

The "cloth of Veronica" in the work of Zurbarán



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"Tibi dixit cor meum: exquisivit te facies mea. Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram. Ne avertas faciem tuam a me".
(My heart said unto thee: "Seek ye my face". Your face, Lord, I will seek. Hide not thy face far from me.)

Psalms 27 (26), 8-9

The enigma of the veil of Veronica

To see the face of God was an aspiration common to all pious men of the Old Testament, a desire also shared by Christians. St. Paul wrote: "Christ Who is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1: 15), and Christ Himself said to Philip: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14: 9). The faithful knew therefore that the Son was the image of the Father. This duly posed the question of the most credible portrayal possible of the Holy Face of Christ¹. A belief in the existence of miraculous "portraits" of Jesus (*acheiropoieta* image, from the Greek *αχειροποίητα*, i.e. "not made by hands") soon established itself. Such portraits were sacred relics consisting of sweat-cloths on which the features of Jesus had, remarkably, been imprinted. These early "icons", which authenticated Christ's strongly Semitic looks, played a major role in the Byzantine tradition. The most notable examples of such "portraits" were the image of Edessa (or *Mandylion*) in the Eastern Church and, subsequently, the veil of Veronica in its counterpart in the West. Such images were widely revered as sacred relics and, as a result, were copied to great effect.

The name Veronica does not actually appear in the New Testament and her figure lacks historical grounding. Today, the name is largely assumed to come from the phrase "vera icona", formed by a curious combination of the Latin word *vera* (true) with the Greek *ikon* (image). Some authors see this as yet another case in Christian iconography where the attribute has given rise to a human figuration, in this case of a saint. However, other scholars, including the great Bollandists², do not accept this view, offering by way of argument the sheer number of ancient versions where she is referred to as Berenice, which in Greek means "bearer of the victory". Besides the Bible, the Christian tradition also feeds off ancient oral transmissions often collected in remote Christian writings known as the *Apocryphal Gospels*.

1 See Belting 1998, Belting 2007, Boespflug 1984, Boespflug 2010.

2 Guérin 1872, vol. II, pp. 236-246.



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1. Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664)
The Holy Face, c. 1660
Oil on canvas, 104.3 x 84.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 86/4

As we shall see, in the time of Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664), Veronica was a Mediaeval variation on legends taken from several apocryphal texts and popularised by the Mysteries. Christian traditions view the pious gesture of Veronica wiping Christ's face as He moved painfully towards Calvary as an exemplary act, one the Church officially recalled, around the 14th and 15th centuries, in the Sixth Station of the *Via Crucis*. Although the theme of the Holy Face inspired great devotion at that time, the historical existence of Veronica was denied and her feast day eliminated in his diocese by St. Charles Borromeo, in 1620. However, Pietro Galesini's *Roman Martyrology* (Milan, 1578) marked it on February 3, and the image of the Holy Face imprinted on a veil continued to be highly successful in engravings and paintings alike.

Images used by the earliest Jesuits as tools for religious instruction were a significant part of post-Tridentine Christian iconography, above all in Spain. Zurbarán's exploration of the theme of the Holy Face and other accompanying innovations need to be placed in the religious atmosphere of Spain's Golden Age, following the guidelines of the *Decree on sacred images* (twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent, 4 December 1563). I subsequently consider the very moving version in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum [fig. 1]³, possibly the last on this theme, and one of the artist's most interesting works.

Painter and essayist Francisco Pacheco's *Arte de la pintura* (Art of Painting) was considerably influenced by the writings of the Jesuit fathers Jerónimo Nadal and Pedro de Ribadeneyra⁴. Below is a brief review of what these three authors published about the issue we are concerned with here. In two of his works, published in Antwerp after his death, the erudite Majorcan Jesuit Jerónimo Nadal (1507-1580) turned the educational significance of the images to the purposes of meditation and prayer. Both works need to be considered together, given the intimate connection they had for author and readers alike. Published first was the *Evangelicæ historiæ imagines...*, containing one hundred and fifty-three engraved illustrations of the life of Jesus Christ⁵. The second work, *Adnotationes et meditationes in Euangelia...*, sold out shortly after publication and re-published two years later⁶, provides a series of explanatory notes to the great engravings contained in the first book. Each of the *Adnotationes* is a brief commentary on the scenes shown in the "images", and is designed to aid the "construction of place or scene" of the Ignatian method of prayer. Painters found these annotated prints extremely useful in their search for the "truth" of what they had to portray. Image 126, engraved by the Fleming Hieronymus Wierix from a drawing by Italian Mannerist Bernardino Passeri [fig. 2], shows Christ falling on the path to Calvary with a woman kneeling before Him, offering a cloth to wipe His face. The commentary in Latin with the letter "D" explains to the reader that the likeness of Jesus was imprinted on the veil: "...refert in linteo eius effigiem".

Another ascetic writer from the Society of Jesus, which was founded at around that time, Spaniard Pedro de Ribadeneyra (1526-1611), wrote the lives of the first three Jesuit Generals: Ignatius of Loyola, Diego Laínez and Francisco de Borja. New editions of his most popular work, the *Flos Sanctorum*⁷, appeared regularly and translations were produced in several languages. We know that in Pacheco's *Arte de la pintura* most of the anecdotes referring to the lives of the saints are taken from Ribadeneyra. In the chapter of "La vida de Christo Señor nuestro" (The Life of Christ Our Lord) in his *Flos Sanctorum*, the Jesuit hagiographer recounts as being amongst the Lord's miracles "... as Cardinal Baronio notes in his Annals; who, taking this from other, and most serious sources, adds that Christ our Lord sent to Abgar a portrait and likeness of Himself,

3 Delenda 2009-2010, vol. 1, no. I-259.

4 See Delenda 2003.

5 Nadal 1593.

6 Nadal 1595.

7 See Ribadeneyra 1790.



2. Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619)
Christ on the Road to Calvary
 Engraving on a work by Bernardino Passeri
 In Jerónimo Nadal, *Evangelicæ historiæ*
imagines, 1593, plate 126
 The British Museum, London
 Inv. no. 1868,0612.584

not made by the hands of man, but miraculously, and that through it God worked many miracles"⁸. Further on, in his account of the Passion, when Jesus encounters the women of Jerusalem on the path to Calvary, Ribadeneyra refers specifically to the figure of Veronica: "Amongst these devout women there was one called Berenice, or Veronica, who gave the veil, or scarf, that she was wearing on her head, to the Lord to wipe away the sweat and blood from His face; and this he did, leaving imprinted on the veil the likeness and the blood of His Face, which from the name of the woman is called Veronica, and in Rome, the *Bulto Santo*, where in the Church of St. Peter it is displayed with great veneration, and of the places in the Holy Land, the house of this woman Veronica is pointed out"⁹.

Previously, the Carthusian Laurentius Surius had published his monumental work *De probatis Sanctorum historiis* (Cologne, 1570-1577), six volumes devoted to the lives of the saints. Although Surius took a few liberties with the texts of the manuscripts he consulted, his work, also republished several times and translated to many other languages, contained plenty of stories from the lives of the saints that were perfectly acceptable at the time of the Counter-Reformation. In discussing the German hagiographer, Pacheco mentions in *Arte de la pintura* a miraculous image of Christ in Rome sent to Abgar, king of Edessa. About this *acheiropoieta* portrait, Pacheco adds:

I made, when a young man, a copy of a panel of this holy image that was brought from Rome, which they call "Sacro Volto", which had a letter in the painting that declared this: *Imago Christi salvatoris ad imitationem ejus quam missit Abagaro, quæ Romæ habetur in monasterio Sancti Silvestri*¹⁰.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁰ Pacheco 1990, p. 232.

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3. Felipe Gil de Mena (1603-1673)
Saint Veronica, c. 1650
Oil on canvas, 126 x 140 cm
Diocesan and Cathedral Museum, Valladolid

Unfortunately this copy of the *Image of our Saviour Jesus Christ* by Pacheco remains unknown. Pacheco also refers to another miraculous portrait of Jesus:

The second occasion on which our Redeemer made an image of Himself was the day of His Passion, as he went to Calvary to die for us, made more grievous by the weight of the Cross and of all our guilt. A great mass of people followed him, and many pious women who wept abundant tears of compassion. Among these was one called Veronica, who gave the veil off her head to the Lord for Him to wipe away the sweat and blood from His face. And so that an act of such piety should not go unrewarded, Christ our good imprinted miraculously a second time His face in the three folds of the scarf, which was to retain three of His images. Not without cause did the Lord make this painful portrait, so that the sovereign benefit of our redemption should not be diverted from our memory, as the essence of the image is to bring us to knowledge of its original. This episode has been at all times preached on the authority of the Roman Church, which has one of the three images of Saint Veronica [...] in the chapel built by Pope John VII in the Church of Saint Peter in the Vatican, as Pedro Galesiano affirms, where this holy image is displayed with universal devotion¹¹.

What makes Pacheco's account particularly interesting is his mention of the three likenesses of the Lord imprinted on the "three folds" of the pious woman's veil. This belief may well explain the peculiar iconography of Veronica painted in the 1650s by Felipe Gil de Mena now in the Diocesan and Cathedral Museum in Valladolid [fig. 3]¹². The tradition accepted in Zurbarán's time defends the veneration of "image-relics" of the face of Jesus, which was miraculously left three times imprinted on the veil. In Spain two of these relics had been venerated since the 15th century: one in Jaén cathedral and the other in the Monastery of the Holy Face in Alicante. The third was believed to be preserved in Rome, but in fact for some time there were two miraculous portraits, "not made by the hand of man", as Pacheco notes. The *Sacro Volto* had apparently been honoured since the 8th century at the Monastery of St. Sylvester in Capite, and Veronica's veil from the

¹¹ Ibid., p. 233.

¹² Alicante 2006, no. 110, pp. 364-365.



4. Luis Borrassá (c. 1360-c. 1425)
Legend of Saint Veronica
 Upper left side panel of the *Retable of the*
Convent of Saint Claire, 1414-1415
 Tempera on panel
 Episcopal Museum, Vich

12th century in the Basilica of St. Peter. Although the canonical gospels make no reference at all to these miraculous portraits or to the saintly woman, the apocryphal ones do mention them. The two Roman relics actually rivalled each other¹³ and by the 14th century they had become indistinct¹⁴.

The legend of St. Veronica gradually took shape over the years before the 12th century, the details being taken from a number of apocryphal texts. Below is a summary of the rather complicated origins of the worship of *acheiropoieta* images, considered sacred relics in former times. The image of Edessa, also known as the *Mandylion*, is related to the ancient "letter of Abgar". According to some old tales, collected in the early 4th century in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*, the king of the Syrian city Edessa, Abgar V, wrote to Jesus pleading with Him to come to the city to cure him of a serious illness. The Lord replied that he was unable to go but that he would send one of His disciples to him¹⁵. No image of Jesus is mentioned here, although it was added to the story in the 7th century, in what was known as the *Doctrine of Addai* or *Acts of Thaddeus*, where we are told that a portrait of Christ prodigiously imprinted on a canvas miraculously cured Abgar when it was presented to him¹⁶.

In the early, and popular *Gospel of Nicodemus*, also known as the *Acts of Pilate* (c. 320-380)¹⁷, we find the name Bernice (Veronica)¹⁸, who is none other than the bleeding woman of the first three gospels (Matthew 9: 20-22; Mark 5: 25-34; Luke 8: 43-48). The same occurs in the *Vengeance of the Saviour* (c. 700-720). This apocryphal text also states that Veronica kept a miraculous "face of the Lord" at her home. The emperor Tiberius, ill with leprosy, sent an emissary to Jerusalem to bring a portrait of Jesus back. Veronica wanted

13 See Belting 1998, pp. 277-300.

14 Molanus 1996, vol. I, pp. 381-384; vol. II, pp. 481-485.

15 Santos 2006, pp. 355-359.

16 Geoltrain/Kaestli 2005, vol. II, pp. 645-655.

17 Ibid., pp. 251-252.

18 Santos 2006, p. 215.



5. Pieter Coecke van Aelst the Younger (attributed to) (before 1527-c. 1559)
Legend of Saint Veronica, 1553
 Oil on panel, 80 x 170 cm
 Private Collection

to go to Rome with the image she possessed and when the emperor saw it, he was cured of all his ills¹⁹. Something similar is to be found in the *Death of Pilate*²⁰. This group of extraordinarily widespread legends aroused the interest of Jacobus de Voragine, who narrates the miracles of Veronica in his *Golden Legend*, adding that it was "an apocryphal story". This famous book was a source of inspiration for Mediterranean painters and Flemish artists alike. Catalan artist Luis Borrassá includes this miracle on a side panel of the retable at the convent of St. Claire of Vich (1414-1415), now in the town's Episcopal Museum [fig. 4], and a panel dated 1553, attributed to Pieter Coecke van Aelst the Younger, reproduces three episodes from the legend of Saint Veronica according to these apocryphal texts [fig. 5]²¹.

The idea of the face of Jesus printed on Veronica's veil did not actually emerge until the Middle Ages, when the tradition of this saintly woman of Jerusalem's meeting with Christ on His way to Calvary was established. The oldest testimony for the existence of this miraculously printed Holy Face is provided by Petrus Mallius's *Historia basilicæ Vaticanæ antiquæ* (c. 1160)²². Despite these sources being uncertain and very old, the story of the veil has been present in the Catholic tradition down the centuries. It originated in the street where Mary met her Son as he struggled towards Calvary and became an icon thereafter. The image gifted to Veronica venerated in Rome was kept in the Basilica of St. Peter from the late 6th century. As an important relic with the divine imprint, it was exhibited to the huge numbers of pilgrims arriving in Rome to worship it in Holy Years. Dante confirms this in Canto XXXI of "Paradise" in the *Divine Comedy*²³. It inspired extraordinary devotion and reproductions were numerous from the Holy Year of 1300 on. The crown of thorns on Christ's head, the pained expression and the drops of blood made the miraculous portrait the symbol of the Passion as a whole.

19 Geoltrain/Kaestli 2005, pp. 389-395.

20 Ibid., pp. 407-409.

21 Auctioned at Drouot Montaigne, Paris, 10 November 1998, no. 2.

22 Belting 1998, p. 729.

23 See Chastel 1978.



6. Master E.S.
Saint Veronica, 1450-1467
 Engraving, 15.7 x 11 cm
 The British Museum, London
 Inv. no. 1895,1214.113



7. Lorenzo Costa (1460-1535)
Saint Veronica, 1508
 Oil on panel, 65 x 54 cm
 Musée du Louvre, Paris
 Inv. no. RF 1989-15

In paintings and engravings alike, the Lord's face is frequently seen front on. However, the fact that the crown of thorns is not always shown in the image [fig. 6] is quite striking. Curiously, in the early 16th century, some Italian portrayals of Saint Veronica displaying her veil show the face of Christ as a largely undefined reddish smudge with no crown. This is true of a small painting from 1508 by Lorenzo Costa [fig. 7] and in the large frieze Pontormo painted in 1515 in the Pope's chapel at Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Even so, around the same time, Dürer engraved an impressive Holy Face seen from the front, crowned with thorns and held by two sorrowing angels [fig. 8]. The iconography of the two angels presenting the Holy Face printed on a veil, as if to encourage pious meditation, is also found in paintings, including the ones made by Friar Juan Sánchez Cotán around 1620 for the charterhouse at Granada²⁴.

In the Counter-Reformation the miraculous imprint of Christ's features became a statement for the defence of holy or sacred images of the kind criticized and attacked by Protestants. In the 17th century, the Catholic Church sought to propagate the truth of the miracle by commissioning portrayals of the Saintly Woman Veronica in art. In the basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican, Francesco Mochi was commissioned in 1629 to produce a huge marble sculpture of the saint to accompany Bernini's baldacchino. Many artists reproduced the sacred image on its own or presented by the saint, including El Greco, who painted both versions of the theme, with a Christ looking very like a Byzantine icon.

Zurbarán's workshop produced upwards of a dozen reproductions of the Holy Face, several of which are accepted today as works by the maestro himself (two are signed and dated 1631 and 1658 respectively). All of which illustrates how interested the artist and his clients were in this particular theme. A number of quite varied and suggestive essays, interpretations and publications have explored Zurbarán's peculiar treatment of the theme²⁵. Below are some thoughts inspired by an analysis of numerous reproductions of the face of Christ on Veronica's veil by Zurbarán, emphasizing their originality.

24 Alicante 2006, no. 104, pp. 350-351.

25 Caturla 1965, Calabrese 1995, Stoichita 1995 (1996), Gómez Piñol 2006, Pereda 2011.



8. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)
The Holy Face with Two Angels, 1513
Burin on paper, 102 x 141 mm
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Inv. no. 531LR

The Holy Face in the art of Zurbarán

One of the most frequent themes in post-Tridentine iconography, particularly in Spain, is the devotion for the Passion and Death of Jesus. The Christian faith encompasses the concept of sacrifice, and the highest expression of sacrifice in the faith is the willingly embraced death of the Son of God and its renewal in the Eucharistic celebration of the mass. In reaffirming the value of the sacraments against Protestant heretics, the theologians of the Council of Trent detailed how faith and religious feeling had to be revealed and outwardly expressed. It is also possible to appreciate how Zurbarán developed as an artist through the theme of the Holy Face, which he came back to time and again.

Realism and a powerful dramatic quality are what most impress the viewer in Zurbarán's compositions. They show Christ's foreshortened head with a fine reddish imprint, three-quarters to the right, which was probably closer to the gesture the woman would have captured than what we find in so many hieratic mediaeval portraits or in the Veronicas of El Greco. Indeed, with Christ carrying the Cross, a front-on portrait would have been nigh on impossible to achieve, an inclined and slightly off-kilter view being much more likely. The white, "hyperrealist" cloth or veil thrusts forward powerfully from Zurbarán's paintings, in profound contrast to the vague image of the rather sketchy likeness. The pleasure in portraying Veronica's veil in such a markedly realistic way, like a *trompe-l'oeil*, is resolved in these paintings by the illusion of the frame, the only connection to the external world being some thin double cords from which hangs a knotted cloth in a neutral, undefined space. We are indebted to that great scholar of Zurbarán, María Luisa Caturla, for the perfect definition of the Holy Face by Zurbarán as a *divine trompe-l'oeil*²⁶. Indeed, in her study of the theme in Zurbarán's work, Caturla rightly came to consider it a kind of religious version of the *trompe l'oeil*:

²⁶ See Caturla 1965, pp. 202-205.

Against the dark, ruddy or black background, what really stands out, by dint of its tactile qualities, is a blueish — or ivory—white cloth, and this is tied in complicated folds, as if to frame the Divine Face. The folds are held by pins in the old style, the golden head fashioned apart. The pins prick... the external world... i.e. they stick into the background, as if this were made of real matter that their points could pierce. Above, from the two upper corners of the painting, braids hang diagonally, each one wrapping around a tip of the canvas. The veil of Veronica by Zurbarán hangs from these thin cords, tied to something we cannot see, something outside the painting: nails, surely, from which droop the cords to knot the bundles. Thus the painter achieves the vital connection with the external world, as the contrivance requires the artwork to be linked to the surrounding reality, the painting to be placed seemingly beyond its limits, in the outside world. That is why, as I said earlier, the trompe-l'œil resists framing. Zurbarán's *The Holy Face* simply will not tolerate a frame and trying to put one on it is a waste of time. The painter was well aware of this and assayed a frame for the Divine Face made with the painting itself²⁷.

In the lower part of the early versions Zurbarán produced, a long shiny pin gathers the fabric at the centre, creating a totally illusionist "frame within the frame". This way of presenting the fabric appears to have been invented by the painter; I certainly do not know of any other comparable examples in 17th century painting. I have only come across this curious detail in an engraving by Wierix [fig. 9] where the Holy Face imprinted on a veil is accompanied by several instruments of the Passion. The print would have been an *imago pietatis*, i.e. an image designed to encourage Christians to reflect on the sufferings Jesus Christ underwent for the salvation of mankind. But the print does not achieve the incredible trompe-l'œil sensation we find in the works of Zurbarán. Rather than attempting to fool the observer, pious engravings and paintings of the Holy Face sought to awake true feelings of repentance in Christians, whose sins were responsible for sufferings of the Saviour. Below the Wierix engraving is a verse from Psalm 30 according to the *Biblia Vulgata*, confirming the educational role of such images: "Ilustra facem tuam super servum tuum" (Make thy face to shine upon thy servant) (Psalms 31 (30): 17).

When comparing the frequent portrayals of the Holy Face in Zurbarán's work, one becomes increasingly and powerfully aware of the peculiar nature of the artist's interpretation of the theme. This peculiarity was noted in the mid—19th century by Amador de los Ríos, à propos of a "Holy Face of the Lord" then in the "Gallery of Señor Bravo":

[...] *The Holy Face* is a not uncommon theme for our Spanish artists, although they haven't taken much care to portray it appropriately. Zurbarán avoided the mistake of finishing the face of the Saviour as if he were painting a portrait: the *Holy Face* under examination here is rendered on the canvas with a lightness of line so suggestive that we seem to be seeing the one actually left on Veronica's veil. The cloth is copied from life with the projection employed by Zurbarán, who also perfectly deployed his profound understanding in the way of folding robes²⁸.

Zurbarán's first known version of an iconography to which he repeatedly returned throughout his career is signed and dated in 1631 and is currently in a private Spanish collection [fig. 10]²⁹. The signature is displayed on the right edge of the veil, painted on a dark background in trompe l'œil, as Caturla so acutely observed. A vertical inscription is quite unusual and the signature has been questioned on a number of occasions. However, cleaning confirmed the age of the work and the date, 1631, clearly appropriate in this case, links it to the *Apotheosis of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, dated in the same year³⁰. The bottom part of the painting has

27 Ibid., p. 205.

28 Amador de los Ríos 1844, pp. 421-422.

29 Delenda 2009-2010, vol. 1, no. I-34. Signed and dated on the right edge of the cloth: "F[ran]co Zurbará[n] fct 1631".

30 Ibid., no. I-48. See detail of signature on p. 171, fig. 3.



9. Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619)
The Holy Face as "imago pietatis"
 Engraving, 8.1 x 5.1 cm
 The British Museum, London
 Inv. no. 1928,1212.128



10. Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664)
The Holy Face, 1631
 Oil on canvas, 101 x 78 cm
 Private collection



11. Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619)
The Holy Face with Two Angels and the Instruments of The Passion, before 1612
 Engraving on a composition by Johannes Stradanus



12. Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664)
The Holy Face, c. 1635
 Oil on canvas, 70 x 51.5 cm
 Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
 Inv. no. 5382

been reduced in size, and the corners of the cloth cut away, perhaps because the lower part of the canvas had deteriorated. When I had the opportunity to examine it in 1999 it had not been cleaned and it was not well conserved. The yellowy varnishes that dirtied the painting were recently lifted off and the differing shades of the maestro's celebrated whites recovered. Theologians and the devout seem to have found this early version of the Holy Face very much to their taste; demand remained high for works by Zurbarán on the theme.

The existence of several Holy Faces is in itself proof of the success of this peculiar formula imagined by Zurbarán. The formula was indeed perfect for this particular kind of worship, widespread in 17th-century Spain. Moreover, the 1631 work allows us to date a set of signed replicas (in which the occasional participation of members of the workshop is appreciable) relatively closely, to 1630-1635. In all of them the symmetry of the folds is more rigorous than in subsequent works, and the face of Christ is little more than a sketch portrait. This group of paintings, a majority in Zurbarán's production, is an unmistakable type for the face of Christ, one that is independent of any external model. As in the first known version, in these works the cloth has three tips above and three in the lower part, formed by two pins or very fine nails that keep the fabric centred. The trompe-l'œil effect, produced by setting the greyish or ivory-tinged white cloth against neutral, dark backgrounds, is always perfectly rendered in these early paintings on the theme. Four paintings of very high quality belong to this group³¹. Some slight differences in Christ's face, in the deep lines, argue against them being mere copies of the 1631 original; they are signed replicas executed by the painter himself. These images are clearly related to prayer engravings dealing with the episodes of the Passion [fig. 11].

One splendid version of the Holy Face is now in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm [fig. 12]³². Considered the finest of the extensive series produced by Zurbarán, it is also held to be one of the most suggestive creations of the entire 17th century. Although its original location remains uncertain, it was probably destined for Seville, as its first known owner was Frank Hall Standish, whose favourite residence was the house he owned there. This wealthy Briton built up a major collection of paintings, which he decided to leave to the French king, Louis Philippe, whom Hall Standish greatly admired on account of the monarch's shared enthusiasm for Spanish painting. The collection, housed after his death in 1841 by Baron Taylor at his residence in Duxbury Park, Manchester, was deposited in a side wing on the second floor of the Louvre³³. Auctioned in the sale of the assets of the vanquished king Louis Philippe after his death (the "Sainte Véronique" was described as being by "anonymous of the Spanish school" in the Standish collection catalogue)³⁴, it was acquired by William Stirling-Maxwell, who recognised it as the work of Zurbarán, and sold by his descendants in 1957 to the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Slightly smaller than the rest, this Holy Face is a remarkably subtle piece of work, dominated by the multi-toned white veil; Zurbarán used these nuances to portray the face of the Lord framed by the vigorous folds of the cloth. The knots that here hold the folded part by invisible, totally illusory cords, greatly accentuate the trompe-l'œil. The penetrating gaze and the half-open mouth, as if He were about to speak, make Christ's face, sketched as a grisaille, particularly interesting. This relatively un-bloodied Holy Face recalls the dramatic event in the *Via Crucis* from which the oft-repeated theme comes. At around the same time two other veils of Veronica were produced in Italy [fig. 13] and French artists, including Champaigne and Melan, also painted and engraved the same subject; in all Christ is shown strictly face on, like an icon. Comparisons of the remarkable painting in Stockholm with the versions of other contemporary maestros once again underscore the profoundly original nature of Zurbarán's work.

31 Ibid., no. I-35: *Holy Face*. Oil on canvas. 105.4 x 76.8 cm. On the art market; no. I-36: *Holy Face*. Oil on canvas. 107.2 x 79.3 cm. Sarah Campbell Foundation, Houston. Inv. no. 1980.9; no. I-37: *Holy Face*. Oil on canvas. 105 x 84 cm. Parish church of San Pedro, Hermandad Sacramental, Seville; no. I-38: *Holy Face*. Oil on canvas. 101.6 x 83.2 cm. Private collection, New York.

32 Ibid., no. I-84.

33 Plazaola 1989, pp. 151-152.

34 Christie's, London, 28 May 1853, lot 120.



13. Domenico Fetti (1589-1623)
The Veil of Veronica, c. 1618-1622
Oil on panel, 80.6 x 66.3 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Samuel H. Kress Collection
Inv. no. 1952.5.7

In her essay on the subject, the leading Zurbarán scholar María Luisa Caturla published a Holy Face that she owned at the time³⁵. The version then in Caturla's possession, now in the GMG collection in Madrid [fig. 14]³⁶, is one of the few known to have a red background. It is in fact a very dark garnet that actually accentuates the reddish tone of the miraculous imprint. Beyond the crimson drops of blood, what really draws the attention is the Impressionist-like lightness on the cloth's fine ivory tone, powerfully dramatic in the deep folds. At first sight this Holy Face seems to be a repetition of the early versions. However, close observation reveals many slight differences in the fold and the face of the Saviour. Christ's expression here is an incredible mixture of meekness and majesty. The face, merely sketched in like the others, appears to be intact and gazes out frontwards at the spectator. Zurbarán's peculiar manner of dealing with the theme of Veronica's veil, with the Holy Face seen three-quarters and inclined, really does seem to come from portrayals of Christ with the Cross on His shoulders. Oddly we know that Zurbarán occasionally found inspiration in the engravings of the painter Claude Vignon, whose almost Mannerist style could not have been further from his own³⁷. The similarity of the face in this latter painting to one of the French artist's prints on the theme of Christ's path to Calvary is quite striking [fig. 15].

³⁵ Caturla 1965, p. 204; Delenda 2009-2010, vol. 1, no. I-85.

³⁶ My grateful thanks to Antonio Pardiñas for the photograph of the painting.

³⁷ Delenda 1998, pp. 209-213.



14. Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664)
The Holy Face
Oil on canvas, 104.5 x 89.8 cm
GMG Foundation Collection, Madrid



15. *Jesus Christ Shouldering the Cross*, c. 1650
Anonymous engraving on a composition by Claude Vignon

A Holy Face from the Apelles Collection³⁸ that came to light recently has an original feature in the lilac-tinged pink strip or edging on the holy veil; this is the only known version to bear this decorative note. The painting is also unusual for the way the cords tying the knots of the cloth are nailed to wood-like rectangles by nails with very bright round heads. Small nails lift the veil's upper and lower tips up in the centre. The veil is arranged thus, carefully folded against a neutral grey background, to throw into relief the celebrated trompe-l'œil effect observed by Caturla. Much more like a portrait here, Christ's face has a day or two's growth of beard and moustache and the crown of thorns is barely visible. Although his delicate features, less sketchy than in the Stockholm version, have a pleasing, almost tender look about them, they lack the expressive force of the Swedish painting.



16. Jean Rabel (c. 1520-1603)
Sudarium, 1586



17. Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619)
The Holy Face as Christus patiens, before 1620
Engraving, 11.4 x 7.3 cm
The British Museum, London
Inv. no. 1880,0508.54

Late versions and the Holy Face in Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

Among the maestro's late works are some very delicate paintings on the same theme. The composition has changed somewhat, and the hugely sensitive portrayals may provide even greater stimulus to a poetically pious meditation. The first of these is dated 1658, the year Zurbarán moved to Madrid, and the last are credibly from 1660-1662. In these later versions, Zurbarán lets the veil hang freely and Jesus's features are imprecise, barely sketched in light reddish tones. The perfect optical pretence of the hanging veil is one of the finest trompe-l'œil effects ever created. In the mostly Flemish engravings circulating in Spain, although Veronica's veil with the Holy Face usually has an illusionist effect, the almost hyperrealist portraits of Christ

³⁸ Delenda 2009-2010, vol. 1, no. I-110: Holy Face. Oil on canvas. 108 x 79 cm. Fine Arts Museum of Asturias, Asturias, Oviedo (deposit from the Apelles Collection, 2000). Inv. no. P. 96.05.



18. Francisco de Zurbarán
The Holy Face, 1658
Oil on canvas, 105 x 83.5 cm
National Museum of Sculpture, Valladolid
Inv. no. 850

are, as mentioned above, rigorously front on. In the superb *Sudarium* commissioned in 1586 by the French Jesuit Edmond Auger from engraver Jean Rabel [fig. 16], Christ's impressive face is not suffused by pain and seems to float on the veil. But in the early 17th century other Flemish prints appeared with the Holy Face of a very Semitic-looking Christ, the *Christus patiens*, where the pain and suffering are evident [fig. 17]. The Latin texts accompanying these engravings are straightforward incitements to repentance. Nevertheless, the difference with regard to Zurbarán's paintings featuring a blurred, undefined face is quite clear.

In the signed version dated 1658 in the Museum of Valladolid [fig. 18]³⁹, the cloth appears hung from a wall of a rather surprising reddish colour. It is held by the typical double cords that knot its upper angles and by a long pin, its round head still shiny, at the central tip of the veil. For the first time in Zurbarán's work, the lower part of the veil hangs naturally, with nothing holding it up. What is curious about this is the remarkably faint, incorporeal Holy Face, little more than a shapeless stain, almost imperceptibly suggested by the lightest of ochre and carmine touches, which imbues this practically erased image with an impression of being the real thing, the actual result of the incredible occurrence. Indeed, if the pious woman moved to use her own veil to wipe Jesus' sweaty, bloodied face, the printed image would much more likely be blurred

³⁹ Ibid., no. I-251. Signed and dated on a card, in the lower left corner: "Franco de Zurbarán / 1658".

and imprecise. However, rather than merely providing a realistic narrative of a miraculous event, Zurbarán is much more interested in an ideal portrayal of the miraculous image itself. The lateral light from the left throws the ivory-toned veil into relief with powerful visual realism. The relief itself bears the signature, on a slightly torn card with two folded points, all designed once again to achieve an extraordinarily real effect. Both signature and date, portrayed in another trompe-l'oeil, have an important place in the painting.

Discovered in 1968 by Juan José Martín González, the painting comes from a retablo in a hermitage near Torrecilla de la Orden (Valladolid). If the numerous votive offerings in the chapel are anything to go by, Zurbarán's painting was probably offered in thanksgiving to the local patron Our Lady *del Carmen* and fitted into the attic of the early 18th-century altar-piece. The fact that the painting is signed on a simulated card that is illegible at any distance suggests the painting was not conceived for a retablo, but as a work of private devotion. Bearing in mind the place and the circumstance surrounding the discovery, Martín González assumed that the work had not been restored prior to its arrival at the Museum of Valladolid, leading him to the conclusion that some of the versions on the theme executed by Zurbarán (or by his workshop), in which the Holy Face is more defined, may well have been repainted⁴⁰.

In José López Rey's photographic records, I found a photograph from around 1950, taken by Madrid art photographer Moreno, of a Holy Face⁴¹ that Martín S. Soria had seen in the church of St. Sebastian in Madrid and which he considered a workshop product⁴². At the time no-one knew about the late Holy Faces in Valladolid and Bilbao and Zurbarán's late work was not greatly esteemed then. It is not known when the painting disappeared from the church and unfortunately locating it has since proved impossible. Even so, to my mind the work is probably a signed version from around 1658-1660.

No 17th-century painter showed greater interest in the theme of the Holy Face than Zurbarán. There are substantially fewer known versions of the variation lacking the pin in the lower part of the veil, which hangs down freely, and these come, as noted, from the painter's late period. The one in the Museum of Valladolid may actually be the first of this type of composition. The version in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum [fig. 1]⁴³, which I examine below, would seem to be later and might possibly be the last known work Zurbarán painted on the subject. Discovered and published by Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez in 1964, this marvellous Holy Face was in a private collection in Valladolid at the time and remained in private hands until it became part of the Museum collection in 1986.

Although the highly impressive painting in the Museum in Bilbao is undoubtedly one of the later type, the veil, wider than in the 1658 painting, takes up almost the entire canvas and its folds are more restrained, giving the figure an exceptional, monumental quality. The fold of the cloth, hung against a very dark grey-brown background by two small knots in the upper corners, is also simpler than in the Valladolid version. Despite being rather more legible in the Bilbao version, the Holy Face inspires greater pathos, with "an extraordinary phantom-like appearance, a sort of prodigious, spectral presence"⁴⁴. This highly dramatic *Christus dolens* does indeed have a disconsolate expression of intense suffering. The swollen eyelids are almost closed astride a protruding nose in a long face with prominent cheekbones. The half-open mouth accentuates the tragic expression.

40 Martín González 1970, pp. 11-12.

41 Delenda 2009-2010, vol. 1, no. I-258: Holy Face. Oil on canvas. 100 x 80 cm (approx.). Current whereabouts unknown.

42 Soria 1953, p. 147, no. 63.

43 Delenda 2009-2010, vol. 1, no. I-259.

44 Madrid 1988, p. 389.



19. Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664)
The Holy Face, c. 1660
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Face (detail)



20. Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619)
Man of Sorrows Wept over by an Angel
 Engraving, 10.1 x 6.3 cm
 The British Museum, London
 Inv. no. 1859,0709.3087
 Face, inverted (detail)

This admirable image might well serve as a portrayal of the Man of Sorrows predicted by the prophet Isaiah:

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows [...] with his stripes we are healed.

Isaiah 53: 3-5

The strange similarity between the face of Jesus in Zurbarán's painting and the engraving of a *Man of Sorrows Wept over by an Angel* by Hieronymus Wierix [figs. 19 and 20], from the early 17th century, may confirm this new iconographic interpretation. The Biblical text inscribed below the print alludes to the Lamb of God and to Christ disfigured after the Passion: "Tamquam ovis ad occisionem ductus est: et sicut/agnus coram tondente se, sine voce, sic non/ aperuit os suum. Act. 8 ex Isa. 35 [sic, for 53]". As the caption states, the text is taken from the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: "he was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (Acts 8: 32); but also from Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 53: 7), which is where this verse the apostle St. Philip reads to the Ethiopian eunuch comes from. The theological theme of Christ as the Man of Sorrows, who assumes the personality of the Servant of the Lord as gleaned from the prophet Isaiah's verses, is rooted in mediaeval central Europe. The dissemination of the appearance of Christ showing His wounds and several consequences of the Passion in the Mass of St. Gregory, led to the theme being popularised in the Flemish engravings of Veronica [fig. 21]. During the post-Tridentine period, the idea of showing the figure of *Christus dolens* prolonged the cult throughout the Baroque, with hugely popular paintings and major images ensuing.



21. Antonius Wierix II (1555/1559-1604)
Saint Veronica with Two Angels
 Engraving on a composition by Martin de Vos

The absence of the crown of thorns in these late versions suggests we may be looking at the face of Christ after His death. However that may be, it is clearly a devotional image destined for worship. In the Bilbao Holy Face Zurbarán painted a "vera icona" to be displayed as a fictitious holy relic on the wall of a church for the faithful to contemplate and venerate. It is not the strict reproduction of the legend of Veronica. A veil hung thus is a true "divine trompe-l'oeil", whose impact, despite the similarity to a still life (the cloth), lies in this pathetic portrayal of the Saviour as the Man of Sorrows. The painter seeks to throw the spectator into confusion, as he believes he is seeing a true painting with the actual image of the face of Jesus Christ on His way to Calvary. Thus the painting becomes an object of admiration, stimulus and consolation. Nobody got more out of the theme than Zurbarán: this image of a faded Holy Face, like a veil that really was used to wipe the sweat and blood from Jesus' face, makes a perfect deception and must have awakened deep emotions of piety in the faithful. The blurred, imprecise image of the unforgettable Holy Face in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum perhaps impresses the spectator more than any other, as "an ultimate, more mature meditation on a theme so often repeated"⁴⁵. Showing Christ's pain-racked features, the painting is one of the most moving and poetic on this theme, an original evocation of how the wounded Jesus looked, the shattering vision of the "sorrowing Servant" prophesied by Isaiah (Isaiah 53:2-3). The anxious, pathetic expression is perfectly achieved. This masterwork shows that, in his later years in Madrid, Zurbarán was still capable of great expressive power, an ability that remained intact despite the evolution in his technique.

An autograph replica of the Bilbao painting was recently auctioned in London [fig. 22], although it attracted no buyers⁴⁶. While this replica has much in common with the marvellous version described above, there are some slight differences in the folds of the cloth, in the darker, reddish ochre colouring of Christ's face and

45 Pérez Sánchez 1964, p. 195.

46 Delenda 2009-2010, vol. 1, no. I-260. Auctioned at Christie's, London, 7 July 2009, no. 31 (no buyer). It From the Madrid collection of Juan Pereira González.

47 Gállego/Gudiol 1976, no. 554, fig. 495; no. 555, not shown. The work auctioned in 2009 (see note 44) was no. 554 in the catalogue.

48 Luna 1987, p. 11, note 4.



22. Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664)
The Holy Face, c. 1658-1660
Oil on canvas, 104 x 84.5 cm
Private collection

in the slightly more open eyelids. Although in the Gudiol catalogue both works are included with different numbers and origins⁴⁷, the remarkable likeness has on occasion led to some confusion⁴⁸.

However, it might be worth asking why Zurbarán was commissioned to portray the Holy Face of Christ on Veronica's veil quite so often. According to the oldest mediaeval tradition, paintings believed to be *acheiropoieta* were worthy of fervent devotion of theologians and the faithful. Such representations "not made by hands" were generally used for the veneration of the divine image as one way available to the spectator of accessing the invisible, in this case the divine, from the visible, the image. The function of meditation was attributed to images of worship; the images believed to be of divine origin were copied repeatedly. The most celebrated *acheiropoieta* image was, unarguably, Veronica's veil in Rome. One account of the impact of the portrayals of the Holy Face in post-Tridentine worship is given in Juan Acuña de Adarve's *Discursos de las effigies y verdaderos retratos non manufactos del Santo Rostro y cuerpo de Jesu Christo* (Discourses of the image and true portraits not made by hand of the Holy Face and body of Jesus Christ) published in Villanueva in 1637⁴⁹, in which the author refers to Isaiah's prophecies. With his personal prototype of the Holy Face already formed in 1631, Zurbarán aligned himself with a very ancient tradition, but the way the theme evolved in his art until the Bilbao version shows how each of the maestro's minor modification to his original idea created a deeper emotion in the spectator contemplating the sufferings of Christ for the salvation of the faithful⁵⁰.

49 See Stoichita 1995, pp. 63-65.

50 As ever, my thanks are due to my good friend Almudena Ros de Barbero for her close reading of this essay.

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