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Juan de Mesa
Saint Joseph, c. 1620

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JUAN DE MESA

(Córdoba 1583 - 1627 Seville)

SAINT JOSEPH, c. 1620

Carved, painted and polychromed wood

71 x 36 x 28 cm.; 30 x 14 ½ x 11 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Spain.

Literature and bibliography of reference

C. Gálvez, 'Dos esculturas de Juan de Mesa en el Colegio de San Luis Gonzaga de El Puerto de Santa María', in *Arquitectos, escultores y pintores sevillanos del siglo XVII. Documentos para la Historia del Arte en Andalucía*, vol. I, Seville, Universidad, 1927.

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A. Muro Orejón, *Artífices sevillanos de los siglos XVI y XVII. Documentos para la Historia del Arte en Andalucía*, vol. IV, Seville, 1932, pp. 74-75 and 78.

J. Hernández Díaz, *Juan de Mesa. Escultor de Imaginería (1583-1627)*, Seville, Diputación, 1972, p. 80.

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F. Haskell and N. Penny, *El gusto y el arte de la Antigüedad. El atractivo de la escultura clásica (1500-1900)*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1990, pp. 191-193.

E. Pareja López (co-ordinator), *Grandes Maestros andaluces. Juan de Mesa*, Seville, Ediciones Tartessos, 2006, pp. 344-345.

M. J. Roldán, 'San José y el Niño, una nueva obra de Juan de Mesa', *ABC* (Seville), 18 April 2016.¹

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This sculpture represents the iconographic subject of *Saint Joseph with the Christ Child walking*, although the Child is lacking and the work now depicts the saint standing, his body in movement and his hands gesturing as if communicating with another figure. This iconography was disseminated by the Barefoot Carmelite nuns in the 16th century following its promotion by Saint Teresa of Ávila. The saint has a face with features similar to those seen in various male figures carved by the sculptor Juan de Mesa in the early 1620s, as this study will discuss.

Following the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Saint Joseph as the protector of Christ in his infancy acquired notable importance. During the 17th century this iconography evolved from the saint as a protective figure to a more paternal, affectionate one.

The initial representation of Joseph with the Christ Child walking next to him, and holding his hand, was gradually replaced by that of the saint holding the Infant Christ in his arms, sometimes in tender communication and in other examples playing with him.

The first documented sculpture by Juan de Mesa is the *Saint Joseph with the Christ Child walking* (155 cm) commissioned in 1615 by Friar Alonso de la Concepción, a monk of the Barefoot branch of the Mercedarians, for the monastery of San José in the village of Fuentes de Andalucía (Seville). This work is now in the parish church of Santa María de las Nieves in the same village (fig. 1).¹ In May 1616 the artist was paid the 70 *ducados* for this work, in which he followed the composition used by the sculptor Francisco de Ocampo in *Saint Joseph with the Christ Child walking* (1622) for the parish church of Villamartín (Cadiz).

A few years earlier, by around 1609-10, the convent of Saint Joseph of the Carmelite or Teresian nuns in the Santa Cruz area of Seville already had a devotional image of *Saint Joseph with the Christ Child walking*, which has been attributed to Juan de Mesa.²

These two images by Juan de Mesa differ in the form of the saint's mantle. In the documented work Joseph's mantle completely envelops him under his right arm then crosses over his front obliquely to join up with the other end in his other hand. In the attributed image the mantle envelops the figure at breast height, concealing the right arm, the end knotted over the shoulder in a manner undoubtedly inspired by the Roman sculpture of one of the *Farnese Captives* (Museo Nazionale, Naples).³ During restoration another *Saint Joseph with the Christ Child walking*, this one in the chapel of the Colegio de la Sagrada Familia in Seville, was recently attributed to Juan de Mesa (fig. 2).⁴ This image follows the previously described one in the arrangement of the mantle knotted at the shoulder but it differs in the formal features of the head. The fourth example of this subject by the artist is the present work with Colnaghi, which

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lacks the figure of the Christ Child. Interestingly, this is a third variant with regard to the arrangement of the mantle and the dynamic pose.

There are two further known contracts in which Juan de Mesa was commissioned to execute other works on this subject in carved cedar wood. The first, dating 4 April 1619, is to execute an image of *Saint Joseph holding the Christ Child's Hand* and "with a saw on his left arm", commissioned by Diego de Herrera, a resident of Seville, without specifying its intended location. This work has not been identified.⁵ The artist was to be paid a large amount, 220 *ducados* (2,420 *reales*). This document cannot be associated with the present work as the image was to measure 7 *cuartas* high without the base (146 cm), almost double the height of the present example.

The second contract, dated 8 August 1620, is between the sculptor and Friar Francisco de la Cruz, a Barefoot Carmelite monk of the monastery of the Santo Ángel de la Guarda in Seville. The image of Saint Joseph was to be a *vara* and a half high including the base (125 cm), which was smaller than the previous one, and the price was logically less, 100 *ducados* (1,100 *reales*).⁶

Also attributed to Juan de Mesa is another *Saint Joseph and the Christ Child* in which the saint carries the child in his arms, which was formerly in the church of San Vicente Mártir in Guadalcanal (Seville).⁷

The present sculpture is a medium-sized work, for which reason the anatomical details are slightly softer than those found in life-size examples, such as the artist's depictions of Christ the Nazarene or the Crucified Christ. Nonetheless, the features of Joseph's head reveal formal affinities with other sculptures executed in the early 1620s, such as the *Christ of Pardon* (ca. 1619-20) in the conventual church of Santa María de Jesús in Seville and the *Christ the Nazarene* (documented, 1621-22) in the conventual church of the Espíritu Santo in La Rambla (Córdoba), the titular figure of the penitential confraternity in that town. These shared features are the small, slanting eyes, the shape of the forehead with its pronounced sides, giving the head a marked volume, the short, undulating eyebrows, and the beards, which are more softly modelled than in other works by Mesa.

One detail of the carving of the hair of the present saint is identical to two other works by Mesa. As in the present work, in *Saint John the Evangelist* (documented, 1620) - which the artist executed together with an image of *Christ of the Great Power* for the penitential confraternity of that name in Seville (Basilica de Jesús del Gran Poder) - and in *Saint John the Evangelist* (ca. 1625, attributed) in the convent of Santa María la Real in Bormujos (Seville), the heads have a heavy cluster of curls of a type disseminated by Mesa's master Martínez Montañés.

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Mesa, however, added distinctive details of his own, such as the two small, curved and voluminous locks, one larger than the other, which resemble small horns and which adorn the figure's broad brow.

Finally, the arrangement of the tunic and mantle of the present *Saint Joseph* is different to that of the other three saints referred to above. Nonetheless, the arrangement of the mantle and that of the folds at one end wrapped around the left arm is also found in two works of 1622 by Juan de Mesa: *Saint Ignatius Loyola* and *Saint Francis Xavier* in the Colegio de San Luis Gonzaga in El Puerto de Santa María (Cadiz), which have been attributed to the artist on the basis of a document found inside them.⁸ The mantle leaves the entire front part of the tunic visible, in contrast to the other depictions of this saint, in which it is partly concealed. The upper part of the tunic has a square neck from which linear folds emerge, almost in a radial direction, a solution to be found in the *Saint Joseph* in Fuentes de Andalucía (Seville) and in the *Christ of the Pardon* in the convent of Santa María de Jesús in Seville.

Like other Sevillian sculptors of this period, Juan de Mesa delivered his images without their polychromy but prepared for the application of the gilding, the paint and the decorative technique known as *estofado*. The polychromy of this work dates from the first half of the 18th century and has a predominance of greens and gold. Its decoration is based on foliate elements (large gilded leaves) and floral ones (roses). The mantle is primarily gilded with painted roses, a decoration that undoubtedly replaced the original one in order to reflect the new Baroque taste.

On the basis of the arguments presented above, this sculpture of *Saint Joseph*, now lacking its Christ Child, can be considered a work executed by Juan de Mesa in Seville in the early 1620s. Furthermore, the saint's pose and clothing are an innovative element within the iconography of *Saint Joseph with the Christ Child walking*, although the pose of the splendid right hand, which would have held the Christ Child, is similar to the example most recently attributed to the artist, the above-mentioned work in the Colegio de la Sagrada Familia in Seville.

Dr José Luis Romero Torres
Art historian and curator of cultural heritage
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Fig. 1, Juan de Mesa, *Saint Joseph and Christ Child*, polychromed wood. Fuentes de Andalucía, Santa María de las Nieves.

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Fig. 2, Juan de Mesa, *Saint Joseph with Christ Child*, polychromed wood. Sevilla, Colegio de la Sagrada Familia.

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COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com