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Pedro Roldán
(Antequera 1624– 1699 Seville)

Saint John the Baptist
ca. 1660
carved, gilded and polychromed wood
Height: 122 cm.; 48 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Seville, 2011,
Private Collection, USA, 2018.

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This striking polychrome sculpture of St John the Baptist, by the Sevillian seventeenth-century master Pedro Roldán, transforms the traditional iconography of the ascetic desert prophet, dressing him in garments whose rich *estofado* decoration (where the surface is scratched through to reveal a contrasting colour) includes the motif of the cross of the Order of Saint John of Malta.



Fig. 1 Detail showing the cross of St John of Malta



Fig. 2 Detail of current work, *Saint John the Baptist*

This is a free-standing image but was intended to be seen from the front, as indicated by the flat finish on the back. The work's formal features and the technique of this carved, cedar-wood sculpture, its polychromy and the type of *estofado* decoration, all reflect the style of the Sevillian sculptor Pedro Roldán (Seville, 1624-1699), who was active in the city from 1646 onwards. The very noticeable presence of the cross of the Order of Saint John of Malta suggests that it was commissioned by a knight of that military Order or was the titular image in one of its churches.

St John the Baptist leans towards the believer or viewer with his right hand held up in blessing while with his other hand he caresses the head of a lamb standing on its hind legs. The saint's camel hair garment, one of his traditional attributes, is merely hinted at with a minor reference at the lower edge of his richly decorated tunic, whose wide, round neck is opened to reveal the lining and the saint's upper chest. A cord knotted on a circular buckle at the centre of the waist holds up this tunic, which clings to the body as it falls to the level of the knees, where it terminates in points that reveal St John's bare legs and feet. The saint also wears his traditional red cloak which envelops him from behind, each end falling over his arms and covering his shoulders. This depiction of *Saint John the Baptist* reveals certain highly distinctive compositional and stylistic elements combined with very high level of execution which give it an important place within the overall context of Baroque art in 17th-century Seville.

The iconography of John the Baptist

The cult of Saint John the Baptist and his individual representation became widespread in the 17th century. In addition to the traditional cult of this saint as the forerunner of Christ who announced his arrival and took part in his baptism in the Jordan, which had been widespread since the Middle Ages, St John The Baptist became, from the sixteenth century onwards, the object of particular veneration in combination with Saint John the Evangelist. This new cult was related to the exaltation of Mary and the defence of her Immaculate Conception, which acquired particular force with the Spanish Marian movement that arose in the second decade of the 17th century. Due to this relationship with the Immaculate Conception, the two Saints John came to form a pair in some religious houses, particularly in convents¹ and Hieronymite monasteries. Works related to this context include the pair by Juan Martínez Montañés for the monastery of San Isidoro in Dampo de Santiponce (Seville). In the presbytery of Carthusian convents John forms a pair with Saint Bruno as patron of hermits, for example in the pair sculpted by Juan de Mesa for the Carthusian church in Seville (Museo de Bellas Artes, Seville) or the one by the Moras and the example by José Risueño for the presbytery and the sanctuary of that Order's church in Granada, respectively.

The Baptist is normally depicted standing, as in the present work, wearing his camel hair garment and a red cloak. In addition, he is generally accompanied by the symbols of the long-stemmed cross with the scroll bearing the phrase "*Agnus Dei*" and the lamb placed next to him or on a book (open or closed) that he is holding, generally in his left hand. Juan Martínez Montañés in Seville was the artist who depicted the Baptist with the greatest variety, adding two more poses, one showing the saint kneeling, as for example the figure on the central high relief of the altarpiece in the convent of San Leandro in Seville; and another showing the saint seated, as in the images on the altarpiece of the Baptist in the convents of Santa Ana² and Santa Paula, a variant of which is now in the Meadows Museum, Dallas. This second iconography was widely accepted in the first half of the 17th century and is evident from a work by Alonso Cano in 1634 for the parish church of San Juan de la Palma, which can be identified as the one, previously in the Güell Collection and now in the Museo Nacional de Escultura in Valladolid, having.³ In Granada, the García brothers produced various small format, high reliefs of the Baptist seated in different positions.

Another element within this iconography is the depiction of the saint as either beardless or bearded. In sculpture, the most frequent image of John in the Early Modern Age was as a bearded man with a tanned face, which best reflected the physical appearance of a man who had lived in the desert. But he was also represented in an idealised manner as a young,

¹ TORREJÓN DÍAZ, Antonio: "La iconografía de San Juan Evangelista en la obra de Juan de Mesa: revisiones y nuevas atribuciones", in *Juan de Mesa (1627-2002): visiones y revisiones*. Acts of the "III Jornadas de Historia del Arte", held in November 2002 in Cordoba and La Rambla. Cordoba, Universidad, 2003, p. 371.

² Executed for the now closed convent of Nuestra Señora de Belén in Seville.

³ MARCOS VILLÁN, Miguel Ángel: "San Juan Bautista, Alonso Cano", complete catalogue entry CE1142, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid, at <http://museoescultura.mcu.es/coleccion/domus.html>.

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beardless man, possibly following the pictorial models of Leonardo and Caravaggio, principally the latter who influenced early Baroque Spanish artists such as the painter Juan Bautista Maíno⁴ and the Garcías, two sculptor brothers working in Granada.⁵

In Seville, Martínez Montañés produced alternative depictions of the Baptist, shown at different ages and in varying poses. He is shown standing with long, shoulder-length hair, with a short beard and pointing to the lamb on a book (1609-13, monastery of San Isidoro del Campo, Santiponce); standing but beardless (1621-26, convent of Santa Clara, Seville); in *The Immaculate Conception Altarpiece* (1628-31, Seville cathedral); standing, with a moustache and goatee beard, pointing across and up with his right hand and with his other resting on his cloak that covers a tall rock (ca. 1600-10, Metropolitan Museum, New York), which has been identified as the one formerly in the convent of the Concepción in Seville, together with the *Archangel Michael*); standing and beardless, pointing to the lamb at the top of the composition (1620-22, convent of San Leandro, Seville); seated and beardless, with the lamb leaning against his leg as if in dialogue (formerly convent of Belén, now convent of Santa Ana; and Meadows Museum, Dallas); and, finally, seated, with a short beard and his hands in a gesture of dialogue, pointing to the lamb resting on a rock (1638, convent of Santa Paula, Seville). Martínez Montañés also produced two altarpieces with reliefs on the life of this saint (1607-22, Lima cathedral, Peru, formerly in the convent of the Concepción; 1610-20, church of the Anunciación, Seville, formerly in the convent of Santa María del Socorro), in which he depicted the episodes of the Baptism of Christ and the martyrdom of the Baptist, with his dead body without its head, the head on a tray, in addition to sculpted images of the saint as a child. In these two altarpieces the Baptist's physical appearance is comparable to that in the sculpture in the monastery of San Isidoro del Campo.

This relationship reveals how sculptors were not bound by pre-established iconographic models but conceived their representations in different ways depending on the commission, intended location and religious function of the work. This might depend on whether the sculpture was conceived as the titular image or played a secondary role on the altar and whether it was intended to be a free-standing image or relief, aspects that were often specified by the client. On occasion Martínez Montañés even depicted the Baptist with two different appearances on the same altarpiece. In the monastery of San Leandro, he is seen as young and beardless in the relief in the first level of the altar and as bearded in the second level (the scene of the Baptism). Occasionally, as in the present sculpture, the Baptist points to the lamb on the ground by his side, or shown in a tree, as in the sculpture carved by Jacinto Pimentel in 1651 for the church of San Agustín in Cadiz (now in the Capuchin church in Granada). In other examples he holds the lamb on a book with one hand. In some depictions

⁴ ROMERO TORRES, José Luis: "Los Hermanos García. Sculptors, Painters and Brothers in Sixteenth Century", in *The Mystery of Faith. An eye on Spanish sculpture, 1550-1750*. London, Matthiesen-Coll y Cortés, 2009, pp. 53-61, 68-77.

⁵ With the disentanglement of Spain's religious houses in 1835, the conventual church became the parish church of Santa María Magdalena.

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of the seated saint, he is conversing with the lamb, as in the example by Alonso Cano (1634, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid). In his other hand the Baptist traditionally holds the long-stemmed cross sometimes with a scroll wrapped around it inscribed “*Agnus dei*”. Our figure of St John, on the other hand, has his right arm raised in benediction with his fingers pointing heavenwards in a gesture which would have made it impossible for him to have been holding the Cross.

Our St John also breaks with traditional iconography by being conceived not, as usual, in an ecstatic pose⁶ but appearing to stride towards the believer. Some of these innovations in the iconography of the Baptist can be traced to the influence of the Flemish sculptor José de Arce (Bruges, 1600 - Seville, 1666), who was active in Seville and Jerez de la Frontera where he carved two images of the Baptist for the Charterhouse (1639) and parish church of San Miguel (1641-43)



Fig. 3, Jose de Arce Statues of St John the Baptist, Charterhouse, Jerez de la Frontera

Arce introduced fresh ideas which eventually replaced the aesthetic of Martínez Montañés which had dominated Sevillian art during in the first thirty years of the seventeenth century. His novel presentation of the standing Baptist introduced innovations which influenced the creator of the present work in the dynamism in the position of the legs, the raised position off on of one the hands, and the presence of the lamb with its raised front legs.

⁶ though there are few exceptions such as the one carved by Gaspar Núñez Delgado in 1606 for the conventual church of San Clemente in Seville

The sculptor Pedro Roldán and the sculpture of *Saint John the Baptist*

Although Pedro Roldán was born in Seville in 1624, his parents were from Antequera and his childhood, early training and marriage took place in Granada. He learned the art of sculpture in the workshop of Alonso de Mena in that city, together with his master's sons, Alonso and Pedro de Mena y Medrano, and with other artists including the Murcian Juan Pérez Crespo. Aged twenty-two Roldán returned to Seville where he remained for the rest of his life, although spending periods of time in Cordoba, Jaén, Jerez de la Frontera and elsewhere in order to execute commissions.



Fig. 4, Pedro Roldan, Statue of the Arcangel Gabriel

By the time he returned to his native city in 1646, Martínez Montañés was an elderly artist (he died three years later) and his aesthetic and sculptural technique were influenced by the style of José de Arce. This Flemish artist had introduced a more modern language involving soft forms in the treatment of the hair; figures enveloped in tunics and ample mantles which produce a powerful sense of volume; and more dynamic poses than those resulting from the classicism of Martínez Montañés or his pupils and followers, including Juan de Mesa, Alonso Cano and Felipe de Ribas. The young Roldán was one of the sculptors who assimilated Arce's innovations, as did Jacinto Pimentel and Alonso Martínez. The first important documented work by Roldán from his Seville period is the sculptural programme of the high altar of the conventual church of Santa Ana in Montilla (Cordoba). The *Crucified Christ* that crowns this altar clearly reflects the formulas defined here as characteristic of Arce.

Few works by Pedro Roldán have associated contracts, because his sculptures tended to form parts of larger-scale commissions that were received by the architect-joiner. These contracts habitually stipulated that the sculptures were to be created by prestigious artists and on occasions Pedro Roldán is specifically named. On 10 September 1663 the architect-joiner Pedro Comacho de la Vega signed a contract to produce an altarpiece for the Confraternity of the Virgin of the Rosary, which had its headquarters in the Dominican monastery of San Pablo.⁷ Among the stipulated conditions was that Pedro Roldán would execute the sculptures. One year later we know that the altarpiece and the sculptures were completed, because a contract was signed for their gilding and polychromy with the artists

⁷ With the disentanglement of Spain's religious houses in 1835, the conventual church became the parish church of Santa María Magdalena.

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Diego Díaz and Juan de Paredes. Surviving from this group are the sculptures of the *Archangel Gabriel* and the *Archangel Michael*, both by Pedro Roldán, now in the chapel of the Sacrament in the parish church of Santa María Magdalena. The exhibition on Luisa Roldán curated by the present author included the sculpture of the *Archangel Gabriel* while the accompanying text emphasised the walking pose, the beauty of the oval face and the volume of the freely flowing hair. These compositional elements are notably similar to the formal features of the present *Saint John the Baptist*.

A few years later, on 30 September 1666, the architect-joiner Francisco Dionisio de Ribas signed the contract to execute the principal altar for the chapel of the Confraternity of the Pietà founded by the Basque community in the church of the Jesuit monastery of San Francisco in Seville. As in the case of Pedro Camacho, the client stipulated that the sculptures were to be by Pedro Roldán. Two years later we know the altarpiece was completed as Ribas received the final payment for the work on 19 January 1669. After this, the polychromy was entrusted to the painter Juan de Valdés Leal (1674).

On the disentanglement of the religious houses in Spain in 1835, the altarpiece was moved to the high altar of the parish church of Seville cathedral, where it remains today. Notable in this work is the sculptural group of the *Pietà* in which the grieving Mary holds her dead son on her lap, accompanied by the faithful John the Evangelist, Mary Magdalene, the Apostles and other followers. This is a masterly depiction of free-standing sculptures which is completed with two magnificent youthful angels depicted life-size on the lateral sections of the altarpiece and holding instruments of the Passion.⁸ Their elegant poses convey a sense of dynamic movement through the forward position of one of the legs, the billowing of the tunics, and the voluminous, agitated hair whose soft locks are completed with strands of hair painted on the foreheads. This compositional concept and the formal features of the head reinforce the attribution of the present *Saint John the Baptist* to the sculptor Pedro Roldán.

In 1688 Pedro's daughter Luisa Roldán (known as La Roldana), carved a *Saint John the Baptist* which includes the traditional elements described at the start of this text: standing, bearded, holding the lamb on a book and with a long-stemmed cross.⁹

⁸ RODA PEÑA, José: "Pedro Roldán. Ángeles pasionarios, 1666-1668", in *Teatro de Grandezas*, exhib. cat., within the project *Andalucía Barroca*, held in the Hospital Real in Granada, November 2007 to January 2008. Sevilla, Consejería de Cultura de la Junta de Andalucía, 2007, p. 140.

⁹ The architect-joiner Juan González de Herrera constructed an altarpiece with the sculptures of *Saint John the Baptist* and *Saint Joseph* by Luisa Roldán for the altar which the confraternity of the carpenters' guild dedicated to their patron saint, Joseph, in the convent of the Candelaria in Cadiz. In 1692 the altarpiece was moved to the church of San Antonio de Padua, where the sculptures by Luisa Roldana are still to be seen. ROMERO TORRES, José Luis: "Luisa Roldán. San Juan Bautista", in *Roldana*, exhib. cat., within the project *Andalucía Barroca*, held in the Real Alcázar de Sevilla between July and October 2007. Sevilla, op. cit., p. 188. ALONSO DE LA SIERRA, Lorenzo: "Luisa Roldán, San Juan Bautista, c 1688", exhib. cat., within the project *Andalucía Barroca*, held in the Hospital Real in Granada between November 2007 and January 2008. Sevilla, op. cit. p. 230.



Fig. 5, Luisa Roldán St John the Baptist

Luisa Roldán's innovation was less the iconography than the technique of carving and the manner of defining the body, the long beard, and the overall sense of dynamism. This work, now in the church of San Antonio de Padua in Cadiz, is not stylistically comparable to the present figure, which is attributable to Luisa's father, but nonetheless both display the motif of the cross of the Order of Malta.

From the arguments presented above, it can be stated that this sculpture of *Saint John the Baptist* is undoubtedly a work by Pedro Roldán of the 1660s. It has an interesting composition including unique elements, such as the innovative position of the raised arm with the blessing hand, the distinctive treatment of the traditional camel hair garment, the figure's walking movement and its androgynous beauty. These formal features and the work's technical and artistic quality make the present work an important example of Andalusian Baroque art.

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