

Vicente Carducho

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The Descent of Christ into Limbo



Vicente Carducho
(Florence, c. 1576 – Madrid, 1638)
The Descent of Christ into Limbo
1624-1632
Oil on canvas
269 × 220 cm
Church of São Domingos de Benfica /
Portuguese Air Force

Born in Florence in 1576, Vicente Carducho travelled to Spain at a very young age (in 1585) to accompany his brother Bartolomé, who was part of the entourage of Italian painters commissioned by Philip II to decorate the Monastery of *El Escorial*.

Appointed royal painter after his brother had died, his production and influence

– always associated with the evolution of Italian art – were remarkable, painting for the court and, most importantly, for various clerical institutions. In 1633, this learned artist, who possessed a vast library, published the *Dialogues on Painting*, exploring the principal doctrines and practices in Italy and systematising the apprenticeship of painting as an intellectual and theoretical art.

The series done for the *Church of São Domingos de Benfica*, which included this painting, was part of a programme of refurbishment, which took place between 1624 and 1632 on the initiative of the prior of the convent, Friar João de Vasconcelos. The commission of six large canvases for the side chapels and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* for the main altarpiece is, thus, a relevant testimony of Portuguese commissioning in Madrid during the time of the Iberian Union. The original set included the following paintings: *Transfiguration*, *Descent into Limbo*, *Assumption*, *Pentecost*, *Auxiliary Saints*, and *St Dominic in Soriano*. Although the Dominican Friar Andrés Ferrer de Valdecebro had already mentioned it in *Historia de la Vida del V.P.M. Juan de Vasconcelos de la Orden de Predicadores* (Madrid, 1668), it was not until 1946 that Cruz Cerqueira, in an article published in *OLISIPO* (Bulletin of the Group “Friends of Lisbon”), identified Carducho as the author of the ensemble (while pointing the finger at the lack of study of the panels “to which nobody has so far given the slightest importance”). By then, *modern panels* had already replaced *Transfiguration* and *Ascension*, and the entire lower part of *Pentecost* had burned. Except for the *Adoration* at the main altar, only three paintings from the original series remain in the church. Newly restored for the exhibition *Shared Identities: Spanish Painting in Portugal*, they fortunately regained their grandeur and colour.

Since it is not part of the Dogma of the Church, the *Descent into Limbo* (or *Liberation*



Fig. 1

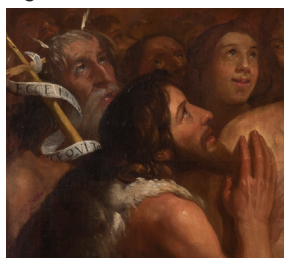


Fig. 2

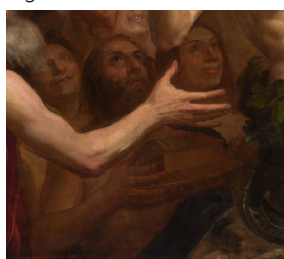


Fig. 3

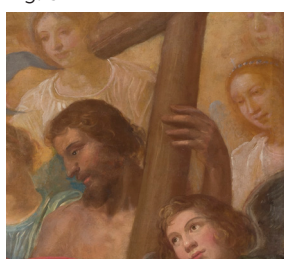


Fig. 4

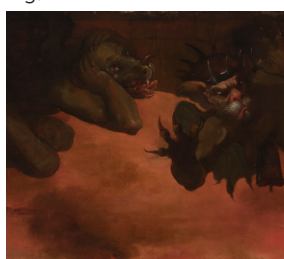


Fig. 5

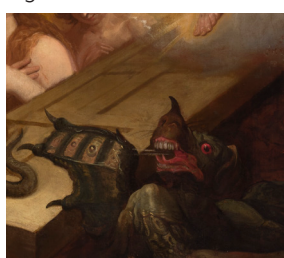


Fig. 6

of the Souls of the Patriarchs) is absent from the canonical texts. The first descriptions written about it are part of the *Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus*¹. This episode describes how, after the burial and before the Resurrection, Christ descended into Hell to rescue the souls of the Righteous – those who, although saints, had lived before the Incarnation and Death of Jesus and were, therefore, still condemned by the Original Sin of Adam and Eve, which only the possibility of baptism would redeem. The doctrinal and iconographic relevance of the subject led to it being developed innumerable times, both by intellectuals and theologians and by artists, especially from the Middle Ages onwards. To a considerable extent, the representation by Carducho seems to follow the original text by Nicodemus, even if the choice of characters does not entirely correspond to this description (already expanded upon in later texts and discussions).

Prominently featured in the picture, and recognisable by the fig leaves that cover his nakedness, is Adam, accompanied by Eve (fig. 1). Next to him, in a prayerful pose and identifiable by his garments and the staff on which is wrapped the speech scroll, is St John the Baptist, the one who announced the coming of Christ; behind him, sporting a pair of horns of light, is Moses, who received the Tablets of the Law (fig. 2); below, Noah, who repopulated the Earth after the Flood, is depicted with a miniature Ark (fig. 3); finally, following Christ and among angels, the Good Thief (fig. 4) is carrying the cross as a sign of his conversion. His presence illustrates the fulfilment of the prophecy of the angel who received him in Paradise, anticipating this episode: “Wait a little, and behold, Adam, father of the whole human race, will enter with all his holy and righteous children, after the triumph and glory of the ascension of Christ the crucified Lord” (p. 407).

Interestingly, Carducho also gives a demonic body to three characters central to the original account by Nicodemus: Prince Satan and Hell, which in this text is a character who argues with Satan about the power of the Redeemer (fig. 5), and Death, here crushed under the door (fig. 6).

As summarised in the apocryphal text by Nicodemus, “Then the King of Glory, with his majesty, trampled down Death and seizing prince Satan, he handed him over to the power of Hell, and he brought Adam into its clarity” (p. 395). It is this brightness, which in the original text announces the Redeemer as “a golden warmth of the sun and a purplish, regal light that shone upon us” (p. 379), that the painter chooses as the origin of the *chiaroscuro illusion* that gives shape to the multitude of the Righteous, in contrast to the burning but dim fire that rages in the infernal city behind the walls. It is, in fact, in this handling of light and colour and through an imposing composition filled with movement that Carducho’s art is best perceptible.

However, it is in the jubilation of the condemned, and above all in its compositional and narrative balance when the figure of Jesus appears, that this painting stands out the most. Gathered in a lower plane, at a slight downward angle, the crowd shows a combination of surprise, relief, and joy. This representation contrasts with the serenity of a triumphant Christ who seems to be still hovering in the air, with a flowing cloak and feet barely touching the overturned door, in a diagonal descent that begins out of sight, far from the infernal realms.

And, if the reason for such joy would not be strange for a believer in eternal salvation, it is in the words of Friar Luis de Granada (*Book of Prayer and Meditation*, Madrid, 1556) that its description is most appropriate to his time, which was still that of Carducho and Friar João de Vasconcelos:

“Those who return to Spain from the East Indies say that all the labour of the past navigation was worth it because of the joy they received on the day they returned to their land. For if this results from sailing and exile of one or two years, what would the exile of three or four thousand years do on the day they received such prosperous blessing and came to take harbour in the land of the living?”

MARTA CARVALHO

1
4th-5th centuries, quotes from the Portuguese translation by Frederico Lourenço (2022), here translated into English.