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Luis de Morales,
called El Divino
(? Badajoz, c. 1520 – ? 1586)

Pietà

oil on panel

72 x 55 cm

28 3/8 x 21 5/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Spain.

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

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This powerfully moving, unpublished panel of the *Pietà* is an important addition to the *œuvre* of Luis de Morales, who was, together with his contemporary El Greco, arguably the greatest devotional painter working in Spain in the sixteenth century. During the religious fervour of Counter-Reformation Spain, the artist fulfilled the need for intensely spiritual devotional works and, such was his success, that he became known posthumously as '*El Divino*'.

Unlike El Greco, Morales did not travel outside the Iberian Peninsula and most of his pictures were painted in the small Extremaduran city of Badajoz, close to the border with Portugal, which became his home and the centre of his activities between 1539 and 1582, when he moved from the city four years before his death. Despite his provincial life and career, Morales was receptive to a wide range of influences particularly from Flemish fifteenth- and Italian sixteenth-century art and from German prints by Schongauer and Dürer. The clarity of form and harmonious compositions of his early work in the manner of Raphael or Leonardo da Vinci would indicate the influence of Italianising Flemish painters working in Spain, of which there were many. Palomino's suggestion that Morales received his initial training in the Seville workshop of the Fleming Pieter de Kempeneer (Pedro de Campaña) is no longer credible, because he was already an independent master with his own workshop by the time the Fleming arrived in Seville, but he was nonetheless certainly receptive to ideas from contemporary Flemish painting.

He was also strongly influenced by the carved polychrome sculptures of 'Spain's Michelangelo', Alonso Berruguete, an artist who had spent several years working and studying in Italy (fig. 1); and by the paintings of Sebastiano del Piombo, whose work was well known in Spain and popular with Spanish collectors.

Morales's various versions of *Christ Carrying the Cross* (fig. 2) for example, were very directly inspired by Sebastiano's prototypes (fig. 3) – three out of four of which were painted for Spanish patrons – as was his treatment of the subject of the *Pietà*, discussed below.

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The carefully constructed geometry of his compositions also follows closely Italian High Renaissance practice, even if the elongated figures, such as that of the Virgin in the present *Pietà*, show that, by the 1560s, Morales, like many Italian Mannerist artists, and indeed El Greco, was not afraid to take liberties with anatomical proportions in the interests of heightened expressiveness.

Morales's early works, painted in the 1540s, are harmonious, sweet in style and strongly influenced by Leonardo and Raphael. These include the exquisitely painted *Virgin and Child with a Little Bird* (1546, Madrid, Parish Church of San Agustin, fig. 4), which owes an obvious debt to Leonardo's *Madonna with the Yardwinder* as well as Raphael's *Madonna of Loreto* and *Madonna of the Goldfinch*, and the playfully naturalistic *Virgin and Child with the Infant St John* (c. 1545 – 55, Salamanca, Cathedral of St John), which again shows the influence of Leonardo, Raphael and, even more directly, Leonardo's disciple Bernardino Luini.

By around 1560, both the style and the subject matter of Morales's paintings was beginning to change. A darker mood is evident even in some of his more tender Madonna and Child subjects such as *The Virgin and Child with a Spindle* (1566, Madrid, Museo del Prado, fig. 5), where the chiaroscuro introduces a more sombre note and the rolled up eyes of the Christ Child and the sharpness of the spindle provide foreshadowings of the Crucifixion and, still more directly, the *Holy Family* (1554 – 6, New York, Hispanic Society of America, fig. 6), where the swaddling clothes of the Christ Child are ominously suggestive of the shroud and the body of the Virgin shows the beginnings of the stylised elongation which would be a feature of the powerfully expressive devotional paintings of the 1560s.

It is in Morales's scenes of the Passion: his *Ecce Homo* subjects, *Crucifixion* scenes and paintings of the *Pietà*, painted mainly in the 1560s, that we see this expressionism most powerfully manifested. This undoubtedly reflects the religious developments which took place at the time of the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563), whose findings brought about fundamental changes in liturgical practices; and the impact of the writings and preaching of the Spanish mystics such as saints Teresa of Avila and the founder of the Jesuit Order,

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Ignatius of Loyola, who laid stress on meditation and spiritual exercises particularly focussing on the events of Christ's passion. This fervent spiritual climate was fostered in Badajoz by Bishop (later Saint) Juan de Ribera (1532 – 1611, fig. 7), an important patron of Morales, who commissioned one of the 'Gypsy' Madonnas and encouraged the production of small-scale devotional works on Marian themes or themes of the Passion which would act as aids to prayer and meditation.

Other important spiritual catalysts were two great visiting preachers – Fray Luis and Juan de Avila – whose sermons focussed both on the reality of the suffering of Christ, but also on his mother as expressed in Juan de Avila's sermon on the solitude of Mary with its powerful rhetorical question: 'is this the body I loved and wrapped up so tenderly?' The figure of Mary, her suffering but also her stoicism, lies at the heart of the Passion story.

The present composition is the only fully autograph version of this particular design, in which a beautifully elongated Virgin is seen delicately cradling the recently crucified Christ, His head resting on her left arm and her right hand delicately grasping His right shoulder. Nevertheless it, and the other cognate versions of the subject painted in the later 1560s, can be seen as the culmination of a line of development which begins in the early 1550s, when the artist painted a *Pietà* for Badajoz Cathedral (now housed in the Cathedral Museum). Earlier depictions of the subject in the paintings of Giovanni Bellini (fig. 8) show Christ being supported in the tomb by the Virgin and Saint John, and Sebastiano del Piombo, in his version of the subject now in the Prado (fig. 9), showed the Virgin somewhat distanced from her son, whose pillowed head leans back against the edge of the sepulchre.

But in the Badajoz Cathedral altarpiece (fig. 10), Morales moves the scene to the foot of the Cross and Mary takes the full weight of Christ's body, with her arms tenderly supporting His chest, greatly increasing the sense of intimacy and pathos and bringing together iconographically the body of Christ, the Cross and the Virgin Mary in a way which emphasises her centrality to the Passion story, harking back to earlier Flemish prototypes such as Hans Memling's *Pietà* in the Royal Chapel in Granada (fig. 11).

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Morales's Badajoz *Pietà* is still firmly located on Mount Calvary in a landscape background, but as we move into the 1560s his depictions of the subject become increasingly abstract and emotional, intensifying the focus on the Cross and the figures of Christ and the Virgin who are thrown into sharp relief by the black backgrounds.

A key transitional work in this process of transformation was the *Pietà* in the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid, which was painted c. 1560 (fig. 12). Here the landscape background has not been totally eliminated, because we can still see the ground littered with stones, a broken tree and a thistle growing in Golgotha, the desolate 'Place of the Skull', but the sky has been plunged into darkness and all of our attention is focussed on the figure of the Virgin, the vertical beam of the Cross and the broken dead body of Christ from which blood streams and which the Virgin supports and cradles with extraordinary pathos, her long fingers pressing into the flesh of His chest and her tear-stained face close to his grey cheek.

Drawing upon the traditional iconography which had been handed down from artists like Rogier van der Weyden, the painting captures the pathos of the scene described by Fra Luis of Granada when he wrote 'the Mother embraces the broken Body and presses it firmly to her breasts (for this alone did any strength remain to her)'.¹

Probably around three years later, Morales painted the largest of all of his depictions of the *Pietà* for the Parish Church of San Pedro y San Pablo in Polán, near Toledo (fig. 13).

Here the composition has been further simplified, the background entirely eliminated and the focus is solely upon the three main elements: the Cross, the sorrowing Virgin and the figure of Christ supported by her hands. The Virgin is still presented frontally, as in the early panels at Badajoz Cathedral and the Accademia di San Fernando, 'where she is envisaged as the throne of her dead son', but the Cross, as Marques observes, 'acquires special protagonism here, since, beside its oblique position, which makes it very visible, it is strongly illuminated, highlighting the geometric exactitude of the hard edge of the wood and emphasising the cruelty of the torture.'² There are several very high-quality variations on the theme of the

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Polán altarpiece, including the present picture, in which Morales plays with the same elements of the Cross, the figures of the lifeless Christ and the grieving Virgin, contrasting the hardness of the wood of the Cross with the softness of the bodies of Christ and his mother. In the Polán *Pietà*, the Virgin and Christ are depicted on the same plane with His head lolling back into her chest, whereas in the Prado *Pietà* (fig. 14) – painted slightly later and much smaller in size – Christ’s head is angled to the right and supported by her hand and in the Bilbao *Pietà* (fig. 15), His body and head are painted on the opposing diagonal and His head is supported with her other hand and the image is ‘cropped’, giving the picture an increased sense of intimacy. This formula is repeated in a version of the subject, very similar in design to the Bilbao *Pietà*, in the Fondo Cultural Villa Mar, Madrid, where the figure of Christ is painted with great delicacy with increasing emaciation in his body and a haggard face, all of which are features of Morales’s style between 1565 and 1570, as noted by Marques.³ A further development of the theme can be seen in the Triptych in the Prado of c. 1570 (fig. 16), which was extensively reworked by the artist as has been revealed by technical analysis.

Here the middle panel shows again the strong, central upright of the Cross, obliquely turned and brightly lit and the figure of the Virgin cradling the head of the dead Christ, while the side panels show the grieving figures of Saint John and Saint Mary Magdalene. It is this central panel which provides the closest parallel to our altarpiece (figs. 17 & 18). The placement of the Cross and its lighting is almost identical. The turquoise blue colouring of the Virgin’s robe is similar in both cases. In both pictures also the figure of Christ has been enlarged relative to that of the Virgin, whose figure is tall and expressively elongated, a feature not found in the other versions of the *Pietà*. The Prado Virgin seems more solidly anchored, her proper left arm describing a right angle and her other hand supporting His head, while the Virgin in the Colnaghi picture, young and beautiful, looks at Him with great tenderness, and her long elegant fingers appear to caress His chest.

Within the context of these various depictions of the *Pietà*, the Colnaghi painting can be seen as a work of great quality and refinement, probably painted around the same time as

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the Prado triptych and therefore at the culmination of an important series of devotional pictures in which Morales explored one of the great themes of his art.

In his *Arte de la pintura*, the artist and writer Francesco Pacheco (1564 – 1644) wrote that Morales' depictions of this subject were so poignant that they 'could move stones to devotion'. The particularly fine preservation of this panel adds to its visual impact: the porcelain-like skin tones and starkly-lit cross are set off beautifully by the jet-black background, and the painting of the Virgin's robe has a jewel-like luminosity which harks back to the great altarpiece of the *Pietà* which the artist painted some seven years earlier.

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Figure 1. Alonso Berruguete, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, c. 1525.
Meadows Museum, Texas

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Figure 2. Luis de Morales, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 1566.
Patriarch Museum, Valencia



Figure 3. Sebastiano del Piombo, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, about 1515/1517.
Chicago Institute of Fine Art

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Figure 4. Luis de Morales, *Virgin and Child with a little Bird*, 1546.
Parish Church of San Agustin, Madrid



Figure 5. Luis de Morales, *The Virgin and Child with a Spindle*, 1566.
Museo del Prado, Madrid

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Figure 6. Luis de Morales, *Holy Family*, 1554 – 6.
Hispanic Society of America, New York

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Figure 7. Luis de Morales, *Saint Juan de Ribera*, c. 1566, Bishop of Badajoz.
Museo del Prado, Madrid

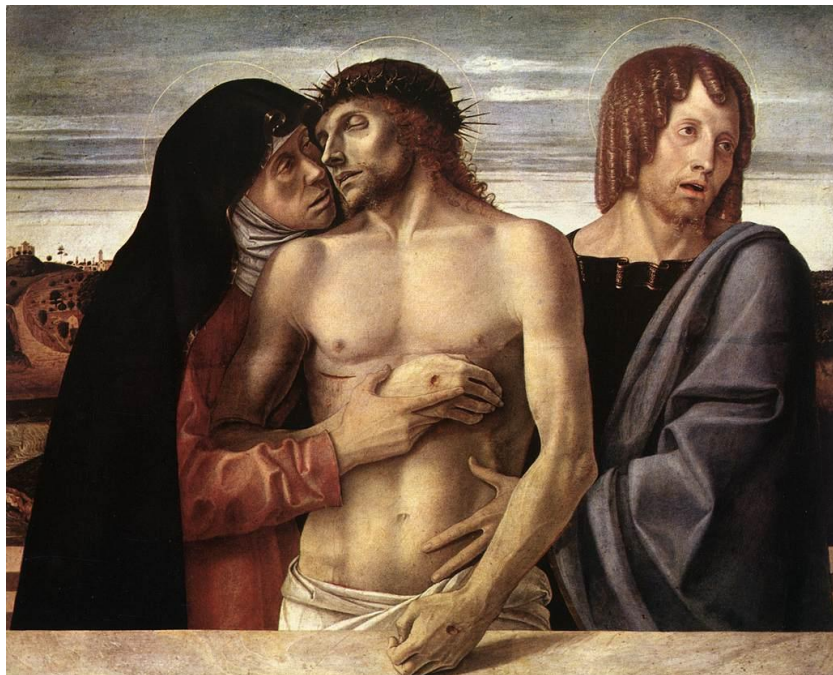


Figure 8. Giovanni Bellini, *The Dead Christ Supported by The Virgin Mary and Saint John*,
1465. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

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Figure 9. Sebastiano del Piombo, *Pietà* (detail), c. 1599.
Museo del Prado, Madrid

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Figure 10. Luis de Morales, *Pietà*, 1553 – 4.
Badajoz Cathedral Museum



Figure 11. Hans Memling *Pietà*, 1475/9.
Royal Chapel, Granada

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Figure 12. Luis de Morales, *Pietà*, c. 1560.
Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid

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Figure 13. Morales, *Pietà*, c. 1563.
Parish church of San Pablo y Pedor, Polán, Toledo

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Figure 14. Luis de Morales, *Pietà*, 1565 – 1570.
Museo del Prado, Madrid

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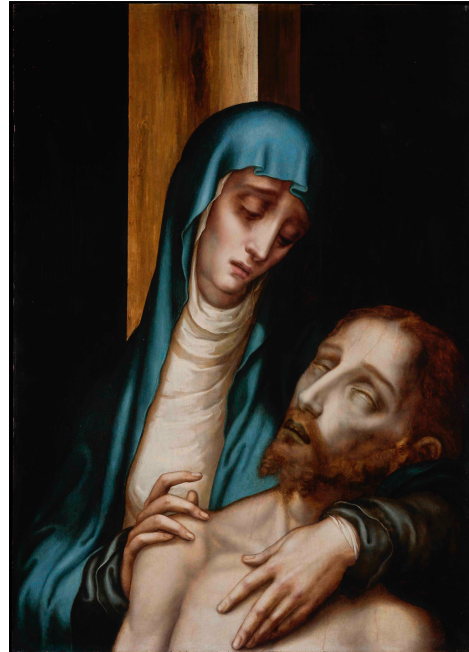


Figure 15. Luis de Morales, *Pietà*, c. 1568.
Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao

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Figure 16. Luis de Morales, *Triptych of the Pietà, Saint John and Saint Mary Magdalene*, c. 1570. Museo del Prado, Madrid



Figures 17 & 18. Luis de Morales, Central panel of the *Pietà* triptych (detail), c. 1570. Museo del Prado, Madrid; Luis de Morales, *Pietà*. Colnaghi, London

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Footnotes

¹ Cited by M. Portmann, *L'image du corps dans l'art espagnole aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles. Autour du 'Libro Segundo' de Juan de Are y Villafane (1585)*, Bern 2014, pp. 59-61.

² M. B. Mena Marques, in L. Ruiz Gomez (ed.), *The Divine Morales*, exh. cat., Madrid, Museo del Prado, Bilbao, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, Barcelona, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, 2015, cat. nos. 40, 41, 42 and 43, p. 161.

³ Marques 2015, p. 166.