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Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Brazil, 18th century)

Saint Benedict of Palermo

carved and polychromed wood
70 x 24 cm.; 27 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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Our beautiful, free-standing sculpture depicts the figure of a sweet-featured young man with dark skin and curly hair. He is seen wearing the Franciscan habit made up of rough, dark brown wool cloth secured at the waist by a typical Franciscan belt and a high-collared cape with a triangular hood falling down his back. The main body of the habit has vertical folds while the sleeves feature delicate creases. He is gathering up the front of his robe with his left hand, forming a pouch in which he is carrying a little bunch of red flowers, while raising his right hand. The portrayal of the saint concealing flowers in his robe is a reference to one of his miracles. In the habit of providing food for the poor, which he took from the monastery's stores, he was once caught in the act by a superior and, on opening up the front of his robe, a bunch of roses miraculously fell out onto the ground. His hair is curly, and his facial features are those of a young man of African descent. The traditional Franciscan cincture, made up of a cord with three knots in it, is highlighted through gilding to emphasize his intercession in childbirth complications, by which said mediation was carried out. The habit is adorned with flowers and parallel borders.

Saint Benedict of Palermo (San Fratello c. 1524-Palermo 1589), also called Benedict the Black, Benedict the Moor or Benedict of San Fratello. In Brazil he is also called *São Benedito das Flores*. The son of African slaves, he was a hermit before becoming a Franciscan. It is thought his parents worked on a plantation near Messina where they had been brought from Africa. In around 1564 he entered the monastery of Santa María in Palermo and, despite not being able to read or write, due to his saintly character was appointed guardian of the community, then vicar and master of services, and proved an inspiration to everyone, as he seemed to possess divine enlightenment. He subsequently went on to take responsibility for the kitchens, where he showed great humility and charity towards the needy. He died in 1589. He was beatified by Pope Benedict XIV in 1743, and canonized in 1807 by Pius VII. He has become the patron saint of African Americans and, in particular, black slaves.

One of the most important genres of viceregal art was the depiction, both in painting and sculpture, of Black saints. Religion and slavery were two essential elements enabling the

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Portuguese crown to achieve its goals in the colonization of the Americas. In various regions of Brazil, including Minas Gerais and the north-east of the country, confraternities were formed by and for slaves, whose worship centered on black saints of African origin. In the evangelical process throughout Africa and the Americas, one devotional object proved particularly efficient in the 16th century: the rosary. The devotion born of the appearance of the Virgin Mary to Saint Dominic in 1218 spread among Europeans through the Dominicans, whose friars welcomed the blacks arriving in Lisbon. Nossa Senhora do Rosario dos Homens Pretos (Our Lady of the Rosario of Black Men) is one of the most widespread confraternities in Recife, whose church included altars dedicated to Saint Elesbaan (fig. 1), Benedict of Palermo (fig. 2), Anthony of Catalagirona, Moses the Hermit, Iphigenia and Melchior, all of African origin. These brotherhoods of Black men constituted privileged pockets of liberty, although not of equality with white men. Given the number of renowned Brazilian artists of African descent working during the colonial period, it seems quite possible that the creators of sculptures depicting Black saints might themselves be Black or mixed race sculptors, although there is no recorded information on said artists.

Depicting Black saints was one of the Catholic Church's strategies aimed at the sought-after catechesis and evangelization of the Black slave population, recently arrived in the Portuguese colony. The combination of Black saints with traditional ones also constituted a form of religious syncretism. The search for moral virtues in the lives of Black saints contributed to combatting undesired habits and customs, which would generate social disorder. They sought to establish a profile for the faithful that cultivated humility and prayer, and to this end made use of the history of saints and developed hagiographies that would assist the good and faithful Catholics.

Saint Benedict of Palermo was venerated, and his virtues, goodness, charity and excellence were exalted to illustrate a Christian predisposition among Black and mixed race peoples. In his hagiographies, much of the focus is on his poverty, obedience, chastity, proclivity for fasting, humility, prayer and also his many miracles, mostly aimed at children, and both rich and poor men and women. Particular emphasis is given to medical subjects such as the healing of the blind and his intercession in childbirth complications. In building

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up this Christian model based on a Black saint from Sicily, the intention was to portray him as an example for the African population to follow, which would serve as a tool for their social integration.

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Figure 1. Saint Elesbaan, Brazil, 18th century, 120 x 105 x 50 cm. Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Rosario dos Homens Pretos, Recife (Brazil)



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Figure 2. Saint Benedict of Palermo, 18th century. Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Rosario dos Homens Pretos, Recife (Brazil)