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# The San Gabriel Stations of the Cross from an Art-Historical Perspective

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**E**VEN for the most casual observer, the cycle of the Stations of the Cross in the Museum of the Mission San Gabriel Archangel is a compelling visual encounter. For the art historian, it offers as well a fascinating exercise in speculation as to what extent the painter, presumably the Indian neophyte Juan Antonio, was attempting to follow, as best he could, a European prototype representing the agonies of Christ on the Road to Calvary and to what degree we may assume the ingredient of his native imagination and expressive power. Quite obviously, both factors are involved.

The tradition of the Stations of the Cross as a means of encouraging contemplation on the significance of Christ's suffering on the *Via Crucis* has a long and complex history.<sup>1</sup> From earliest medieval times, pilgrims had prayerfully traced the steps of Christ along the road to Calvary. The convention of arranging in churches pictorial or sculptural representations of episodes of Christ's path to Crucifixion gradually arose as a means whereby pilgrims could relive their pilgrimage, or as objects of devotion for those unable to undertake the trip to the Holy Land. The Stations of the Cross were especially popular among the Franciscans and their followers, and were given even wider sanction following the Council of Trent in the late sixteenth century, with the new emphasis of the Counter-

Reformation on the visual arts as a stimulus to piety and faith. By the late Baroque period, the episodes along the Road to Calvary had become standardized to the Fourteen Stations. This familiar convention is followed in the Stations of the Cross at Mission San Gabriel.

Obviously our painter had access to an illustrated cycle of the Stations. The representation of religious subject matter in Spanish art, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was generally prescribed by established convention, and it is hardly to be imagined that the fathers of the Mission San Fernando Rey de España, where this cycle was originally painted, would have left a neophyte Indian painter to his own imagination in interpreting so sober a theme as the Stations of the Cross. Very likely, as Dr. Phillips suggests in his accompanying article, Juan Antonio would have had access to a series of woodcuts in a religious book of (presumably) Spanish origin.

The First Station (representing Jesus Condemned Before Pilate) offers clear evidence of such a European prototype. The painting conflates two distinct scenes from the Passion of Christ: the Scourging of Christ by the soldiers, and His condemnation at the hands of Pilate. At the right, dressed in a loin cloth, the scourged Christ is tied to a short pillar, mocked and flagellated by the soldiers. The Scourging, as an episode extracted from

the Passion and underscoring Christ's physical abasement as a stimulus to empathetic contemplation on the part of the Christian beholder, is a familiar theme in Spanish art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The curious shape of the column, reminiscent of a chess figure, is too identical with the stubby column (believed by tradition to have also served as a support for the shed of the Nativity) traditional in Spanish representations of the Scourging to have been an independent invention on the part of the artist. We must assume that such a scene was represented in the woodcut prototype. Similarly, the representation of Pontius Pilate closely follows European tradition. He is seated on a raised podium, approached by two circular steps. As a backdrop, two blood-red curtains have been parted and tied in complex, billowing folds at the corners of the stage-like podium. This is a virtually ubiquitous device in European Baroque painting. Again, the inclusion of the descriptive caption (*1<sup>a</sup> Estacion: Casa de Pilato*) with its stylized Rococo floral border within the painting itself suggests an ornate eighteenth century woodblock, in which the border assumes a degree of decorative embellishment inseparable from the scene itself. Whatever the source of this element in the First Station, it is significant that in the subsequent scenes in the cycle, Juan Antonio wisely chose to avoid this decorative aside and to concentrate on the dramatic pathos inherent in the history of Christ's Passion.

A curious factor in this, and indeed in most of the scenes, is the seemingly Oriental garb of the soldiers. The knee-breeches, the padded doublets, the "Phrygian" caps or helmets, the almond-shaped eyes, all suggest a debt to Near Eastern miniatures which, unless we are to assume an influence filtered through intermediate prototypes (that a Near Eastern miniature would in fact have found its way to California defies all probability), remains unexplainable. Equally curious is the gesture of the one soldier facing Pilate, with his index

finger to his nose. In the European tradition (e.g., in Hieronymus Bosch's scenes of the Mocking of Christ) this gesture is one of contempt and derision, generally directed toward the Savior. In the Near Eastern tradition, this same gesture is one of deference and respect. Directed toward Pilate in this scene, the latter meaning is more probable. In any event, we note in this scene and indeed throughout the cycle a careful attention on the part of the painter to expressive gesture.

Other instances of the artist's dependence upon (and simultaneous independence from) his presumed prototype merit brief comment. A strong diagonal line beneath the feet of the soldiers before Pilate, dividing the surface into two adjacent color fields, has no logical explanation except as the ghost of a receding orthogonal line establishing a spatial recession in the original. The painter seems to have misunderstood or ignored this element as a means of suggesting illusionistic depth of field and has rendered it as a purely decorative division of painted surface. Indeed, throughout the cycle, concepts of space, weight, and gravity are largely ignored. The figures appear to float before spaceless surfaces and two-dimensional architectural props. This is especially evident in the figure of Christ, in which the left leg disappears "behind" the column, while the foot incongruously appears in "front" of the base, resulting in the illusion of a floating column.

The subtle use of the language of gesture, so fully developed in European Baroque art, again suggests a prototype behind this scene. The gestures of the soldiers at the far right concentrate attention on the figure of Christ; the extended arm of the tall figure in center field, reinforced by the white banner behind the arm, leads the eye to the pair immediately before Pilate; their gestures in turn lead toward Pilate, finding an echo in the answering gesture of Pilate's hand. The division of the *personnae* into such compact and coordinated subgroups almost certainly presupposes a proto-

type which Juan Antonio has deftly adapted to his own use.

To underscore his debt—and his partial misunderstanding of—this unidentified prototype is by no means to deny an independent expressive power on the part of the painter. Quite the contrary. The figure of Christ, for all of the naivité of his spatial definition, is a strikingly powerful image. Rendered considerably smaller than the surrounding soldiers, the diminutive stature of Christ, combined with the moving expression of humility and submission in the face, suggests a degree of sympathy with the lonely sufferings of the Savior at least as convincing and moving as the more sophisticated representations of the Scourging in the mainstream of European Baroque painting.

In Station Two (Christ is Made to Carry the Cross) we again detect the influence of a visual prototype in the carefully balanced symmetry of grouping in the figures to the far right and far left. In the upper right corner, we see an abbreviated suggestion of an architectural backdrop, a composite pilaster bearing a triple entablature which breaks forward toward the corner of the painting. This is a standard feature of European Baroque architecture and hardly a decorative innovation on the part of the painter. Upon closer inspection, one is also struck by the far more careful rendering of the garment of Christ, with the pocket of shadow captured within the protruding fold over the hip. The isolated figure of Christ bearing the cross was a frequent theme in Spanish and Colonial sculpture. One wonders if such a sculpted figure might not have been familiar to Juan Antonio; this would account for the more sculptural grasp of form in the drapery of Christ in this instance (and repeated within narrow variations in Stations Four, Five, and Eight), in contrast to the totally flat color field which describes the form of the man—presumably Simon the Cyrenian—who assists Christ in bearing the cross.

But here again, the apparently independent

expressive vocabulary of the artist is manifest in such details as the floating horse and rider in the upper center field. The brooding black horse with its almost demonic eyes, delineated with amazing economy and control in simple, white outline, is indeed worthy of the tormented animals of Picasso's *Guernica*.

Station Three (Jesus Falls for the First Time) is perhaps even more expressive. The Holy Women, observing the tragic sequence from a bleacher-like structure at the right, is again a common detail in Spanish representations of the Passion, and the evasive mystery of expression in their faces immediately calls to mind the maidens (both holy and secular) in the works of Goya. The striking decorative motif of the stylized floral patterns in the architectural structure immediately behind the fallen Christ may well have been suggested by eighteenth century Spanish ceramics or their Colonial imitations.

The expressive power of the figure on horseback at the upper left, however, seems to be a factor of the painter's own imagination. Perhaps the most haunting single feature in the entire cycle, this figure, whose eyes reflect a demented delight in the Savior's sufferings, might easily hold its own among the ghoulish mockers of Christ in the paintings of the twentieth century Belgian Expressionist, James Ensor.

In the short space of this note, it will of course be impossible to treat each of the 14 Stations individually. But even so cursory a discussion will underscore something of the diversity and the expressive range of the cycle.

Station Six (Veronica Wipes the Face of Christ) is the most ambitious of these paintings, at least in terms of the artist's attempt to emulate such "academic" concepts as foreshortening and the rendering of the human body in incisive action. Here the cross is diagonally deployed in space, as opposed to its placement parallel to the surface plane of the canvas in most of the other scenes in the cycle. Careful attention is paid to suggesting

the full cubic dimensions of the cross, i.e., by the simultaneous depiction of two surfaces of the beams, meeting at illusionistically convincing right angles. In contrast to the rest of the cycle, it is indeed almost a *tour-de-force* of perspectival draftsmanship. Equally striking is the semi-nude figure at the left, viewed from the rear, as he strains to help lift the cross. While hardly anatomically convincing, the very attempt to tackle so challenging a figure belies the presumed limits of a "primitive" imagination and suggests the instincts (however halting the expression) of a quite remarkable narrational power.

The outcropping of stylized landscape in Station Ten (Christ is Stripped of His Robes) again poses questions as to the ultimate prototype for the cycle. These papier-mâché mountains crowned with ideographic trees, with the closely clustered human forms looming from behind in an immensely disproportionate scale, are immediately suggestive of Early Christian or Byzantine manuscript illumination. But no sooner is the intriguing possibility of a direct link with Byzantine tradition raised, than it must be dismissed. It is virtually unthinkable that so rare a manuscript would have found its way to the New World. There are furthermore the many stylistic indications, noted above, which suggest a source much later in date, from the seventeenth or eighteenth century. A feasible possibility is again a familiarity on the artist's part with Spanish ceramics, where similarly stylized landscapes survived well into the early nineteenth century.

A clear dependency upon a European model is again found in Station Twelve (Christ Dies upon the Cross). Many elements of the traditional representation of the Crucifixion, dating back to the Middle Ages, are in evidence here. The sun and the moon are simultaneously depicted, suggestive of a cosmic participation in the death of the Creator's Son. The figure on horseback spears the side of Christ, and from the wound springs

a thin jet of Christ's blood. Both elements—the sun and moon, and the stress upon the saving blood of Christ—date all the way back to Byzantine iconography (although in Byzantine art the eucharistic significance of the Blood is underscored by a hovering angel capturing the drops in a chalice), and remained standard features in European depictions of the Crucifixion. The tradition of representing the two thieves as tied (not nailed) to the cross is again European, specifically Flemish, dating back at least to the time of the Master of Flemalle in the early fifteenth century. Flemish tradition was of course strongly entrenched in Spain, and the appearance of this specific detail in the Mission San Gabriel cycle is not surprising. The convention of contrasting the reactions of the Good Thief (on Christ's right, the traditional side of the "elect") and that of the Bad Thief on His left (the side of the "rejected") is again a European tradition, and one which has obviously been well understood and appreciated by Juan Antonio. He depicts the Good Thief as standing quietly and confidently on the cross, his hand extended in a gesture of salute toward his Savior. This is in striking contrast to the twisted arms and the expression of tormented agony of the Bad Thief, who even in death, turns from Christ and from salvation.

Station Thirteen (The Body of Christ is Removed from the Cross) simultaneously represents the Deposition and the Pietá, with the dead Christ mourned upon the lap of the Virgin. The fact that the body of Christ is so diminutive in scale here, in contrast to the bulk of the Virgin, is not an instance of naiveté on the part of an Indian painter. This is a consistent feature in the iconography of the Pietá, suggesting the Virgin's precognition and acceptance of her son's fate, even while He lay on her lap as a babe. Another detail from the standard depictions of the Deposition is the man on a ladder, removing the nails (as holy relics) from the cross. The expressive agony of Christ's death is here heightened by the Crown



of Thorns, one of the traditional Instruments of the Cross, which Juan Antonio has painted as hovering, like a torturous halo, just over the head of the Savior.

The most originally conceived, and the most hauntingly moving, of the paintings in this cycle is the last, Station Fourteen (Christ is Laid in the Sepulchre). The imperfect perspectival foreshortening of the tomb only seems to add to the stark expressive power of the scene. The tomb is totally unadorned, except for a ghostly image of Christ's body atop the slab, an almost certain reference to the tradition of the Holy Shroud in Turin. It looms, with inescapable visual authority, simultaneously suggestive of both tomb and altar, in the midst of almost palpable blackness. The soldiers seem to suggest the eternal sleep of death of those who reject Christ. The semi-nude to the right, with an arm extended as though stiffened by rigor mortis,

is in its way far more arresting than those sprawling classical bodies clustered before the tomb in Italian Renaissance art. Indeed, it is difficult to call to mind in the whole spectrum of Western art a more effective capturing of the gloom of Good Friday, the most dolorous day in the Christian calendar.

It is fortunate indeed that these paintings, so long relegated to disintegrate in an outside corridor, have now been recognized in the true dimension of their value. For they are nothing less than minor masterpieces of New World religious art.

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#### NOTE

1. For the most comprehensive account, see H. Thurston, S. J., *The Stations of the Cross, an Account of their History and Devotional Purpose*. London: Burns & Oates, 1906.

