

RETABLE OF SAINT LUCY

MASTER OF RIGLOS

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IN THE BOOK *Embaixadas de Portugal*, published in 2006 (Lisbon: Polígono Editores), mention was made of the existence at the Portuguese Embassy in Spain (at the former palace of the Dukes of Híjar in Paseo de la Castellana, Madrid) of four fifteenth-century paintings described as being Catalan and attributed, in the book, to Luis Borrassá, the painter from Girona who had settled in Barcelona in around 1383, the city where he was to die in 1425. The paintings, depicting scenes from the life of St. Lucy, cannot, however, be attributed to that remarkable Catalan painter, as they date from a slightly later period (the mid-fifteenth century) and clearly belong instead to the Aragonese school.

They were talked about, for the first time, in Volume VIII of the monumental *A History of Spanish Painting* by Chandler Rathfon Post, published in 1941 by Harvard University Press. Post describes two altarpieces that he had seen in Paris, in the collection of the famous antique dealers the Bacri brothers – one dedicated to St. Blaise and the other to St. Lucy. The two altarpieces were similar in their structure: the main figure of the saint was placed in a large central panel, with six narrative panels at the sides, a representation of Christ at the top, and a predella displaying five scenes from the Passion of Christ. These were also the work of the same painter and were connected to one another, given that the themes of the Passion of Christ were continued from one altarpiece to the other, with the scenes from the altarpiece of St. Blaise being the natural sequence of those represented in the altarpiece of St. Lucy.

Although the painter of these altarpieces could be compared with other Aragonese painters from the mid-fifteenth century, such as Pere Garcia de Benabarre, Blasco de Grañen or the Master of Santa Quirse, Chandler Post understood that he was, in fact, a master with his own particularities and that he could therefore be identified as a different painter. Post gave him the name of Master Bacri, because of his links to the antique dealers and brothers who owned the paintings. The four paintings from the Portuguese Embassy formed part of the altarpiece of St. Lucy,

**Master of Riglos**

Aragon, middle of the 15th century

St. Lucy gives his goods to the poor

c. 1450

Tempera and gold on pine panel

described by Chandler Post. It was composed of a large central panel, showing the saint standing on a tiled floor whose perspective was drawn against an open brocade curtain behind her. Above this panel was a representation of Christ with his hand raised in blessing, in keeping with the iconographical model normally described as Christ Pantocrator. Situated on either side of the central panel were three paintings placed one above the other narrating six episodes from the life of St. Lucy: *St. Lucy and her Mother at the Shrine of St. Agatha*; *St. Lucy before the Governor Paschasius*; *The Charity of St. Lucy*, or *St. Lucy gives his goods to the poor*; *A team of oxen attempt to move St. Lucy*; *The martyrdom and last communion of St. Lucy*; and *St. Lucy healing the blind*. The last four themes are the ones relating to the paintings now displayed as the Guest Work at the MNAA. The altarpiece



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A team of oxen attempt to move St. Lucy
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also had another five small paintings at its base, showing five scenes from the Passion of Christ: *Entry into Jerusalem*, *Washing of Feet*, *The Last Supper*, *Christ in the Garden* and the *Arrest of Christ*. The narration of the Passion was continued in other similar panels in the altarpiece dedicated to St. Blaise. From the material point of view, the paintings display a number of features that were common to most of the paintings produced in Spanish territories at that time: the use of tempera as a binding agent, related with the gilding applied in certain parts of the background, and the use of pine wood as the support for the work, with the different planks of wood being joined together with glue and burlap.

St. Lucy was a Christian virgin martyred in 304. Her legend, just as it is recounted in *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, begins with the discovery of her vocation when visiting the tomb of St. Agatha in Catania, with her mother. The cure that her mother obtained there led her to give all her wealth to the poor and to devote herself entirely to religion. Her betrothed then denounced her to the Roman consul Paschasius, who subjected her to various ordeals and sentenced her to be defiled in a brothel. The saint refused to move and not even the strength of several oxen succeeded in dragging her off to serve in the brothel. Furious, one of Paschasius' men killed her by thrusting a sword into her throat, but the Virgin Martyr only lost her life after monks were brought to comfort her with the last rites. Besides these scenes, the altarpiece also contained another one – the saint curing the blind – which is not described in her legend. In fact, the linking of St. Lucy with the

protection of the eyes is due to an association between her Latin name, *Lucia*, and the word *luce* (light), explored by medieval etymology, namely by St. Ambrose: “*Lucia a luce, Lucia quasi lucis via*” (Lucia is the light, the path of light) – which was why Dante summoned the saint to lead Beatrice to Paradise.

Certain legends about the saint would later introduce into the narrative of her martyrdom the removal of her eyes, which were then delivered on a tray to her betrothed, the person who had denounced her. The theme of curing the blind is included in this protection of the eyes belatedly associated with the saint, so that it still remains unclear whether the scene that is represented took place during St. Lucy's lifetime or whether it documents a miracle of her glorification.

Following José Gudiol, Spanish historiography has preferred to give the artist who produced these paintings the name of Master of Riglos, based on the altarpiece of the Church of St. Martin in Riglos, a village to the north-west of Huesca, and this author joined together in his “corpus” more than twenty works, characterising them under the scope of the so-called “international Gothic” style, consisting of linear drawings and a taste for sophisticated adornments, as well as the use of gilded backgrounds and a great variety of colours, but also, in this case, with a highly developed narrative sense and careful attention to the most curious details.

Besides the nationalism underlying this choice, it also derives from the fact that the collection of the Bacri brothers no longer existed when Post's book was published. On 21 June 1940, two days before Hitler entered Paris, the Parisian police commissioner, together with the Professor of Art Jacques Beltrand and the German historian Walter Andreas Hoyer, inventoried and confiscated various collections belonging to Jewish Parisian antique dealers, including the Cohen Bacri brothers, whose collection had already been completely scattered. **JOC**