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LUISA ROLDÁN, CALLED LA ROLDANA
Seville, 1652 - Madrid, 1706

VIRGEN DE BELÉN (VIRGIN OF BETHLEHEM)
c.1701-5

Polychrome terracotta; areas of the polychromy repainted, repaired breaks to the proper left knee, one cherub's head and to the veil
12.5 cm. high

PROVENANCE

Priego collection, Cordoba, since at least the 19th century;
And by descent, until acquired by a private collector, Cordoba, in 2022;
From whom acquired.

LITERATURE

Luisa Roldán, Escultora Real, 2024, exh. cat., M.A.Marcos Villán and P.F.Amadro Marrero eds, p.194 (illustrated)

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

B.G.Proske, 'Luisa Roldán at Madrid,' in *The Connoisseur*, 1964
M.Trusted, 'Art for the Masses: Spanish Sculpture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in *Sculpture and Its Reproductions*, A. Hughes and E. Ranfft eds, London, 1997, pp. 46-60
X.Bray, 'Luisa Roldán: 'Eminente Escultora'', in *Luisa Roldán Court Sculptor to the Kings of Spain*, London, 2016
C.Hall-van den Elsen, *Luisa Roldán*, London, 2021
P.Lenaghan, *Luisa Roldán, The Virgin Holding the Sleeping Infant*, private publication, 2022/3
Luisa Roldán, Escultora Real, 2024, exh. cat., M.A.Marcos Villán and P.F.Amadro Marrero eds

Luisa Roldán is the earliest documented woman sculptor in Spain that is also recognized as one of the few women artists to have maintained a small studio outside of the convents in Golden Age Spain.

She was remarkable both for the fact that she was an artist that ended up working in the Royal Court of late 17th and early 18th century Madrid as sculptor to two kings - becoming their court sculptor - but also for her development of small, jewel-like, terracotta sculptures, for which she was celebrated. There are only a handful of such works in private and public collections, so the rediscovery of this precious and intimate *Virgen de Belén (Virgin of Bethlehem)*, which retains much of its original polychromy, is both a rare and exciting event.

The burgeoning interest in Roldán's works - for their high sculptural quality, but also for what they tell us about her unique difficulties in achieving recognition as a sculptor during her lifetime - has resulted in significant research being carried out on her. Crucially, the most recent scholarly research has been widely published for the first time in English (2021) by Dr Catherine Hall-van







den Elsen and a monographic exhibition in the Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid is on show until March 2025 - the catalogue for which includes the present group as an autograph work.

The rediscovery of this enchanting statuette adds much weight to the artist's self-proclaimed status of being a creator of *alaxas de escultura* (sculptural jewels)¹: at 12.5 cm high it is one of the smallest - if not the smallest - and most delicate of the works by Roldán to ever appear on the market.

Composed in her typical pyramidal format, the Virgin is depicted seated on a cloud populated at its lower perimeter by winged cherub's heads while, seated on her lap, the infant Christ twists around to tenderly touch her cheek with his right hand. She tilts her head towards his and, in another act of tenderness, her cheek gently touches his forehead. While the two protagonists display none of the fear or anticipation of Christ's ultimate sacrifice and, instead, smile in an act of familial love, one cannot escape the works' compositional closeness to the image that defined the end of Christ's life - the *Pietà* - where his lifeless body is depicted cradled in his mother's arms. As with so many of Roldán's works created at the same time, this is an apparently simple devotional piece that represents the humanity of the mother of Christ with no iconographical complexity².

The direct inspiration for the terracotta was most likely Francisco Camilo's composition of the *Virgen de Belén* - a much-copied image - painted in around 1662 for the church of San Juan de Dios in the convent of Antón Martín, Madrid (for a copy of this now-missing work see fig.1). Camilo's work was, itself, an indirect copy a famous Byzantine type - the *Madonna Eleusa*³ - which was popularised in early Christian art via works like the *Madonna of Cambrai* in Cambrai Cathedral (fig.2). The latter was thought to have been painted by St. Luke - though most likely painted in around 1340 by an unknown Sienese painter - and legend told that it was secretly worshiped in Jerusalem during the persecutions of the Christians, after which it was given to Aelia Pulcheria, daughter of the emperor Arcadius in 430, who took it to Constantinople, where it was publicly venerated for centuries, before ending up in Cambrai. Its fame was immense and given that it was considered a most holy relic that granted miracles to those that venerated it, it was subsequently, widely, copied as a vehicle for devotion.

The similarities between Roldán's terracotta and Camilo's work (which channelled the *Madonna of Cambrai*) clearly illustrate the influence of the latter: the sculptress has closely replicated the composition, as well as its finest details down to the jewellery both the Virgin and the infant Christ wear⁴

¹ See B.G.Proske, 'Luisa Roldán at Madrid', p.130, footnote 20: "*dos alaxas de escultura echas de su mano para mostrar algo de su habilidad, la una el santo Nacimiento de Nuestro Señor Jesu Cristo; la otra es el Entierro de Nuestro Señor Jesu Cristo...*"

² Hall-van den Elsen, *op.cit.*, 2021, p.108.

³ Which broadly translates to the Madonna who 'shows tenderness' or 'mercy'.

⁴ In this instance, she has replicated the ring on the Virgin's index finger, though has placed another on the thumb rather than on the ring finger. Likewise, she rearranged the rings of Christ's hand, thought

as well as the arrangement of folds on the white cloth she has in her hands. The refinement, choice of material, colour palate and style of this statuette, as well as the physical location of Camilo's influential canvas, all point to Roldán having modelled the present statuette in Madrid between 1688 and 1706.

Despite the obvious compositional inspiration from the venerated painted image, this statuette is representative of an accumulation of ingredients that contributed towards Roldán's inimitable style. First, and foremost, one cannot overlook the importance of her formative years working in her father's (Pedro Roldán) workshop⁵ and, in particular, the inspiration she will have taken from working on, for example, the *Virgen del Rosario* made for the Capilla de la Real Maestranza de Caballeria, Seville (fig.3) in the early-mid 1660s. Here one can clearly see compositional parallels in the pyramidal arrangement of the Virgin and Child seated on a cloud and accompanied by winged cherubs' heads. Also note the drapery, which varies between broad planes of undulating material to much more delicate rippled passages. This format became one that would reverberate throughout Roldán's later career, such as in her groups of the *Virgen de la Leche* and example of which is in the Church of San Antón, Granada (fig.4) and her signed and dated (1692) *Virgin and Child with St. John the Baptist* in the Loyola University Museum of Art, Chicago (fig.5), but also in her later works.

While Pedro's compositions will have unquestionably filled the young Luisa with inspiration, one cannot fail to notice the similarities between her Madrilenian sculptures and the painted works by the preceding generation of artists such as Claudio Coello and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. Consider how her abovementioned groups of the *Virgin and Child* exude a similar intimacy and lightness of spirit that can be seen in Coello's *Virgin and Child between the Theological Virtues and Saints* painted in Madrid in 1669 and today in the Museo Nacional del Prado (fig.6), and Murillo's *Virgin and Child* painted in the 1660s and in a private collection (fig.7) - the former of which, at least, Luisa could have seen first-hand in Madrid. In creating her own interpretations of powerful devotional images which such works in mind, Luisa developed a new stylistic and compositional vocabulary, that was attuned to the requirements of her patrons, and which would define her productive output from 1688 onwards.

What came after her move to the seat of the Spanish court in 1688⁶, accompanied by her children and husband, Luis Antonio de los Arcos - who was previously apprenticed to Pedro Roldán as a painter - was a period of creativity that moved in a radically different direction to the work that preceded it. She moved away from creating life-sized polychrome wood processional figures

these are not easily visible due to the loss of the polychromy of the painted jewels.

⁵ It is important to note that while it is well known that she honed her skills working alongside her father, her position as an assistant or an apprentice was never acknowledged by a guild (C.Hall-van den Elsen, *op.cit.*, 2021, p.45).

⁶ Luisa and Luis Antonio moved to Madrid sometime after June 1688 without a firm offer of employment. She was formally named *Escultora de la Casa Real* (Sculptor of the Royal Household) on 15 October 1692 after which time she produced a number of her most celebrated polychrome terracotta works for the Crown, as well as for other private patrons including the Duque del Infantado.

for churches and convents that were bound in the more traditional Counter-Reformist spirit of violence and pathos and, instead, began creating works that both inspired - and educated - the viewer about the mysteries of the Catholic faith and stimulated a more intimate relationship to God. As Hall-van den Elsen (*op.cit.*, 2021, p.93) observed, Luisa and Luis Antonio began working on small-scale painted terracotta statuettes for the domestic market that would provide both a much-needed income stream but that also provided Madrid's royal and noble families with the type of works that catered to their desire for a quieter and more intimate religious experience.

Indeed, Roldán alluded to her perceived function of these works as being vehicles for 'pleasure' and 'devout purposes' in a letter she wrote to Queen Mariana of Neuburg, wife of Charles II, in 1697:

*For more than six years she [Roldán] has had the good fortune to be at your royal feet executing different figures for the pleasure and devout purposes of Your Majesty and considering that she is poor and in great need she beseeches Your Majesty to be kind enough to give her clothing or a gratuity or whatever Your Majesty likes ...*⁷

At this time, Luisa - also closely assisted by her brother-in-law Tomás de los Arcos, who painted her statuettes - created numerous such polychromed terracottas groups⁸: notwithstanding the abovementioned (figs.4&5), but also including the more complex signed and dated (1691) *Rest on the Flight to Egypt* in a private collection, Madrid and the *Entombment of Christ* dating from c.1700 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Populated by animated, richly coloured, figures and arranged in tender groupings, these terracottas pushed the art of polychrome sculpture away from the more violent scenes of the *Passion of Christ* that had prevailed throughout Spain in the earlier part of the 17th century, towards a style that was quieter and more intimate and closer in spirit to the painterly manner of Murillo. And it is precisely within this context that the quiet power of this *Virgen de Belén*, offered on the market for the first time, comes into play.

Seemingly a unique composition - though with other works by the hand of Roldán yet to be discovered one cannot say with absolute certainty - it is easy to draw comparisons between it and any number of the *Virgin and Child* groups she created. Perhaps the most compelling similarities can be found in her very rare terracotta works in relief, such as *Our Lady of Solitude* and the *Virgen de la Leche*, the former dated 1705, while the latter is more broadly dated to c.1701-5, and respectively in the Detroit Institute of Arts (fig.8) and the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (fig.9). Measuring 38 and approximately

⁷ B.G.Proske, 'Luisa Roldán at Madrid,' in *The Connoisseur*, February 1964, p.128, footnote 17

⁸ Though it is important to note that Luisa did not totally abandon working on a large-scale works, as her 2.3m tall polychrome wood *St Michael Smiting the Devil* executed in 1692 (with the assistance of Tomás de los Arcos) for Carlos II's court and today in the Monastery of El Escorial, Madrid, testifies. The same can also be said for her life-size polychrome wood *Jesús Nazareno*, also in polychrome wood, executed in c.1701, for the Convent of the Hermanas Nazarenas, Sistente, Cuenca.

35 cm in height, once one ignores the background detail, the central figures of the Virgin are directly comparable in terms of scale and, therefore, quality of the present work.

Associated to the former, one can draw parallels with the simplified passages of the drapery, the very fine, miniscule, rendition of the jewellery, the modelling of the winged cherubs' heads (even if they are painted in grisaille) and, most relevantly, to the modelling the Virgin's face, which displays a mature, less child-like, facial type.

But perhaps the closest compositional, stylistic and qualitative comparisons can be made with the *Virgen de la Leche* in Santiago de Compostela: here the Virgin's short, stocky body, is enshrouded in three heavy layers of drapery, her downwards-tilted head, and her parted knees, which create gentle undulation in the folds of the mantle are all directly relatable. One can also see clear parallels in the style of all the facial types, in the modelling of the fingers and, particularly, in the handling of the different textiles. Interestingly, Hall-van den Elsen observed that the *Virgen de la Leche*, is the only known terracotta work by Roldán where the Virgin's gaze meets the viewer's, thereby establishing *her* as the protagonist in the composition, rather than a secondary one (which is the case in so many of her other works, where her eyes are directed downwards or towards the infant Christ). The same must now also be said for the *Virgen de Belén*.

In conclusion, given this work's undeniably close stylistic and compositional similarities to other signed and dated works by Luisa Roldán - and especially to the *Virgen de la Leche* in Santiago de Compostela - one can be sure of her hand in its creation sometime between 1701-5. Modelled on a precious scale as a fully autonomous, high quality, work of art, it has come down to us simply with a provenance of having been in a family collection since the 19th century - therefore without detail of its original commission - though it can be assumed it must have been made for a wealthy individual for private, intimate, devotion. Such works would have been placed in private chapels or in sitting rooms - often under glass - which accounts for their, often, well preserved painted surfaces. This statuette is no exception. And while it has evidently suffered a degree of damage in its recent history, the largely remaining (original) polychromy and its delicate modelling remain as proof of Luisa Roldán's great skill in creating exceptional devotional works of art that facilitated quiet, reflective, expressions of faith.

We are grateful to Miguel Ángel Marcos Villán and Patrick Lenaghan for confirming the attribution.



Fig.1
After Francisco Camilo, *Virgen de Belén*
Oil on canvas, location unknown



Fig.2
Unknown Sinese painter, *Madonna of Cambrai*,
c.1340
Tempera on panel, Cambrai Cathedral



Fig.3 (detail)
Pedro Roldán, *Virgen del Rosario*, early 1660s
Capilla de la Real Maestranza de Caballería, Seville

Fig.4 (bottom left)
Luisa Roldán, *Virgen de la Leche*, c.1692-1706
Polychrome terracotta, 44 cm. high,
Church of San Antón, Granada

Fig.5 (bottom right)
Luisa Roldán, *The Virgin and Child with St. John the Baptist*, 1692
Polychrome terracotta, 45.7cm, Loyola University Museum of Art, Chicago





Fig.6 (detail)
Claudio Coello (1642-1693), *Virgin and Child between the Theological Virtues and Saints*, 1669
Oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



Fig.7
Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682), *Virgin and Child*, c.1650
Oil on canvas, Private collection



Fig.8 Luisa Roldán, *Our Lady of Solitude*, c.1701-5
Polychrome terracotta, 38 cm high, The Detroit Institute of Arts



Fig.9 Luisa Roldán, *Virgen de la Leche*, c.1701-5
Polychrome terracotta, 35 cm high approx, Capilla de las Reliquias, Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela