
THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION WITH THE JURORS OF VALENCIA (1662) THE FUSION BETWEEN SACRED AND SECULAR PAINTING IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SPAIN

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Abstract

This article compiles some of the results of the multidisciplinary research project dedicated to the analysis of 'The Immaculate Conception with the Jurors of Valencia', oil on canvas painted between 1662 and 1663 by Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa. The picture has been analysed in various different ways, but what is presented here is fundamentally the historical and documentary aspect of the research. This will involve a description and analysis of the documentation related to the commission of the painting, which will be framed within the wider context of seventeenth-century Valencia and its place in the system of kingdoms making up the Spanish Monarchy. The objective is to reconstruct the socio-historical circumstances surrounding the gestation of a painting that has traditionally been classed as religious. Nevertheless, it will be shown that Espinosa's work lies on the permeable border between the sacred and the secular and is a clear example of the frequent fusion of the two worlds in seventeenth-century Spain.

Keywords: Valencia, oil, canvas, baroque, period

1. Introduction

Between 1662 and 1663, Geroni Espinosa, habitually known to scholars as Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa, painted an enormous canvas in which the Jurors of the city of Valencia, representatives elected to the municipal government, are portrayed kneeling before an image of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, whose devotion they are swearing to defend (Figure 1) [1]. The picture reflects the festivities held in Valencia to celebrate the papal constitution *Sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum*, favourable to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, news of which arrived in the city in January 1662 [Valencia City Archives (Archivo Municipal de Valencia, hereafter AMV), Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 24 January 1662]. In May 1662, the painter was working on the picture but had not yet delivered it to the *Ayuntamiento* (City

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Council) [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 22 May 1662]. It must have been finished and delivered to the *Casa de la Ciudad* ('House of the City', the former City Hall) by mid-1663, since Espinosa received fifteen pounds on 8 June for some angels he had painted that did not appear in the original contract [AMV, Manuals de Consells, A-195 (1663-1664), fols. 24v-25r. 8 June 1663].



Figure 1. Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa, *The Immaculate Conception with the Jurors of Valencia*. 1662. Oil on canvas. Dimensions: 360 x 350 cm. Valencia, Museo Histórico Municipal.

The socio-political context of *The Immaculate Conception with the Jurors of Valencia* becomes clearer if we broaden our vision beyond the walls of Valencia in 1662. The constitution *Sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum*, issued by Pope Alexander VII, defined the religious feast celebrated by the Catholic Church on 8 December as dedicated to the Conception of the Virgin Mary. This decree was the third great success obtained by Spanish diplomacy in the seventeenth century on behalf of the devotion to the Immaculate Conception. The doctrine, a belief in the absolute perfection of the Mother of God, was not sanctioned by the Church, and was not established as a dogma of faith until 1854. Nevertheless, Philip III had embraced the cause of the Immaculate Conception as a state crusade

and had turned it into an affair of national interest [2-5]. From 1616 onwards, the Monarchy's preferred course of action was therefore to put pressure on the Papacy to come down in favour of the defenders of the doctrine [6]. The Crown then set up a *Real Junta* (Royal Committee) for the purpose, and a succession of embassies was sent to Rome with the task of persuading the pontiffs [7].

The commission Espinosa received from the municipal authorities of Valencia must be viewed within the context of the festivities held throughout all the territories of the Spanish Monarchy to celebrate the constitution *Sollicitudo* of 1662. Indeed, *The Immaculate Conception with the Jurors of Valencia* is itself a part of those celebrations. My objective is therefore to present a detailed analysis of the festive context in which the picture took shape and the intentions with which it was painted. Afterwards, I shall attempt to explain the significance of Espinosa's canvas, a snapshot of a particular political, social and ideological reality that allows us to understand the Valencia of 1662 and its way of understanding religion as a civic cult imbued with its own identity.

2. Documentation

News of Pope Alexander VII's Conceptionist constitution reached Valencia at the beginning of 1662 [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 24 January 1662]. At that moment, the Jurors of Valencia's municipal government were Lluís Mercader, Lluís Pallàs, Donís Tensa, Crisògono Almela, Severino Arboreda and Timoteu Xulví, whilst Pere Antoni Torres held the post of *Ciudadà racional*, Victorino Forés was the *Síndic de la cambra*, and Cristòfol del Mos was the *Síndic del racionalar* [AMV, Manuals de Consells, A-194 (1662-1663), fol. 3r. List of the members of the City Council of Valencia]. The ordinary advocates were Juan Bautista de Valda, Miquel Joan Moret, Miquel Àngel Dolz and Donato Sanchís de Castellar, the extraordinary advocates were Josep Lop and Juan Francisco de Villena, and the post of scribe was held by Joan Antoni Torres.

The municipality immediately gave thanks for the diplomatic success achieved by a Valencian, the ambassador Luis Crespi de Borja, and set aside five thousand pounds for the joyful festivities that were going to be organised in the city [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 26 January 1662]. The Jurors of Valencia wasted no time, and all the contents of the festival were outlined in deliberations held on 11 March 1662 [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 11 March 1662]. A solemn feast with a sermon was to be officiated in Valencia Cathedral on Friday 5 May and the following Saturday and Sunday, and the city was to be filled on those three nights with illuminations for which four prizes of twenty, fifteen, ten and five pounds were offered. On the Saturday night, fireworks were to be let off from the cathedral tower of El Micalet, and there were to be dances throughout Valencia similar to those of the eve of the feast of Corpus Domini. Finally, on Sunday 7 May 1662, the culminating point of the celebrations would arrive when the image of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary was borne through the city in a

solemn procession. On Monday 8 May, the festivities would end with bull-running and tournaments in Valencia's Plaza de Predicadores.



Figure 2. Andrés Marzo, José Caudí and Jerónimo Vilagrasa, *Frontispiece*. Engraving. Dimensions: 18.5 x 14 cm.

Besides organising the festivities, the municipal government of Valencia devoted special care to the design and financing of the durable elements that would ensure the lasting memory of these events. A central component of the feasts of May 1662 was the image of the Immaculate Conception, now lost, which the municipality ordered to be clothed in luxurious fabrics for bearing in procession [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 27 May 1662]. To commemorate the success of the Conceptionist cause, the City Council also produced the richest festival book ever printed in Valencia until then (Figure 2) [8]. The decision to publish the chronicle of the festivities of 1662 was taken at

the same time as the celebrations were organised, and Juan Bautista de Valda, one of the advocates of the municipality, was officially designated on 23 March to take charge of compiling the festival book [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 23 March 1662]. This enterprise was considered an integral part of the feasts by the municipal authorities, who included its cost within the ordinary budget for the celebrations on 30 April 1662 [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 30 April 1662]. In the meantime, the visual record of the historic events of 1662 in Valencia was entrusted to the painter Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa. On 22 May 1662, it was thus acknowledged that a debt of one hundred and forty pounds was owed to Geroni Espinosa for the picture he was painting of the Immaculate Conception [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 22 May 1662], and on 8 June 1663, Espinosa received fifteen pounds for the angels he had painted on the great canvas [AMV, Manuals de Consells, A-195 (1663-1664), fols. 24v-25r. 8 June 1663]. The picture represents the vow sworn by the nine Jurors of Valencia on 28 May 1662 before the image of the Immaculate Conception [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 28 May 1662].

After fixing and disseminating the memory of the events of 1662 with a book and a picture, the Valencian authorities also determined that the civic feast of the Immaculate Conception should leave an indelible imprint on the seat of municipal power, the now vanished *Casa de la Ciudad*. On 1 May 1663, the *Consell General* therefore decided that the image of the Immaculate Conception that had been ordered to be made for carrying in the festival procession should remain in the City Hall, where it would be placed in a niche in the centre of the altarpiece of its chapel [AMV, Manuals de Consells, A-194 (1662-1663), fols. 268r-268v. 1 May 1663]. Furthermore, the municipal government ordered the setting of a stone epitaph on its building to remind everyone of the city's devotion to the Immaculate Conception [AMV, Querns de Provisions, B-114 (1661-1662), s/f. 27 May 1662]. The Conception of the Virgin thus displaced Saint Michael, who had been the city's patron for centuries. Furthermore, the sculpture of the Virgin would be mirrored just a few yards away in Espinosa's enormous painting.

3. Discussion

The picture painted by Espinosa and the changes carried out by the municipality in its main building must be understood as a shift in the religious and self-defining referents of the city of Valencia. This mutation should not be interpreted simply as the substitution of one cult for another but as the reformulation of the very image of the city and its government. For this reason, *The Immaculate Conception with the Jurors of Valencia* is more than a religious painting. It is an exponent of the urban political culture of seventeenth-century Spain, and one of the greatest group portraits of the European Baroque.

The political system of seventeenth-century Spain was recently defined as a polycentric monarchy, a political structure in which territorial and local institutions, along with the urban patrician classes, wielded considerable power

and had great scope for action [9]. The cities, as the principal space of collective identity and the main cohesive element within the state, were the basis of this polycentric monarchy [10]. Indeed, Manuel Herrero Sánchez described the political system of the Spanish Habsburgs as a monarchy of urban republics [11]. Within this structure, the cities and the monarchy usually acted in conjunction with the aim of maintaining the system they formed part of [12].

Within the Spanish Monarchy's negotiated regime of authorities, religion and religiosity played a fundamental role as agglutinants for diverse identities and governing bodies, a fact which appears in Spanish political theory from the late sixteenth century onwards [13]. In the seventeenth century, the defence of a particular Catholic orthodoxy and a specific form of religiosity became a key nexus between the various authorities that made up the state, and a common cause that gave this polycentric monarchy its sense of purpose [14]. In the case of Valencia, the Immaculate Conception was proposed after 1662 as an image for the political structure of the city and its government. The collective portrait of the Jurors is, *de facto*, not a simulacrum of the donors of the picture but a reflection of a political act carried out by politicians, and a display of a particular civic culture.

To assess the reasons that impelled Valencia to choose the Immaculate Conception in 1662 as the symbol of its urban republic, we should look not to the court but at the identity of the city itself. The documentation and the municipal enterprises that surrounded the celebrations, and therefore the production and intentions of Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa's picture, refer insistently to the concept of memory. As they are not living beings, cities are evidently not endowed with memory, but the individuals who inhabit and make up an urban republic are. The actions of the Jurors in 1662 are therefore justified by the interest of the municipal government in preserving its own memory. They also show how that memory projected into the future was fed by the one the Valencians of 1662 had received from the past.

In 1394, the king of the Crown of Aragon, John I, signed the first royal decree in Valencia to endorse the mystery of the Immaculate Conception [15]. In 1474, the first printed literary work in the Iberian Peninsula, a poetry competition full of compositions dedicated to the Purity of the Virgin Mary, came off the press in Valencia [16]. In 1530, the University of Valencia was the first in the Spanish Monarchy to require anyone entering the institution, or intending to take a doctorate there, to swear an oath to defend the Immaculate Conception [15, p. 365-366]. The oath is included in [17]. And in 1622, Pope Gregory XV Ludovisi published a decree favourable to the Immaculate Conception, the *Sanctissimus*, producing a great outburst of Conceptionist fervour in Valencia that was recorded in a printed festival book [18]. Moreover, the municipal government then determined that evidence should be left of its oath of fidelity to the mystery in the form of a picture painted by Agustín Ridaura, where the city's coat-of-arms and the names of its Jurors appear alongside the image of the Most Pure Virgin Mary (Figure 3). Evidently, the Immaculate Conception was already a fundamental part of the cultural heritage of Valencia by 1662.



Figure 3. Agustín Ridaura, *Immaculate Conception*, 1624. Oil on canvas. Dimensions: 198 x 142 cm. Ayuntamiento de Valencia.



Figure 4. José Orient, *Portrait of Luis Crespi de Borja, Agent of Philip IV in the Cause of the Immaculate Conception*, c. 1674. Oil on canvas. Dimensions: 141 x 96 cm. Valencia, Museo de la Ciudad.

Owing to their own memory as an urban republic, the people and Jurors of Valencia felt that the diplomatic success of 1661 was their own, since it was a celebration of their history long before forming part of the monarchy of Spain. Even the ambassador responsible for the Conceptionist triumph of 1661 was a Valencian. Luis Crespí de Borja, provost of Valencia Cathedral, professor of theology at the city's university, and Bishop of Orihuela before becoming that of Plasencia and receiving the ambassadorial appointment from Philip IV, loomed large in the minds of the city's leaders [19]. Only a year before the papal decree, in 1660, the Jurors had written to him in Rome to ask him to bestow his patronage on Friar Pedro Trías, master of theology and professor of metaphysics, who had been sent by the municipality to thank the pope for the canonisation of St Thomas of Villanova [AMV, Lletres misives. g3-60 (1659-1669), s/f. Letter from the Jurors to Luis Crespí de Borja, ambassador of the king before His Holiness and the Roman Curia. 8 March 1660]. Afterwards, on his return from Rome, Luis Crespí visited Valencia before travelling on to the court, and was given a hero's welcome by the city [20]. Indeed, the municipality commissioned José Orient in 1674 to paint a portrait of Crespí for its gallery of Valencian glories (Figure 4). His biography, a panegyric that appeared to destine him for sainthood, was published in the city two years later [19]. If the Immaculate Conception was undoubtedly Valencian, there were even more reasons for such a belief in 1662.

From all this, it follows that Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa's picture, Juan Bautista de Valda's book and the celebrations of 1662 should all be seen as the reception of the identity of the city of Valencia by its municipal government and the transmission of that identity to future generations. All three enterprises formed part of a great festival, and Richard Trexler reminds us that the festive ritual was the nucleus of the traditional European city, the defining element of its identity, and the guardian of its memory [21]. Such rites called for the participation of all the components of the social scale of the *Ancien Régime*, establishing the place occupied by each in the living organism of the city and reaching an agreement among them whereby every one accepted its assigned place [22]. This social pact nearly always had a religious substratum, since the social order was ultimately sanctioned and guaranteed by the saint, Virgin or Christ to which each specific celebration was dedicated. It was, then, the divinity that ensured the participation of the whole of urban society in the ritual pact of the feast, and at the same time defined everyone's place in the established order. Thanks to the feast, the citizens, who were mere individuals in their private lives, materialised as components of a much larger structure in which each had a differentiated identity that was nevertheless largely constituted by their collective identity as part of the city.

In the Valencia of 1662, the municipal government designed, organised, financed and transmitted the memory of an event that managed to mobilise the whole of Valencian society with the aim of strengthening the collective identity of this great urban republic around the Immaculate Conception. Some years ago, Anthony D. Smith defined the nation as a community of human beings who possess a collective cultural identity, a collective political identity, or both [23]. In 1662, Valencia showed itself to be the perfect republic, with a solid municipal

government that guaranteed the preservation of a cultural heritage of its own, Conceptionism, and its transmission to the future. Espinosa's picture is therefore not a religious painting, or at least not only that. It is a harmonious demonstration of the political and civic culture of Valencia in 1662, which was represented in oil and canvas through the image of nine gentlemen kneeling before the Immaculate Conception.

4. Conclusions

Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa's *Immaculate Conception with the Jurors of Valencia* was painted in 1662 to preserve the memory of the success of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. The result was even more powerful than the festivities themselves, the written record of them, or the reforms undertaken in the *Casa de la Ciudad* to perpetuate Valencia's Conceptionist fervour in stone. The canvas materialised the Jurors' desire to transmit to future generations the heritage they had received, one of which they were proud and which gave a sense of purpose to their community. The artistic image created by Espinosa is a compendium of all that occurred. It is a festival picture, a graphic document of the oath taken by the municipality, a snapshot of the interior of the City Hall with the sculpture of the Immaculate Conception, a reflection of the harmony of an urban republic, a measure of the pride of the municipal government, and an expression of the ideology which then moved all the inhabitants of Valencia to act as one. It is all that and more. It is one of the foremost paintings of the Spanish Golden Age, which makes it one of the finest in the world, and it remains today as visual proof of how shared identities were and are constructed. It is a lesson in urbanity whose relevance is undiminished in 2019.

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