

Luis de Morales *el Divino*

# The Pietá at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



Manuela B. Mena Marqués

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

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In Spain there is a long tradition of devotion to the image of Christ and His Passion, with, from the Middle Ages, increasing emphasis being placed on the dramatic, blood-soaked aspect of the theme. This long-standing, deep-rooted devotion surely explains the exceptional number—higher even than in Italy—of surviving examples of Veronica's famous veil, showing what is known as the *Santa Faz*, or Holy Face. There are in fact three, in which devotion, uncertain or fabulous provenance and local legend are all mixed. One is the *Santa Faz* in Alicante, since 1479, another is the *Santo Rostro* in Jaén (the earliest documents dating from 1478, although its origins go back to the 13th-century and the conquests of Fernando III the Holy), which determined the construction of its first cathedral and the 16th-century refit. Finally, there is the one in Honrubia (Cuenca), probably later, reliably documented from the early 17th century. Another image is the *Sudarium of Oviedo*, a blood-filled canvas that devout tradition, which has accompanied it since the 7th century, considered part of the sudarium or shroud that covered Christ's head in the sepulchre. The *Santo Rostro* of Jaén was reproduced regularly in small medals made to meet the demand of popular devotion (widespread generally and particularly intense in Andalusia), a practice that continued into the 16th century, in prints as well. The characteristic, schematized features of the Byzantine face, the symmetrically arranged hair stuck close to the head, and the "three-pronged" beard familiar in the Middle Ages evolved during the 16th and 17th-centuries towards a highly realistic, vivid image of modern masculine beauty, which several exceptional artists created in their versions of Veronica's veil. The highest quality was achieved, in one century or the other, by El Greco and Zurbarán, who painted best and most often the popular image they themselves had transformed into an object of devotion with added values in the high level of artistry and the refinement of expression. Often crowning retables with their unequivocal message, they were also used for private but no less sophisticated devotion, by prelates and by the high born and the wise.

No known image of Veronica's veil by Luis de Morales *el Divino* (Badajoz, c. 1520-1586) has come down to us, despite him being the most obsessive painter of Christ's image in all Spanish painting, and not just in his own Counter-Reformation 16th century. The oeuvre of Morales concentrated to an extraordinary extent on the figure of the Saviour (doubtless at his clients' request), whom he portrayed from childhood to death, moving through the events of his life, accompanied by His mother, the Virgin, on the painful progress of the Passion and His death [fig. 1]. One gets the impression, however, that the special typology of his Christ images sought to retain the religious attraction of the popular Holy Face: in other words, he was looking to recapture the intensity of the sacred and mysterious already absent from the later Greco, despite the latter's Greek origins.



1. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, c. 1568  
Oil on walnut panel, 72 x 50 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 82/2

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2. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Holy Family with a Shepherdess*, c. 1562-1568  
Mixed media on panel, 91 x 67 cm  
The Hispanic Society of America, New York  
Inv. no. A78

## Religious realism

Images by Morales are precise and accurate, as if he had thought deeply about how best to show Jesus Christ with truthfulness, while improving on the more conventional way he represented Our Lady or the saints. Morales engaged in a constant battle to imagine and reproduce His real, human features. In one of his most singular works, the *Holy Family with a Shepherdess*, in the Hispanic Society, New York [fig. 2], he reproduced in the upper part the horoscope of Christ's birth, which had been established by the Italian mathematician and astrologer Girolamo Cardano (Pavia, 1501-Rome, 1576) in his book *Quadripartitae Constructionis libros Commentaria in Claudium Ptolemaeum* (Basle, 1554). The complicated horoscope, branded as heretical in 1570 and censured in successive editions, was an attempt to explain, with the support of the incipient scientific know-how of the time, the humanity of Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup>. From the earliest times, his external features had been decisive, as they revealed the Holy Face to the faithful. That Holy Family by Morales, which has a curious theological interest (albeit with additions from modern astrology) in the human nature of Christ, is dated with almost complete certainty to between 1562 and 1568<sup>2</sup>, in the period of the artist's close connections with the Bishop of Badajoz and patriarch of Antioch, Juan—now Saint Juan—de Ribera (Seville, 1532-Valencia, 1611), who was also interested in mathematics and astrology apart from his brushes with Erasmus's followers and the *Alumbrados*, the Illuminated, and who was the artist's most important patron. As noted above, in most of his works Morales's Christs follow an unchanging human model, distinct from his figures of masculine saints. His Christ generally has calculated features and unmistakable signs

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1 Elizabeth du Gué Trapier published the identification of the horoscope of Morales by Gertrud Bing and declared that she thought the artist had worked "under the direction of someone with a profound knowledge of astrology, because the inscription at the centre of the horoscope has been shortened, without prejudice to its correct meaning". See Gué Trapier 1956, pp. 23-25. For greater precision on the horoscope, see Esteban 1995. Rodríguez G. de Ceballos 1987 (p. 201) also identifies Morales's tutor on this issue as Pedro Mexía, gentleman from Seville and friend of Saint Juan de Ribera's father.

2 However, Du Gué Trapier dates the painting to after 1574 (Gué Trapier 1956, p. 25), a thesis refuted by the more frequently accepted chronology today, which puts it in the 1560s in Badajoz. See Gaya Nuño 1961, p. 44, no. 23.



3. Fernando Gallego (c. 1440-c. 1507)  
*Pietà*, c. 1470  
 Mixed media on panel, 118 x 111 cm  
 Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid  
 Inv. no. P02998



4. Bartolomé Bermejo (c. 1440-c. 1498)  
*Canon Desplà's Pietà*, 1490  
 Oil on panel, 175 x 189 cm  
 Diocesan Museum, Barcelona

of identity, such as the colour of the eyes, which in the works we are certain are by Morales are almost always a bluish green tone, instead of the brown colouring in general use in Spain. The eyes of the Christ in the Bilbao Pietà could well have been that colour, as there appear to be remnants of lighter colouring in the worn, whitish pupils. This touch of colour may come from Morales's knowledge of the features of Christ in the works of Flemish artists, who, being from the north, frequently used a blue tone for the eyes. There might, however, be another explanation, such as the desire to point more clearly to Jesus Christ's humanity, this being what the blue of his cloak signifies, as opposed to the divine red or purple of His tunic. Both



5. Juan de Flandes (c. 1465-1519)  
*Ecce Homo*, c. 1500  
Oil on panel, 30 x 21 cm  
Charterhouse of Miraflores, Burgos

clearly marked His two natures. His passion and death, the figures or scenes Morales painted most, actually presented the end of Christ's human nature on the Cross, which, in short, signified redemption.

The Spanish 16th-century, into which Morales was born around 1520<sup>3</sup>, was distinguished by its exalted reaction to the Protestant Reformation, some of whose visible results, even before the Council of Trent, were the repeated production of images and the proliferation of worship to maintain the deep-lying inclination towards such images from earlier history, and the unchangeable will to orthodoxy. In mediaeval retables from the Romanesque and Gothic periods, and in all the artistic centres in the Iberian Peninsula, the central iconographic theme of the Passion in its different phases was, naturally, one of the most popular. The Pietà executed around 1470 by Fernando Gallego (Salamanca, c. 1440-c. 1507), today in the Prado [fig. 3], the Pietà by Bartolomé Bermejo (Córdoba, c. 1440-Barcelona, c. 1498) produced towards the end of his life for Bishop Lluís Desplà in Barcelona Cathedral [fig. 4], or the representations of the Passion by Flemish artist Juan of Flanders (Flanders, c. 1465-Palencia, 1519) in the early years of the 16th-century, like the ones in the retable in the cathedral at Palencia, or his *Ecce Homo* (one from the same retable and one in the *cartuja* or charterhouse of Miraflores, Burgos) [fig. 5], are all good examples of the range of profoundly expressive and refined models of the saddest, most sorrowful image of Christ, and the image of Christ in His mother's arms, and none too remote either from the period in which Morales practiced his art. Works by the artist from Extremadura, however, do not show only the trace of mediaeval Spanish-Flemish painting, although this is of course evident<sup>4</sup>; the influence of early 16th-century Italian painting is also noticeable, a feature many

3 Like his birthplace, the exact date of birth of Morales is still unsettled, although today, in line with Gaya Nuño (Gaya Nuño 1961, p. 8 and ff.), it is generally accepted to be around 1520, which fits the possible date of his marriage in around 1539, established by the birth of his first child in 1540.

4 A thoroughgoing, if somewhat ingenuous, summary (Torres 1975) erroneously gives the year of the painter's birth as 1550.

authors attribute to a putative journey to Italy, one for which no reliable documentary evidence has yet been found<sup>5</sup>. While the Leonardo-esque *sfumato* technique and the models of profound devotion of Sebastiano del Piombo (Venice, 1485-Rome, 1547)<sup>6</sup> and of other Italian artists in the milieu of Milan<sup>7</sup> are certainly crucial to the formulation of *El Divino's* style, it is also clear that, beyond occasional coincidences with works by Italian artists, or with his possible maestro in Seville, Pedro de Campaña, what is most characteristic of Morales's painting is the creation of his own, singular idiom. As an artist, his "voice" is unmistakable, perfectly differentiated from other painters of his time, outside, in short, any particular artistic school. Morales escapes that kind of strict classification. Although his painting never reaches the heights of artists such as Alonso de Berruguete (Paredes de Nava, Palencia, c. 1490-Toledo, 1561), Morales *el Divino* had his own personal style that, as in the case of an admittedly greater artist like El Greco, is not susceptible to simple, straightforward definition. The painting of Morales did not achieve the level of the great masters of the 16th century, perhaps as a result of poor artistic training that later prevented him from the flights of invention required for the great scenes or for managing a broad variety of figures in his scenes<sup>8</sup>, or in part because his range was limited, both in the themes he addressed and the models he used. Palomino got it right when recounting the artist's visit to Philip II at El Escorial palace: "... in which he bore himself as a good vassal [...]. But having served His Majesty in so many things of his devotion (because his skill did not extend to more, nor was it fitted to works of greater magnitude), he returned to his home a well-rewarded man, and favoured by His Majesty's greatness"<sup>9</sup>. Admired by all, even the King, his models of devotion seem truly to have been created with a will to permanence in time, as if they had been minted for all eternity in some noble, unchanging material, executed as true portraits of living figures. It may well be that this special feature of his painting, which goes beyond the purely artistic, oscillating in its creation between the sacred and the true, is what earned him, while alive, the rather unusual nickname of *el Divino*, an accolade very few artists have received. Palomino also made some perspicacious comments on this issue: "He was named *el Divino*, because all he painted was sacred things, and because he painted such marvellous heads of Christ, and used such subtlety in dealing with the hair, that even the most curious in art is tempted to blow them, to make them move; because they appear to have the same subtlety as their natural counterpart"<sup>10</sup>.

## Aspects of his technique

Just as his personal iconography and his models are decisive in our immediate recognition of the hand of Morales at work, the actual painting technique Palomino singles out for its extraordinary *trompe l'oeil* character (appreciating him for the same reason that painters in the classical world had been admired) deserves attention as something consubstantial to his painting. Most of his works were painted on panel, before then a support almost entirely exclusive to 15th-century painting, although it remained in use by Spanish artists of the 16th-century Renaissance. The appearance of the prepared wood surface, with the layer of fine polished plaster on which the paint was applied, was also unique in Morales for its startling perfection, far removed from what other contemporary masters from very different schools, including Juan de Juanes (Fuente la Higuera, Valencia, 1523-Bocairent, Valencia, 1579) and Pedro de Campaña (Brussels, 1503-c. 1580) achieved.

5 Bäcksbäck 1962 (pp. 19 and ff.) tried to prove that the Italian influences on Morales could have been acquired in Spain. See also Gué Trapier 1956 (pp. 25 and ff.). However, Alfonso Pérez Sánchez reviewed the chronology of the artist's works and established clear parallels with artists in the circle of Siena, which are difficult to explain without Morales never having been to the city or having direct knowledge of the works of Sodoma, Beccafumi and Vincenzo Tamagni. See Pérez Sánchez 1974, p. 4.

6 On the generalized influence of Piombo in Spain, see Benito Doménech 1988. With regard to Morales, see Benito Doménech 1995.

7 Gué Trapier 1956, especially pp. 20 and ff.

8 See Pérez Sánchez 1974, p. 17, with regard to some works by de Morales.

9 Palomino 1988, vol. III, p. 75.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 74.





6. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Private Judgement of Saint Juan de Ribera*, 1567-1568  
 Oil on panel, 130 x 98 cm (central panel); 130 x 48 cm and 130 x 34.9 cm (side panels)  
 Royal Seminary College of Corpus Christi, Valencia  
 Inv. no. P-125

Unlike other artists, Morales created his own personal world, into which he plunges the spectator through his perfectly recognizable models, with his capacity to make them true, and where colour, technique and the variations on a single theme achieve special effects of refinement and reality, even in the description of matter. If he had always maintained the same effects and resources, such as *sfumato*, he would have been little more than a minor imitator of Leonardo, as indeed he has generally been considered. However, it wasn't like that; or, rather, the problem was never quite so simple.

Morales used the *sfumatura* of contours only on specific occasions and in particular areas of his compositions—for instance, the face—to achieve the humid, melancholy look of the eyes. He did not use it as a standard resource for an entire scene or a complete figure. To give an example, in his painting *sfumato* contrasts with the precise definition of the contours of the figures, and the quasi-sculptural perfection of his fabrics, which resemble carvings done in some soft, coloured wood. He combines this with the sensitive drawing of his figures, shown in varied, dynamic movement, with special lighting reserved for the edges and borders, to separate figures from the generally dark background. He endows them with an almost three-dimensional presence that harks forward to the tenets of the 17th century; in other words, he points the way towards the Caravaggio-esque. At times, what Morales did brought him close to what we understand by the modern, i.e. to the special kind of freedom in the application of paint on the surface of the support, which were in his case panels. For example, in the mass of trees in some landscapes, the artist put the brush down and worked directly with his hands, leaving the print of his fingers and palm on the actual paint surface. This is clear, for instance, in the landscapes of the wings of the triptych *Private judgement of Saint Juan de Ribera*, from 1568 [fig. 6], in the Collegiate of Corpus Christi or the Patriarch,

in Valencia, painted for his patron Ribera. Here, the trees, behind the figures of the Virgin and Saint John, have clearly been painted using this technique. The forceful application by hand of a range of green tones enabled him to obtain the density and variety of leaves. Over this he applied, using the same method but with lighter, less extensive touches, paint of a luminous yellow tone<sup>11</sup>, achieving the realistic impression of the thick, radiant foliage of the trees.

## Retardant or modern

The painting of Morales falls on the line separating the mediaeval Gothic and the modern world, making it difficult to decide whether the painter marked the end of an era or the beginning of a new age. He had no disciples, only assistants, and a few poor quality contemporary imitators<sup>12</sup>, who distorted his inventions. Even so, he may well have had an admirer in El Greco, who later on would also work for Saint Juan de Ribera<sup>13</sup>. The works of El Greco evidence the same obsessive fixation as the religiosity of Morales, as Rodríguez de Ceballos pointed out in 1983 when he referred to the artist's nickname "*Divino*": "not so much because the themes of his painting were exclusively religious, but rather because he managed better than anyone (with the possible exception of El Greco) to express the tense religious fervour and the accentuated spirituality of Spanish society in the second half of the 16th century [...] religiosity and spirituality that in Morales manifest themselves at times with a degree of almost neurotic morbidity"<sup>14</sup>.

Like El Greco's work, his is the painting of silence; a silence not of the teeming church-bound sort of popular devotion, but the silence of intimate meditation in the private or reserved prayer chapel. His work was intended for unusual personalities like his patron, and other prelates and members of the chapter of Badajoz cathedral, such as García de Loaysa y Girón, later to become tutor to prince Philip, the future Philip III, and Archbishop of Toledo. His target clientele included several Bishops of Badajoz, like Francisco de Navarra (until 1557), Cristóbal de Rojas y Sandoval, who would remain there until 1562, and the Bishop of Ciudad Rodrigo, Diego de Simancas<sup>15</sup>, who meditated and wrote about the burning questions of the Counter-Reformation day. Amongst the faithful in Badajoz were some who flirted with heresy, including the devout *Alumbradas* of Juan de Ribera's circle, and "particularly the most perfect [devotees] who became overexcited and felt the pain of Christ's wounds and gave evidence of similar phenomena ..."<sup>16</sup>. However, despite retaining the cold, formal distancing of the late Mannerist Renaissance in many of his compositions, particularly in the ones destined for church and chapel retables, in some of his compositions, most notably when portraying the Virgin with Child [fig. 7] and the figures of Christ, he managed to create a kind of painting, of the sort considered by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) in the years when the artist was still at the height of his powers, that was endowed with a naturalistic proximity accentuated by the use of powerful light directed from outside the actual composition. It was the same system that caught on in Italy, not in the first third of

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11 The panels in the Patriarca College were restored at the Prado Museum in 1981-1982 by Alfredo Piñeiro.

12 As Agustín Ceán Bermúdez pointed out in his *Diccionario Histórico de los más ilustres profesores de las Bellas Artes en España* (Madrid, 1800, vol. III, pp. 187-188): "... it has been, and so remains, very easy to attribute to him all the paintings showing Eccehomo, languid, dry and plain and all the exhausted, wasted Our Ladies of the Sorrows, quite neglecting the fact that the master had a son and several disciples who, however much they tried, could not imitate him: on the contrary, they discredited him with their horrendous caricatures."

13 Mena 2003.

14 Rodríguez G. de Ceballos 1987, p. 194. On the religious feeling of Morales, see also Marías 1992.

15 Ceballos saw the clientele for the most ascetic works by Morales in what he describes as "... a devout public with little intellectual appetite and which was moved to tears by the realistic, sentimental description of the scenes. Perhaps the panels of Morales could be better described as being by a traditional, old Christian, who, in the witty phrase of Antonio de Guevara, pinned their faith on the external practices that Erasmus and his cohorts had lambasted ( ... ), a village Christian, a morally healthy man as opposed to the dissolute character at court." However, he recounts the list of those special prelates under whose supervision the artist work. Ibid, p. 194.

16 Ibid., p. 197.



7. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Virgin with Child*, c. 1565  
Oil on panel, 84 x 64 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid  
Inv. no. P02656

the century, with which Morales is always considered in parallel, but rather in the last twenty-five years of the 16th century in the north of the country, with the masters of Lombardy and even with Caravaggio (Milan, 1571-Porto Ercole, 1610); and in Bologna, the venue for the Council at one time, with Ludovico Carracci (Bologna, 1555-1619) and his circle.

This powerful lighting, designed now to point up tenderness or drama or even to highlight blood, made instant contact with the senses of the faithful, transporting them to a higher level of faith, now bolstered with renewed vigour by the new images. So it is not surprising that Morales's painting was still not understood in full until the 17th century<sup>17</sup>. One innovative feature of his images was an especially penetrating, realistic quality, occasionally verging on the heartbreaking in the most dramatic themes; this quality, furthermore, went hand in hand with his technique, capable of describing, for the first time, the actual material of cloths and veils, or Christ's naked body, with the same intense emotion. So he was in fact something of a forerunner for artists who surely admired his paintings in the 17th century, painters such as Zurbarán<sup>18</sup>, and even Velázquez, whose *Christ crucified* (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid) partakes of the same material refinement and deeply expressive finesse as the work of Morales<sup>19</sup>. Although never fully recognised, Morales

<sup>17</sup> Barrio 2002.

<sup>18</sup> It should be remembered that, according to Rodríguez G. de Ceballos 1987 (p. 198), Zurbarán was described in the 17th century as an "*Alumbrado*", although his relation with the painting of Morales was not so much one of content as of a similar taste for the representation of matter and material as part of a strong religious feeling.

<sup>19</sup> Despite Francisco de Pacheco, Velázquez's maestro, describing Morales as "sweet and syrupy" in his *Arte de la Pintura* [Art of Painting].



8. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Saint John the Baptist*, 1560-1563  
Oil on panel, 76 x 73 cm  
Retable from the Church of the Assumption, Arroyo de la Luz, Cáceres

also had an undoubted influence on sculpture, which he was interested in for its effects, although, unlike his interest in contemporary painters, he wasn't particularly drawn to the sculpture of his own time. What interested him was the sculpture of the future. We shouldn't be surprised by the fact that a number of sculptors from the 17th century became interested in his works, when he himself had used some sculptural resources from Alonso de Berruguete, as is clear from his *Saint John the Baptist* in the retable at Arroyo de la Luz [fig. 8]<sup>20</sup>, to obtain the expressive, refined three-dimensional effects found in his painting. In the portrayals of Christ laid out or tied to the column by Valladolid artist Gregorio Fernández (1576-1636) [fig. 9], we can see the same intensity of realist detail, side by side with Morales's moderation in the use of the effects of blood. And in the magnificent *Dolorosas* and the mistreated but merciful *Ecce Homo* by Granada-born sculptor Pedro de Mena (1628-1688), or in his intense *Saint Francis of Assisi* [fig. 10], inflamed with ecstasy and asceticism, we sense the religious feeling of Morales's restrained realism much more than the expansive, sensual plenitude of the Baroque.

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20 Pérez Sánchez 1974, pp. 4 and 48.



9. Gregorio Fernández (1576-1636)  
*Christ tied to the column*, c. 1615-1619  
 Polychrome wood, 160 cm (height)  
 Church of the True Cross, Valladolid



10. Pedro de Mena (1628-1688)  
*Saint Francis of Assisi*, 1663  
 Polychrome wood, 83 cm (height)  
 Toledo Cathedral

## The Pietà

Since its arrival at the Fine Arts Museum, recent literature has described the Bilbao Pietà simply as an oil painting on panel measuring 72 by 50 cm, occasionally specifying that the wood used is oak<sup>21</sup>. The latest technical studies conducted to herald the present essay have come up with another result, of no little interest for our greater understanding of the artist, in that it establishes that the wood of the panel is in fact walnut (*Juglans regia*). Other analyses conducted for the occasion are also of some importance, as they seem to suggest that this almost certainly is the first of the versions of this type of *Pietà* in which Christ is shown seated to the Virgin's right, but in three-quarter length, towards the left of the composition. Further, it should be dated very close to the Hispanic Society's Holy Family [fig. 2], now accepted as being from the 1560s. This also links it to the works painted for Juan de Ribera between 1562 and 1568. Analyses of the paint layer suggested there might well be a drawing underneath, which finally came to light under infrared reflectography<sup>22</sup>. Employing smooth lines done in charcoal or black stone, the artist made the drawing to

21 Galilea 1994, pp. 22, 34, 42; Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao... 1999, pp. 90-91; Old and Modern Masters... 2001, p. 35; Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao... 2006, p. 39 (details by Benito Navarrete).

22 The chemical analyses of the pigments and binder were conducted by Arte-Lab S. L., which also identified the wood used as support. SGS Tecnos cooperated on the x-rays. The analysis and technical report were coordinated by the Department of Conservation & Restoration at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, where the infrared reflectography was performed using *Osiris* equipment from *Opus Instruments*.



11 and 12. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, c. 1568  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of the Virgin's face and the same detail under infrared reflectography



13 and 14. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, c. 1568  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of Christ's face and the same detail under infrared reflectography

sketch the figures on the panel ground, which is a thin, uniform 80-micra layer of plaster. The delicate but confident lines defining the oval of the Virgin's face (slightly elongated in the area of the chin) are clearly visible [figs. 11 and 12], although they are shorter in the definitive painting. The drawing also situates the eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth, in the same way the head of Christ was prepared [figs. 13 and 14]. Light but confident black lines also trace the contours of the Virgin's blue mantle, for which Morales used azurite, with slight variations in the way it falls, which define, for instance, the important fold at the centre of the forehead, above the nose, stabilizing the face and imbuing it with grace and variety. The folds of the rest of the mantle, down the Virgin's right arm, are done in the same way, although more freely drawn. This indicates that the artist was not copying here from another, identical composition, but was in fact creating the drawing for the composition for the first time, complete with aids to proportion and changes of mind. The most important variation, however, is to be found in the drawing of the Virgin's right hand, laid across Christ's chest and holding the body up [figs. 15 and 16]. In this case, it's not just a question of a slight modification, as when Morales centred the head perfectly; above all, the change was going to affect the intensity of expression of the Virgin and the composition as a whole.



15 and 16. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, c. 1568  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Detail of the Virgin's hand and the same detail under  
 infrared reflectography

In its original state, as revealed by the infrared photographs, the hand showed a gap between the index finger and thumb closer to what would be consistent with the Virgin's hand holding up the body of Christ, the thumb almost vertical and the index finger at an angle of roughly 80 degrees, which appears in other, earlier versions by Morales of the theme of the Passion. The hand appears like that in works where, beginning with the earliest, the *Pietà* from the retable in the primitive chapel of the Sagrarium in Badajoz cathedral [fig. 17], from c. 1563-1564<sup>23</sup>, and continuing nearly ten years later with the San Fernando Academy *Pietà* [fig. 18], from around 1560, Christ is firmly held by the hands of the Virgin, to indicate the weight of the dead body<sup>24</sup>. In the version in the San Fernando Academy, from the Jesuit church in Cordoba, the landscape has all but disappeared, being replaced by a black background, with only a reference to the dry trees of Golgotha remaining, against which the highly illuminated figures really stand out. They are shown before the Cross, of which we see only a part, and the two figures, the Virgin and Christ, are shown three-quarter rather than full length, as in the original idea for Badajoz, which, from its size and the fact it concludes a scene, was clearly intended for a retable. In this second variation in the Academy, conceived for private devotion and prayer and with the bodies shown in half-length, Christ is seated to the Virgin's left, the head and body directed to the right of the composition. A replica, with variations, of this latter version, is the *Pietà* in the Balanzó Collection in Barcelona, which was followed by a number of others with the same layout. Replicas and versions of

23 Solís 1999, p. 312, no. 1.3.

24 Ibid., p. 212, no. 28.



17. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, c. 1563-1564  
 Oil on panel, 111 x 83 cm  
 Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist, Badajoz. Cathedral Museum



18. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, c. 1560  
 Mixed media on panel, 126 x 98 cm  
 Museum of the San Fernando Royal Academy of the Arts, Madrid  
 Inv. no. 612

the *Balanzó Pietà*<sup>25</sup> vary in quality, and suggest workshop copies and imitations, some even dating from after the 16th century. In all of them, the right hand of the Virgin, on Christ's chest, follows the pattern appreciable in the underlying drawing for the version in the Museum in Bilbao, with the thumb vertical to the axis of the composition and the index at a slightly oblique angle, while the other fingers are set in accordance with the position of the first two<sup>26</sup>. There is a version of this compositional model arising from the dramatic image in the San Fernando Academy; after the idea of the busts of the Virgin and Christ, this version is a work of enormous delicacy and expressiveness [fig. 19]. Comparison with the Bilbao panel is particularly interesting, as it is clearly an earlier work, a fact appreciable in the exact typology within the context of the *Pietà*s produced by Morales, which we will be considering shortly, and from the enhanced interest in portraying matter and materials, as evidenced by the wood of the Cross, the tears and the Virgin's hand, and the sleeve of her robe, which also introduces a touch of intense red into the scene. Later on, matter and materials would become more abstract, more spiritual, and the colouring more restrained, darker, adjusted to the sadness of the moment. One interesting feature of this version is the white veil that frames the Virgin's face, on which the blue mantle rests, the folds highlighting her rose-tinged paleness, and also skilfully separating it from the body of Christ and underscoring her contained movement towards her son, whose dead body she

25 The document archive at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum has listed several versions and replicas of greater or lesser quality of this first version of the *Pietà*, which have not been included here, the information being available from the Museum and in the most recent bibliography on Morales.

26 This is true of the replicas of the old Rodríguez Acosta Collection, Palacio Episcopal (Bishop's Palace) in Madrid, Malaga cathedral, the Prado Museum, the convent of las Teresas in Seville and the convent of Pinto (Madrid), this last of very fine quality. All of them were illustrated by Díaz Padrón 1968, pp. 19-20, figs. 2-7.





19. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, c. 1562-1565  
 Oil on walnut panel, 43.5 x 31 cm  
 Villar-Mir Cultural Fund, Madrid



20. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, c. 1568  
 Oil on panel, 45 x 62.5 cm  
 Laia-Bosch Collection

leans forward to kiss<sup>27</sup>. And now another, hitherto unknown version has come to light in a private collection [fig. 20]. Besides combining the position of the Virgin in the work in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum with the one in the central panel of the triptych in the Prado Museum [fig. 21], it also displays a new idea for the Virgin's hands, not employed until now in other works by Morales with this iconography. Here the Virgin's right hand points, in an eloquently dramatic touch, to the dead Christ, actively directing the spectator's attention, in this case a member of the faithful looking at the painting, to the unjust death of her Son.

This change to the Virgin's hand, now revealed by infrared reflectography, is an intriguing detail that differentiates the Bilbao *Pietà* from the other, earlier versions in Badajoz and the Academy of San Fernando. It confirms the work as by Morales—as if the high technical quality were not enough—and bears witness to his inspired *pentimento* in changing his first compositional idea directly on the panel. The artist must have realized that he needed to modify the position of the hand and abandon the idea of the thumb strictly vertical to the body as shown in earlier versions. It is still in the original position in the underlying drawing, but, having changed the scene and its religious meaning, the Virgin's hand no longer needed to exert strong pressure to ensure Christ did not slip out of her grasp. That was what the original position required, the hand exerting pressure to hold up the weight of her son's dead body, which is about to slide out from her arms. This occasionally leads to the thumb making a deep indent in the dead flesh, as in the version in the Academy of San Fernando. Here, however, in respect of the first version in Badajoz cathedral, Christ is shown in the

27 Apparently from the old collection of Scotsman William Stirling, it was acquired at auction in Great Britain (Sotheby's, London, 14 January 2000, lot 63), where most works by Morales have been sold. This was also the case with the *Pietà* in the Laia-Bosch Collection [fig. 20], which gives an idea of the artist's current international standing. A replica of the *Pietà* once owned by Stirling appeared recently on the Madrid market (Fernando Durán, 27 May 2009, lot 270, oil on panel. 56.5 x 41 cm).



21. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà, Saint John and Mary Magdalene*, c. 1563  
 Mixed media on walnut wood panel, 80 x 55 cm (central panel); 84 x 28 cm (side panels)  
 Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid  
 Inv. no. P7714

same direction, sat to the right of the Virgin, His head and body addressed at three-quarters to the right, thus distancing it from the subsequent variation in San Fernando and from its numerous replicas, which showed the naked body seated to the left.

Furthermore, the Virgin's thumb vertical to the body is similar to the one in the Hispanic Society's Holy Family, also arranged there to hold up the Child's body. In the Bilbao version, whose exquisite perfection and delicate, restrained expressiveness enable us to date it with confidence to some time later than the other images on the theme, the original arrangement of the hand as revealed by the underlying preliminary drawing, disposed to exert the same pressure on the body of Christ as in previous versions, was no longer necessary. So the artist changed the position of the fingers. The thumb is more slanted now, forming a sharper angle with the index finger, pointing to the centre of the base of Christ's neck, where the two branches of the sternocleidomastoid muscle meet. The Virgin's arm now forms the base of the triangle that defines the composition. The cleverly attractive arrangement of the illuminated right hand draws the spectator's gaze along a well-lit path established by the slanted thumb, towards the neck, from where the muscles, accentuated by the light, point us to the afflicted head. The Virgin's left hand holds the head with extraordinary delicacy, her fingers avoiding the sharp thorns still stuck in the forehead and hair. This is the only Pietà by the artist to show the crude torture of the crown, signalling his status as King, but also the price of redemption; it is an exhortation to humility. Although the crown has already been removed, some thorns are still stuck in the forehead, and, rather than show just the dry gashes Morales depicts fresh blood dripping from the wounds. In this, the first version of the theme conceived with Christ in the new position,

the head of the Virgin leans to the side opposite Christ's, in a new gesture that allows Morales to accentuate her intimate sorrow. This he expresses through the masterly opposition of the two heads, askew from strict parallel (unlike, for instance, the simpler, more diagrammatic version in the Prado Museum [fig. 21]<sup>28</sup>) and set on a broken, counterpoised line. This is a profoundly moving attitude for anyone meditating on the event narrated while actually viewing the painting. The delicate gesture of the Virgin's hands finds an echo in the expression on her face, conveying only intense sorrow, now tinged with profound resignation, which is the example she gives here to the devout, through the precise drawing of the raised eyebrows and the half-open mouth announcing the brimming tears, in what is a perfect study of the feeling of hinted-at inner sorrow. Here the Virgin blends in with the Cross, and her arms, which once held the sleeping Child, in a sort of prefiguration of His future death, now supplant the arms of the Cross, with the typical *cinquecento* idea of associating the childhood of Jesus Christ with His Passion<sup>29</sup>. That's why Morales places His figure upright and resting against the Cross, transformed into a true throne, beaming a powerful light on the grain of the wood, and marking out the edge, here skilfully presented without coming into visual conflict with the Virgin's head, as occurred in the version in the Prado Museum, and with the same intensity with which, a century later, Velázquez would mark out the illuminated bracket of the stretched canvas in *Las meninas*. Morales had tentatively assayed a similar arrangement of the Virgin in relation to Christ in another exquisite, surely contemporary Pietà, although slightly earlier than the Bilbao painting, in the parish church of Saints Peter and Paul in Polán, Toledo [fig. 22]<sup>30</sup>. There, the Virgin leans her head to the left, as she does in the version discussed here, although the painter makes use of a white veil that both defines and gives the measure of the excellence of the oval face. The hand remains in the position held in the earlier versions of the theme, with the thumb vertical, here directing the spectator's eyes along the streak of blood on Christ's shoulder towards His head and the Virgin's, which closes the compositional triangle. The body of the Son is shown front on, in a daring foreshortening that realistically accentuates the violence of His death through the eyes and the half-open mouth, bloodless and discoloured, giving a view of the teeth and tongue comparable, for instance, to modern painting, conceived to accentuate Christ's humanity. The face front on, the eyes and mouth not quite closed, the purpled lips and the streaks of blood from the thorns, seems in a way to echo the figure of the dead Christ in Van der Weyden's magnificent panel of *The Descent* [fig. 23], already in the chapel in El Pardo in 1564, when it was included in the royal inventories, and later, from 1574, in El Escorial. We have no way of knowing whether Morales ever saw it, although he might have done in 1570, when Philip II called him to court, in which case these compositions would very likely date from slightly later, which is by no means impossible given the uncertainty that still plagues the chronology. However that may be, it is interesting to note that the delicate features of his Christ are more Gothic than the powerful, advanced realism of the Flemish painter's figure.

Although there are only three known replicas of the Bilbao Pietà, not all of them seem to be by Morales himself. One, of average quality, was exhibited at the City Art Gallery, Leeds [fig. 24], England, in the middle years of the last century<sup>31</sup>. Painted on canvas, it came from the works acquired in Spain in the 19th century by Scottish collector William Stirling. Accompanying the main characters, one on either side, are Saint John and Mary Magdalene. It goes without saying that the Virgin's hand on the chest is in the visible, definitive position of the hand in the Bilbao panel, although the artist didn't take particular care when placing it, leaving it further to the right; he clearly hadn't understood the intensity of expression and the realism of the

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28 Acquired in 1998. See Valladolid 1998.

29 Gué Trapier 1956, pp. 26-27.

30 Solís 1999, pp. 254-255.

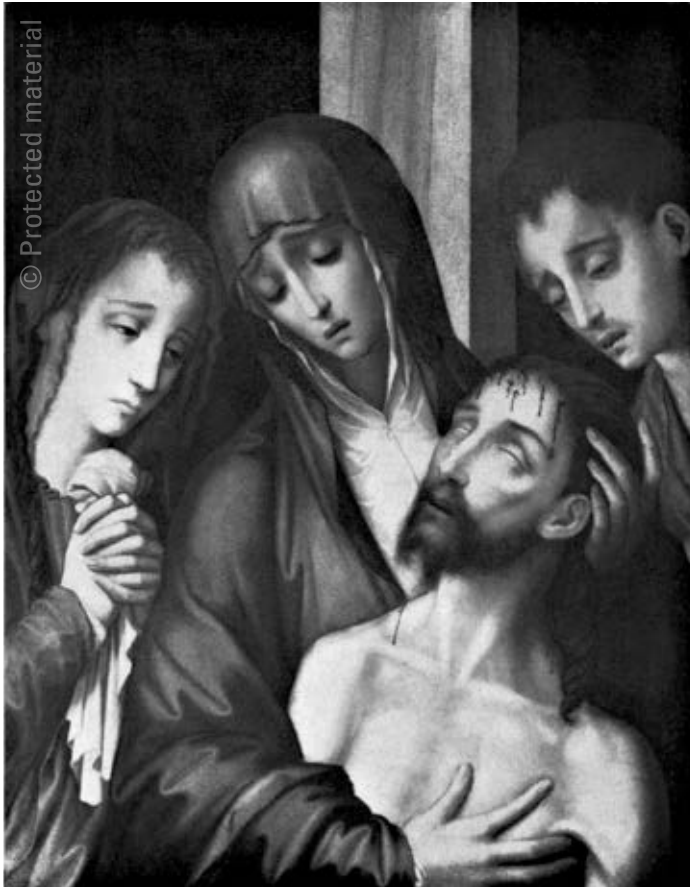
31 Published by Angulo 1950, p. 254. Included in Gaya Nuño 1961, p. 45, no. 39.



22. Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, c. 1563  
Mixed media on panel, 90 x 66 cm  
Church of Sts. Peter and Paul, Polán, Toledo



23. Roger van der Weyden (c. 1399/1400-1464)  
*The Descent*, c. 1435  
Oil on panel, 220 x 262 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid  
Inv. no. P2825  
Detail



24. Attributed to Luis de Morales (c. 1520-1586)  
*Pietà*, after 1568  
 Oil on panel, 78 x 62 cm  
 Current whereabouts unknown  
 (formerly in deposit at Leeds City Art Gallery)

attitude Morales had sought—and found—with the change<sup>32</sup>. There is a variation of the Bilbao original in which the Virgin leans her head towards the body of Christ, although remaining at some distance from Him. The fingers of the hand, partially covered by a white cloth, as in the reversed version in the Archbishop's Palace in Madrid<sup>33</sup>, are arranged as are the fingers in the Bilbao panel, which suggests this model was followed here, combining it with the one in the Archbishop's Palace<sup>34</sup>. The best replica of the Bilbao panel is without doubt the one in the Prado Museum [fig. 21] mentioned above. Also painted on a walnut wood panel, slightly larger than the one in Bilbao, it is still in its original triptych format, which the one under discussion here might also have had, although in that case, unlike the Leeds version, the figures of Saint John and Mary Magdalene would occupy the side wings of the devotional triptych. The colouring of the Prado Museum version is lighter and the figures rather more rigid, the Virgin's hand placed in the same position as the definitive one in the Bilbao panel, which suggests that the artist, possibly Morales himself or one of his direct disciples<sup>35</sup>, based the latter panel on this work when it was finished, while leaning the head of the Virgin, in parallel with her son's head, as noted above.

32 A second copy, of much poorer quality, with the two figures only and less emphasis on the timber of the Cross, from the arms of which hangs the canvas of the sudarium, and with the hand in its final version as visible in the Bilbao panel, belonged to the Angulo Collection in Madrid.

33 Solís 1999, pp. 221-222, no. 32.

34 From a French collection, it is currently in Adam Williams Fine Arts Ltd., New York. Done in oil on panel, it is smaller than its Bilbao counterpart (55.4 x 42.5 cm). One very strange feature is the way in which the artist marks the Virgin's breast under her robes, details of her anatomy being perfectly visible. This is rather shocking, and certainly quite out of character in comparison to the decorous nature of the image in the painting by Morales. See also note 25.

35 Solís 1999, pp. 200-201, no. 22. Bäcksbacka 1962 (pp. 107, 209) considered it as being a workshop piece, despite its attribution to the painter himself. The walnut wood panel, like the one in Bilbao, suggests, in any case, that it comes from Morales's immediate circle.

The theme of the Fifth Sorrow, dealt with here in masterly fashion by Morales from the compositional, expressive and canonical perspectives, is mentioned in the religious literature of the 16th century, usually by authors with close links to Saint Juan de Ribera, including Juan de Ávila and Luis de Granada. Saint John of Ávila, a Jesuit, reminded the faithful of the ideas of Saint Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, noting "the Passion has to be imitated first with compassion and feeling even for the most sensitive part and with tears". In his *Libro de la oración y meditación* [Book of Prayer and Meditation], however, Fray Luis de León, one of the masters most admired by Morales's mentor, approaches exacerbated drama in his description of the death of Christ and the principal scene of the Fifth Sorrow, which does not coincide clearly with the visual artist's more restrained sense of drama, particularly as seen in the Pietà in Bilbao: "The Mother embraces the torn body of her Son, she holds it achingly against her breast, she has strength for nothing more, she puts her face into the thorns in the sacred head, face to face, the face of the Mother is tinged with the blood of the Son and the face of the Son is bathed in the tears of the Mother"<sup>36</sup>. The silent, intimate sorrow of the Virgin and the description of the dead Son in the Pietà in Bilbao seems much closer to the elegiac recreation that, still in the 16th century, poet and humanist fray Íñigo de Mendoza (c. 1425-c. 1507) brings to the theme. His *Lamentación a la quinta angustia, quando Nuestra Señora tenía a Nuestro Señor en los brazos* [Lamentation for the Fifth Sorrow, when Our Lady had Our Lord in her Arms]<sup>37</sup> has lines of a restrained, highly poetic sorrow, close in spirit to the Pietà of Morales, and in which, furthermore, the profundity of the sacred music of the time seems to resound:

Let the excellent angels  
Lament of my misfortune,  
Incline their perfection  
To my present tears  
Dissolved in this affliction ...  
Now to Thee I turn again,  
So still in deathly hue,  
Unequal in endured pain,  
Extinct and from me slain,  
And I undone by visited wrong;  
The archangel's gifted grace  
That in me brimmed,  
To sorrow is now conveyed  
As that Blessed gaze I do survey  
Sans the lustre of Thy face.

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36 Rodríguez G. de Ceballos 1987, p. 199. See also Sánchez-Mesa 1991. Du Gué Trapier fails properly to appreciate the relation with Fray Luis de Granada's text (Gué Trapier 1956, pp. 29-30).

37 Mendoza 1968, pp. 215-222.

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