



XAVIER BRAY AND JOSÉ LUIS ROMERO TORRES

PEDRO DE MENA

The Spanish Bernini

M_NHA



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Musée national
d'histoire et d'art
Luxembourg

MNHA

HANNIBAL

FOREWORD

Pedro de Mena y Medrano (1628-1688) is nowadays the most highly regarded master of Spanish Baroque sculpture, on a par with his contemporaries, the great seventeenth-century painters Velázquez, Zurbarán and Murillo. He began his artistic training in the workshop of his father before joining the workshop of Alonso Cano (1601-1667), another of the great Spanish sculptors and painters at the time. Mena's style is much indebted to the latter – although more theatrical and naturalistic – but his contributions to Spanish Baroque sculpture are unsurpassed in both technical skill and expressiveness of his religious subjects. His ability to sculpt the human body was remarkable, and he excelled in creating figures and scenes for contemplation.

As Director of the National Museum of History and Art Luxembourg (MNHA), I am delighted to present this revised and augmented edition of *Pedro de Mena – The Spanish Bernini*. Indeed, our museum recently had the opportunity to enrich its display with a selection of prestigious Spanish Baroque works through long-term loans from important private collections. Among others, these works include key paintings by Francisco de Zurbarán, Alonso Cano, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Jusepe de Ribera, Juan Carreño de Miranda, Antonio de Pereda and Francisco Collantes. These outstanding loans also feature no less than eight polychrome sculptures by Pedro de Mena. Consequently, the MNHA probably holds the largest number of sculptures by this legendary artist on public display outside of Spain.

These exceptional private collections were put together following the ground-breaking exhibition *The Sacred Made Real* curated by Xavier Bray, one of the two main contributors to the present book. Presented in 2010 at the National Gallery in London, this blockbuster exhibition was a true revelation, not only for the general public but for experts alike. Many curators, directors, critics, and collectors were until then unfamiliar with, or even unaware of, Spanish polychrome sculpture. Recent acquisitions of the artist's works by major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum New York, the Hispanic Society of America, the

San Diego Museum of Art and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge are a direct consequence of the London exhibition that attracted over 100,000 visitors. Recent studies by the Getty Research Institute of the sculptures' highly complex and unique assembling technique also largely contributed to the worldwide appreciation of this long overlooked Spanish art form.

With the newly regained appreciation for Spanish Baroque polychrome sculpture well established, it is the great pleasure of our museum to be able to show and promote the oeuvre of Pedro de Mena, one of its most important representatives. In this context, the MNHA will organize, in close collaboration with its colleagues from Musea Brugge, a temporary exhibition entitled *De Mena, Murillo and Zurbarán: Masters of the Spanish Baroque* at the Sint-Janshospitaal in Bruges in 2019 and in Luxembourg in 2020.

Apart from the article by Xavier Bray, the present book also features important contributions by José Luis Romeo Torres, curator of the monographic exhibition *Pedro de Mena*, to be held in Malaga in 2019. Discussing Mena's life and artistic career, his new comparative studies highlight and contextualize the eight sculptures by Mena that are currently under the care of the MNHA.

The works kept at the MNHA have been beautifully photographed by Dominique Provost in close consultation with Muriel Prieur, the head of the MNHA's restoration department and an expert in polychrome sculpture.

The revised edition of *Pedro de Mena – The Spanish Bernini*, first published in 2014, is an important and indispensable guide and reference for connoisseurs of Baroque sculpture.

Michel Polfer
Director of the Musée National d'Histoire et d'Art Luxembourg



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Pedro de Mena The Spanish Bernini

Xavier Bray



Fig. 1 Francisco de Zurbarán, *Christ on the Cross*, 1627, oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago.

Unlike its sister art of painting, the art of polychrome sculpture is remarkable for the fact that many of its greatest masterpieces are not in museums but in the churches, convents and cathedrals for which they were originally made. Rather than being considered primarily as art works, Spanish polychrome sculptures are still revered today primarily for their function, as religious objects that are worshipped by the devout and carried through the streets during the annual Holy Week processions. In contrast with the familiar names of the great Spanish seventeenth-century painters – Velázquez, Zurbarán, Murillo – the great masters of Spanish seventeenth-century sculpture are still largely unfamiliar to us. And yet, the arts of painting and sculpture were intimately linked during this period. Zurbarán is documented as having painted sculpture early on in his career, and a painting like his *Christ on the Cross* (1627), today in the Art Institute of Chicago, reveals his tremendous debt to the art of polychrome sculpture (fig. 1). Sculptors such as Juan Martínez Montañés, Juan de Mesa, Gregorio Fernández, Alonso Cano and Pedro de Mena were the most skilled masters of their art, and four hundred years later, our contemporary taste for the real and hyper-real means that these sculptors are finally being reappraised and considered alongside their painter contemporaries.



Fig. 2 Pedro de Mena and workshop, *Saint Peter of Alcántara*, ca. 1663-1670, polychrome wood with ivory and glass, Cleveland Museum of Art.

Fig. 3 Pedro de Mena y Medrano, *Saint Diego of Alcalá*, 1670s, polychrome wood, San Diego Museum of Art.

Fig. 4 Pedro de Mena y Medrano, *Ecce Homo*, ca. 1670-1680, polychrome wood, ivory, glass, and hair, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 4a & 5 (Overleaf) Pedro de Mena y Medrano, *Ecce Homo* and *Mater Dolorosa*, ca. 1670-1680, polychrome wood, ivory, glass, and hair, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Testimony to this art historical shift is the fact that museums and galleries have begun to seek out and acquire masterpieces of Spanish sculpture. In 2009, the Cleveland Museum of Art acquired Pedro de Mena's *Saint Peter of Alcántara*, in 2012 the San Diego Museum of Art bought his *Saint Diego of Alcalá* (figs. 2 and 3), and in 2014 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York purchased an *Ecce Homo* and *Mater Dolorosa* (figs. 4, 4a, and 5) also by the artist.

Pedro de Mena was born in 1628 in the city of Granada, Andalusia, and, according to the records of the parish church of San Andrés, was baptised on 28 August of that year. His first biographers, Antonio Palomino (1653-1726) and Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez (1749-1829), tell us that he began his training with his father, Alonso de Mena (1587-1646), who ran a successful sculpture workshop in the city, supplying local churches and convents with religious images.





Alonso de Mena's work can still be seen in churches in the area. Sculptures such as the *Virgin and Child* (1615) in the parish church of San Cecilio, reveal him to be an accomplished artist working in a classicizing Italianate style and using traditional polychromy techniques like *estofado* which, by this date, had been in use for more than fifty years (fig. 6). Alonso de Mena was typical of sculptors of the early seventeenth century in his respect for the well-established guild system, which held that the sculptor executed the carving and the painter added the polychromy. The production of religious sculptures in Spain (as in the rest of Europe) was strictly governed by guilds, the Guild of Carpenters (*carpinteros*) for the sculptors (*escultores*), and the Guild of Painters for the painters who polychromed them. Sculptors would carve their sculptures and gesso them "in white" (*en blanco*) but were strictly prohibited from painting them themselves. This was reserved for a specially trained painter known in Spain as a "*pintor de imaginería*," a "painter of religious imagery."



Fig. 6 Alonso de Mena, *Virgin and Child*, 1615-1616, parcel-gilt polychrome wood, Granada, parish church of San Cecilio.

In 1646, Alonso de Mena died and Pedro, aged eighteen, took over the workshop. There are no works securely attributed to Pedro from this early period but a turning point in his career seems to have been the arrival in Granada of one of the greatest sculptors and painters working on the Iberian Peninsula at the time, Alonso Cano (1601-1667). Born in Granada and celebrated as the "Michelangelo of Spain," Cano returned from Court in Madrid in 1652 to take on a position as *racionero* (prebendary) and artistic director at the Cathedral of Granada. Significantly, Cano was an artist who fused the art form of painting and sculpture in a way that turned the traditional separateness of the guild system on its head. He trained in Seville as a sculptor, and it is thought that he studied under the celebrated Juan Martínez Montañés. In 1616 he entered the workshop of Francisco Pacheco, master and father-in-law of Velázquez, obtaining his diploma as a *pintor de imaginería* in 1626. Trained in both arts, Cano was one of the few sculptors working in Spain who painted the sculptures he carved.



Fig. 7 Alonso Cano and Pedro de Mena, *Saint Diego of Alcalá*, 1657-1658, polychrome wood, Granada, Museo de Bellas Artes.

Pedro de Mena joined Cano's workshop in 1652, and his first known works from this period are a series of four sculptures that Cano and Mena are documented as working on collaboratively. These four larger-than-life-size sculptures of three Franciscans saints, *Saint Diego of Alcalá*, *Saint Antonio of Padua*, and *Saint Peter of Alcántara*, along with *Saint Joseph with the Christ Child* were a commission from the convent of the Santo Ángel Custodio in Granada (fig. 7). Although the exact division of labour is not known, the young Mena had clearly been introduced to new levels of naturalism. The polychromy on the figure of Saint Diego is exceptional in the rendering of his coarse and heavy drapery, and the pose itself – which shows Saint Diego seemingly arrested mid-movement – is infinitely more life-like than the majority of the sculptures of the period. The carving and polychromy work together, and it was this fusion of the two arts that was to leave its mark on the young Pedro de Mena.



Fig. 8 Pedro de Mena y Medrano, Choir stalls (detail), 1658-1662, Malaga Cathedral.

By 1658, Mena had set up his own workshop, not in Granada but in the port city of Malaga, then under the jurisdiction of Granada. Although Malaga did not equal Seville or Cadiz in terms of trade, there were many commissions to be had, with little competition from local sculptors. While Cano had been invited to redesign the façade of Granada's cathedral, Mena was commissioned to carve for Malaga Cathedral forty wooden relief panels of saints, without polychromy, for the choir stalls. The stalls had been started in 1633 by Luis Ortiz de Vargas and, when he returned to Seville in 1638, José Micael Alfaro took over until his own death in 1650. Mena started work on the relief panels in 1658, completing the work in 1662 (fig. 8). The project brought Mena considerable fame, and between 1662 and 1663 the sculptor travelled to Madrid where he made important contacts.