

Greta Dzikowska

KRAKOW

## The Sevillian collection of the images of Mercedarians by Zurbarán

New conditions which had emerged in Spain along with the spirit of the post-Trident reform left their mark in visual arts. Every monastic congregation strove to present its own story and episodes from the life of its founder as well as other important figures of the order. The most accomplished artists of the Spanish baroque were commissioned by many monasteries, creating outstanding work cycles which can be described as unique monastic chronicles. The images of Mercedarian monks of the Sevillian order of Nuestra Señora de la Merced are part of monastic culture and art. Paintings depicting Mercedarian monks were made by Francisco de Zurbarán, one of the most exquisite painters of the Spanish golden age.

In my work I focused on six surviving paintings of Mercedarians destined for the Sevillian cloister Nuestra Señora de la Merced. In addition, I referred to a replica of the painting by Francisco de Zurbarán showing the bust of an unidentified Mercedarian monk. Iconographic analysis of selected works of the artist was presented in a brief historical and artistic outline of the Mercedarian order in Sevilla. The omission of paintings depicting founder of the order Peter Nolasco was intentional. Pictures of the Mercedarian founding father have already been discussed by Polish researcher and art historian Andrzej Witko.<sup>1</sup>

My discussion of the subject is based on literature in the Spanish language. The most extensive publications concerning the works by Francisco de Zurbarán from the Sevillian monastery include *Francisco de Zurbarán 1598–1664* by Odile

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<sup>1</sup> A. Witko, *Cykl malowideł z wielkiego dziedzińca sewilskiego klasztoru Merced Calzada ilustrujący historię zakonu mercedariańskiego*, [in:] *Laudator temporis acti. Studia z dziejów sztuki i kultury ofiarowane Księdzu Doktorowi Janowi Niecieckiemu w 65. rocznicę urodzin*, red. I. Rolska, K. Gombin, K. Przylicki, Lublin 2015, p. 135–147; A. Witko, *Cykl malowideł Francisca de Zurbarána z Małego Dziedzińca sewilskiego klasztoru Merced Calzada* [pending publication].

Delendy<sup>2</sup> and the catalogue of the exhibition Museo Nacional del Prado, entitled *Zurbarán*.<sup>3</sup> Also Jonathan Brown in a chapter of his book *Zurbarán*<sup>4</sup> analyses the religious art of the Spanish painter, referring, among other things, to the artist's works from the Sevillian Mercedarian monastery. Less exhaustive, albeit equally useful, were publications by Isabel Sánchez Quevedo: *Zurbarán*<sup>5</sup> and *Zurbarán. 1598–1664. Biography and Critical Analysis. Catalogue of the Works*.<sup>6</sup>

The present work uses the analytic-synthetic approach. Individual works by Francisco de Zurbarán were analysed on the basis of selected available literature and gathered visual material.

Ordo Beatae Mariae Virginis de Mercede – the Order of Our Lady of Mercy and the Redemption of the Captives – was established 1218 in Barcelona by Peter Nolasco. The main purpose of the order was to free Christian captives held by Muslims.<sup>7</sup> The Sevillian monastery dedicated to Nuestra Señora de la Merced was founded in 1249 by Ferdinand III at the recommendation of Peter Nolasco, who took part in the reconquest of the Andalusian capital. The structure of the medieval buildings was pulled down in 1602. Construction works according to a design by Juan de Oviedo y de la Bandera lasted until 1612. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the most renowned Sevillian architects participated in the decoration of the compound. Sculptures for the monastery were made by Francisco de Ribas, Alonso Martínez and Juan Martínez Montañés. Paintings were created by Francisco Pacheco and Alonso Vázquez, both of whom painted images illustrating the history of the order. Juan de Roelas and Francisco Herrera el Viejo prepared many retables and paintings.<sup>8</sup>

Francisco de Zurbarán also made a series of canvases with images of Mercedarians. Under contract signed by the artist in 1628, the painter was obliged to supply within one year twenty-two paintings depicting the life of Saint Peter Nolasco. The agreement also contained a clause which stipulated that the superior of the order himself was to prepare the iconographic programme. Moreover,

<sup>2</sup> O. Delenda, *Francisco de Zurbarán 1598–1664*, Madrid 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Zurbarán*, Museo del Prado 1988; Ministerio de Cultura, Banco Bilbao Vizcaya 1988, Bilbao–Madrid 1988.

<sup>4</sup> J. Brown, *Patronage and piety. Religious imagery in the art of Francisco de Zurbarán*, [in:] *Zurbarán*, New York 1987, p. 25–37.

<sup>5</sup> I. Sánchez Quevedo, *Zurbarán*, Madrid 2000.

<sup>6</sup> J. Gudiol, J. Gallego, *Zurbarán. 1598–1664. Biography and critical analysis. Catalogue of the works*, New York 1977.

<sup>7</sup> J. Brown, *Patronage and piety...*, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Zurbarán*, op. cit., p. 137; J. Gudiol, J. Gallego, *Zurbarán, 1598–1664...*, op. cit., p. 4; I. Sánchez Quevedo, *Zurbarán*, op. cit., p. 10.

in addition to hosting the painter and his workers, the principal agreed to pay a sum of 1500 ducats in three instalments, namely at the beginning of the work, after the delivery of eleven paintings and after the completion of the order. The contract was very important for the artist, because it gave him the opportunity to leave Llerena, a small town, and settle in Sevilla – a city which back then was the centre of culture and art.<sup>9</sup>

However, Francisco de Zurbarán managed neither to complete the work by the time specified in the contract nor to deliver the twenty-two paintings he had been commissioned. The number of paintings completed by the artist is subject to discrepancies. Antonio Ponz reports fifteen, whereas Ceán Bermúdez twelve paintings. While there exists a record (dated 1732) of paintings and sculptures belonging to the order, it makes tasks of counting works by Francisco de Zurbarán even more complicated. According to the list, apart from scenes from Peter Nolasco's life, there were additional eight oval portraits of the founders of the order attributed to the Spanish artist. Nevertheless, the record is presumed to be erroneous, as the painter never used the oval format. Contemporary literature mentions thirteen paintings by Francisco de Zurbarán, among which there are canvases presenting images of the founder and other important members of the Mercedarian order in Sevilla.<sup>10</sup>

Before the establishment of the Mercedarian order the artist also painted other monks from the Sevillian monastery. Among eight portraits of theologians, a painting of Jeronimo Pérez was placed in the library (fig. 1). Jerónimo Pérez was a professor of theology and philosophy in Valencia and Vicar-General of the Mercedarian order in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The artist presented the monk in his Mercedarian habit – a white cassock with a scapular and a white hood. Note that it is the only image of a Mercedarian in which the friar's head is covered with a hood. The monk faces the viewer almost directly, with his eyes looking straight ahead. In his hands there is a book in which he is writing something. To his right there is a table covered with a scarlet tablecloth, which adds depth to the composition. The dark background emphasizes the white of the monk's robes and the contrasting red of the tablecloth. The realism of the man's features, the suppleness of the model and the exact structure of the bones of his palms suggest that the painting was created after 1630.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Zurbarán, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>10</sup> Zurbarán, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>11</sup> O. Delenda, *Francisco de Zurbarán...*, op. cit., p. 158; A. Witko, *Sewilskie malarstwo siedemnastego wieku. Od wizji mistycznych do martwych natur*, Kraków 2013, p. 429–430.

Francisco Zumel y Bustillo (fig. 2) was depicted in a similar manner to Jeronimo Peréz. The monk's image was also destined for the monastic library. Francisco Zumel y Bustillo was a doctor of arts at the University of Salamanca. With the support of Philip II he was elected General Superior of the order, in which he was responsible for implementing reforms and ransoming captives from the Moors. Later he returned to the University of Salamanca, where he gained renown as a Thomist theologian. He wrote many works, including biographies of key members of the order. He published a commentary to the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas, which was first issued in 1585. Francisco de Zurbarán showed the intellectual strength of the monk in his mimics, which expresses remarkable concentration. Furthermore, as in the case of other friars, the artists equipped Francisco Zumela y Bustillo in a book and a pen – attributes associated with knowledge and wisdom.<sup>12</sup>

Another canvas presents brother Pedro Machado (fig. 3), consecrated as Mercedarian by Francisco Zumel y Bustillo. Pedro Machado was a doctor of arts at the University of Salamanca, a professor of theology and a distinguished philosopher and mathematician. He wrote many texts, e.g. a commentary to the Gospels *Liternalis et moralis omnium Evangeliorum*, a work first published in 1604. Among his works one should mention *De la comunión diaria* and *Tractatum de puritate Deiparae Virginis Mariae*. Like the paintings referred to above, this canvas was allocated to the library, a place where monks gathered to study. Francisco de Zurbarán presented brother Pedro Machado in the same vein as Francisco Zumel, although in an mirror image. As is the case with the former, except for the face, the images differ only by the Mercedarian coat-of-arms, which decorates the habit of brother Pedro Machado. The remaining parts of the composition were copied from other images of Mercedarians.<sup>13</sup>

Miguel Jerónimo Carmelo (fig. 4) took his vows in 1542. He was a doctor of theology and pontifical notary. According to biographers, he was a great worshipper of Mary and promoter of the idea of the Immaculate Conception, which he defended with intense commitment. The iconography of the portrait of Miguel Jerónimo Carmelo seems to be based on a text by Padre Guimeran, containing a description of the apparition of Mary to brother Migueli after he wrote the *De Conceptione* treatise. References to the supernatural were reduced to the

<sup>12</sup> O. Delenda, *Francisco de Zurbarán...*, op. cit., p. 160; A. Witko, *Sewilskie malarstwo...*, op. cit., p. 429.

<sup>13</sup> O. Delenda, *Francisco de Zurbarán...*, op. cit., p. 161; A. Witko, *Sewilskie malarstwo...*, op. cit., p. 429–430.

minimum by the artist. Clad in a Mercedarian habit, the friar is presented with a book in his left hand, his right one raised and holding a pen. His eyes are looking at a tiny figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception, who appeared to the monk. As Miguel Jerónimo Carmelo performed the function of a papal nuncio, the painter adorned the habit with insignia associated with the supremacy of the Holy See. The artist included the crucifix hanging over the chest, and put a mitre on the friar's head. The emblems of power make this composition unique among other paintings, which are dominated by the austerity of the monastic attire.<sup>14</sup>

The image of brother Miguel Jerónimo Carmelo is linked to the painting depicting a *Bust of a (Saint) Mercedarian* (fig. 5), or, according to other sources, Right Reverend San Carmelo. The work is known today from a French copy belonging to a private collection. When creating the image of San Carmelo, Francisco de Zurbarán imparted to him the physical traits of the same model that he used in his portrait of St. Serapion. The expression with which he presented both saints is varied. Serapion's figure reflects reconciliation with fate, while San Carmelo contemplates the revelation of Mary, as indicated by his eyes looking upward. There is also the gesture of the raised right hand holding the pen, reminiscent of the painting of *Saint John the Evangelist on the Island of Patmos* by Diego Velázquez. The bust of a not entirely identified Mercedarian was to be found in the *De Profundis* room. The images of the above-mentioned Mercedarians present friars in white habits with a book in their hands.<sup>15</sup>

Saint Serapion (fig. 6), who had taken part in the crusade led by Richard the Lionheart and had been captured with the king, was depicted in a totally different way. After his release, St. Serapion appeared at the court of Leopold the Glorious and joined the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula. However, he did not fight the Moors, as he arrived soon after the truce had been called. He participated in the Fifth Crusade, and then he joined the entourage of Elisabeth of Swabia, where he met Peter Nolasco. In 1222 he entered the Mercedarian order. During the last crusade, because of the lack of money for ransom, he surrendered himself a captive in return for other slaves. Because he was effective in preaching the gospel to others, he was first crucified on St. Andrew's cross, and then tortured. Francisco de Zurbarán did not present the martyr's death with the cruelty present in hagiographical sources. Zurbarán's saint Serapion is dead or already dying, an agonised martyr, suspended on a rope tied around his arms in an undefined

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<sup>14</sup> Zurbarán, op. cit., p. 162; A. Witko, *Sewilskie malarstwo...*, op. cit., p. 431.

<sup>15</sup> O. Delenda, *Francisco de Zurbarán...*, op. cit., p. 167–168.

space. The artist generally avoided depicting martyrs' deaths with all their brutality. Also in this case he concealed the wounds left by tormentors under a white Mercedarian habit. Francisco de Zurbarán made the moment of Serapion's death similar to the manner in which the death of the crucified Christ was presented in popular images. Both the head of the dying Christ and the head of the tormented Mercedarian rests on the right shoulder with a discernible expression of acceptance and peace. The face, without a slightest trace of idealization, clearly bears portrait features characteristic for a specific model, which is manifested by prominent lips and a broad nose. The artist showed agony with anatomical precision and unusual realism, as expressed by closed eyes and half-open mouth. Note the startling expression of humility on the face of St. Serapion; humility with which he accepted his martyrdom, pursuing his earthly mission and key ideas of the Mercedarian order.<sup>16</sup>

The painting of Hernando de Santiago (fig. 7), which, according to the inscription, is a real portrait, stands out among the images of Mercedarian friars. In fact, Francisco de Zurbarán based this work on a drawing of a monk by Francisco Pacheco from his book *Libro de descripción de verdaderos retratos*. The monk was known as *Pico de Oro* for his garrulousness. He was a very important figure in the order, hence a portrait larger than those of other friars. The portrait is painted in a style similar to other images, the difference being that the Mercedarian in the picture appears to be looking at the viewer. A pause in writing in the book is revealed by a still hand over the manuscript.<sup>17</sup>

A monochromatic palette permeates all images of friars. An extremely emphatic white of the friars' habits contrasts with the dark background on Zurbaránian canvases. The simplicity of compositions, the central point of which are figures of monks, exudes peace. Lack of sudden motions introduces harmony, thanks to which the work focuses on the persons depicted. In his portraits the artist depicted five Mercedarians of the Sevillian monastery in standing position. In view of the fact that the friars make notes in their books, presenting them in a standing posture is an interesting and perhaps amusing decision. The standing position is neither appropriate nor comfortable for writing. In the European art of painting, there are many examples of depictions of members of the Church and other personages sitting at a writing desk with an open book and a pen in their hand. Why did Francisco de Zurbarán choose to paint friars making notes standing?

<sup>16</sup> O. Delenda, *Francisco de Zurbarán...*, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> O. Delenda, *Francisco de Zurbarán...*, op. cit., p. 165; A. Witko, *Sewilskie malarstwo...*, op. cit., p. 430.

The standing position expresses alertness, attention, respect, veneration, readiness to take orders and to perform a service, as well as to set on a journey.<sup>18</sup> The monastic life is a ceaseless service to neighbours, recognition and acceptance of certain commands and rules followed in a given branch of the order. Most importantly, it is focusing one's attention on God and a perpetual journey towards Him. The artist combined this meaningful posture of the monks with a book in their hands, which constitutes the basis of their consecrated life.

Francisco de Zurbarán painted images of the most important Mercedarian friars. In this way the Sevillian brothers gained an illustration of their history and portraits of the members of the order, who could become guides on the paths of their everyday life. In order to outline the figures of the friars from rather distant past, the artist used models of contemporary persons. This measure lends universal characteristics to the virtues held by depicted Mercedarians. In iconographic and artistic terms, paintings by Francisco de Zurbarán can be described as simple compositions with a pared-down colour palette. Restraint in the use of means of artistic expression did not prevent the artist from including spiritual depth in his works. On the contrary, his images of Mercedarians catch the viewer's eye and encourage contemplation, reminding us anew of values and effort which the monks embraced in their everyday life. Similar character of almost all portraits suggests that the content of the works is far more important than wealth of means of artistic expression or complex iconographic structure. Paintings by Francisco de Zurbarán contain a perfect combination of the two levels, intellectual and spiritual, on which the order operated.

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<sup>18</sup> D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, tłum. i oprac. W. Zakrzewska, P. Pachciarek, R. Turzyński, Warszawa 1990, p. 20.

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## Abstract

The portraits of Mercedarian monks by Francisco de Zurbarán were created for the Sevillian monastery Nuestra Señora de la Merced. The artist sketched images of old-time monks based on the physiognomy of his contemporary models. The surviving paintings characterize in a simplicity of composition. Each canvas shows an image of a monk clothed in a white frock. All the presented members of the order, with the exception of Saint Serapion, are pictured with a tome, which emphasizes the intellectual skills of the selected monk. The images of the Mercedarians, which decorated the walls of monastery rooms, were the reference point, as well as a model, of the monastic life for the generations of men who were taking the veil. Francisco de Zurbarán, with the use of two colours: a dark, almost black, background and a shining white, pictured the spiritual dimension of the images, which sublimated the idea of the monastic life.

## Keywords

Francisco de Zurbarán, paintings, Mercedarians, Sevilla, portraits



## Abstrakt

### Sewilski zbiór wizerunków zakonników mercedariańskich pędzla Zurbarána

Wizerunki zakonników mercedariańskich autorstwa Francisco de Zurbarána powstały do sewilskiego klasztoru Nuestra Señora de la Merced. Artysta naszkicował postaci braci zakonnych z odległych czasów w oparciu o fizjonomię współczesnych mu modeli. Zachowane obrazy charakteryzują się prostotą kompozycji. Każde płótno wypełnia postać zakonnika odzianego w biały habit. Wszyscy ukazani przedstawiciele zakonu, za wyjątkiem świętego Serapiona, przedstawieni zostali z księgą, która podkreśla walory intelektualne wybranych zakonników. Podobizny mercedariuszy zdobiące ściany pomieszczeń klasztornych stanowiły punkt odniesienia oraz wzór życia zakonnego dla pokoleń mężczyzn wstępujących do zakonu. Francisco de Zurbarán za pomocą dwóch barw: ciemnego, niemalże czarnego tła i jaśniejszej na nim bieli zawarł duchowy wymiar wizerunków uwznioślając ideę życia zakonnego.

### Słowa kluczowe

Francisco de Zurbarán, malarstwo, mercedariusze, Sewilla, wizerunki



1. F. Zurbarán, *Jerónimo Pérez*, 1630–1632, Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, repr. in: O. Delenda, *Zurbarán*, Madrid 2009, fig. 29



2. F. Zurbarán, *Francisco Zumel*, 1630–1632, Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, repr. in: O. Delenda, *Zurbarán*, Madrid 2009, fig. 30



3. E. Zurbarán, *Pedro Machado*, 1630–1632, Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, repr. in: O. Delenda, *Zurbarán*, Madrid 2009, fig. 31



4. E. Zurbarán, *Jeronimo Miguel Carmelo*, 1630–1632, Madrid, St. Barbara's Church, repr. in: *Zurbarán*, Museo del Prado 1988; Ministerio de Cultura, Banco Bilbao Vizcaya 1988, fig. 14



5. F. Zurbarán, *A bust of a Mercedarian*, 1628, Madrid, Ruméu de Armas collection, repr. in: O. Delenda, *Zurbarán*, Madrid 2009, fig. 8 bis



6. F. Zurbarán, *St. Serapion*, 1628, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum, repr. in: O. Delenda, *Zurbarán*, Madrid 2009, fig. 8



7. F. Zurbarán, *Hernando de Santiago*, 1630–1632, Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, repr. in: O. Delenda, *Zurbarán*, Madrid 2009, fig. 32