

JUAN CARREÑO DE MIRANDA

Avilés, 1615 – Madrid, 1685

Study of three heads of cherubim

c. 1660

Black pencil, sanguine and white crayon highlights on laid paper pasted on a secondary medium.

234 x 163 mm

Inscriptions and marks: "22" (crossed out) in brown ink, top centre.



Juan Carreño de Miranda was born in Avilés in 1614. His early training was under his uncle Andrés Carreño in Valladolid, but he soon moved to Madrid, where he learned the art of painting in the workshops of Pedro de las Cuevas and Bartolomé Román. His early religious work earned him entrance to the Court and he rapidly became the most significant painter in Madrid circles following the death of Velázquez in 1660. Even so, his participation in 1659 in the al fresco decoration on the ceiling of the Salón de los Espejos of the Alcázar de Madrid along with the Bolognese painters Agostino Mitelli and Angelo Michele Colonna draws our attention. Apart from his unquestionable skill, it may have had something to do with his possible links to the Seville workshop and the fact that he testified in its favour in the procedure for the granting of the Habit of Saint James on 23 December 1658.¹

In 1669, Carreño's rise in society earned him the post of painter to the king by order of the regent Queen Mariana of Austria and he reached his peak in 1671 when he received the post of chamber painter. The official image of Charles II, his mother and his first wife, Marie Louise of Orléans, was the one dictated by his brushes. His work as royal portrait artist also gave him access to the higher spheres of the Court and produced one of his masterpieces, the *Portrait of the Duke of Pastrana* (1666-1670) kept in the Prado. This success also extended to his religious production, which stands out for the series of pictures he painted with Francisco Rizi for the Chapel of San Isidro in the church of San Andrés (c. 1663). These were destroyed in 1936. He also worked with

Rizi in various undertakings such as the mural decoration of the Camarín de la Basilica de Atocha (1664), the Ochavo of Toledo cathedral (1665) –both lost– and the dome of the church of San Antonio de los Portugueses (1662-1665), which has fortunately been preserved though heavily retouched by Luca Giordano in the late 17th century. Another of his major works, *The Foundation Mass of the Order of Trinitarians*, currently kept in the Louvre in Paris, was not painted in Madrid. During the last years of his life, his palette became lighter and more colourful and his paintings reflected his profound knowledge of Venetian painting as well as of the great Flemish masters of the 17th century, such as Rubens and Van Dyck. He died in Madrid in 1685.

As regards his graphic production, more than 50 drawings by his hand are kept in museums and private collections in Spain and abroad. In them the painter shows all his mastery based on lush, free brushwork, in which he combines the use of black pencil with sanguine and sometimes with white crayon. Thanks to this alternation, he produced powerful pictorial effects in his compositions, which, like his painting, reflect his admiration for Venetian painting.² His mastery of the use of the three pencils also shows how his formative process merged the two main artistic trends of the time in Madrid, which had Vicente Carducho and Eugenio Cajés as protagonists. From Carducho he took the use of black grease pencil, and from Cajés he learned to combine black pencil and sanguine, alternating them with greater freedom.

There is evidence of what I am saying in the work in hand. This *Study of Three Heads*

¹ Pascual Chenel and Rodríguez Rebollo (forthcoming) gather the entire bibliography on this matter. On Carreño see also the biography by Lázaro Díaz del Valle written in about 1656-1659 and quoted in García López, 2008, pp. 315-319, the famous exhibition on Carreño, Rizi and Herrera, 1986, pp. 18-55,

López Vizcaíno and Carreño, 2007; and Navarrete Prieto, 2015.

² On Carreño's drawings, Pedro Sánchez, 1986, pp. 232-238 is still a fundamental text. To this must be added Agüero's study (forthcoming) which will soon be seeing the light.

of *Cherubim* is executed in black pencil and sanguine with some very subtle white crayon highlights. In this work, despite the simplicity of the technique, we can appreciate a very “pictorial” feeling in the execution, almost as though he had used the pencils as a brush. This can be seen especially in the way he does the hair, in the subtle use of sanguine to create the flesh tones of the angels’ faces and, above all, in the way he applies the black pencil, like strokes with a light brush, in particular details like the eyes, nose and mouth of the characters.



Fig. 1. Juan Carreño de Miranda, *Study of Heads of Cherubim*, 1650-1660. Black pencil on laid paper, 270 x 200 mm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, D-97.

We know of several drawings by Carreño on this same theme. The closest are undoubtedly the specimens in the Prado museum (Fig. 1) and, especially, the one in the Biblioteca Nacional (National Library) in Madrid (Fig. 2), which are not only the same size but also use the same technique combining three pencils. The second of these has traditionally been dated to

around 1660, a time when Carreño was doing almost exclusively religious painting.³ I agree fully with this, which is why I am suggesting a similar date for our sketch.



Fig. 2. Juan Carreño de Miranda, *Heads of child angels*, 1650-1660. Black pencil, sanguine and white crayon highlights on laid paper, 251 x 196 mm. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, DIB/13/2/85.

As well as the books already mentioned, we must add a specimen in a private collection (194 x 242 mm),⁴ the page in the Apelles Collection (230 x 155 mm)⁵ and one last sketch in the so-called Albums of Ferdinand VII in the Real Biblioteca (Royal Library) of the Palacio Real in Madrid. These are of less quality than the others. A common denominator in all of them is the analysis of the faces of the cherubim in different positions and with different expressions so as to form models and repertoires which the artist subsequently combined in his

³ Agüero (forthcoming). I am grateful to the author for her indications about the chronology of the drawings in the Prado and the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid.

⁴ Published in *Fecit I*, 2010, pp. 5-6, cat. no. 1.

⁵ Apelles Collection (2002), p. 272, cat. no. 16. Black pencil and sanguine. On the recto of the drawing is a study for Saint Didacus of Alcalá.

compositions according to the subject to be represented. That these are models and not actually preparatory drawings can be explained by the fact that in Carreño's paintings we do not find any group of *putti* exactly matching any of the drawings mentioned. Nothing suggests that these designs are linked exclusively to his compositions on the subject of the Immaculate Conception. Although these compositions are where we find most *putti*, it is also true that in the rest of the paintings on religious subjects we find this same sort of character. This can be seen in early pictures like the *Saint Augustin* in the monastery of Nuestra Señora de Gracia in Madrigal de las Altas Torres (1647) and in others from his mature period, like the *Apparition of the Virgin to Saint Felix of Cantalice* in the Museo de Guadalajara (Fig. 3).

One fact to be borne in mind is whether this work could have been part of some type of album of drawings. If we look closely, we see that at the top the number 22 is inscribed in brown ink. Exactly the same happens with the drawing in the Prado (D-97), which has the number 12 inscribed in the same handwriting and the same ink as in our work. The use of the same type of paper and the fact that the two have very similar dimensions support our theory, according to which this is a compilation of sketches by the artist which has come down to us in fragments. The page in the Biblioteca Nacional may well have belonged to the same series, but the fact that it is trimmed means we can not tell if it originally had some kind of numbering. From the style of the numbers, the possible album would have been put together in the 18th century, though we can not discard an earlier date, possibly during the artist's own lifetime. In this case, the volume would have acted as

a repertory of images which Carreño would have used as a portfolio in executing his compositions, as I have already had occasion to explain. It would therefore answer to the same concept of work in 17th-century workshops that we find if we study the drawings of Vicente Carducho⁶ or Antonio de Pereda. In fact, we know of several drawings by Pereda with studies of *putti* which answer to the same creative sphere as our *Study of Three Heads of Cherubim*.

Ángel Rodríguez Rebollo



Fig. 3. Juan Carreño de Miranda, *Apparition of the Virgin to Saint Felix of Cantalice*, 1666-1668. 194 x 242 cm. Guadalajara, Museo Provincial, inv. no. 20.

⁶ With regard to the drawings of Carducho and the context of his workshop, see Pascual Chenel and Rodríguez Rebollo, 2015, pp. 23-52.