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Alonso Cano,
Portrait of a Carmelite Monk, c. 1644

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ALONSO CANO
(Granada 1601 - 1667)

PORTRAIT OF A CARMELITE MONK, c. 1644

Oil on canvas.
112 x 92 cm.; 44 1/8 x 36 1/4 in

Provenance

Private Collection, Italy.

Literature

B. Navarrete, "Alonso Cano revoluciona el retrato", *Ars Magazine*, no. 68 (2024), pp. 106-116, reproduced.

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We are grateful to Dr. Benito Navarrete for the discovery and scholarly identification of this masterpiece by Alonso Cano, published in “Alonso Cano revoluciona el retrato”, Ars Magazine, no. 68 (2024). The following note is based on his article.

This exceptional portrait marks a decisive moment in our understanding of Alonso Cano as a painter. Although Cano's greatness has never been in doubt - few artists of the Spanish Siglo de Oro moved as fluently between painting, sculpture, and architecture - his reputation has tended to rest on his religious imagery, while portraiture has often been treated as peripheral. Indeed, it has frequently been argued that Cano painted comparatively few portraits, simply because so few have survived. Some authors went further: Harold Wethey (1902-1984) even suggested that Cano lacked, by temperament, the qualities needed to become a truly great portraitist. Other historians have likewise noted that Cano's conception of painting was anchored in narrative and history, leaving little room for portraiture as a sustained pursuit.

Yet the documentary record has always hinted at a different picture. José Álvarez Lopera (1945-2015), in particular, insisted that Cano's activity as a portraitist was more substantial than the surviving corpus suggested, and he even anticipated that new discoveries might one day force a reassessment. Older sources were also explicit: Palomino, who admired Cano deeply, singled out his gifts in portraiture and referred to numerous examples he had seen, especially a portrait of the royal minister José González, President of the Council of the Indies. Such testimony is not isolated. Inventories and historical references mention self-portraits by Cano and portraits of figures close to him, alongside works depicting leading personalities of his age. These include portraits associated with his family circle, as well as notable sitters such as Pedro Calderón de la Barca, and high-ranking ecclesiastics. The evidence points towards an artist who did not merely dabble in portraiture, but was recognised for it.

A crucial point of reference for Cano's early portrait practice is the celebrated *Retrato de eclesiástico* in The Hispanic Society of America, New York (fig. 1), signed by Cano and datable c. 1635-40, before his final establishment in Madrid as painter to the Count-Duke of Olivares. Lopera connected the work to a seventeenth-century inventory description (1691) which corresponds strikingly with the work as it appears today: a half-length cleric, shown with a book of hours, an hourglass resting upon books on a table, and the mention of a small Crucifix near the books - a motif which, though now abraded or suppressed, still leaves its trace in the picture.

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Painted around 1644, the present rediscovered portrait must be counted among the most commanding portraits of the Spanish Golden Age, not simply for its rarity within Cano's painted oeuvre, but for its sheer quality and force. The sitter is represented as a young Carmelite friar, standing in an outdoor setting, framed by a tree trunk, and the base and shaft of a column. He turns towards the viewer, shown in three-quarters, yet with his gaze directed outward with striking immediacy. The effect is one of intense psychological presence: Cano does not idealise or generalise the sitter, but fixes him in a charged moment of attention and inner concentration.

One of the most significant aspects of Navarrete's identification is the precise reading of the habit, which confirms the sitter as a Carmelite of the Calced branch. The distinctions are not incidental. The fall of the white hood and mantle across the chest and shoulders, together with the underlying layers of the garment, correspond to the Calced form of the habit rather than that of the Discalced Carmelites, whose white element falls differently. Cano's depiction is careful and exact: the brown tunic is clearly visible beneath the white, and the arrangement of the fabric, including an additional hood beneath the white mantle, signals an intimate familiarity with the order's dress.

Cano's treatment of this habit is, however, far more than descriptive. The portrait is built around drapery conceived almost as architecture. The mantle gathers and falls with a sculptor's understanding of weight and structure, and Cano intensifies its presence by making the sitter's hands part of the design. With one hand the friar draws the cloth in at the waist, creating a strong knot of tension in the folds; with the other he supports a small book of hours, marking his place with a finger. This motif of reading has deep resonance within Cano's portrait practice and recalls the device already seen in the Hispanic Society cleric.

Navarrete places the work around 1644, linking it convincingly to Cano's Valencian period, immediately after the violent rupture caused by the death of his wife in Madrid. The circumstances are well known from early accounts: Cano left the city in fear of accusation and scandal, and the contemporary record suggests a dramatic sequence of events. The resulting flight brought him to Valencia, and sources indicate that he worked discreetly, almost in hiding, at a time when his professional protection had weakened following the political fall of Olivares. Navarrete further notes that Cano's move was accompanied by the removal of his working materials - books, drawings, models and moulds - an extraordinary detail later confirmed by their purchase in 1673 by the Valencian painter Vicente Salvador Gómez. The impression is of an artist severing himself abruptly from one world and preserving, as best he could, the tools of his craft.

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This Valencian moment is also illuminated by the testimony of Antonio Ponz (1725-1792), who recorded works by Cano in the Charterhouse of Porta Coeli, including, crucially, 'a portrait of a venerable Carmelite'. Navarrete persuasively connects this textual reference to a striking portrait of a Carmelite friar that surfaced in Italy and was first published in 1951, initially ascribed to Van Dyck.¹ The picture was then recorded in a Genoese private collection in the 1950s, later appearing in the collection of Bruno Lorenzelli in Bergamo, and is today preserved in the Fondazione Ca' la Ghironda, Zola Predosa (Emilia-Romagna). It was exhibited in 1998, still with an uncertain attribution and even misidentified as a Capuchin, and was consequently excluded from Erik Larsen's catalogue raisonné of Van Dyck (1979). These successive reclassifications - oscillating between the Flemish and Spanish traditions - neatly illustrate how a Spanish portrait of the highest order could, in an Italian context, be absorbed into the orbit of a Northern master. Yet that very history also strengthens the case for the present rediscovery: it belongs to a category of Cano's portraiture that has long been suspected by documentary sources, but has too often been obscured by the accidents of survival and attribution.

In the present portrait, Cano's ambition is unmistakable. The figure is conceived with an almost monumental naturalism, yet set within a structure of classical restraint. The strong vertical of the column, echoed by the pillar-like fall of the cloak, lends the sitter an imposing stability, while the sharply modelled planes of fabric create dramatic contrasts of light and shade. Cano was acutely aware of the tradition in which he worked - portraits of religious sitters formed a distinct and prestigious genre within Spanish painting, and Navarrete rightly places the work within that lineage. Among the most telling precedents is Luis Tristán's celebrated Carmelite portrait in the Museo del Prado (fig. 2), in which the white and brown of the habit become vast fields of colour. Yet Cano departs from Tristán's conception in a fundamental way. The Tristán friar sits with books before him, almost frontal in his confrontation with the viewer; Cano's sitter stands, turning sharply, the head animated and the gaze sharpened into something more immediate, more individual, and in a sense more modern. Cano also brings to this portrait a memory of the Sevillian tradition, above all Zurbarán's intensely physical monastic figures, such as his *Saint Serapion* (fig. 3). Here too the cloth takes complete centre stage, fulfilling that three-dimensionality which is sculpted on the canvas with astonishing vivacity.

Navarrete further advances the idea that this portrait should be understood within Cano's relationship with Velázquez, in a period when both artists were exploring the outer limits of portraiture. The comparison is especially persuasive when considering Velázquez's portrait in Apsley House (fig. 4), in which a sitter's three-quarter turn, the

¹ D. Neri (ed), *Le Mani nella Pittura*, Florence 1951, p. 179.

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piercing engagement of the gaze, and the swift, decisive handling of the collar combine to create a similarly direct psychological encounter. Cano's brushwork is firmer and more compact, his forms more tightly held; Velázquez is freer, more open in handling. Yet the parallels reveal shared aims: both seek presence, truthfulness, and an immediacy that does not depend on overt display.

These stylistic affinities are not confined to the present work. Cano and Velázquez would encounter one another again in a group of portraits that have, at different moments, been attributed to one or the other - most notably the *Portrait of Martínez Montañés* (Museo del Prado, inv. P001194), as well as the *Portrait of the Duke of Modena* (Galleria Estense, R.C.G.E. 472). Such parallels remain compelling even in the *Portrait of Archbishop Fernando de Valdés* (National Gallery, London, NG6380), painted between 1640 and 1645, where the closeness of conception and effect demonstrates how both artists, within a shared moment of experimentation, arrived at a comparable ideal of portraiture - one built on restraint, immediacy, and psychological force.

Nothing is currently known of the identity of the sitter in the present painting, nor of the circumstances of its commission. That uncertainty only sharpens the portrait's effect. Cano has created an image in which the religious habit, far from suppressing individuality, becomes the means of heightening it: the figure stands poised between public presence and private thought, between the discipline of an order and the unmistakable specificity of a living face. The sitter appears young, no more than thirty, and the combination of youth with the gravity of the portrayal gives the work a particular poignancy. This is not a generic emblem of devotion, but a true portrait, conceived with the seriousness of a major artistic statement.

In the end, the importance of this rediscovery lies not only in the addition of a magnificent portrait to Cano's oeuvre, but in what it confirms about Spanish painting itself. Navarrete rightly frames the work within the larger tradition in which quality and originality are inseparable: the greatest portraits of the Siglo de Oro are those that achieve the most direct kind of truth, without rhetoric, and with an unforced authority. The present portrait does precisely that. It stands as a commanding testament to Cano's gifts, and as a reminder that even within a field as intensely studied as Spanish Golden Age art, masterpieces can still emerge, altering the map of an artist's achievement and enriching the history of the genre.

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Fig. 1, Alonso Cano, *Portrait of an Ecclesiastic*, c.1635-40, The Hispanic Society of America, New York

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Fig. 2. Luis Tristán, *Portrait of a Carmelite Friar*, c.1620, oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid

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Fig. 3. Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Martyrdom of Saint Serapion*, 1628, Wadsworth Atheneum, Connecticut

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Fig. 4. Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of a Man* (possibly José Nieto), c.1635-45, Apsley House, London

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