[4]

ALONSO CANO (Granada, 1601-1667). Circle of

The Immaculate Conception

c. 1640

Black chalk, grey-brown ink and greyish wash on laid paper

320 x 195 mm

Inscribed:

"desendimiento en las faldas/de n^{ta}. Senora/las Crus aCuestas-" at the upper left

"+/los misterios de nuestra Señora/desposorios =1/laencarnasion/nacimiento =/(denuestra Seño^{ra}/ pre sentacion/a el tenplo/disputa entre/los dottores de/la lei/ Santaisabel-/Reina deungri/a" at the right

Signed: "Alonso Co" at the lower left corner in ink, covered over with a greyish wash

Provenance: Private collection, Oxford

The present drawing is of exceptional interest. Executed in black chalk with the addition of grey-brown ink and greyish wash, in addition to the drawn images it includes numerous annotations located in the upper zone and all along the right side of the sheet that refer to a number of different religious scenes. In the centre of the sheet is a depiction of the Virgin as the Immaculate Conception, standing on a cloud created by cherubim heads, her hands serenely clasped in prayer. On the right is an angel with its wings spread, and on the left is what seems to be an image of a royal figure wearing a crown and holding an orb. At the foot of that figure is what at first sight appears to be the outline of a fish, but which is, in fact, a concealed inscription in charcoal or black chalk that is difficult to make out as it was covered over at a later date.

This combination of elements suggests that the drawing is a working tool of the artist, re-used on various occasions in order to jot down ideas and notes. This explains the apparent disconnection between the subjects written on the sheet and those depicted, as well as the fact that while the figure of the Virgin is more highly finished, the others flanking her are barely sketched in with rapid strokes of the pen. The identical nature of the sepia ink applied with the pen both for the writing and the drawn lines clearly demonstrates that they are by the same hand.

As with the images, the large number of annotations on this sheet is also striking. Most refer to what the artist termed "the mysteries of our Lady", in other words, scenes of the life of the Virgin. The word *Desposorios* [Marriage] has a "1" to the right of it, indicating that the Marian cycle starts here, or perhaps that each scene, like this one, was to be depicted in a painting. This subject is followed by the Annunciation, the Birth of the Virgin, the Presentation in the Temple (it is not clear whether this refers to the presentation of Mary or Christ), and Christ among the Doctors. The other two subjects, whose names annotated towards the top of the painting, are the Descent from the Cross and Christ bearing the Cross. The last annotation refers to a hagiographic scene with Saint Elizabeth of Hungary.



Alonso Cano, *Austurian-Leonese King*, 1641. Madrid, Prado Museum (inv. no. 632)

It should be assumed that all these subjects – eight in total – refer to a single commission, possibly an altarpiece or a private oratory, for which the image of the Immaculate Conception could have been the principal scene. Of the other two figures, only the angel fits in with the group as a whole. This is not the only known Spanish drawing of this type and other relevant examples include the series of drawings by Eugenio Cajés for the tomb of Philip III (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence). The sheets in that series also include a wealth of explanatory notes of what is depicted and the place that each element was to occupy [1].

Both the handwriting and technique indicate a Spanish artist, probably a mid-17th-century Madrid one. Although a specific attribution might initially seem difficult to deduce, it can be said that the present sheet clearly suggests the work of the painter, sculptor and architect Alonso Cano (1601-1667), particularly the figure of the king. This figure reveals clear similarities with the *Asturian-Leonese King* in the Museo del Prado (inv. no. 632) painted by Cano for the Bedchamber of the Salón Dorado in the Alcázar in Madrid in 1641. Both that image and portraits such as the double portraits of *Sancho I and Ramiro III* in the Prado (inv. no. 633) and of *The Catholic Kings* (formerly Museo del Prado, destroyed in 1915) were part of a complex royal programme that involved the principal court painters and which was intended to present a genealogical representation of the Spanish monarchy from the Visigothic period up to the reign of Philip IV[2]. In the painting of the *Asturian-Leonese King* in the Prado, the monarch is depicted seated on a throne. He holds an orb in his left hand and a sword in his right and wears a tunic and an unusual three-pointed crown. The image is conceived to be seen from below and for this reason the figure is located on a dais covered in brocade, over which the king's left foot projects. Although very sketchy, the small figure in the present drawing depicts exactly the same image. Not only does it include elements such as the dais and the orb, but the crown is also of the same unusual type. While part of the right hand is now



Alonso Cano, *Three Angels*, c. 1650. Madrid, Instituto Valencia de Don Juan. Pen and grey-brown ink

lost as the sheet has been cut down at exactly this point, it is still possible to see the way in which the figure raises its hand when grasping the sword.

The similarities with the work of Cano go further and the technique also corresponds to that typically deployed by this artist[3]. His use of preparatory lines executed in black chalk and of grey-brown ink applied in rapid, zigzag strokes, is to be seen in the present drawing, especially in the figure of the Asturian-Leonese king and the angel. However, the technique, particularly with regard to the figure of the Immaculate Virgin, is clearly dryer and more abrupt than that found in drawings considered to be autograph works by Cano. Despite this fact, there are evident similarities between the angel and those that appear in the study of *Three Angels* (Instituto Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid), as well as with the technique of *Christ after the Flagellation* (Museo Nacional del Prado, D-57), and that of *Seated Youth* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence). The figure of the Virgin also looks to models by Cano and is particularly similar to the painting of the *Immaculate Conception* now in the Museo Diocesano in Vitoria (c. 1650). All the above suggests that the creator of the present sheet was, at the very least, an artist very close to Cano.

Another curious detail that relates to the issue of attribution is the presence of what seems to be the shape of a fish below the king. However, closer inspection reveals this element to be an inscription that has been subsequently covered over with a greyish wash and which reads "Alonso Cº". The handwriting is the same as that of the rest of the inscriptions and the grey-brown wash is of the same colour as the rest. The strokes of the handwriting are literally identical to ones found in signatures considered autograph, including the ones on *Coronation of a Soldier Poet* (Museo Nacional del Prado, D-78), *The Annunciation* (MNP, D-3819), *Female Nude* (MNP, D-6320), and *The Assumption of the Virgin* in the Apelles collection in London, signed "Alonso Cº. Yn. et Fᵗ".

Bearing in mind the similarities with the work of Alonso Cano, the presence of what seems to be the sketch



Alonso Cano, *Immaculate Conception*, c. 1650. Vitoria, Museo Diocesano

for one of the kings in the Salon Dorado in the Alcázar in Madrid, and the remains of the covered over signature, it can be proposed that the present sheet is a work from the close circle of Alonso Cano, if not actually by the artist himself. It should be dated to around 1640, the date of the execution of the series of paintings of Spanish monarchs.

1 See *Disegni Spagnoli* (1972), pp.62-63, and *Dibujo español de los siglos de oro* (1980), pp. 36-37.
2 For more information on this subject see Aterido Fernández (2002).
3 On Alonso Cano's technique, see Véliz (2001), pp. 19-56, and Pérez Sánchez (2002), pp. 133-143.


Leyenda/ Mi cuento en las faldas de nra Señora
las cinco alcuetas
Los misterios de nuestra Señora
dos personas = la encarnacion nativ
nat. Mi cuenta = de nuestra Señora
para la cuenta cion
el templo
dis puta entre
los doctores de la ley
Santa Isabel
Viena desenojo