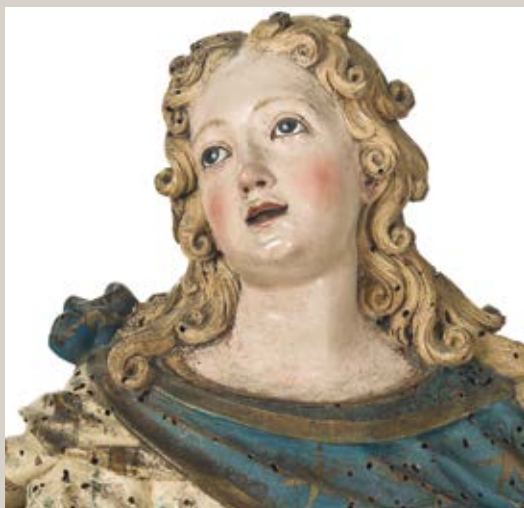


The Immaculate Conception by Giacomo Colombo

A sculpture in its Italian context



Roberto Alonso Moral

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

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During the Modern Age, intense political and cultural relations between Spain and the capital of one of its viceroyalties, Naples, provided a major stimulus for the development of art collections and patronage of the arts. The viceroys and their court, ecclesiastics and Spanish merchants resident in the city all played a large part in the shipping of artworks to the homes of the nobility, church chapels and convents. It was a time when galleries and collections of paintings came into their own, a time about which many important essays have been written; this interest is in contrast to the rather vague notions we still hold about the sculptures such people gathered and brought home with the rest of their baggage. In a short but celebrated commentary on sculptors specialising in polychrome wood, biographer of Neapolitan artists Bernardo De Dominici complained about the almost complete lack of records of their activity, largely because much of their work had been sent away from the city, in particular to Spain¹. The sheer number of these works on Spanish soil is proof that they did indeed circulate; it also provides confirmation of the interest they awoke in the Spaniards present in Naples².

In its collection, the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum has a significant example of this kind of artwork, as accredited by the signature "Gia...Colombo F" on its base. The work in question is the Immaculate Conception [fig. 1], bequeathed to the Museum by Basque philanthropist and collector Laureano de Jado (Mungia, Bizkaia, 1843-Bilbao, 1926), which arrived under the terms of Jado's will in 1927, together with a number of other major paintings and sculptures³. The Madonna is shown straight-backed on a cloud from which emerge the heads of three devout cherubim, hands joined in prayer, as she steps on the serpent—the symbol of sin—with, originally, a waxing moon, now lost. This particular representation responds to an iconographic

1 Dominici 1742 (1971), vol. III, p. 389: "dell'opere loro quasi nulla contezza ne resta, per esser elle per lo più andate in Ispagna, ed altrove".

2 For the current state of the question, see Estella 2007, pp. 93-122; Alonso 2007, pp. 75-86.

3 A photograph published in Beruete 1919 showed the collection on display in his house, although there is no sign of the Immaculate Conception. On the collector and his bequest to the Museum, see Vélez 1992, pp. 168-199.



1. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, c. 1719
Carved wood and polychrome, 78 x 43.8 x 25.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 82/401

model that was widespread during the Baroque period, and which combined the Madonna *tota pulchra*, the attributes of the apocalyptic maiden described by St. John (12, 14) and the *Ipsa* who set to rights the original sin of Genesis (3, 15)⁴. Elegantly posed, with a close-fitting tunic that ripples away slightly at the feet, the Madonna's body is energized by the dazzling treatment of the cloak, greatly enlivened by deep, sharp, powerfully graphic folds making an undulating mass that expands and becomes tangled at the side. Framed by long, blond curls that fall freely down her back, her face, of no little beauty, wears an expression, her eyes turned upward to contemplate the Eternal Father, that would have prompted high emotion in any believer. Overall, the figure is rendered in a sentimental tone that greatly contributes to the enormously effective end result. The polychrome provides the final touch for the iconography by means of shaded pinks in the tunic, undoubtedly added as a Marian symbol alluding to the purity of the Madonna, and the golden stars dotted about the blue cloak, in reference to Heaven's grace.

When the work entered the Museum collection in the late 1920s, the presence in Spain of foreign sculptures in wood was virtually unknown. This might explain why, shortly afterwards, when including the work in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum catalogue, Antonio Plasencia, unaware of the inscription with the artist's signature, considered it to be by an anonymous Spanish artist of the 18th century⁵. However that may be, the author was not correctly identified for a long time⁶, which has clearly prevented it from becoming better known and properly understood, which led to its exclusion from specific studies on Neapolitan sculpture⁷.

Giacomo Colombo (Este, Padua, 1663-Naples, 1731)

Giacomo Colombo was one of the leading sculptors working in Naples in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Born in the city of Este in 1663, probably into a family of Jewish origin⁸, Colombo arrived in Naples in 1678. Although we do not know why he moved, scholar Gennaro Borrelli suggests that he may have been following in the footsteps of the sculptor Pietro de Barberis, with whom he would subsequently work on the church of the Croce di Lucca⁹. De Dominicis notes that he was a student of Domenico di Nardo, a skilful specialist in reliquary busts who worked on the Gesù Nuovo in Naples and whose professional activity is today rather vague¹⁰. However, his only recorded link with Colombo to date is his arrival in Eboli to defend the overpricing of one of the artist's supreme works, the Pietà commissioned by the collegiate church there¹¹. Without actually denying the possible student-maestro relationship, in recent years critics have tended to re-dimension the biographer's assertion and, reducing its impact, consider more decisive in Colombo's artistic development his contacts with other contemporary sculptors, such as the slightly older Gaetano Patalano¹², and with sculptors-cum-precious metal workers like Nicola Ruso¹³ and Lorenzo Vaccaro, whom he supplied with models, as Gian Giotto Borrelli¹⁴ has shown. His relationship with painter Francesco Solimena must have been equally close, if we are to believe De Dominicis's brusque comment in which he notes that the latter had "meglio instradato nel disegno e nelle mosse delle figure, laonde con sua direzione fece vari

4 See Stratton 1989, p. 47, an essential study on iconography in Spanish art. For the Neapolitan case, see Panarello 2008, pp. 19-76.

5 Plasencia 1932, p. 70, cat. 338.

6 It was correctly identified when the Museum's sculpture collection was revised by Montero/Cendoya 1992, pp. 114-116.

7 Essays by Casciaro 2005, p. 299; Estella 2007, p. 105, fig. 11; Gaeta 2007a, p. 100, fig. 29-30 have since helped to publicise the sculpture.

8 Deduced by Borrelli 2005a, pp. 23-24.

9 Borrelli 1967, pp. 28-29.

10 The most complete approach to the sculptor is to be found in Luigi Coiro's recent PhD thesis (Coiro 2011), in press. My thanks to the author for allowing me to share the results of his research.

11 Borrelli 2005a, p. 25.

12 Argued by Borrelli 1970, p. 193; Gaeta 1990, pp. 167-169; Borrelli 2005a, p. 24.

13 Catello 1998, p. 8, note 14.

14 Borrelli 2000, pp. 7-10; Borrelli 2005b, pp. 289-291.

lavori... che riuscirono ottimamente; ma quando da se medesimo faceva il lavoro, non era di quella bontà di quelli diretti dal Solimena"¹⁵. Mindful of all these suggestions, but without losing his own character, Colombo's style evolved from the special, strongly expressive Baroque of his early devotional sculptures towards an elegant, refined taste more in line with the Rococo currents that, from the second decade of the 18th century, ushered in a new phase in Neapolitan sculpture.

A review of the commissions received during his career clearly reflects Colombo's steady rise from the early days when he did the decorative carving for the organ in the Croce de Lucca, commissioned in 1688 and now lost¹⁶, to the major works in marble for the sepulchres of Anna Maria Arduino and Niccolò Ludovisi in the church of San Diego all'Ospedaletto, executed in 1703 and 1704¹⁷. Subsequently, his professional growth increased on a par with his public fame. In 1689 he joined the Painters' Guild, being elected prefect in 1701¹⁸, which presupposes his working as a painter, an activity until now largely unknown¹⁹, while in 1718 he was enrolled together with his "rival" Nicola Fumo in the guild of marble workers²⁰. A prolific sculptor, he ran a perfectly organized studio workshop capable of taking on a growing workload from abroad, without this harming the quality of the final product²¹. He worked intensely for the entire kingdom of Naples, sending sculptures to all the regions of Italy's *meridione*: Abruzzo²², Molise²³, Campania²⁴, Puglia²⁵, Basilicata²⁶ and Calabria²⁷; and of course to Spain, a source of major demand for devotional sculpture in wood, in line with its own tradition. Many commissions were backed by the viceroy's court, which thus contributed to competition between workshops. This may help to explain the presence in Spain of one of Colombo's masterpieces, *Christ Tied to the Column* from the congregation of the church of San Ginés (now in the Cathedral of the Almudena [fig. 2]), a work of marvellously sophisticated movement and great emotive expression. Sent in 1698 from Naples following a commission by the Marquis of Mejorada, the work aroused great popular feeling on its arrival²⁸. Or the equally important *Transverberation of Saint Theresa* from the convent of the Trinitarian nuns in Madrid [fig. 3], signed and dated in 1726; although the reasons why the work was commissioned remain uncertain, it may have been instigated by the Medinaceli family, protector of the community²⁹. Some proof of the warmth of his reception in Spain may be gleaned from several works traditionally attributed to Colombo, including the *Madonna of Charity* in Cartagena, which has by no means been easy to accommodate in his catalogue³⁰, and other recorded works whose whereabouts are now unknown, such as the *Holy Family of the Madonna*, which arrived at the convent of the Capuchin fathers of Cadiz in 1712. All trace of the work was lost when it was subsequently moved to the Capuchins of El Pardo in Madrid³¹.

15 "well directed in the drawing and in the movements of the figures, for which under his direction he undertook several tasks... that gave an optimum result; but when he did the work by himself, the final result was not of the same quality as those directed by Solimena". Dominici 1742 (1971), vol. III, p. 191.

16 Ceci 1903, p. 147.

17 Borrelli 2005a, p. 24.

18 Strazzullo 1962, p. 28.

19 The only surviving record is the canvas that acts as a background for the group of the Annunciation of Sant'Arsenio in the Cilento. See Gaeta 1990, pp. 169-170, 177.

20 Borrelli 2005a, p. 26.

21 Abbate 2002, p. 157.

22 Torlontano 2011, pp. 101-108.

23 Catalano 1994, pp. 13-80; Catalano 2007, pp. 223-226.

24 Gaeta 1990, pp. 163-170; Pezzella 1994, pp. 23-31; Pecci 2005, pp. 149-179; Carafa 2005, pp. 95-96; Pecci 2007, pp. 183-197; Pecci 2008.

25 Pasculli 1983; Pasculli 1989, pp. 55-80; Gaeta 2007a, pp. 87-104; Liddo 2011, pp. 215-230.

26 Borrelli 2005a, pp. 20-28.

27 Borrelli 2009, pp. 67-68.

28 Kreisler 1929, p. 346.

29 See Orozco 1938, pp. 179-180; and, more recently, my essay in Lecce 2007, pp. 288-289, complete with all the bibliographical references.

30 For an opinion contrary to its inclusion in his catalogue, see Alonso 2007, p. 81, note 67 (with previous bibliography). Liddo 2008, pp. 205-213 was subsequently more favourable to this attribution.

31 López 1966, p. 41, note 29.



2. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
Christ Tied to the Column, 1698
Carved wood and polychrome, 190 x 96 x 52 cm
Cathedral of Santa María la Real de la Almudena, Madrid



3. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
Transverberation of Saint Theresa, 1726
Carved wood and polychrome, 89 x 48 x 35 cm
Convent of the Discalced Trinitarians of St. Ildephonsus, Madrid



4. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, 1719
Carved wood and polychrome, 180 x 70 x 60 cm
Foggia Cathedral, Italy



5. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, 1718
Carved wood and polychrome, 175 x 85 cm
Church of San Francesco, Lucera, Foggia, Italy

The artist and the theme: replicas, variations and evolution

Although the circumstances of the arrival in Spain of the sculpture now in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, and its original location, are shrouded in mystery, the purpose of this essay is to review the artistic context in Naples from which it came, as a way of establishing a timeline for the sculpture and illustrating how the studio of sculptor Giacomo Colombo went about its work. Colombo produced several versions of the Immaculate Conception, helping to define an evidently successful type, one that he himself repeated on a number of occasions, with more or less significant variations, and which was frequently imitated by the artists in his immediate circle.

In 1719 the sculptor was paid 130 Neapolitan ducats, a fairly standard price for the time, for a sculpture of the Immaculate Conception commissioned by Carlo Telese³². Recent research has shown that Telese intended to donate the work to the San Francesco convent in Foggia³³, where it remained until 1810, when it was moved to the church of Sant'Angelo in the same city. After the latter's destruction in 1931, the sculpture was moved to the city's largest church, meaning the work's journey to its current location in the cathedral [fig. 4] is traceable³⁴. The procedure followed in the commissioning of the work provides a reminder of the liturgical motivations that were usually involved: representatives from communities or authorized members of church congregations came to the capital of the viceroyalty to secure images for local worship in the chapels of religious fraternities and convents. Reasons that were particularly apposite in Colombo's case, as we know he regularly received orders from Foggia for devotional images³⁵. The artist had already sent another Immaculate Conception to the nearby city of Lucera, signed and dated in 1718 [fig. 5]³⁶; the work had been commissioned by Father Donato Antonio Giovanni Nicolò Fasani, at the time Friar Francesco Antonio, for one of the altars in the church of the San Francesco convent, where he professed. Both have recourse to a gesture often repeated in Neapolitan sculpture, popularized especially from an original by Alessandro Algardi³⁷, in which the Madonna rests her right hand on her breast, while the left hand spreads out in theatrical mode, as a sign of her acceptance of the divine will. Although the artist conceived them as replicas, he added small changes of expression and in the polychrome which make them easy to differentiate.

Producing series from a single model was normal practice in (but not exclusive to) Neapolitan sculpture workshops, and the phenomenon took off in the second half of the 17th century and after, stimulated by the increase in religious fraternities and the taste for private collecting. It meant that demand for the most successful themes could be satisfied, resources optimised and advantage taken of the slowly evolving requirements of the public³⁸. One decisive factor favouring reproduction was that the works were sent to remote places in the kingdom or even to the other side of the Mediterranean; Colombo made good use of this, realising that he could get by without having to be constantly inventive as regards prototypes and models. This practice even determined iconographic transformations; proof of this is the Assumption in the parish church of San Rufo [fig. 6], in Campania, cited as such in an inventory compiled in 1811 motivated by Murat's repression³⁹; this work could easily be taken for one of the Immaculate Conceptions in question were it not

32 Rizzo 1983, p. 227.

33 Gaeta 2007a, p. 101, note 60.

34 The pilgrimage between locations in Foggia is recorded in Freda 1997, pp. 29-33; in Liddo 2011, pp. 218-219. The sculpture was published previously by Pasculli 1983, pp. 38-39, figs. 9 and 10, p. 64.

35 See Marzo in Foggia 1998, p. 182 and note 24.

36 See Pasculli 1983, p. 40, fig. 11, p. 64, although it had already been mentioned in D'Elia 1964, p. 202; Borrelli 1967, p. 41.

37 See Bozzi Corso 2009, p. 53, note 12, on the connection between two small bronzes attributed to the sculptor from Bologna in the English art market and a number of similarly composed sculptures of Neapolitan origin. Another successive example in gilded bronze and silver, attributed to Lorenzo Vaccaro now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was studied by D'Agostino 2008, pp. 123-127.

38 Gaeta 2006a, p. 515.

39 "statua di S. Maria Assunta, autore il Colombo". See Avino 2003, p. 274.



6. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Assumption of the Madonna
Carved wood and polychrome, 162 cm (height)
Parish church of San Rufo, Salerno, Italy

for the lack of the typical attributes. Nevertheless, even though they share the same compositional formula, the change in the gesture is eloquent, particularly the ecstatic expression and the arms open in anticipation of her imminent reception. These details confirm the work's dedication, imbuing the image with an even greater willingness to embrace destiny.

The Immaculate Conception in Bilbao confirms the exploitation of this typological model, even if it does resort to gestures of greater devotional content, in the arrangement of the hands in prayer; it is paralleled in two other Immaculate Conceptions by Colombo venerated in Ostuni, a charming coastal town today in the province of Brindisi. According to a popular legend, they arrived there together in 1719, after being sculpted more or less simultaneously by the maestro while fasting on bread and water⁴⁰. Shipped in the usual way, by sea, and then on ox-drawn carts, one was installed in the church of San Francesco [fig. 7] and the other in the church of San Pietro at the Benedictine monastery [fig. 8]. Both are made on the same model, although the latter overcomes the rigidity of its companion piece (although repainting makes proper appraisal difficult) to become one of the artist's supreme and most personal achievements, abounding with emotional content and quite frenetic in the movement of the cloak. Well aware of his prestige, the artist left his signature and the year quite clearly on the base: "GIACOMO COLOMBO F. 1719". The date is of interest because it helps to assign an approximate timeline for the Immaculate Conception in Bilbao, as they share some common

40 See the narration in Semerano 1933, p. 17; in Lisimberti/Todisco 2000, pp. 101-102.



7. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, 1719
 Carved wood and polychrome, 190 x 90 cm
 Church of San Francesco, Ostuni, Brindisi, Italy



8. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, 1719
 Carved wood and polychrome, 185 x 85 x 67 cm
 Church of San Pietro, Monastery of the Benedictine Nuns,
 Ostuni, Brindisi, Italy

features. It has even recently been suggested that the latter is a *bozzetto* from the finer version in Ostuni⁴¹, although this, in truth, seems most unlikely. For one thing, it is not the right size for a preliminary *modellino*, which in Neapolitan workshops were frequently done in clay, plaster or wax. Indeed, the inventory of goods written shortly after Colombo's death mentions "uno studio di molti modelli di gesso di presa, cera rossa e creta" and "tredici modelli di creta"⁴². The repeat Bilbao sculpture was more likely to have been done on a smaller scale to satisfy a demand for exportation; the *terzino* format, i.e. a third of the original size, which fits the Bilbao sculpture (78 centimetres) and many other Neapolitan works sent to Spain, could well have been a commercial strategy to reduce costs and facilitate shipping⁴³. This rule would seem to be confirmed by another Immaculate Conception that can now be added to this group, at the convent of Sancti Spiritu in Toro, Zamora [fig. 9], originally from the convent of Nuestra Señora de la Laura in Valladolid, where it was attributed to the circle of Pedro de Sierra, a sculptor from Rioseco⁴⁴. Standing at 81 centimetres, the sculp-

41 Liddo 2008, p. 190. Lisimberti 2007 had previously said much the same.

42 Borrelli 2005a, pp. 104 and 107.

43 On this point, see the intelligent observations in Casciari 2005, pp. 297-303.

44 Martín González/Plaza 1987, p. 160, fig. 557.



9. Workshop of Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, c. 1719
 Carved wood and polychrome, 81 cm
 Museum of the Monastery of Sancti Spiritu, Toro, Zamora

ture has clear formal analogies with the version in Bilbao, strongly suggesting that it needs to be included in Colombo's workshop catalogue. Nor should we lose sight of the work's provenance: the Nuestra Señora de la Laura convent was under the patronage of the Alba family, grandees with close links to Naples. This in turn suggests that it might be a good starting-point for locating information about the original commission⁴⁵.

In Colombo's artistic output, apart from two other sculptures for clothing with the same dedication, the study of which goes beyond the bounds of the present essay⁴⁶, this uniform group of Immaculate Conceptions, presumably produced in a surprisingly short time span, is the culmination of a prototype that gradually evolved towards its final conformation. Indeed, we need to go back to 1700, as Colombo was just coming into full artistic maturity, for his earliest known sculptures employing this iconography. In that year, Colombo signed and dated one of these sculptures, now in the church of the Santísima Annunziata in Buonabitaloco [fig. 10]⁴⁷, which, except for the differences in the expression of the face has its replica in the one in the church of San Francesco in Eboli [fig. 11], according to Genaro Borrelli also signed before its restoration in 1897⁴⁸. Although critics tend to regard them as lesser works, both sculptures are interesting as exponents of an idiom that preceded the maestro's stylistic maturity. While providing a glimpse of the definitive plastic and compositional conception, the end result lacks the intense emotional charge, and the arrangement of the

45 The convent was founded by María de Toledo y Colonna, daughter of García de Toledo, Marquis of Villafranca, and Duchess of Alba by marriage to her cousin Fadrique Álvarez de Toledo. See Martí y Monsó, 1899-1901, p. 237.

46 I refer to the Immaculate Conceptions in the Diocesan Museum of Lucera, signed and dated 1724 (Liddo 2008, p. 187, fig. 186), and to the one in Carovigno (Gaeta 2007a, p. 94, fig. 19). Regarding the new attribution to Colombo of an Immaculate Conception in the church of the Addolorata in Foggia, an unusual formal undertaking for the artist, I prefer to be more cautious. See Liddo 2011, pp. 219-223.

47 Gaeta 1990, p. 169.

48 On the base it read "Jacobus Colombo fecit". See Borrelli 1967, p. 42. Others to have subsequently noticed it include Avino 2003, p. 112, who cites an inventory of 1811 in which it is referred to as a work by Colombo, and Carafa 2005, pp. 95-96, fig. 6.



10. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, 1700
Carved wood and polychrome, 205 x 170 cm
Church of the M.H. Annunziata, Buonabitacolo, Salerno, Italy



11. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, c. 1700
Carved wood and polychrome, 160 cm (height, approx.)
Church of San Francesco, Eboli, Salerno, Italy



12. Carlo Schisano, Giacomo Colombo, Giacomo del Po, Matteo Bottigliero, Lorenzo Fontana and Giovanni Ragazzino
Cappellone of Saint Dominic, 1715-1718
 Church of Santa Caterina a Formiello, Naples

cloak, of deep folds broken up by a strong chiaroscuro but with little spatial development, does not achieve the palpitating naturalness of subsequent versions.

These differences demonstrate the efforts Colombo made to achieve a mature personal style, and also add weight to the idea of his having evolved at the turn of the century, acting on the inspiration received from his personal contacts with other artists. In recent years, Letizia Gaeta has rightly insisted on the formal connection between this well-known group of Immaculate Conceptions produced in 1718 and 1719, and the idiom of Roman painter Giacomo del Po⁴⁹, who worked at precisely that time with Colombo on the *Cappellone* of Saint Dominic at the Neapolitan church of Santa Caterina a Formiello [fig. 12]. According to the records, Colombo was entrusted with supervising the work in 1715; following architect Carlo Schisano's design, Colombo produced part of the planned sculptures, while being responsible for the contribution of other artists, including sculptor Matteo Bottigliero and Po himself, from whom Colombo commissioned the large painting for the altar to replace the marble bas-relief he had originally been assigned to do⁵⁰. The group was inaugurated on 31 August 1717, as reported by a favourable news item in the *Gazzetta di Napoli*:

49 Gaeta 2006a, p. 516; Gaeta 2006b, pp. 153-154. Pecci 2008, p. 28 argues along the same lines. Even so, I should add that Giacomo del Po's influence on 18th-century Neapolitan sculpture was generically noted some years earlier by Ferdinando Bologna with regard to Colombo's Christ Arisen at Meta di Sorrento, then considered an anonymous work (Naples 1950), and later by Fittipaldi 1980, p. 36.

50 For the story of how this work was constructed, see Borrelli 2005a, pp. 94-95, doc. 16-18; Catello 2008, pp. 51-55.

spicca à meraviglia lo spirito del disegno, e la distribuzione ben' intesa di buoni Marmi, la fineza dell'Architettura, e Scoltura, e l'eccellenza della Pittura, quale veramente, como gemma preziosa, splende nell'oro di parti tanti nobili, che la circondano. Fatica questa del celebre Giacomo del Po, e il rimanente de' migliori Professori di questa città⁵¹.

This cooperation between the two artists was by then not a novelty, as in 1715 the painter had helped Colombo on a bust of the emperor Charles VI of Augsburg in the Discalced Carmelites' convent church of Santa Teresa⁵², and previous contacts are confirmed by Po's own comments, who in 1721 said that he had been working with Colombo from at least 1688 on furniture design, with the latter being responsible for the ornamental parts⁵³.

Giacomo del Po had trained with his father Pietro in Rome, and had first-hand knowledge of Bernini's latest works, as well as of Giovanni Battista Gaulli's Baroque "peaks"⁵⁴; both artists were, it is now clear, decisive in the configuration of Colombo's mature period⁵⁵. Their refined style, in which robes flow soft and vibrant, highlighted by contrasts of light and shade, moves into a clear Rococo-like phase that must have influenced Colombo, owner, as his inventory of goods shows, of the painter's sketch for the painting *Saint Dominic Vanquishing the Albigenses* which presided over the transept of the Neapolitan chapel referred to above⁵⁶.

In shaping this iconographic type, Colombo also had available previous models that could well have provided him with stimulus or inspiration. Apart from the famous prototype of the sculptor from Marseilles Pierre Puget and its widespread diffusion in circles in Genoa, itself well connected to Naples thanks to its sea port, this type of Immaculate Conception with ample, billowy cloak had precedents in Neapolitan painting, and Antonio Solimena, father of the Francesco mentioned by De Domenici, had used it in a painting with a powerful sculptural feel in the church of the Holy Name of Jesus and Mary at Sorbo Serpico, dating from 1665⁵⁷. In Spain too, at around the same time, Madrid painter Francisco Rizi devoted a drawing to the theme, now in the Louvre [fig. 13]⁵⁸, which shares common ground with the models subsequently used by Colombo. This particular work should be related to an Immaculate Conception signed and dated in 1652 and, in the mid-20th century, in a private collection in Morelia (Mexico)⁵⁹; however, this common ground was not carried over into any of the other Immaculate Conceptions painted by the artist, always closer to the creations of Ribera, the major difference lying precisely in the treatment of the cloak, where the touches of wash bring out with some intensity its powerful visual impact. Rizi very probably used some Roman or Maratta-style print or painting that Colombo later came across; however that may be, the analogies serve to confirm the circulation and perpetuation of the model in the second half of the 17th century and after.

Another major precedent is to be found in the sculptures of Gaetano Patalano in the church of Santa Chiara, Lecce (1692) [fig. 14], in the religious fraternity of the Immaculate Conception in Sarno (1696) and in Salerno Cathedral: a prominent feature of these is the treatment of the cloak, with ample folds that shroud the figure diagonally⁶⁰. But in terms of plasticity, of visual impact, Colombo's sculptures are much more refined; this

51 "It is marvellous how strong the spirit of the drawing is, and also the fine distribution of good marble, the finesse of the architecture and sculpture, and the excellence of the painting, which in truth, like a precious gem, glows in the gold of the noble parts that surround it. This the work of the famed Giacomo del Po, and of the rest of the best practitioners of this city". The notice was published in Rabiner 1978a, p. 328.

52 Rizzo 1981, pp. 23-24, doc. 21.

53 Borrelli 1998, pp. 129 and 137, doc. 5.

54 On Giacomo del Po, see particularly the essays by Causa 1957, pp. 163-172, 309-316; Rabiner 1978b; Russo 2009.

55 The attraction Colombo felt for Bernini-style Roman sculpture was sensed by Elia 1942, pp. 78 ff., and subsequently demonstrated by Gaeta 2006b, pp. 148-151. Gian Giotto Borrelli and, once again, Letizia Gaeta have also demonstrated Gaulli's influence on the artist (Ibid., pp. 150-152).

56 Borrelli 2005a, pp. 23 and 106, doc. 24.

57 Tavarone in Martini/Braca 1994, p. 38, cat. 16.

58 Boubli in Paris 1991, pp. 159-162, cat. 74.

59 Toussaint 1965, p. 121, fig. 207.

60 See Minerva in Lecce 2007, pp. 238-239.



13. Francisco Rizi (1614-1675)
The Immaculate Conception, c. 1652
Indigo wash and pen with sepia ink with preliminary lines in charcoal on beige paper, 48.4 x 36.3 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Inv. no. RF 42642



14. Gaetano Patalano (1654-c. 1699)
The Immaculate Conception, 1692
Carved wood and polychrome, 204 cm
Church of Santa Chiara, Lecce, Italy

refinement is grounded in a sharply profiled design that defines the silhouette clearly⁶¹, in contrast to the complexity and greater compositional variety of his competitor Nicola Fumo, achieving similar results in the *Virgen delle Grazie* in the congregation of Santa Maria della Santella in Capua, dated in 1707⁶².

The success and continuity of the model was guaranteed by Colombo's followers, who reinterpreted the maestro's works after his death. The Immaculate Conceptions by Nicola Antonio Brudaglio and Francesco Picano, much later in the century, are alike in the treatment of the polychrome and the elegant arrangement of the cloak, although with rather more schematic, less natural results⁶³. And other contemporary artists seem to follow his model, including Pietro Patalano, who in the Immaculate Conception in Montesano Salentino, documented in 1737, is closer to Colombo's prototypes than he is to those of his own brother Gaetano⁶⁴.

Naples and the cult of the Immaculate Conception

For a better grasp of the extraordinary fortune of Colombo's Immaculate Conceptions and the proliferation of the theme in general throughout the Kingdom of Naples, we need to remember that, although it was particularly well-loved in religious circles in Spain, it was by no means exclusive to that country. Veneration for the Immaculate Conception in Naples and environs was profoundly rooted in Byzantine tradition, and praised highly by the viceroys in the 17th century, who made it their religious and political emblem and energetically promoted its links with the city⁶⁵. The viceroy Pedro Téllez-Girón, 3rd Count of Osuna, took an important step in 1618, when he gave his solemn oath in presence of a large crowd of the faithful to defend the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception with his life⁶⁶. Such protection was reflected in artistic patronage, the most brilliant example being the commission, by the viceroy Manuel de Zúñiga y Fonseca, for a large painting by Ribera for the altar of the Agustinas de Monterrey convent in Salamanca, which had a resounding impact in Spanish artistic circles. Pope Alessandro VII Chigi's 1661 bull *Sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum*, in which he expressed the belief of the Universal Church in the Immaculate Conception and condemned those who argued against it, provided a new stimulus in the city, as did its proclamation as a feast day of obligation throughout the Kingdom of Naples in 1665 by order of the viceroy Pascual de Aragón⁶⁷. But it was the Franciscan community above all, with its support for the dogma, that did most to help spread the devotion to the Immaculate Conception in the Kingdom of Naples. Indeed, if we look into the question of the original destination of Colombo's Immaculate Conceptions, we find that many were commissioned for convents of that Order, or for religious fraternities under its protection. Nor should we forget, despite it attracting so little attention, the possible influence of the Spanish presence in the viceroyalty, whose religious practices were perfectly assimilated and shared. On this point, we need to remember the hypothesis, as yet unconfirmed by the records, about the Immaculate Conception in the church of San Francesco in Ostuni being the result of a commission by Spanish noblewoman Jerónima López y Royo, married to the 2nd Duke of Ostuni⁶⁸.

61 Gennaro Borrelli considers the design a characteristic that defines the artist's entire output (Borrelli 1967, p. 29).

62 See Borrelli 2005a, p. 27, fig. 41.

63 For Brudaglio, see the examples in the church of San Francesco de Monopoli and in the chapel of the Sacrament in Mola Cathedral (Pasculli 1989, p. 74, plate XLVIII, figs. 35 and 36), together with the one in Vieste Cathedral (Marcovecchio 2005, pp. 341-342, figs. 261-262). For Picano, the Immaculate Conception recorded in 1743 in Vico Equense (Casciaro 2007, p. 69, fig. 48).

64 See reproduced in Lecce 2007, p. 282.

65 Mauro 2008, p. 218.

66 Laneri 1991, p. 195.

67 Mauro 2008, pp. 226-227.

68 Liddo 2008, p. 190. The author documents her devotion to the Immaculate Conception thanks to the publication of a payment to embroiderer Vincenzo Barletta, who in 1688 was working on a dress for a sculpture of the Conception. *Ibid.*, p. 77, doc. no. 65. For other images commissioned by the Duchess for the city of Ostuni, see Lisimberti/Todisco 2000, pp. 111-112.



15. View of the Jado bequest room at the Bilbao School of Arts & Crafts (formerly, Civil Hospital of Atxuri) with the Immaculate Conception by Colombo in the left foreground, c. 1930
 Provincial Council of Bizkaia-Archive

Restorations and technical study: some observations

In light of the diagnostic tests and the treatment applied, the recent restoration of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum's Immaculate Conception also reveals some technical aspects of how this image was produced⁶⁹. The sculpture is today in a rather delicate condition, following a devastating attack by wood-eating insects. In a photograph taken around 1930, which shows the Immaculate Conception when it was on display in a room at the School of Arts & Crafts of Atxuri, together with the other works of the Jado bequest [fig. 15], the sculpture was conserved almost complete, with the half moon at its feet and the head of the serpent biting the apple in place. Both were subsequently lost as a result of the infestation. Even so, it had already lost the original base, usually featuring a mesh of wood-carved and gilded volutes and acanthus leaves. Prior to this latest restoration initiative, two treatments are on record: one in 1979-1980, which involved insect de-infestation, consolidation of the support, cleaning and retouching of flesh tones, and another in 1990, when the right hand was re-attached, after being found in the storage space by the Museum's Keeper at the time, Ana Sánchez-Lassa. The left hand was reconstructed in the latest restoration, by taking a mould of the original that was then filled with epoxy resin. For it to work as a left hand, the position of the fingers was changed and the polychrome added in watercolour using a *tratteggio* system to make it discernible.

One primordial aspect to be taken into account was the polychrome itself. An attempt was made to return the image to its original legibility. Clearly verist in nature, the intervention aimed for and achieved a kind of illusionist refinement, evident for example in the detail of the gilded edge of the cloak, which imitates a face-edging decoration. The bunches of roses painted on the tunic were applied by the tip of the brush [fig. 16]. This procedure is in line with a kind of realist polychrome introduced in Neapolitan sculpture from the 1680s,

⁶⁹ Restoration was carried out from January 2008 to March 2010 by the technicians at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, coordinated by José Luis Merino Gorospe and Jon Apodaca, whose work led to a report on the work done that I was kindly allowed to read.



16. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, c. 1719
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail of polychrome on tunic

originated through the influence of the new fashion rules established by the Marquis del Carpio⁷⁰. Colombo painted his images in the workshop; he was, we recall, himself a painter, although on occasions he might have delegated this sort of work to trusted polychrome workers, with a view to specializing the work in hand.

The x-ray taken of the work during restoration [fig. 17] also revealed something of its internal structure and laid bare some interesting aspects of the work methods at Colombo's studio workshop. The sculpture was made from a single block of wood, to which was stuck, with animal glue, the fragment of the cloak that billows to its right, endowing the whole with greater mobility. Following the habitual parts' assembly process, the hands were added to the main body because they were easier to reproduce separately, alternating the position and gesticulation of the fingers according to their use; they were then incorporated into the figure by means of a glued wood tenon. This practice was once again confirmed in the inventory made of Colombo's goods, in which appear "Due para di mano di legname, uno compito, e l'altro non compito" and "tre para di mano di Madonna; cinque para di mani di bottino"⁷¹. The same process was used for the waxing moons at the figure's feet. In the bottom part are two vertical metal tenons which would originally have fixed the sculpture to its base. The whites of the eyes of the Madonna and the cherubim on the base were done using the standard method for these features: the eye sockets were dug out first and the glass eyes stuck in afterwards, the joints being sealed with stucco, also used to model the eyelids. This procedure differs from the usual method of Spanish sculptors, who preferred to carve the face as a mask, leaving cavities into which the glass eyes would be inserted⁷².

70 For an approach to the changes in polychrome in Neapolitan sculpture in the late 17th and early 18th century, see Gaeta 2007b, pp. 199-220.

71 Borrelli 2005a, pp. 104 y 107.

72 On this point, see Casciaro 2005, p. 301.



17. Giacomo Colombo (1663-1731)
The Immaculate Conception, c. 1719
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
X-ray

Restoring this work physically, and to its rightful place in the Museum collection, is a further step in the ongoing bid by Spanish institutions to recuperate sculptures in polychrome wood, often unjustly undervalued. The initiative should act as a stimulus for similar action to add to a chapter in the history of our international art connections that still requires proper study⁷³.

73 I would like to thank the team at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, and in particular Ana Sánchez-Lassa, for the cooperation given while I was preparing this study. My thanks are also due to Raffaele Casciaro, Letizia Gaeta, Gian Giotto Borrelli, Isabella di Liddo and Jesús Urrea, for being available when needed and for their kind assistance. Much of this research was made possible by time spent in Florence as a grant holder funded by the Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell'Arte Roberto Longhi.

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