have followed, albeit in a freer manner, for some aspects of the figure of the Virgin.

The attention to detail discussed here might indicate that the original destination of this work was a private chapel and not the uppermost panel of the principal altarpiece in a church. In addition, its dimensions - 152 x 110.4 cm - are larger than those found in altarpieces of that type. Some iconographic details, such as the inclusion of the penitent Saint Jerome who closes the composition at the lower right corner, as well as the detailed execution of the right middle-ground with its depiction of the burial of Christ (which would not be visible if the altarpiece were located high up), indicate that this is a panel conceived for closer contemplation. As such, it may have been the sole, central element in an altarpiece installed in a more private space such as a private chapel, which would allow for more intimate, meditative devotion.

Given the fact that after he moved to Santo Domingo de la Calzada, Andrés de Melgar was solely active in the region of La Rioja, even though some of his works are now to be found in Castile, it can be suggested that this panel originated in the former region. Whether or not this is the case, all that it known of its provenance is that it was in a private Spanish collection for some decades in the 20th century.

Andrés de Melgar. *Saint Thomas departing for India* (detail of the landscape). *Saint Thomas Altarpiece.* Pozuelo de la Orden (Valladolid)

Andrés de Melgar. Detail of the polychromy of the principal altarpiece for the cathedral in Santo Domingo de la Calzada (La Rioja). Ca. 1553

Marcantonio Raimondi. *The Descent from the Cross.* Ca. 1520

Andrés de Melgar. *The Lamentation over the dead Christ*. Church of San Pedro. Enciso (La Rioja)

Alonso Berruguete. *The Lamentation over the dead Christ*. Church of San Pedro. Fuentes de Nava (Palencia)

Antonio Salamanca. *The Vatican "Pietà" by Michelangelo*. 1547