

FRANCISCO DE ZURBARÁN

"FRIAR PEDRO MACHADO"

20 SEPTEMBER 2019 – 12 JANUARY 2020

ORIGINATING FROM the library of the Convento de La Merced in Seville – a Mercedarian convent, dedicated to the redemption of captives – this painting was one of a series of eleven portraits of friars of the Order, produced by Francisco de Zurbarán in around 1630.

The convent was founded in 1248, by Ferdinand III. In 1602, a lengthy period of reconstruction work was begun on the monastic buildings, which also involved a renewal of the convent's artistic treasures. In 1628, Zurbarán was commissioned to produce 22 paintings for one of its cloisters, the Claustro de los Bojes. As the commission was never entirely completed, due to the sheer size of the work that it involved, the artist compensated the friars by painting eleven portraits for the Sala De Profundis (the funerary chapel) and the library. These paintings were still there in 1730, according to a report written by Friar Pedro Vasquez, who described the positioning of the works at the convent prior to their subsequent dispersal due to the political turbulence that preceded the French invasions (Seville was occupied by Napoleon's army in February 1810). By 1802, most of the convent's paintings had already been removed, and five of the large portraits from the library, including this one of Friar Pedro Machado – a famous theologian from the Mercedarian convent in Burgos, who died in 1609 – were taken to the palace of the Prime Minister, Manuel Godoy, in Madrid. From there, they would later find their way to the Academia de San Fernando, where they are still housed today. At the time when the portraits of the Mercedarians were commissioned, Zurbarán was still a little-known artist. Born in 1598, in Fuente de Cantos (Badajoz), he had begun his artistic training in Seville, which also included his learning about sculpture, although probably at a fairly elementary level. At that time, Seville was one of the great European cities and certainly the richest and most cosmopolitan city in Spain, although it was already beginning to decline from the period of greatest opulence that it had enjoyed in the late sixteenth century, when the riches of the Spanish West Indies and, in general, all of the Habsburgs' overseas trade tended to flow through the city.

**Friar Pedro Machado**

Francisco de Zurbarán

(Fuente de Cantos, Badajoz, 1598-Madrid, 1664)

c. 1628

Oil on canvas

193 x 122 cm

Provenance: Convento de La Merced, Seville;

Manuel Godoy collection

Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes

de San Fernando, inv. 0668

The painter returned to Extremadura after the period he had spent in Andalusia, settling in Llerena, where he was already living in 1618 and where he was still residing in 1626, when he was commissioned by the Dominicans of the Convento de San Pablo in Seville to produce 21 paintings about the life of St. Dominic, priests and doctors of the Church. The success of this venture brought him new commissions, from a range of different religious orders in Seville, and earned him the admiration of the cathedral chapter, which invited him to settle in the city. This move was opposed by the guild of painters, who demanded that he take the customary examination out of respect for the corporative rules. Zurbarán refused, and, with the backing of his patrons and protectors, he succeeded in gaining unprecedented recognition as the “master painter of the city of Seville”.

In 1658, he left for Madrid – perhaps at the suggestion of Diego Velázquez – in search of new clients, namely those who moved in court circles. Although his painting maintained an undeniable formal coherence with his customary models, his work gradually became receptive to more modern artistic values, such as those disseminated by his friend Velázquez, and by the Italian art works that could be seen in the capital’s palaces. Zurbarán never returned to Seville. He died in Madrid, in August 1664, already in a frail state of health and with financial problems that made the last few years of his life extremely difficult.

During the years that he spent in Seville, Francisco de Zurbarán had created a style of painting in series that he regularly returned to: autonomous portraits showing the subject’s full body, slightly larger than life-size, depicted against neutral backgrounds and exploring dramatic contrasts of light and shade – a genre to which he returned in the series of the Apostles that is housed today at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga. The naturalist treatment that he gives to the habits of saints, doctors of the Church or monks (especially in the group of paintings from La Merced), hanging in wide and highly tactile folds, emphasises the verticality of the figures and enhances their monumental dignity. This is a vivid evocation of men illustrated through their sanctity and wisdom – Friar Pedro Machado, for example, standing, writing in a book held against his lap, with another notebook placed on the table that comprises the painting’s scenery – all of them impregnated with a sculptural solidity, perhaps something that Zurbarán remembered from his youth, when he was learning his trade in the Seville workshop. They were the heroes of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, towards whose image-based strategies Francisco de Zurbarán contributed with some of his most powerful devotional compositions.

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