

24 Juan Martínez Montañés (1568–1649) and unknown polychromer

Christ on the Cross ('*Cristo de los Desamparados*'), 1617

Polychromed wood, 185 x 160 x 46 cm
Iglesia Conventual del Santo Ángel, Carmelitas Descalzos, Seville

Juan Martínez Montañés produced several versions of the *Christ on the Cross* throughout his career, the most celebrated being the *Christ of Clemency* which was made in 1603 for the private chapel of the archdeacon of Carmona, Mateo Vázquez de Leca (see fig. 20). On the strength of its fame, Montañés was commissioned to execute a number of other Crucifixions – even dispatching one to Lima, Peru – of which the present work is among the most accomplished. It was commissioned in 1617 by the Discalced Carmelite monks for their church of the Santo Ángel in Seville, where it still hangs today.

Unlike the *Christ of Clemency*, where Christ is represented still alive in the final moments before his death, Montañés here presents Christ in the more traditional way, with life having been drained out of him, and his skin porcelain white. Blood from the wound in his side has already begun to congeal. A long strand of hair has escaped from his crown of thorns and falls down the right side of his face – a motif that Montañés also used in the *Christ of Clemency*.

The carving is particularly refined, especially the classical proportions of Christ's slender form and the magnificent swathe of white drapery around his waist. Known in Spanish as the *pañó de pureza* ('cloth of purity'), Christ's loincloth has a life of its own. Large and voluminous, it has been wrapped twice round his waist and tied into a loose knot to one side. The endless creases of its folds are testimony to Montañés's skill as a sculptor and to his nickname, *el dios de la madera* – the god of wood.

An X-radiograph of this sculpture, which has recently been restored and cleaned,¹ revealed how different pieces of wood, separately carved and hollowed, were joined together using animal glue and nails (fig. 113). While most of the joins were carefully concealed by the gesso and paint applied on top of the wood, some, like those that link the arms to the shoulders, are still visible. To prevent the wood from warping and breaking, sculptures like this were often hollowed out. This meant that even life-size figures weighed relatively little, around 25–30 kilos, a bearable load for processing through the streets during



113 X-ray of cat. 24

Holy Week.² This sculpture, like the *Christ of Clemency*, however, was probably commissioned for an altar in one of the chapels that adjoined the Carmelite convent.³

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SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Proske 1967, pp. 89–90; Hernández Díaz 1987, pp. 171, 174 and 177; Córdoba–Seville 2001–2, no. 52, pp. 142–3

NOTES

- 1 The sculpture was restored by the Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio Histórico in 2007.
- 2 I am grateful to the restorers at the Instituto for this information and for supplying us with an X-radiograph of this work.
- 3 Seville 2001–2, no. 52, pp. 142–3, mentions that in the nineteenth century it hung in the second chapel on the right as one faces the altar.

