

**ALONSO DEL ARCO (1635-1704)**

***The Immaculate Conception***

**Oil on canvas**

**1.68 × 1.06 m**

**Temporary loan from the Prado Museum, no. P-5317**

Alonso del Arco (1635-1704), a painter of the Madrid school in the seventeenth century, was a student and follower of Antonio de Pereda. The relationship between the two painters, added to the fact that Del Arco was deaf from birth, led to his acquiring the nickname *El sordillo de Pereda* or, loosely, “the little deaf boy of Pereda”. The range of Alonso del Arco's work included portraiture, history paintings and religious subjects. His favourite theme was portraits of the saints and, especially, the Virgin Mary, which is the motif of the painting currently hanging in the Paranymph of the University of Barcelona.

The iconography of the painting closely resembles the iconography used by Del Arco in his other treatments of the subject, such as the one preserved in the church of Villanubla and the one cited by Valdivieso in a collection in Valladolid.<sup>1</sup> The depiction of the Virgin Mary as *Tota Pulchra* reflects Renaissance iconography inspired by the virginal attributes lauded in the *Song of Solomon*: “*Tota pulchra es amica mea, et macula non es in te*”, or “All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you”. This symbolizes the idea that the Virgin Mary was sent by God from heaven as an agent of redemption. In the book of Manuel Trens, *Iconografía de la Virgen en el arte español*,<sup>2</sup> this depiction of the Virgin Mary unites two sets of symbology: the first features the Virgin Mary possessing symbols of her purity and the second features elements taken from the apocalyptic vision of St John at Patmos: “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head”,<sup>3</sup> who, aided by St Michael, vanquished evil, symbolized by the dragon. In other words, the depiction of the *Tota Pulchra* unites two fundamental qualities of the Virgin Mary: her purity and her triumph over evil.

In Del Arco's work, the figure appears in the centre of the painting, rising among the clouds. She is held up by little angels and her feet rest on the moon. She is draped in a blue robe and a white tunic with pronounced straight pleats, which hide her feet. Her robe attests to a great mastery of the pictorial concept required by the period. Under her feet is the waxing moon; all around her, the brilliance of the sun. At her head, twelve stars shine, following the model of the apocalyptic vision. The sea landscape in the background features the *Stella Maris*. Her left hand lies on her breast, while her right hand reaches out, palm open. Her head leans to her left with her eyes looking downward, as a symbol of her obedience to the will of God; the idea is reinforced by her open right hand. Her face is beautiful and angelic, with a classical, well-defined nose, and it is framed by wavy hair that falls over her shoulder. As so often occurs, the figure achieves movement by a twisting of the body that uses the *ponderatio*, that is, by bending her right leg. The figure is encircled by cherubim given differing treatments: while some are highly defined, others are lightly sketched, producing a powerful effect of depth and aerial perspective.

At the feet of the Virgin Mary, little angels create a dynamic effect through the movement of their hands and the variety of their positions. In their hands, they hold symbols of the Litany: the mirror, the olive branch, the lily. The olive branch, signifying the motto *Oliva speciosa in*

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<sup>1</sup> VALDIVIESO, E. *Tres nuevas obras de Alonso del Arco, BSAA*, T.XXXVIII, p. 537.

<sup>2</sup> TRENS, M. *Iconografía de la Virgen en el arte español*. Madrid, 1946.

<sup>3</sup> Book of Revelation 12.1.

*caelum*, and the lily, *Lilium interspinas*, are symbols taken from the *Song of Solomon*, Book 4, while the metaphor *Speculum sine macula* comes from the *Book of Wisdom* (Wisdom 7.26). These attributions came to form part of the Litany of Loreto. In the foreground is the dragon, symbol of sin. An angel threatens the dragon with a raised arm in an allegory that is underscored by the apple found before the monster. This solution appears in other depictions of the Virgin Mary executed by Del Arco, such as the one found in the Convent of Santa Maria Magdalena de Medina del Campo. Both figures appear within a triangle that helps to define the compositional space.

The landscape in the lower part of the canvas is also of interest. Clear brushstrokes give a powerful brilliance to the light, which is intended not to construct form but as a function of colour, based on a chromatic range dominated by warm, golden tones in contrast to the white and blue of the garments. The light strikes the tunic and the face of the Virgin, accentuating the illumination in keeping with the hierarchy of light. Line is used with skill in the execution of the face and the hands of the Virgin, while *chiaroscuro* is used with the other figures, giving greater intensity, but also greater limitation. In some areas, the forms are barely suggested and the texture is nebulous and uncertain, with a total absence of any linearity.



At present, the work hangs in the Paranymp of the University of Barcelona, replacing a series of other pictures. The first painting to hang where *The Immaculate Conception* appears was the portrait of Alfonso XII commissioned from Francesc Sans i Cabot in 1880.

(ICM)