

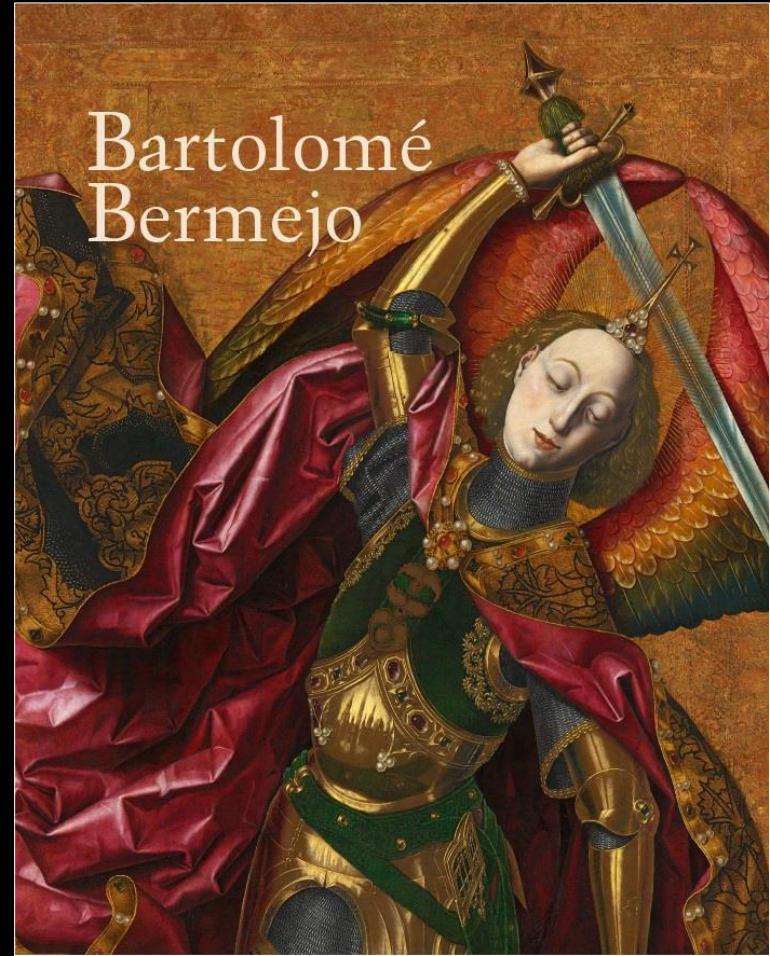
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*Catalogue of the exhibition Bartolomé Bermejo,
one of the most surprising and fascinating painters
of the 15th century in the Iberian Peninsula*

Joan Molina Figueras

Bartolomé Bermejo

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Key Sales Points

- Catalogue of the exhibition Bartolomé Bermejo held at the Museo Nacional del Prado from October 9 2018 to January 27 2019 and The National Gallery, 12 June – 29 September 2019
- Bermejo's work exploits the pictorial potential of oil painting techniques, a new development at the time. He created a personal realist language, one that focused especially on illusionist effects and on the definition of spectacular ranges of colour
- His talent was recognized by a select group of commissioning clients, ranging from members of the Church and noblemen to distinguished merchants. It was also acknowledged by his fellow painters, who often imitated his compositions



Bartolomé Bermejo

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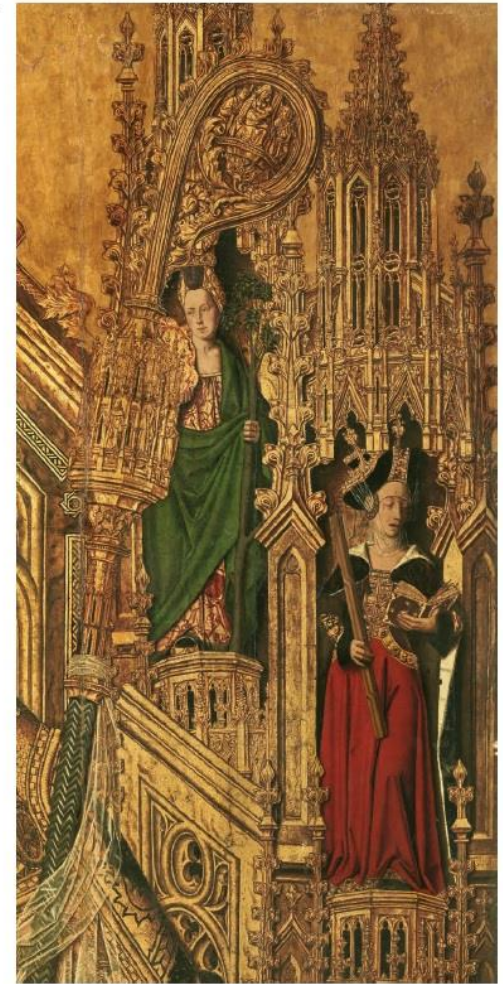


FIG. 4 Detail of the Celestial Jerusalem reflected on the plackart of the archangel in the *Tous Saints Michael* [CAT. 1]

The oil technique also enabled artists to achieve surprising effects of transparency by applying a layer of paint that is much more diluted in linseed oil over another. Bermejo used these effects often and with results that were absolutely unique among his Spanish contemporaries. One has only to look at the gauzes in the form of a *perizonium* in the *Desplà Pietà* and the Peralada Pietà, in the tulle that is part of the headdresses and crowns of Saint Engracia [cat. 7] and in the cloaks and veils worn by several of the figures in the episodes of Christ the Redeemer now on show in the MNAC [cat. 6].³⁶ Of the latter, the delicate depiction of the huge but light gauze covering Christ's body stands out in particular, as do the equally skilfully rendered textiles that both conceal and reveal the pubis of Adam and Eve. In contrast, the most striking feature of the majestic image of *Saint Dominic of Silos* and the *Death of the Virgin* is the transparent *pannicellus* or cloth of dignity, a distinguishing feature of monastic prelates, which is wound around the shaft of the staff [fig. 5] and the cross [cat. 4]. The same painterly play is found in the works of Flemish artists such as Jan van Eyck and the Master of the Legend of Saint Lucy.

Besides reproducing gemstones spectacularly, Bermejo also sought to evoke the textures of all kinds of polished stones, from the coloured marbles from which Christ's tombs in the Peralada Pietà and the MNAC *Resurrection* are carved and the ashlar stones of the walls in *Christ with the Just in Paradise* belonging to the Christ the Redeemer cycle [cat. 6B] to the porphyry columns found in the Acqui *Virgin of Montserrat* triptych, the *Death of the Virgin* and the *Flagellation of Saint Engracia* [cat. 15, 4 and 7D]. Books are a similar case. Luxurious manuscripts (bibles, psalteries, gospels, the monastic rule...) are another recurring feature in Bermejo's paintings and are reproduced almost as a *trompe-l'œil*. Finally, it would not be fair to end this brief survey of Bermejo's visual play without mentioning his attentive and detailed rendering of a few elements of nature. Although this feature can be seen partially in paintings executed from the 1460s onwards, it reached an astonishing height of expression in works from Bermejo's final period, specifically from the Acqui triptych and the *Desplà Pietà* onwards. It is in these works, especially the second of them, that Bermejo brings all his technical skills to bear to recreate sweeping, intriguing

FIG. 5 Detail of the filigreed knob of the saint's crozier in *Saint Dominic of Silos enthroned as Bishop* [CAT. 8A]





Detail of cat. 15

Bartolomé de Cárdenas and European art

CARL BRANDON STREHLKE

Valencia around 1465–85

The options available between 1465 and 1485 to patrons of the arts in Valencia, then the most international city of the Iberian Peninsula, are apparent in the respective choices of a prosperous merchant nobleman and a knight of a chivalric order in the commissions of altarpieces in which each was portrayed as a donor.¹ Around 1468 the ‘magnífico Antoni Johan militi’ (Antoni Joan) picked Bartolomé de Cárdenas [cat. 1], a painter of Andalusian origin who signed with the sobriquet ‘Rubeus’, the Latin term for vermillion, or in old Castilian, ‘Bermejo’. About fifteen years later, Lluís Despuig, master of the military order of Our Lady of Montesa, selected Paolo da San Leocadio [fig. 21], an Italian artist trained in Ferrara known after his family’s home village of San Eleocadio (today San Valentino) near Reggio Emilia.

Neither of the two pictures was destined for a location within Valencia. The Bermejo retablo was made for the parish church of San Miguel Arcángel in Tous, about sixty kilometres north of the city, and the Paolo da San Leocadio one was for the parish church of Montesa, the town where the castle that served as the headquarters of Despuig’s chivalric order stood, not far from Játiva, the homeland of the Despuig as well as of the powerful Borja family.² Related to the ruling class of the Crown of Aragón, Despuig had been a close collaborator of King Alfonso the Magnanimous in the conquest of Naples as well as a royal envoy to Castile, France and various courts in Italy. In 1472 he was appointed viceroy of Valencia by Alfonso’s successor, John II. Despuig’s nephew Ausias was an influential member of the Roman curia who served as archbishop of Monreale in Sicily, chancellor of Sicily under King Ferdinand the Catholic and an intermediary for that king with the papacy as well as governor of Rome under Pope Sixtus IV, who appointed him cardinal in 1473.³ The sculptor Andrea Bregno would create his tomb in the Roman church of Santa Sabina in the Lombard classicising style. No wonder an Italian painter was favoured by the cardinal’s uncle.

The new classical-inspired architecture of Italy that would have impressed the Despuig in their peregrinations is featured in the *Virgin and Child with Saints Benedict and Bernard of Clairvaux* and *Lluís Despuig*, more commonly known as the *Virgin of the Knight of Montesa* [fig. 21]. Lluís Despuig, in robes emblazoned with the red cross of the order of Montesa, is introduced to the Virgin by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, dressed in the white habit of the Cistercians whose monastic rule was followed by the militia. The baby Jesus who turns toward them looks as if he had come out of a painting by the Ferrarese Cosmé Tura – as if the sleeping infant in the central panel of the Roverella altarpiece (London, National Gallery) had been suddenly shaken awake. Tura would have been working still on that picture for the Olivetan monastery of San Giorgio fuori le Mura in Ferrara when Paolo departed for Valencia in 1472 in the train of Cardinal Rodrigo de Borja. The cardinal, the future Pope Alexander VI, must have lured the painter



CATALOGUE

This section has been conceived as a catalogue raisonné of Bartolomé Bermejo's extant oeuvre. This has led to the inclusion of works not present in the exhibition.



FIG. 10.1 Hypothetical reconstruction of the retablo of the Virgin of Mercy

was buried ('en la capienda siquiere sepultura do esta el enterratorio del dito mi padre qui Dios haya e de todos nosotros').³ The dedication, however, cannot have been clearly established at that point, as the church clerk entrusted with recording a new chaplaincy endowment four months later hesitated between Saint Mary of the Snows and Mary's Visitation to Saint Elizabeth.⁴

Juan de Lobera junior took charge of decorating and endowing the chapel shortly afterwards. First of all, presumably having settled his differences with Sarriena, he commissioned the craftsman to make a doorway in plaster 'masonry' ('de maçonería') like the entrance to the chapel of Álvaro de Heredia, prior of Santa Cristina in Somport, also located in the cloister of El Pilar, a moulding inside it and a wooden inner door to close it. The agreement was signed in the presence of the painter Nicolás Zahortiga, who acted as a witness, on 9 March 1479.⁵ The execution of the oratory retablo was commissioned from Martín Bernat and Bermejo ('Bartolomeu de Cardenas') on 14 April that year.⁶

Bernat was ultimately responsible for complying with the agreement and undertook to deliver the ensemble within a year for the sum of 850 *sueldos*, which was to be paid in three instalments, the first of them that very day.⁷ Nevertheless, the contract granted an important

role to Bermejo ('Bertomeu el Bermello'), who was to draw in his own hand all the 'istorias', that is, the scenes on the predella, the body of the retablo and even the figures on the projecting surround, undertaking to fulfil his commitment under oath.

The scenes of the predella were not specified, but those of the main body were described with absolute precision. The central compartment was to display a Virgin Mary with outstretched arms, with members of the clergy – the pope, bishops and cardinals and other prelates – on her right and the king and queen, gentlemen and many people on the other side ('la Virgen Maria [...] con los brazos abiertos, e como a la part dreyta esta el braço eclesiastico, el papa obispos e cardenales e otros prelados, e a la otra part, el rey e Reyna e caballeros y gentes muchas'), that is, a Virgin of Mercy, Grace, Pity, or Refuge – a Mater omnium. The right-hand vertical section was to feature Mary's Visitation to Saint Elizabeth with six figures – 'the Virgin Mary accompanied by one or two maids and Elizabeth with another companion and Zachariah in their house' ('la Virgen Maria con vna donzella de compania o dos e Lisabet con otra companya e Zacarias en su casa') – and the left-hand section, in accordance with the second dedication considered for the chapel, the miracle of Saint Mary of the Snows, was to depict 'the whole miracle [showing] how the pope came out with all the cardinals' ('con todo el miraglo como salio el papa con todos los cardenales'), as in the retablo



FIG. 10.2 Martín Bernat and Miguel Jiménez, *Virgin of Mercy*, 1493, oil on panel. Tarazona, Catedral de Santa María de la Huera, Capilla de la Purificación



CAT. 10A

Descent from the Cross

about 1477–83

Oil on panel, 134 x 112.5 cm
Zaragoza, Museo de Zaragoza, 10043

PROVENANCE

Unknown, probably from a church in the province of Zaragoza

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Castiello 1868, p. 34, no. 38; Tormo 1926, pp. 24, 44; Post 1930–66, vol. VIII (1941), pp. 130–32; Camón Aznar 1966, pp. 484–86; Lacarra 1970, pp. 130–42, cat. XV; Young 1975, pp. 109–10; Berg-Sobré 1997, pp. 102–3, 212–13; Lacarra 2003a, pp. 93–97; M. C. Lacarra in Barcelona-Bilbao 2003, pp. 180–83, no. 11; Ortiz 2013, pp. 211–15

This *Descent* is based on a model that was made popular in Aragón by Bermejo. Various Old Testament figures take Christ down from the cross with the aid of a cloth threaded beneath his armpits. Joseph of Arimathea supports him carefully by the belly while Nicodemus, perched on a stepladder with his head poking through the rungs, props up the lifeless body by the arm. At the foot of the cross the Magdalen is about to grasp him by the knees. A figure with a hammer over his shoulder and the group of the Marys and John the Evangelist, who come to the assistance of the Virgin, complete the scene.

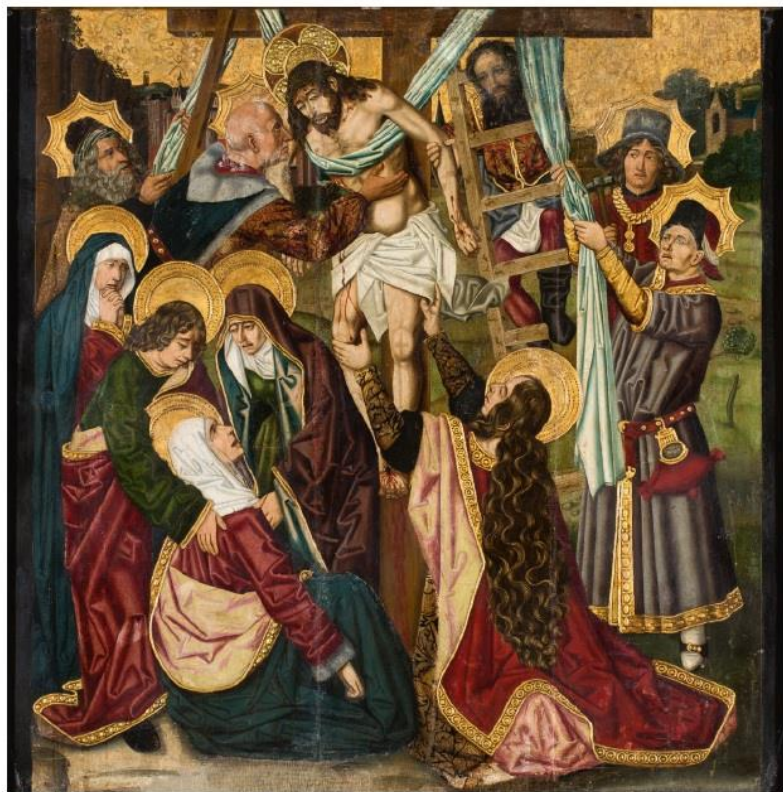
It may be deduced from its style that it was part of a retable executed jointly by Bartolomé Bermejo and Martín Bernat during the years the Cordovan worked in the Aragonese capital. Depictions of the Descent were usually located in the pinnacle of retables, as can be seen in works related to Bermejo and Bernat that faithfully follow the same composition. Such is the case of the retable of Saints Martín, Sylvester and Susanna in the Museo Colegial in Daroca, an ensemble which should be attributed to the circle of Martín Bernat.¹ This scene also topped the left section of the Blesa retable [fig. 42] painted by Bernat and Miguel Ximénez between 1481 and 1486.² And it was likewise included in the ensemble crafted by Bermejo and Bernat for Juan de Lobera's chapel in the cloister of the basilica of El Pilar (1479–84).³ In 1892 Tormo viewed a panel – no longer extant – with an identical composition.⁴

The original model for the composition is unknown, though it is plausible to think it was created

by Bermejo during his years in Daroca. It is evident that these works were based on Flemish schemes, as the position of Saint John recalls that of the same figure in Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent* in the Prado; and the figure holding the cloth far right is surprisingly similar to the Joseph of Arimathea in the central panel of the Passion triptych by Dirk Bouts in the Royal Chapel of Granada (about 1450–58),⁵ as they even wear the same purse suspended from their belts. There is another significant similarity in the same composition between the Mary whose hands are devoutly clasped together at her chin and the Mary in the left part of the panel painted by Bermejo and Bernat.

Bermejo's presence in Zaragoza in 1477 coincides with the start of the professional relationship between Bernat and Ximénez, which lasted until the 1490s. Bermejo should be placed in this context, though he is only documented as working with Bernat, who copied some of his models and compositions and helped Bermejo at a difficult time in his personal life and career. This led to various commissions executed jointly, such as the completion of the retable of Saint Dominic [cat. 8], and that of the basilica of El Pilar [cat. 10]. The various surviving panels from both attest to the predominance of Bernat's hand; Bermejo's involvement appears to have been limited to the faces. This is apparent in the present panel, where Bermejo's style is visible in the figure at the far right and in Joseph of Arimathea's delicate features and the use of light, transparent glazes in his hair.

ALBERTO VELASCO GONZALEZ



CAT. 13

- 1 Berg-Sobré 1997, p. 79; Ortiz 2013, pp. 277–90.
- 2 Ortiz 2013, pp. 103–26.
- 3 Berg-Sobré 2005. See also cat. 10 in this catalogue.
- 4 Tormo 1926, p. 44.
- 5 Périer-D'leeren and Godfrind-Born 1999.

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