

SEBASTIAN DUCETE

(Toro, 1568-1621)

“Christ at the column”

Polychrome and gilt carved wood

132 x 32.5 x 34.5 cm

Carved circa 1605

Provenance:

Santa Sofía Monastery. Toro, Spain

In the late 16th century, when Castilian sculpture seemed to have definitively moved beyond the spiritual tension inherent in the work of Berruguete or Juni and to have replaced it with images that offered a subdued reflection of romanising, Counter-Reformatory art, a workshop emerged in Toro (Zamora) that deployed Juni's aesthetic to represent the movement and pathos characteristic of that Burgundian artist. This workshop was led by Sebastián Ducete, a sculptor born in 1568.

Member of an established family of artists who had dominated artistic creation in Toro in the middle third of the century, almost nothing is known about Ducete's training.¹ While he must have learned the art of sculpture from his father, Pedro Ducete, the latter's modest talents suggests that the origins of Sebastián's art must lie in another workshop and another city. Various experts have suggested connections with the workshop of Juan Sáez de Torrecilla in Palencia,² but the latter's training in the style of Berruguete within the context of the latter's Palencian followers in Paredes de Nava³ suggest that it would be more fruitful to look for connections with the circle of Juni and to limit Ducete's activities with Torrecilla to a merely contractual arrangement in which he worked as an independent master under his instructions. In this sense, insufficient attention has been paid to the relationship between Pedro Ducete and Bautista Vázquez, a follower of Juni in León who evolved towards a romanising style, which he deployed in the altarpiece in Villar de Fallaves (Zamora).⁴ Another connection to explore is that of Sebastián Ducete with Juan de Montejó, the principal sculptor in Zamora, who

revealed an inclination towards Juni's aesthetic, superimposing it on romanising formulas.⁵

Whatever the case, it is clear that Ducete completed his training in various different workshops and cities in the second half of the 1580s and in the early years of the 1590s. One of these locations was Valladolid. He was there in 1588⁶ and it is known that he was contracted there around 1594 to execute the sculptures (now lost) for a small altarpiece for a private chapel in the convent of Las Huelgas Reales. Also dating from this youthful period is a small *Cristo de la agonía* in the convent of Santa Brígida.⁷

Ducete reached the age of majority in 1593, the year of his father's death, and was obliged to return to Toro to take over the family workshop. He assumed the few commissions his father had secured and established closer links with his uncle, the sculptor Juan Ducete, with the intention of becoming better known locally. The result of their collaboration was two images: a *Virgin and Child* for the church of Santa Catalina in Toro, and a *Virgin Dolorosa* for a crucifixion scene in Pinilla de Toro. The first was lost in a fire in the 20th century but its high quality, which is evident in the elevated monetary value placed on it at the time, meant that it became a model for numerous images of this subject executed by Ducete over the following years. *The Virgin Dolorosa* has survived and is extremely valuable for an assessment of the artist's style. Its pronounced bodily movement and the suffering expression of the face reflect Juni's aesthetic which the artist would continue to deploy.⁸

In addition to these commissions inherited from his father, there are others that Ducete undertook on his own account. One is the panel of *The Holy Family with Saint Anne*, now in the Museo Larreta in Buenos Aires, and the other is a *Crucified Christ* in the Museo Marès in Barcelona. The first, which is of outstanding quality, seems to be an exercise by the young artist aimed at demonstrating his virtuosity with the chisel, in which the composition and the treatment of the drapery and figure types reveal the influence of the romanising work produced in León and ultimately that of Juni. The *Crucified Christ* from the convent of the Barefoot Carmelites in Toro (now in Barcelona) is also a good example of the influence of Juni, from whom Sebastián derived his preference for the "serpentine" line, the soft treatment of the flesh and the rounded anatomical forms.⁹

Along with these important works Ducete also produced other, more modest ones around the year 1600, among them a group of Virgin and Child images of which there are now examples in Alcañices, Benafarces and Villavendimio; two Carmelite Virgins, one in Pedrosa del Rey and the other in Medina del Campo, which are examples of the typology used by Ducete's workshop throughout its existence; and a series of single figures with complex draperies and pronounced, open lines that create powerful compositional diagonals (*Saint Andrew* in San Lorenzo de Toro, *Saint Roch* in Gallegos de Hornija and *Saint Michael* in Villavendimio).¹⁰

In 1603 Ducete was contracted to execute the high altar in the convent of Santa Sofía in Toro. This Premonstratensian nunnery had commissioned the construction of an altar

with sculptures and paintings in 1597 from the joiner Tomás de Troas and the painter Alonso de Remesal. Little was done over the following years and it was not until 1603 that the definitive initiative was taken, this time by the joiner Gaspar de Acosta, who replaced the deceased Troas and commissioned Ducete to undertake the free-standing sculptures and reliefs instead of the previously envisaged paintings.¹¹ The replacement of the painter by the sculptor was on the express wish of the nuns who, as Sebastián's lawyer would later observe in the legal case arising from the delay in payment:

“... given that my client [Ducete] is such a renowned master and expert in the art, they [the nuns] had the good fortune that it was executed and completed by a renowned artist and master in the art...”¹²

While the contract stated that Ducete should execute the six, free-standing figures (*Christ at the Column* and *Saint Peter weeping* (fig.1) in the first level, *Saint John the Baptist* (fig.2) and *Saint John the Evangelist* in the second, and *Saint Sophia* and *Saint Norbert* in the principal section) and the four reliefs (*The Adoration of the Shepherds* and *The Temptations of Saint Anthony* in the first level and *The Adoration of the Magi* and *Saint Catherine before the Emperor* in the second) within the space of a year, a lack of funds seriously delayed his undertaking, which was not completed until 1609. The reliefs were executed first and sent to the painter who applied the polychromy in 1608 while the free-standing sculptures were sent for polychromy one year later. At this point all the sculptures were valued at the high sum of 14,000 *reales*, which resulted in further delays and in the legal case brought by Sebastián. Despite the fact that the final price was reduced, at the time of the artist's death in 1621 he had still not recovered the full amount. The two free-standing images of *Christ at the Column* and *Saint Peter weeping* were handed over to the Zamoran painter Cristóbal Ruiz de la Talaya, who had agreed to gild and paint them in gratitude to the convent, which one of his daughters had entered. However, he died before doing so, leaving instructions in his will to have them sent to be painted.¹³



Fig.1

Despite these delays it is clear that the images date from the early years after Ducete received the commission when the influence of Juni was still notably evident in his work, an influence that has been emphasised by art historians since Gómez Moreno's study of the artist's oeuvre.¹⁴ The movements of the bodies, preference for exotic clothes, varied treatment of the drapery, rounded, puffy musculature and the expressivity of some of the sculptures all point to the influence of Juan de Juni.

Gómez Moreno extolled the figure of *Christ at the Column*, which he considered the finest of this group. This immediately provoked the interest of antique dealers and soon after the publication of the *Catálogo Monumental de Zamora* both sculptures left Toro for the Rastro antiques market in Madrid, where Federico Marès purchased *Saint Peter weeping* in 1932.¹⁵ Nothing was known of the *Christ at the Column* until it was sold at auction in Barcelona in 2013.¹⁶

There is no doubt of the figure's provenance. Its height, 132cm, fits perfectly into the niche that housed it, which is 135cm high, while the base, decorated with rhomboidal cabochons and egg-shaped motifs, is identical to the one supporting *Saint John the Evangelist*. Stylistically the image also fully conforms to Ducete's work. The soft treatment of the flesh, instability of the pose, pronounced "contrapposto", wide hips, swollen stomach, interest in the nude, the way the face looks upwards in supplication and the characteristic treatment of the hair with ringlets that frequently recurs in other sculptures in this altarpiece leave no doubt as to the attribution.

This sculpture is presumably Ducete's first interpretation of the iconography of *Christ at the Column*, with or without the accompanying figure of Saint Peter, a subject that he would repeat on various occasions. In 1611 he executed another version for the Confraternity of the True Cross in Burgos, who wished to use it as an Easter processional image.¹⁷ For that work Ducete also used the traditional high column but rather than locating the figure in front of it, he situated it on one side, creating a pronounced twist in the figure, which is also characterised by the same soft, bulging treatment of the flesh. At an unknown date Ducete carved a relief of *Saint Peter before the crucified Christ*, repeating the subject matter used in the altarpiece for the nuns of Santa Sofía but here with a low column of the type that started to prevail in the early 17th century.¹⁸ In 1617 Ducete's pupil Esteban de Rueda carved a life-size image of *Christ at the Column* for the church in Pedrosa del Rey (Valladolid), which subsequently had the body sawn off and was transformed into a bust of an *Ecce Homo*.¹⁹



Fig.2

In conclusion, it can be stated that *Christ at the Column* from the convent of Santa Sofía in Toro is a fine example of the work of a highly distinctive sculptor who was able to evolve from late Mannerism towards naturalism and who had the perspicacity to associate his workshop with Esteban de Rueda, one of Spain's most gifted sculptors. Their collaboration resulted in one of the most unique manifestations of Spanish sculpture in the transition between Mannerism and the Baroque.

Luis Vasallo Toranzo

1. Luis VASALLO TORANZO, *Sebastián Ducete y Esteban de Rueda...*, pp. 93ff.
2. José Ramón NIETO GONZALEZ, “La huella...”, p. 449.
3. Francisco José PORTELA SANDOVAL, *La escultura del siglo XVI en Palencia*, Palencia, 1977, pp. 372ff.
4. Luis VASALLO TORANZO, *Juan de Anchieta...*, pp. 299ff.
5. For Juan de Montejo, see Santiago SAMANIEGO HIDALGO, “El retablo zamorano a finales del siglo XVI: Montejo y Falcote”, *BSAA*, XLVI, 1980, pp. 329-350; Antonio CASASECA CASASECA and Santiago SAMANIEGO HIDALGO, “Aportaciones a la escultura del siglo XVI: El testamento de Juan de Montejo”, *Studia Zamorensia*, IX, 1988, p. 40, and Luis VASALLO TORANZO, “A propósito del escultor Juan de Montejo”, *Goya*, 299, 2004, pp. 68-79.
6. We know that Ducete away from Toro in 1588 and that in 1590 he was condemned to exile for a maximum of two years. Archivo de la Real Chancillería de Valladolid, Registro de Ejecutorias, C. 1683-1.
7. Luis VASALLO TORANZO, “Sebastián Ducete, nuevas...”, p. 192.
8. Luis VASALLO TORANZO, *Sebastián Ducete y Esteban de Rueda...*, pp. 103ff.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 105ff.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 107ff., and “Sebastián Ducete, nuevas...”, p. 192ff.
11. José Ramón NIETO GONZÁLEZ, “La huella...”, p. 450; “Artistas portugueses en España...”, pp. 206-7 and José NAVARRO TALEGÓN, *Catálogo...*, pp. 252-4.
12. Luis VASALLO TORANZO, *Sebastián Ducete y Esteban de Rueda...*, p. 105.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
14. *Catálogo Monumental de la Provincia de Zamora*, Vol. I, Madrid, 1927, p. 223.
15. Jesus URREA FERNÁNDEZ, “Sebastián de Ucete. Sant Pere”, *Catàleg d’escultura...*, p. 302.
16. Auctioned by Balclis, Barcelona, in May 2013.
17. Jesús URREA, “Los Maestros de Toro...”, p. 245.
18. José, NAVARRO TALEGÓN, “Arrepentimiento de San Pedro”, pp. 601-2.
19. Luis Vasallo Toranzo, *Sebastián Ducete y Esteban de Rueda...*, p. 136.

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