

Pablo Esquert

The Ecce Homo in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum and other attributed works



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**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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In 1927, the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum received a number of works gifted by Laureano de Jado y Ventades. One of these works was a panel-painted *Ecce Homo* (118 x 100.5 cm) described as 16th-century in the inventory.¹ The scene shows Christ, accompanied by Pilate and threatened by an executioner, as he is presented to the people (fig. 1). Intrigued by the quality of the panel, a group of Spanish and foreign experts wrote to each other discussing possible attributions. Fortunately, this correspondence has been preserved and is held today by the Museum.²

One of the earliest surviving letters, dated 30 September 1943, came from Diego Angulo, who wrote directly to Losada, director of the Museum at the time. Angulo asked the director for photographs of several Spanish 16th century panels at the Museum, including *The Torment of Saint Agatha* and the *Ecce Homo*, although no mention is made of the possible authors of either.³ In his reply the following month, Losada explained the difficulties involved in photographing the panels and, with regard to *Ecce Homo*, suggested he got in contact with a photographer in Madrid called Linker, who had photographed most of the works in the Jado bequest, and who might just also have had one of *The Torment of Saint Agatha*.

On 22 February 1951, three years before the publication of the volume of *Ars Hispaniae* that included Angulo's study of Spanish painting in the 16th century, an American, R. C. Post, wrote to the Museum applying for information as direct and accurate as possible about the signature appearing on *The Torment of Saint Agatha*: PALENCIA (cit.), as Gudiol in Barcelona had told him that the painter's name, GASPAR DE, was also legible. Unable to get hold of a copy of the latter photograph, Post suggested that it might be no more than a deduction, since documentary evidence existed of a painter with the same name and surname in Valladolid. Among other questions, Post also asked about the origin of the Saint Agatha painting and the *Ecce Homo*; he considered them both to be the work of the same painter. The then Museum director, Crisanto Lasterra,

1 Inv. no. 69/186. Galilea 1995, pp. 14, 35, 40, attributed to Gaspar de Palencia. Appears as «Anonymous, Spanish, 16th century» in Plasencia 1932.

2 My thanks to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum for allowing me to consult this correspondence, which was also used by A. M. Galilea Antón for her doctoral thesis.

3 Angulo was presumably compiling material for his vol. XII of the *Ars Hispaniae*, covering Spanish painting of the 16th century, which was published in 1954.

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1. Pablo Esquert (active between 1559 and 1576)
Ecce Homo, second half of 16th century
Oil on panel, 118 x 100.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/186

answered on 6 March 1951, confirming that only the surname PALENCIA FE (cit) appeared on the Saint Agatha panel, with the name Gaspar conspicuous by its absence. He then informed Post that the panel was part of a bequest from Gregorio de San Pelayo, and the *Ecce Homo* part of the Laureano de Jado bequest.

Post's attribution of both panels to the same painter marked the beginning of the attribution of the *Ecce Homo* to the Valladolid-based painter Gaspar de Palencia. The American historian considered it to be in the more vigorously modelled style of Spanish Mannerism.⁴

Prior to Post's publication, Angulo, in his 1954 study referred to above, mentions Gaspar de Palencia briefly, noting that, to date, no documented work of his had yet been found, nor was it known for certain that he was the artist whose signature is to be found on *The Torment of Saint Agatha*. He does not mention *Ecce Homo* at all.⁵

In the 1969 edition of the *Catalogue of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum*, Crisanto de Lasterra gave an extremely detailed description of the *Ecce Homo* panel, cataloguing it as a mid-16th century work and referring to Post's study.

In 1970, Camón Aznar considered *The Torment of Saint Agatha* a feasible basis for a reconstruction of the personality of Gaspar de Palencia. He refers to an *Ecce Homo* in the Bilbao Museum, relating it to Morales, but we can't be sure whether it is the one studied by Post or a different one acquired by the Museum in 1918 that seemed to be by the painter from Extremadura, and which featured plenty of chiaroscuro as described by Camón. If it is the one studied by Post, it is curious that he should link it to Morales, without openly attributing it to Gaspar de Palencia.⁶

In her 1993 doctoral thesis, Ana María Galilea Antón supports Post's theory, attributing the *Ecce Homo* to Gaspar de Palencia. Her analysis of the panel dwells on the effects of the light and the intense colours used in the clothing of the figures in blue, red and green, in contrast to the purity of the white cloth covering Christ. Galilea Antón made a major contribution to the debate when she compared the model of Christ with another of the Aragon school in the Despujol collection in Barcelona, attributed to Rolán de Moys, a painter of Flemish origin who arrived in Spain thanks to the good offices of the Duke of Villahermosa.⁷

Rolán de Moys was not the only Flemish painter to arrive with the Duke of Villahermosa: with them another Flemish artist appears in Spanish art for the first time, one Pablo Schepers, who, like Rolán de Moys, worked mostly in Aragon. They even worked together on paintings on several occasions. Schepers was known in Spain both as Pablo Esquert and Micer Pablo.

Also in 1993, Miguel Angel González García and Manuel Arias published an excellent article reconstructing Gaspar de Palencia's oeuvre, in which they point to the need to revise the paintings attributed to the artist up to that time. Rather than seeing it as a panel painted by the Valladolid artist, they consider—rightly I believe—the *Ecce Homo* in the Bilbao Museum to be more Flemish than Spanish.⁸

Still in 1993, Pérez Sánchez inquired about three paintings by Gaspar de Palencia, which he apparently believed to be in the Bilbao museum. On 21 June, the Museum replied that it had only two works by Palencia, *The Torment of Saint Agatha* and the *Ecce Homo*, which Post had attributed to him. Another work Post saw

4 Post 1930-1966, vol. XIV (*The later Renaissance in Castile*, 1966), pp. 65-66, fig. 25.

5 Angulo 1954, p. 195.

6 Camón Aznar 1970, p. 267; Galilea 1995, p. 34.

7 Galilea 1993, vol. II, pp. 539-541; vol. IV, figs. 215-217.

8 González/Arias 1994, p. 43; Morte 1999, pp. 450-451.

at the Museum, on the theme of the Epiphany, might have been a temporary deposit. Some years later, on 16 June 2001, Pérez Sánchez wrote again to the director of the Museum, after seeing the *Ecce Homo* in the Museum workshop. He noted a certain parallelism between the panel in Bilbao and another in the Pilar in Saragossa, of which the city museum had a copy on canvas. While the work in Bilbao attributed to Gaspar de Palencia was, in his view, of high quality, he also noted what he described as ‘a Flemish tone’, coinciding with the suggestion made by González and Arias.

A study of the two Saragossa *Ecce Homo* underscores how popular the theme was, besides reproducing the solitary Christ, very similar to the way He appears in the engraving by Thomasino, who must have helped a good deal to popularize the subject. The *Ecce Homo* in the Pilar is considered to be an Aragonese work executed in the 1570s, and stylistically very close to the high retable in the Recoletas convent in Tafalla (Navarra), which the Flemish artists Pablo Schepers and Rolán de Moys were commissioned to paint in 1571. This study included an important piece of information, which we shall return to: it refers to the fact that Luis de Morales had sent an *Ecce Homo* to Saragossa and that Schepers, at least according to Jusepe Martínez in his *Discourses*, ‘made many similar heads, adding hands to them.’⁹

Jusepe Martínez became the painter expert in the work of Pablo Schepers, referring to him regularly in his *Discursos practicables del nobilísimo Arte de la Pintura (Practicable discourses on the Most Noble Art of Painting)*, written around 1675.¹⁰ As noted above, Martínez refers to Schepers’s knowledge of the work of Morales, while also describing his arrival in Spain from Flanders with Rolán de Moys under the Duke of Villahermosa’s wing. Martínez calls Schepers a painter of ‘stories’ and Moys a painter of ‘portraits’. Jusepe Martínez describes both as being knowledgeable about Italian painting, referring to Schepers’s technique as ‘fine of manner and very subtle’, as befits his Flemish origins, and to his inclination towards using canvases of taffeta, a textile Covarrubias describes as ‘a fine silk which makes a *tif taf* sound as it moves when one dresses’.¹¹ That same quality of fabric can be seen in the cloth of purity covering Christ in the Bilbao *Ecce Homo*, folded in strips parallel to the tucked-in edge. The cloth is also knotted in a highly characteristic way, a feature that is going to help us to make other attributions to the painter. Martínez describes Schepers as lively, a lover of music and with a rather splendid life-style, a personality that perhaps puts us in mind of Rubens. Martínez also tells us that some of his commissioned works were actually finished off by Rolán de Moys, whom he mentions as being particularly focused on portraits, although he never refers to his interest in painting the *Ecce Homo*, or, for that matter, of any admiration for Morales.

Although virtually all Schepers’s biographers repeat Jusepe Martínez’s text, some, like Palomino, also add some interesting tidbits, such as Schepers having been a judge at the Royal Court at Saragossa as well as an artist. He rates him an excellent painter ‘as one may deduce from the painting he made for the oratory of the Count of San Clemente, greatly praised by all the craftsmen and held in great esteem.’ He died in Saragossa in around sixteen hundred and fifty-nine at the age of seventy-six,¹² an excessively late date.

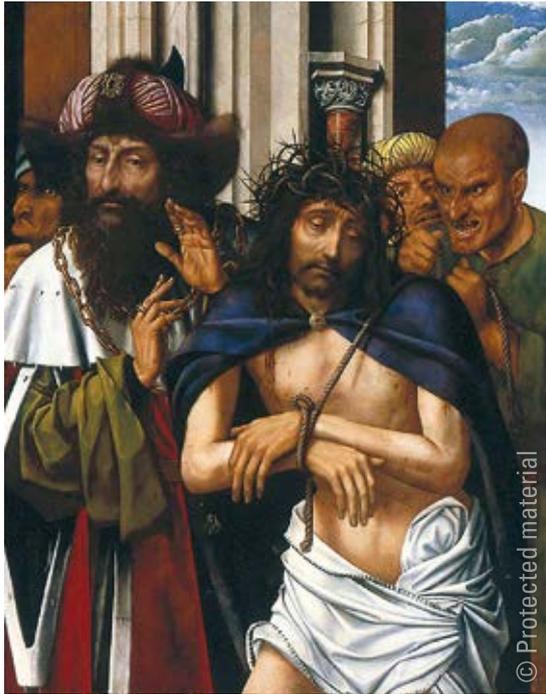
Ezchepers is how the name appears in the documents, Angulo noting that his style —judging by what Jusepe Martínez has to say on the matter— didn’t seem to have been particularly Italian-influenced. He also drew attention to the fact that, although there were no known works by him and, following Martínez’s

9 Saragossa 1990, pp. 224-225.

10 Other books of interest that might have provided interesting information about Pablo Schepers include the manuscripts of Hernando de Ávila (lost) and Lázaro Díaz del Valle, in the Library of the Institute of History at the CSIC research institute in Madrid, currently unavailable during restoration work and the transfer of the Library. For Jusepe Martínez, we used the edition by Julián Gállego, Barcelona, 1950, pp. 216-219.

11 Sebastián de Covarrubias. *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, 1611 (ed., Madrid : Turner, 1977).

12 Ceán Bermúdez 1800, vol. II, p. 45; Palomino 1724, p. 317.



2. Quentin Metsys (1465-1530)
The Mocking of Christ, beginning of 16th century
 Oil on panel. 95 x 74 cm
 Doge's Palace, Venice. Chamber of the Magistrato alle Leggi



3. Copy of Quentin Metsys
Pilate presents Jesus to the people
 Oil on canvas, 94 x 76 cm
 Collection of Vicente Lassaia, Valencia

reasoning that linked it to Morales, the *Ecce Homo* in the *Concepción* in Tarazona might in fact have to be attributed to him.¹³

Fernando Benito Domenech includes Schepers in the group of Flemish Mannerist painters that arrived in Aragon in the last quarter of the 16th century, largely due to the patronage of the Duke of Villahermosa, Martín de Gurrea, who died in 1581. He stresses that Pablo Schepers, who died in 1576, was one of the group, as was Rolán de Moys, who died in 1592. Both painters decorated the Duke's *palacio* or town house in Saragossa and his country residence and, over time, revived the local scene to the end of the century. Benito underscores the fact that, from 1571 on, they worked for themselves, keeping up their own workshop. Like the other authors, he refers to Jusepe Martínez's text about the various *Ecce Homo* Schepers painted after seeing the one by Morales in Saragossa, but 'alternating it with variants', relating this information to the *Ecce Homo* of the basilica of the Pilar in Saragossa and with another in the Museum of Navarra. For Benito, the style of these panels coincides with that of the painter's only known signed and dated work, *The Virgin of the Pilar with St. James and a Jesuit*, from 1575, now in a private collection in Valencia.¹⁴ The differences in dramatic sense and chiaroscuro between this work and the *Ecce Homo* are surely due to the theme and influence of Morales.

How, then, should we define Schepers? He was a Flemish painter who could well have visited Italy, like other Flemish artists shortly before him, such as Quentin Metsys, or contemporaries, such as Miguel Coxcie, examples of whose work were to be found in Spain, particularly in El Escorial. All combined their Flemish

13 Angulo 1954, pp. 333-334; Camón Aznar 1970, p. 306, both include Jusepe Martínez's text.

14 Benito Doménech 1995, pp. 284-285.



4. *Ecce Homo*
Basilica of Nuestra Señora del Pilar
(Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic. Arxiu Mas)



5. *Ecce Homo*
Despujol Collection, Barcelona
(Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic. Arxiu Mas)

techniques and idiosyncrasies with the new, more monumental and more intensely colourful Italian forms, features that are appreciable in the *Ecce Homo* in Bilbao and which are quite remote from Gaspar de Palencia's style. So it seems fair to attribute to Schepers the Bilbao panel, the composition of which derives from the panel on the same theme painted by Metsys (fig. 2), in the Doges' Palace in Venice, and of which an exact copy exists (fig. 3), possibly by Schepers, in the Vicente Lessaia collection in Valencia¹⁵. Like the Metsys panel, the ones attributed to Schepers in Valencia and Bilbao follow in iconographical terms St. Matthew's text (27, 28-30) in which Jesus's trial, the crowning of thorns and the use of a reed as a mock sceptre when He is presented to the people's scorn are all described. Pilate used the term *Ecce Homo*, which has a precedent in the words of Isaiah (50, 4-11) referring to the Messiah as the 'Man of Sorrows'.

In the Bilbao painting, although the grimace of pain on Jesus' face, the thinned nose and the mannered movement of the body recall Morales, the chiaroscuro is not yet so intense as in other compositions on the same theme attributed to Schepers. The same occurs with the executioner who threatens Jesus; he recalls others, not just by Morales, to be found in the composition by Metsys and others by Coxcie. But the model for Pilate has a more personal character; indeed, it has the feel of a portrait. One highly suggestive possibility is that it may actually be of the painter himself: in the light of Palomino's description of Schepers as a judge at the Royal Court at Saragossa as well as a painter, he might well have portrayed himself as a judge in the place of Pilate in this composition. If this supposition is accurate, the panel in Bilbao may be considered a late work by the artist, who as we know died at the age of 76. If it isn't a self-portrait, it might be one of the artist's stand-in, or one of a number of other possibilities: the portrait, perhaps, of Luis de Requesens, linked by family ties with Aragon, and whose mother, Estefanía de Requesens, was Lady of the smaller Old Palace

¹⁵ *Exposición Internacional de Barcelona 1929: el arte en España*. Barcelona, 1929, gallery XXXII, no. 32, catalogued as a work by Juan de Juanes.



6. *Ecce Homo*
 Monserrat Collection, Saragossa
 (Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic. Arxiu Mas)



7. Studio of Tiziano Vecellio (1485/1488-1576)
Ecce Homo, 1547
 Oil on canvas, 72 x 58 cm
 Musée Condé, Chantilly, France
 Inv. no. PE32

of the Kings of Aragon in Barcelona. Luis de Requesens's features are familiar to us from engravings illustrating Spanish history of the period, and the Pilate in the Bilbao *Ecce Homo* has a similar air. Furthermore, Requesens served as governor of the Low Countries, which would account for the rod he holds. Finally, it might be the painting that belonged to the Count of San Clemente, Juan Marín de Villanueva, who received the title in 1640¹⁶.

Apart from the *Ecce Homo* in Bilbao, which we attribute to Pablo Esquert or Schepers, it seems perfectly possible that the one in the Pilar in Saragossa (fig. 4), until now tentatively attributed to Rolán de Moys, is also his¹⁷. The awkward, half-bent body posture, the long, sharp nose, the anatomy of the naked body, the musculature of the arms, the resolution of the hands and the quality of the panels, all seem to suggest that the painting is by the same masterful hand. There are also similarities in the features of the executioners in both works; the ear of the spectator in the *Ecce Homo* in the Pilar is identical to the one of the executioner in the Bilbao panel. The compositions, done at roughly the same time, are also closely linked, the difference being that the one in Bilbao adheres to the Metsys model.

Identical characteristics are appreciable in the *Ecce Homo* in the Despujol collection in Barcelona, sufficiently so to warrant it as a work of this painter (fig. 5), and, in what is a later copy, in the version in the Montserrat collection in Saragossa (fig. 6). There is something very Titianesque about the monumental nature of all these paintings (fig. 7).

16 Alberto and Arturo García Carraffa. *Enciclopedia heráldica y genealógica hispanoamericana. Diccionario heráldico y genealógico de apellidos españoles y americanos*. Madrid, 1920, vol. 53, p. 251.

17 Saragossa 1990.



8. School of Morales
Ecce Homo
Oil on canvas
College of Nuestra Señora del Recuerdo, Madrid



9. Jan Mostaert (c. 1475-1555/1556)
Ecce Homo or *Christ of the Tears*
Oil on panel, 40 x 30 cm
Museum of Burgos
Inv. no. 221



10. Pablo Esquert (active between 1559 and 1576)
Ecce Homo
Oil on canvas, 120 x 91.5 cm
Private collection

I would also go so far as to suggest that an *Ecce Homo* (fig. 8) in the college of *Nuestra Señora del Recuerdo* in Madrid¹⁸ considered to be of the Morales school, is also by Esquert. There we find the same features, and a distant iconographic resemblance to Jan Mostaert's 'clothed' *Ecce Homo* in the Museum of Burgos (fig. 9).

To end, another *Ecce Homo* (fig.10), which appeared on the Madrid market in 1999, has the same characteristics—as a disciple of Morales and close to the painter from Extremadura—as the one in the Museum of Lisbon¹⁹. I think this latest painting should be included in the group we consider as being works by Pablo Esquert or Shepers, as a great admirer, but by no means slavish follower, of Luis de Morales. An admirer, surely, of his dramatic Mannerist tendencies and chiaroscuro and his sensibility towards the early Flemish painters, merged with several models learnt in Italy. In this 'Moralesian' facet, Pablo Esquert achieved a quality style that is his own.

18 Documents archive from the Institut Amatller, Barcelona, like the ones mentioned in Saragossa and Barcelona.

19 *Subasta de arte y joyas, Sala Retiro*, Madrid, November 1999; the panel measured 120 x 91,5 cm.