

Virgin and Child and portraits

Pedro Atanasio Bocanegra: the creative context



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

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Virgin and Child and portraits, by Pedro Atanasio Bocanegra (1638-1689) [fig. 1] is a quality addition to the collection of Bilbao Fine Arts Museum that already offers a notable overview of Spanish Golden Age painting, with splendid works by Ribera, Zurbarán and Murillo, among others. The work is also a worthy representative of the Granada school, which, while “minor” in comparison to other art centres in Spain, managed to develop its own, quite distinctive character. Granada in fact provides an interesting example of how active and original regional focal points of artistic activity appeared in the second half of the 17th century, apart from Seville and at Court in Madrid, the two cities most prolific in terms of artistic production.

A family heirloom, the painting has been generously donated by the Alzola de la Sota sisters Blanca, Begoña and Aránzazu. Nothing is known of its provenance prior to 1924, when it appears listed in the Duke of Andría’s collection in Madrid¹. Since then, it has been appraised and appreciated by specialists who have had the opportunity to inspect it and has been the subject of discussion in essays on the artist² and in general reviews of Spanish painting³.

In the absence of a signature or contract or other contemporary documents identifying the author, the attribution of the work is largely based on stylistic features. Pedro Atanasio Bocanegra⁴ was mooted as the author on its discovery, and since then the proposal has been accepted by investigators, mainly because of the clear similarities in the range of colours, characters portrayed and the composition as a whole between this painting and other works by the same artist, which are markedly different from any other painter.

1 C. y O. 1924.

2 Orozco 1937, no. 132.

3 Pérez Sánchez 1992, p. 385; Pérez Sánchez 2004.

4 Attribution suggested by Juan Allendesalazar to “A de C.” who signed the 1924 article.



1. Pedro Atanasio Bocanegra (1638-1689)
Virgin and Child and portraits
Oil on canvas, 146.5 x 135.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



2. Pedro Atanasio Bocanegra (1638-1689)
Virgin and Child, angels and saints
Oil on canvas, 244 x 202 cm
St. Joseph convent of the Carmelitas Descalzas of Antequera, Málaga

The picture has a good deal in common with *Virgin and Child, angels and saints* in the convent of the Carmelitas Descalzas of Antequera [fig. 2]⁵. To begin with, the format is similar, with the Virgin and Child set in a central, although slightly less invasive position on the canvas. In the lower part there are two figures, in this case saints, portrayed around three-quarter length. The figures of Mary and Jesus and the small angels are all similar, as is the profile of the Virgin (a rhomboid fairly wide at the centre). The features of the Mother and Child, which can be seen in many other works by Bocanegra, can be taken as his trademarks. They are to be found, for example, in the huge canvas of *the Virgin with saints and angels* (Prado Museum) [fig. 3].

This last painting would seem to be coupled with *The Virgin with saints* (Prado Museum, deposited in the Granada Fine Arts Museum), of similar size and composition although of a rather more advanced style. Both are to be found in the inventory of the artist's possessions made shortly after his death, valued at considerable amounts⁶. To judge by the style, the works were executed after 1676, the year he travelled to Madrid

5 Orozco 1937, no. 133.

6 "Another painting of Our Lady, the Child and several saints, with carved gilt frame four *varas* wide and two high, two hundred ducats" and "Another painting of different virgin and martyred saints and Our Lady with the Child in her lap, four *varas* wide and two high, with black frame, one thousand five hundred *reales*". Gil Medina 1997.



3. Pedro Atanasio Bocanegra (1638-1689)
Virgin with saints and angels
Oil on canvas, 187 x 332 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid
Deposited in the Granada Fine Arts Museum

and came into contact with the Flemish models, and the interpretation of those models by Court painters like Francisco Herrera *el Mozo*⁷. The similarities between the Bilbao painting and *Virgin with saints and angels* suggest they were executed around the same time, probably in the years after his Madrid visit. Besides the Virgin's facial features, the distribution of her hair or the profile of her body, these similarities are also to be found in the Child Jesus, whose broad head, blond, curly hair and trunk gradually spreading to the stomach are of a type that can ultimately be traced back to Alonso Cano. A comparison of the girl in the lower left corner of the Bilbao painting with Saint Catalina in the same position in the Prado painting also reveals significant similarities in hair (very long with centre parting) and clothing, the wide neckline being the fashion in the later decades of the 17th century.

A substantial number of paintings signed by Bocanegra or solidly attributed to him, and a generous flow of biographical detail mean we know a good deal about his artistic personality and life. Emilio Orozco's rigorous study, written as early as 1937, also helped to win him a certain standing in the history of Spanish painting in the second half of the 17th century. As is the case with many other artists of his generation, the main source of biographical detail is *El Museo pictórico y escala óptica* (1715-1724), by painter and essayist Antonio Palomino, who knew him in Madrid⁸. Besides the specific information it provides about paintings by Bocanegra and his activities, the value of Palomino's biographical sketch lies in the description of his character and temperament, which one frequently misses in other documentary sources. Thanks to Palomino, we know that Bocanegra was the gruff, short-tempered, overproud sort of artist, a man largely untroubled by doubts about his personal and professional worth. While it is true that Palomino tended to lay it on thick in his bid to achieve artist profiles that matched the cliché of artistic creation being linked to psychological peculiarities, the stories he tells about Bocanegra are sufficiently precise for us to imagine

7 Some details of these paintings do in fact remind us of works undoubtedly executed in Madrid. One of the angels in *Virgin with saints and angels* has much in common with the angels in *St. Peter Martyr* and *St. Catalina* which he executed for the convent of the Gógoras in Madrid.

8 Palomino (1724) 1986, pp. 302-304.

the somewhat unusual character behind them. He describes him as well set up socially, as “his house was often visited by the leading nobility of Granada, even by the judges of the Royal Chancellery, which is more than all, don Pedro holding himself superbly with great displays of refreshments and chocolate at the proper hour.” All this resulted in a fairly prolific production, creating in Bocanegra a high artistic consciousness that blossomed in particular on the occasion of his visit to the Court in 1676. Despite being honoured with the title of painter to the King, Bocanegra was incapable of keeping out of catfights with his colleagues, of whom he was openly disdainful.

Rivalries of this kind were a major feature of Bocanegra’s career, as they were with many other Spanish painters of his time. Such episodes were a regular phenomenon in literary and artistic circles of the time and are essential to a proper understanding of creative development then. Certainly no exception, Bocanegra had feuds running at local and national level. During his career in Granada he found himself vying with Juan de Sevilla, a painter with similar talents to his own, for primacy on the local market after the death of Alonso Cano. Bocanegra was hugely gratified by his securing the post of Cathedral painter in 1674, which Sevilla also coveted⁹. If Palomino is to be believed, even Bocanegra’s death needs to be seen in this intensely competitive context, his demise apparently being hastened by the terrible frustration consequent on his defeat (which he took as a personal humiliation) in a sort of “artists’ showdown” held with Teodoro Ardemans, a much younger artist.

Whatever it was that finally did for him¹⁰, Bocanegra died on 17 April 1689. From his testament and the inventory of his possessions, we know he had five children and not much to bequeath them¹¹. Besides some property, the list includes a few books and more than two hundred and sixty paintings. Although some were his own works, many of the pictures in the inventory are directly attributed to other artists, while others, particularly the paintings on panel, lack the distinctive features of Bocanegra’s work. Amongst the masters cited are El Greco, Alonso Cano and Barocci. One interesting feature is the remarkable preponderance of portraits, something we will return to later on, including several of writers and artists.

Together with other contemporary documents, Palomino’s biographical sketch and the inventory of his possessions give us a profile of Bocanegra as a fairly typical artist of the second half of the 17th century, when many Spanish painters had become fiercely jealous of their professional standing and harboured social and intellectual aspirations. However, in Bocanegra’s case, such attitudes and behaviour need to be seen in the light of the existence of Alonso Cano, a benchmark for artistic developments in the city in the second half of the 17th century. Born in Granada, Cano lived and worked there from 1652 to his death in 1667, except for a three-year period in Madrid. His work became the basis for the creation of an outstanding local school of painting, to which its leading figures (Bocanegra included) came in search of compositions, types and stylistic formulas¹². But rather than merely transmitting artistic models, Cano also stimulated a specific creative awareness and attitude. Of Spanish Golden Age artists, his is one of the most powerful personalities. All his early biographers portray him as a temperamental man with an extraordinarily developed personal and professional pride, and his *vita* abounds in episodes that, though generally based on legend, convey the image of a highly self-conscious artist who demanded for himself and his art recognition and honours that were not always forthcoming. His example would seem to have made a powerful impression in Granada, as his two leading disciples (Bocanegra and Sevilla) were also noted for their odd characters.

9 On this subject see Orozco 1937, p. 30.

10 Gil Medina 1997, p. 89, notes that his mother had died just 25 days before.

11 These documents have been published in Gil Medina 1997.

12 Wethey 1954, Orozco 1968, Calvo Castellón 2001a and Calvo Castellón 2002.



3. Alonso Cano (1601-1667)
Virgin of Bethlehem, c. 1660-1667
 Oil on canvas, 170 x 110 cm
 Curia Eclesiástica, Granada



4. Alonso Cano (1601-1667)
Virgin of the Rosary, c. 1655-1666
 Oil on canvas, 356 x 219 cm
 Málaga Cathedral

Besides providing useful biographical information about Bocanegra, Palomino's profile of the artist also includes some judgements that until fairly recently greatly influenced critical opinion on the artist's work. Although the length of the biographical sketch, in which favourable comments about his paintings are by no means lacking, might appear to be a sign of appreciation, it is hard to miss the pejorative nuance in his judgements. Palomino says Bocanegra "excelled with great taste, and sweetness of colour", which won him "popular esteem". While not overtly critical, this apparently innocent praise hints at certain critical reservations. One given of the time was that most people were captivated by chromatic richness, which rendered them incapable of appreciating values to do with drawing and composition that the more refined artistic intelligences considered superior. Palomino comes back to this point later: "Truth to tell, if he had had the same mastery in the drawing as he had of colour and good taste, one may grant the same to any such; but he was completely mannered, not in the slightest naturalistic, and was therefore very remiss in drawing, preferring the flattery of the common people: to all this was I witness."

The idea that the painter was more comfortable with colour than with drawing remained unchallenged even in recent art history¹³, and is perhaps partly justified by the sheer size of Bocanegra's understandably uneven catalogue. Even so, such prolific creativity also led to paintings of high quality, in which the

13 Pérez Sánchez, for example, talks about "weakness in the drawing, which he offsets very gracefully in the colour, which always underlines his interest in Flemish painting, with a certain tendency towards the style of Van Dyck". Pérez Sánchez 1992, p. 384. Others, including Wethey, were much more critical, dismissing quite unjustifiably the work in general (describes the paintings as "poor attempts" by the artist). See Wethey 1983, p. 107.

artist demonstrated that he was fully capable of assimilating what he had learnt in the cities he visited or where he lived (Granada, Seville and Madrid), and transforming that learning into a personal style. The main benchmark for that style was the work of Alonso Cano, from which Bocanegra progressed towards greater delicacy and feeling and greater compositional variety, his painting becoming more dynamic and colourful as it progressed. In other words, his is a more Baroque take on Cano's style¹⁴. This is evidenced by his finest paintings, like the splendid ones in Granada Cathedral (the *Crucified Christ*, *The Virgin appears to St. John of Math* and *The Lactation of St. Bernard*)¹⁵.

Bocanegra's personality also comes out in his choice of themes. Although most of his catalogue is taken up with images of devotion involving traditional iconographic types, the icons used in some of his works are quite peculiar. When, in his bid to be appointed its official painter, he painted the *Crucified Christ* as a gift to Granada Cathedral in situ, instead of using traditional formulas, he came up with a quite unusual composition. To the left of the Crucified Christ a cascade of child angels lament his death, while to the right an adult angel waves his sword energetically to drive off the Grim Reaper and the Devil¹⁶. This macabre iconography can also be seen in his *Allegory of the Black Death* (Musée Goya, Castres), a painting without precedent in the history of Spanish art¹⁷, or in *Alonso Cano, dead* (Sevilla Fine Arts Museum), an explicit homage to the man who provided him with the benchmark for his own professional career¹⁸. Also attributed to Bocanegra is an *Allegory of the river Darro, Granada* (Cordoba Fine Arts Museum), which has an equally unusual theme in Spanish painting of the time and he is the author of a *Hieroglyph of Justice* that was partially inspired by a 16th century Flemish print and which earned him the title of painter to the King¹⁹.

One prototypical work by Bocanegra, *The Virgin and Child and saints*, shares many of these features, providing support for claims of a measure of originality in his way of resolving narrative in painting. As with most of the artist's production, the basic reference point for the work is Alonso Cano, as the group comprising the Virgin and Child (which dominates the canvas) is of a typology arising out of Bocanegra's personal views on Cano's iconography. The *Virgin of Bethlehem*, in the Curia Eclesiástica, Granada has been signalled as a crucial antecedent [fig. 4]²⁰. Although Mary is shown as the throne of God, interaction with the Child is unhindered, Our Lady being represented from a fairly low viewpoint to give the painting a more monumental feeling. Bocanegra kept this image close, in works like *Virgin and Child in the Parish of Colomera* (Granada)²¹. But to get a full understanding of the Bilbao picture, and other similar ones, we need to bear in mind Cano's *Virgin of the Rosary*, in Malaga Cathedral [fig. 5]. Here, Our Lady appears on high holding the Child, with her gaze lowered to permit communication with a group of saints in the lower part of the painting receiving the rosary from angels. This, one of the most important works from the artist's late period, is very likely to have been familiar to Bocanegra, to whom a similar painting in Granada Cathedral is attributed²². The painter used these models to develop his own types with some very characteristic facial features, narrowing the Virgin's face, while conserving the broadness of the eyes, sharpening the nose and reducing the size of the mouth. He also made the body more corpulent. Bocanegra also introduced variations in the models of the Child Jesus, adding to the distinctive character of many of his paintings with the same theme.

14 For a description of Bocanegra's style, and a study of the painter's development, see in particular Orozco 1937, p. 39 ff., and Calvo Castellón 2001a and 2002.

15 Calvo Castellón 2002.

16 Ibid., p. 240.

17 Pérez Sánchez/Augé 2002, no. 12.

18 Probably the same as the one mentioned in the inventory of Bocanegra's possessions as "a portrait of the late prebendary Cano". Gil Medina 1997, p. 96.

19 Pérez Sánchez 1965.

20 Wetthey 1983, no. 53.

21 Calvo Castellón 2001b, pp. 57-58.

22 Ibid., p. 62.

Besides being an example of the way Bocanegra's models developed from those of Cano, the Bilbao painting is a splendid example of the painter's skills, and is undoubtedly on a par with his finest works. His acknowledged mastery in the handling of colour is once again demonstrated, for example, in the highly effective combination of the different tones of red, the factor that orders the entire composition, particularly through the large lateral curtains and the Virgin's robe. The painting also provides a good illustration of how volume is constructed through the variations produced by light on colour, as well as through forms. But at the same time, while the proportions of Mary's body are slightly distorted (something that occurs in other paintings by Bocanegra), this is, in compositional terms, a measured, well-balanced picture; the artist appears to have taken special care over its execution, displaying an appreciable sense of drawing and a clear desire for detail that leads him to portray characters, robes and textures with great precision.

Although from the topological perspective, as we shall see, the painting comes within the tradition of Virgins with donors, his approach to narrative is quite unusual. To solve the problem of including a group of characters from different levels of reality in a relatively small area (146,5 x 135,5 cm), the artist opted to isolate the religious group from the portraits by means of a double curtain, which thus serves to separate the two realities. The device creates a very ambiguous zone, allowing Bocanegra to play with the double idea of a virtual presence of the Virgin and Child (curtains were often used to suggest this kind of thing) and the possibility of the group being in fact a "picture within a picture", as at this time, to judge from contemporary inventories, it was not unusual for paintings to be protected by curtains²³.

Close observation of the children leads to similar conclusions. To judge by their clothing and the earrings, the youngsters on the edges are girls. The one on the right has very short hair, possibly as a result of illness, which could mean the work was votive in nature. Judging by the coat he is wearing, the child at the centre is a boy²⁴. His hair is long in the fashion of the period. But although the idea appears to have been to represent three people of a certain age and sex and who are a reflection of three real children, the fact is that they have virtually no individualizing features. Indeed, they bear a curious resemblance to the features attributed to the Virgin²⁵.

This circumstance has more to do with the conventions of the typology the painting belongs to than with any supposed inability of Bocanegra to paint portraits. Although the catalogue of his identified works includes few paintings of this kind, the inventory of his goods suggests that the genre interested him as a collector and that he regularly acquired such works. The inventory gives notice of ninety eight portraits, some of which were probably painted by Bocanegra himself. This is the case of a portrait of Cano, which it states was executed by "the said don Pedro", and of the one of effigies of characters who presumably lived in Granada, such as Andrés de Mazola, Antonio de Leiva, Diego de Viana, a friar at the convent of Zubia, or the prior of the Cartuja. There are also references to "a dead girl" and to "six heads of portraits to be finished"²⁶. Further, both the portrait of the dead Alonso Cano and the effigy of archbishop Rois included as a donor in the *Lactation of St. Bernard* in Granada Cathedral²⁷ denote no little skill in the individualization of facial features, which is only to be expected of a painter who worked in the genre regularly.

As I have already noted, the lack of individualization in the Bilbao painting can be explained by its belonging to a particular type of work. It is part of a double figurative tradition, one being the Virgin and Child as intercessors and the other the tradition of including donors in paintings. Both themes abound in western

23 Although, clearly, they were not of the size they appear to be in the painting.

24 A small boy appearing in Van Kessel's *Family in a garden* (Museo del Prado), which dates from around this period, also wears a coat.

25 Orozco 1937, pp. 55-56, drew attention to this.

26 Gil Medina 1997, pp. 96-98.

27 Calvo Castellón 2002, p. 220.

painting. In the first case, there is also a local tradition, represented above all by Alonso Cano's *Virgin of the Rosary* discussed above²⁸. The theme of Marian intercession is undoubtedly present, despite not having been much noticed until now, in Bocanegra's *Virgin with saints*, which appears more explicitly to be a presentation by several saints and an angel (a guardian angel, perhaps?) of a soul, in the shape of a girl with tunic and a bonnet with flowers, before Mary and Her Child.

The idea of Mary as protector or intercessor led to the inclusion of representations of contemporary personalities who entrusted themselves to her care, via the formula of the "donor", of a longstanding tradition in western art. There are plenty of Spanish examples of this practice, particularly in miniatures forming part of the *cartas ejecutorias*, documents accrediting nobility, in which entire families are shown kneeling at the feet of the Virgin²⁹, who usually holds the Child in her arms. Although the scene is normally set in a landscape, with Mary borne aloft by clouds, sometimes, as in the Bilbao painting, the work plays with the ideas of "apparition" and "representation". This is the case, for instance, in the document drawn up in 1613 at the request of Alonso González (private collection)³⁰. The scene takes place in a church, where two children and their parents kneel before one of the altars. On the altar table, set against clouds, is a typical Marian sculpture. Rather than being placed in the usual way in such a context, the sculpture is represented as an "apparition". It should be remembered that, while genuine portraits are occasionally included in this kind of image, representations of donors appearing in such nobility documents do not usually stress actual physical likeness, many figures lacking individualized features.

When studying the possible influence of this kind of work on Bocanegra, we should not forget that the chancery in Granada, along with the one in Valladolid, was responsible for issuing these nobility documents. Furthermore, the Virgin-with-donors formula had a measure of iconographic success in nearby Seville in 17th century painting. Major examples include Roelas's *Immaculate with Fernando de Mata* (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), and two paintings by Pacheco showing the same character in the same situation accompanied by Miguel Cid (Seville Cathedral) and Mateo Vázquez de Leca (private collection). Suzanne Stratton notes that in neither case was the model present when the painting was executed³¹, and we do not know whether the artist had other portraits available when representing these people. Juan Valdés Leal's splendid *Immaculate Conception with donors* (National Gallery, London), signed in 1661³², dating much closer, includes two extraordinarily fine portraits. In all these paintings the donor is given the same space as the Virgin, which creates a somewhat arbitrary narrative. Bocanegra, however, tried to eliminate this arbitrary quality, using curtains to isolate the two levels of reality, giving his work a fair measure of narrative character.

I have tried here to describe the creative background and iconographic tradition to my mind essential for a full understanding of the *Virgin and Child and portraits*, a work that, besides being remarkably representative of the direction painting in Granada took after Alonso Cano's death, is also one of the artist's most interesting paintings, both in terms of the originality of his approach to a traditional theme and the use of colour (for which Bocanegra has always been given credit), as well as the care taken in the composition and the description of the scene's components.

28 See in particular Camacho 1990 and Sánchez López 1999.

29 For example, in Museo Nacional del Prado 2000, scenes of this kind are to be found in nos. 30, 31, 32, 45, 46 and 75, dated between 1571 and 1818. I have dealt with these subjects in Portús 2002, pp. 22 ff.

30 El documento pintado... 2000, pp. 208-210, no. 45.

31 Stratton 1988, pp. 62-63.

32 Madrid/Seville 1991, pp. 182-183, no. 52.

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