

THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS

MATEO GILARTE (c. 1620-1675)

Oil on canvas

2.26 × 1.46 m

On loan from the Prado Museum, no. P-5604

The composition and execution of this work shows much greater elaboration and detail than the painter's *Virgin Mary with John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene*. (Completed for the Knights of the Assumption congregation in the Jesuit church of San Esteban of Murcia, the latter painting currently also resides in the Historic Building of the University of Barcelona.) In this work, Gilarte demonstrates his artistic debt to the Valencia masters of the early seventeenth century, although he painted it on his first visit to Murcia, where he actively collaborated with artists of the stature of Juan of Toledo. The Prado Museum houses seven more paintings in this series.

The subject is the adoration of the shepherd and the painting forms part of a series depicting the life of the Virgin Mary for the congregation mentioned above. Because of the subject matter, perhaps, we can find a much greater variety of postures and visual models. On the one hand, we observe the idealized faces of the Virgin Mary, Joseph and the Christ Child, reflecting greater skill in the use of colour than in the previously cited work. They show Italian influence filtered through Valencia's pictorial tradition, which Gilarte studied in his early years of training. On the opposite side, we find the figures of the shepherds, who draw more on popular models and lean toward realism. Although not as stark as commonly seen in Spanish Baroque paintings, they reflect an idealization that relates them to the more archaizing aspect of the period's style. Even so, Gilarte does not suppress his interest in detail, as we can see in his treatment of the textures of the sheep's coat or the shepherds' garments. Nor does he avoid introducing anecdotal elements in the foreground, such as the basket of eggs, seeking to flesh out the setting accurately and give the depicted scene greater verisimilitude.

Turning to the composition, we find—as Alcolea already commented—that the two groups form a pyramidal form, especially the left-hand group, the holy family. The vanishing points converge in the centre of the work where the Christ Child appears. This is logical because He gives sense to the entire history of catholicism. For this reason, most of the figures also direct their gaze toward the spot, inviting us to do the same. In turn, all of this is supported by the use of light. Although uniform throughout the work, the light is strengthened by the use of sunbeams coming from the little angels in the upper part of the canvas. Again, as is typical in Gilarte's works, they appear in somewhat involved positions as they bring their good tidings on scrolls.

The landscape in the background is resolved in a fairly straightforward manner. Mountains in pastel tones do not disturb or distract the viewer's attention from the main subject matter. The half-ruined architecture and restrained plant elements follow the traditional models for representing the scene in Bethlehem. We can also see how Gilarte draws nearer to the style of the Valencia painters after Juan (such as Father Borràs), giving a cleanly Baroque treatment that rejects light effects and shadowy landscapes to create a much more amenable setting.

As in the other canvas painted by Gilarte that is on loan from the Prado Museum to the University of Barcelona, the artist's signature appears in the lower part of the painting, almost in the centre of the composition, with the same words as in the other case: GILARTE FACIEBAT.

(BFL)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AGÜERA ROS, J. C., "Fuentes documentales para el estudio de Mateo Gilarte", in *Anales de la Universidad de Murcia*. Volume XL. 1981-1982. pp. 217-243.
- ALCAHALÍ, BARÓN DE, *Diccionario biográfico de artistas valencianos*. Valencia: Librerías Paris-Valencia. 1989 [1897] pp. 135-136.
- ALDANA FERNÁNDEZ, S., *Guía abreviada de artistas valencianos*. Valencia: Valencia City Hall. 1970.
- BENITO DOMÉNECH, F., *Ribalta y la pintura valenciana de su tiempo*. Madrid: Prado Museum. 1987.
- CEÁN BERMÚDEZ, J. A., *Diccionario histórico de los más ilustres profesores de las Bellas Artes en España*. Madrid: Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando and its History. 1965 [1800] Volume II. pp. 190-192.
- KOWAL, D., *Ribalta y los Ribaltescos: la evolución del estilo Barroco en Valencia*. Valencia: Provincial Government of Valencia. 1985.
- LÓPEZ JIMÉNEZ, J. C., "Precisiones en torno a Mateo Gilarte", in *Archivo Español de Arte*. Number 145. 1964. pp. 78-81.
- PALOMINO, A., *El museo pictórico y escala óptica. El parnaso español pintoresco y laureado*. Madrid: Aguilar. 1986. [1715-1724] pp. 341-342.
- PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ, A. E., "Mateo Gilarte, un casi zurbaranesco", in *Archivo Español de Arte*. Number 146. 1964. pp. 139-157.