FRANCISCO DE ZURBARÁN
(Fuente de Cantos, Badajoz, 1598 - Madrid, 1664)

“Saint Francis in prayer”
Oil on canvas
157 x 100.5 cm.

Ca. 1650-55

Provenance
Luis Pacheco Suárez de Deza.
Alonso Pacheco de Torres, 1st Count of Ibagrande (in 1700).
Pilar Carrillo de Albornoz Dávila, 8th Countess of Ibagrande (ca. 1906).
María Dolores Carrillo de Albornoz.
María Luisa Martínez Carrillo de Albornoz.

Exhibitions:
The painting will be included in the forthcoming exhibition Zurbarán, to be held at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara and at the BOZAR in Brussels from 2013 to early 2014.

Literature:

This oil on canvas by Zurbarán depicts Saint Francis praying in a cave, dressed in the habit of the Franciscan Observants. The kneeling saint with his hands joined is
presented as a monumental figure, his powerfully illuminated face charged with spirituality. Particularly notable is the high quality of the still life of the book and skull in the foreground, depicted in the strikingly descriptive manner characteristic of Zurbarán’s work as a whole.

This is a late work by Zurbarán dating from the final years of his Seville period. By this stage in his career the artist had to some extent moved away from the austere tenebrism that characterised his work of the early part of the century and which was influenced by the Counter Reformation, adopting instead a refined, gentle manner of a marked spirituality. Nonetheless, paintings of this period retain the intensity of the figures and expressions, including the characteristic serene, “interior gaze” of his saints, who perfectly convey a sense of ecstasy combined with that serenity. The result here is a youthful Saint Francis of a slightly idealised type who manifests no visible signs of his ascetic existence. These characteristics are also evident in the Saint Francis in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (fig. 1), which depicts the same model. During this period Zurbarán was clearly rethinking his style, moving towards more personal solutions and away from the Sevillian and Madrid Baroque of the period. The dark brown ground of “Seville earth” is also typical of this phase in his career.
Two studio copies are known of the present *Saint Francis*, which is described as a masterpiece by Dr Odile Delenda in her monograph on Zurbarán. One is in the palace of the Marquis and Marchioness of Legarda in Ábalos (Logroño) and the other is in the Herron Museum of Art, Indianapolis.

The technique and figure of the saint, and in particular the rock, allow this work to be compared to the outstanding “Hamlet” *Saint Francis* in the Plácido Arango collection (fig. 2), dated 1659 and thus of the same date as the Munich painting.

![Fig. 2](image)

Zurbarán’s assimilation of innovations in Baroque art is evident during this period of his career, just before he moved to Madrid. His compositions are more luminous and no longer deploy a pronounced chiaroscuro, while the brushstroke is softer and the artist abandoned the use of pronounced outlines resulting from an incisive line. The extent of this evolution is evident if the present work is compared to *Saint Francis in Meditation*.
in the National Gallery, London, painted twenty years earlier (fig. 3). The latter reveals an austere and rigorous naturalism that is much closer to the work of Ribera.

Fig. 3

In 1649 a serious outbreak of the plague ravaged Seville, reducing its population by half, while the following years saw a profound economic depression that left the city impoverished. Monks, friars and religious confraternities became extremely active in charitable work, focusing on helping the large numbers of the poor and needy rather than on commissioning works of art. Francisco de Zurbarán’s son Juan was one of the victims of the plague but despite this tragedy Zurbarán continued to maintain good relations with clients from the local nobility and to work for the South American market. Nonetheless, he eventually opted to go to Madrid, as recorded by Palomino, in
search of other professional opportunities. The precise date of his permanent departure for the Court is not known but it must have been around 1658 when he acted as witness for his friend Velázquez’s entry into the Order of Santiago.

Among the artist’s most important works of this period are:

- The beautiful *Annunciation* (Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art), painted for the Count of Peñaranda, which confirms the presence of the aristocratic elite among the artist’s clients.

- A signed and dated work of 1653 is the expressive *Christ bearing the Cross* in Orléans cathedral, for which the artist was inspired by processional images, specifically by Juan de Mesa’s celebrated *Jesús del gran poder*.

- Particularly interesting for its late date of 1655 is the magnificent *Crucified Christ with Saint John, Mary Magdalen and the Virgin*, which was first published in 1998 on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the artist’s birth. It is one of the most important additions to the artist’s oeuvre in recent years.

- Around the same date are the *Immaculate Virgin as a Child* from the Arango collection and another *Immaculate Conception* in a South American private collection.

- Professor Delenda has dated the two important, identical *Still lifes* in the Museo del Prado and the Museo Nacional de Arte de Cataluña to ca.1650 to 1655. They are comparable to the present *Saint Francis in prayer* due to the exceptional descriptive powers of the still life in the latter. As Delenda has noted, few artists attained this level of mastery in the representation of inanimate objects.

- Again in 1655 the artist painted the *Saint Peter Altarpiece* for Seville cathedral and the celebrated paintings of *Saint Hugo in the Refectory* and *The Virgin of the Carthusians* (Seville, Museo de Bellas Artes).