

# *The Holy Kinship* by Francisco de Herrera the Elder

in Louis-Philippe's Spanish Gallery



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**BILBOKO ARTE  
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Francisco de Herrera the Elder marks the transition in Spanish painting between the "reformed Mannerists" and the later artists who fully espoused naturalism. For this reason his work provided the backbone of an exhibition I co-presented in 2005<sup>1</sup> which sought to highlight the Seville artist as the forerunner of what Pérez Sánchez has called the generation of the great masters, in whose work can be found many of the artistic, chromatic and formal values that would help to revitalize art circles in Seville well into the first third of the 17th century.

When Herrera came to execute works like the ones in the St. Bonaventure cycle or this *Holy Kinship* [fig. 1], which was probably produced a few years later, his art had entered full maturity, providing a benchmark for many artists living and working in Seville at the time. Zurbarán was certainly one of these, and he assimilated the sculpture-like rotundity so characteristic of Herrera the Elder's paintings, absorbing too his chromatic values, his plastic vision and the ability to model when it came to applying oil paint to the waiting canvas.

Herrera painted this particular painting for the Convent of the Franciscanas Clarisas de Santa Inés in Seville, together with a *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, both paintings being located in lateral reredoses at the foot of the church's nave. According to the bill of payment, we know the polychrome work was executed in 1636 and 1637, and that the painter received "four thousand reales, with which, together with the other 3,250 reales I have already received in other payments, I have been paid 7,350 reales, which are the remnant of the nine thousand I was to have for painting, gilding and scoring the two reredoses that were made for the Church of said monastery, one of the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the other of the Lady Saint Ann placed in said church..."<sup>2</sup>.

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1 Sevilla/Bilbao 2005, pp. 150-153, no. 13.

2 López Martínez 1928, p. 66.



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1. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*The Holy Kinship*, 1636-1637  
Oil on canvas, 194.5 x 177 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 69/127

Thacher<sup>3</sup> first linked this contract with the painting entitled *The Holy Kinship*, curiously catalogued in the inventory as *Santa Ana*<sup>4</sup>, which may allude to the saint's family and her apostolic lineage, an issue we shall look into in more detail later. But the essential point is that *The Descent of the Holy Spirit* and *The Holy Kinship* were in the Church of Santa Inés until before 1838. In his *Spanish Journey*, Ponz writes about them thus:

Two singular and very handsome paintings by Francisco Herrera the elder are conserved in this church: one, of the Holy Family, with much accompaniment and God the Father above, the other being of the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, of even finer treatment and invention than the former. They have been hung on the wall to replace a modish carpentry, instead of in the reredos, where they were originally placed<sup>5</sup>.

Unfortunately, nothing is known of this other painting, which in Ponz's view was of even greater inventiveness than the picture he dubs the "Holy Family". This circumstance highlights the importance of these two paintings, which were, in light of what the scholar says, originally embedded in reredoses. The details would seem to confirm the information gleaned from the documentation published by López Martínez, wherein payment is made to Herrera for painting, gilding and scoring the two reredoses and not for the paintings, which, presumably, were earlier works<sup>6</sup>. In 1791 Arana de Varflora<sup>7</sup> describes Herrera's paintings in the Church of the Convent of Santa Inés as "of merit".

In the inventory prepared by Gómez Ímaz<sup>8</sup> in 1810, neither of these two paintings were amongst the ones removed by the imposed, French-backed government, which suggests that *The Holy Kinship* disappeared immediately afterwards, and in any case before 1838. However, although the painting was by that time in the Louvre, in 1844 González de León still refers to the two as being in Santa Inés: "Towards the foot of the nave are two fine paintings by Herrera the Elder: one representing the Holy Family with other figures, and the other the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the group of apostles"<sup>9</sup>, which is clearly wrong, as we shall see, and suggests that in this case González de León is using references from years back. The disappearance of Herrera's paintings from Santa Inés was recorded by Pascual Madoz in 1849, who limits himself to saying: "in the past it had some good paintings by Francisco Herrera the Elder"<sup>10</sup>.

The first historical reference placing *The Holy Kinship* in Paris is dated 20 September 1838, when it was located<sup>11</sup>, attributed to Juan de Roelas, in Louis-Philippe's Spanish Gallery, open to the public in the Louvre from 1838 to 1848. Until now, this piece of information had gone unnoticed, principally because the work had been attributed to another artist. But the first irrefutable proof we have that this painting was indeed the work by Herrera originally in Santa Inés is the description of the issue in entry number 256 of the News of the Louis-Philippe Gallery: "L'Enfant-Jésus et saint Jean-Baptiste. Sainte Élizabeth vient visiter la Vierge Marie. Elle porte saint Jean-Baptiste, qui, à la vue de l'Enfant Jésus, lui tend les bras pour l'embrasser. Haut. 2 m. 70 c. - Larg. 1 m. 80 c."<sup>12</sup>.

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3 Thacher 1937, p. 367.

4 Soria however prefers to associate this document with Herrera's *Saint Ann and the Virgin* once in the Contini-Bonacossi, and now in the Juan Abelló collection, which, given the measurements is in our view unlikely, particularly as it is a painting intended to aid private prayer. Cf. Kubler/Soria 1959, p. 382, note 36.

5 Ponz 1947, vol. IX, letter IV, p. 793. The information supplied in the correspondence of Antonio Ponz with the Count del Águila, his informer in Seville, is as follows: "Santa Inés: De Herrera el Viejo: Los dos retablos celebrados (Quitaron poco ha del uno el lienzo de la venida del Espíritu Santo y lo tienen colgado junto al choro)". Cf. Mata 1929, p. 177.

6 I agree with Ana Galilea, who dates the painting between 1634 and 1635. Cf. Galilea Antón 1992.

7 Arana 1791, vol. II, p. 39.

8 Gómez Ímaz 1896.

9 González de León 1844, vol. II, p. 159.

10 Madoz 1849, p. 328.

11 Archives of the Louvre Museum, Paris, 1 DD 122. Inventory of the Spanish Gallery, no. 281.

12 Baticle/Marinas 1981, p. 165, no. 256, corresponding to the Louis-Philippe Gallery, Paris, no. 248 (1), no. 256 (4).

This is quite clearly Herrera's painting; despite its complexity, the iconography is correctly identified and, most importantly, the original, uncut measurements are given. If it is now 194.5 cm tall, we may deduce that it is missing some 76 cm vertically and barely 3 cm in width, probably through changes in the lining, which comes very close to the height proposed by Antonio Martínez Ripoll in his doctoral thesis<sup>13</sup>, invalidating both Lasterra's calculations<sup>14</sup>, which made the painting four metres high, and the ones I myself had proposed in the exhibition catalogue of *De Herrera a Velázquez*<sup>15</sup>. The remnants of the blue cloak in the upper part, surrounded by cherubs' heads, belonged to God the Father<sup>16</sup>, as Ponz records, leaving no room for my own suggestion of a Mary the Immaculate, which I now withdraw.

The next date of note in the painting's career is 20 May 1853, when the Louis-Philippe sale went ahead in London, the *Holy Kinship* appearing as number 341 with the note: "From a convent in Seville". It was acquired by a man called Haines for 17 pounds. Although there is no way of knowing if Haines bid on behalf of art collector George Alexander Hoskins<sup>17</sup>, the fact is the painting entered the latter's collection, and, when in 1857 it was included in a memorable exhibition in Manchester entitled *Trésors d'art*<sup>18</sup>, Hoskins was identified as the owner. Other works from Spain stolen or acquired clandestinely by the Maréchal Soult<sup>19</sup> were also shown at this exhibition. Although, as on previous occasions, *The Holy Kinship* was attributed to Juan de Roelas, which once again has hindered proper identification, the catalogue contains an allusion to the iconography: "530 Madonna and St. Elizabeth with the meeting of the Holy children", which dispels any doubts.

Likewise the receipt of purchase held in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum [fig. 2]<sup>20</sup> shows clearly that it was displayed at the exhibition with the wrong attribution, repeated on the frame [fig. 3]:

MADONNA & ST. ELIZABETH

With the meeting of the Holy Children

Painted

by JUAN DE LAS ROELAS

Born 1560 – Died 1625

from the Collection of Geo. A. Hoskins 1 8 1 [?]

Exhibited at the Manchester Exhibition of Art Treasures 1857.

The Hoskins sale was made on 17 and 18 June 1864 in London, months after the antiquarian's death, the painting figuring as number 190. *The Holy Kinship* changed hands once again and eventually came into the

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13 Martínez Ripoll 1978, pp. 155-156, no. P.66. He suggested the painting was about 3 metres high.

14 Lasterra 1967, pp. 81-82.

15 Benito Navarrete Prieto in Seville/Bilbao 2005, p. 150, no. 13.

16 Angulo suggested that the cut-off figure in the upper part was Saint Ana. Cf. Angulo 1971, p. 85. Valdivieso however felt that God the Father and the Holy Spirit would have been a fitting crown for the painting. Cf. Valdivieso 2003, p. 246.

17 George Alexander Hoskins (1802-1863) was an English antiquarian, artist, writer who travelled widely in Africa and Spain on a number of occasions, whence his interest in Spanish painting. My thanks to Ana Sánchez-Lassa for this information.

18 Burger 1857, p. 45, no. 530. My thanks to Odile Delenda for allowing me to consult the catalogue in the Library of the Wildenstein Institute.

19 The Manchester exhibition (Burger 1857) also showed Murillo's *Santa Catalina* from the Church of Santa Catalina in Seville, stolen by Soult and later passing to the collection of William Stirling, displayed in Manchester with an attribution to Zurbarán. See Navarrete 2003, pp. 263-268.

20 I would like to thank Ana Sánchez-Lassa for giving me every facility to consult this documentation and for help in reading the frame inscription.

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*Ha recibido de Sr Manuel Bosada la cantidad de Cuatro mil pesetas (4.000 pto) importe de la venta del cuadro titulado = "La Virgen del Niño, de Juan de las Roelas. Exhibido como original en la Exposición de Tesoros del Arte en Manchester (1857). cuyo cuadro lo ha adquirido en propiedad la Junta del Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao para que conste dicha adquisición firma el presente el referido Director de Bilbao a 27 de Abril de 1920.*

*E. M. Andrews  
April 27-1920*

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2. Receipt of purchase for *The Holy Kinship* to The Art Collectors Association Limited, London, 27 April 1920



3. Card from the frame of *The Holy Kinship*

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possession of the Art Collectors Association Limited of London, the director of which, Edgar M. Andrews, sold it on 27 April 1920 for four thousand pesetas to the Board of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum.

It is evident that the painting was mutilated at some point after leaving the Louis-Philippe Gallery and before arriving in Bilbao, as a clean cut is observable in the upper part that removed God the Father, leaving part of his blue cloak and the flower-scattering cherubs and angels. Ponz's testimony makes it quite clear that the work comprised the "Holy Family, with much accompaniment, and above, God the Father", and above all provides the primitive measurements of 2.70 high commented on above. The upper part may have suffered some accident that would explain the adaptation of the frame as it is today; another possibility is that it was removed to satisfy the taste of one its former owners or even for ease of shipping.

The painting's iconography is of a complexity and richness unprecedented in Spanish painting, clearly rooted in northern mediaeval practices. Herrera very probably used a model found in a print or painting of this nature to present as clearly as possible the duality between Christ's human nature, personified in the lower part, where He appears with all His cousins, and His divine nature, by crowning the composition with the now missing God the Father.

In this interpretation of the Holy Kinship, Herrera highlights the central role of Christ and His cousins, particularly St. John the Baptist, making a clear allusion —as Moreno Cuadro has noted<sup>21</sup>— to the relation between the Precursor and the Saviour. The artist places these two figures [fig. 4] right at the centre of the composition, their heads marking the mid-point of the composition's X-shape that orders the scene with its play of diagonals, very much in the Baroque style. In the right foreground is St. Elizabeth and behind her, her husband Zachary. In her lap Elizabeth<sup>22</sup> cradles her son St. John the Baptist, who rests his head on the head of the Child Jesus, who embraces him, and in turn is held up by his mother, the Virgin Mary. St. Joseph stands just behind her, and between their heads is St. Ann, who observes her grandson rather nostalgically. Between the heads of St. Elizabeth and the Virgin, at the centre of the composition, are two of Mary's sisters; to the left in the canvas and to the right of Christ, Salome, wife of Zebedee and mother of St. John the Evangelist and St. James the Elder, who are shown as children [fig. 5] in the lower left foreground. St. John the Evangelist points to Christ, and St. James the Elder rests his chin on his brother's shoulder. St. Mary of Cleophas's head can be seen between the heads of St. John and St. Elizabeth.

Mary, wife to Cleophas or Alpheus, had four sons: St. James the Younger, Simeon, Jude and Joseph. As the latter was never an apostle, only the first three are shown in the painting, one of them with St. John the Baptist's lamb [fig. 6].

As Reau<sup>23</sup> rightly reminds us, Mary's kin should not be confused with the Holy Family, as has occurred with this painting and others boasting similar iconography. What is really being represented here is the apostolic lineage of St. Ann or her clan. Curiously, in Herrera's painting the mother of the Virgin is relegated from the foreground [fig. 7], while the apostles, particularly the child St. John the Evangelist, are given a central role as befits the men who would spread Christ's message. John, with the chalice on the table, points to Christ, indicating in clearly prophetic mode that He will save and redeem mankind, thereby foreshadowing His Passion and death. St. John is represented as a theologian, as he will prove Christ's divinity better than anyone<sup>24</sup>.

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21 Moreno 1994, pp. 34-37.

22 My thanks to Odile Delenda for her help with the iconography relating to the *Holy Kinship*.

23 Réau 1996-1998, t. 1, vol. 2, pp. 147-149.

24 *Ibid.*, t. 2, vol. 4, p. 186.





4. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*The Holy Kinship*, 1636-1637  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of Jesus Christ and St. John the Baptist



5. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*The Holy Kinship*, 1636-1637  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of St. John the Evangelist and St. James the Elder



6. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*The Holy Kinship*, 1636-1637  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of St. James the Younger, Simeon and Jude



7. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*The Holy Kinship*, 1636-1637  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of St. Ann



8. Anonymous Castilian  
*The Family of the Virgin*, first quarter of 16th century  
 Tempera on serge, 120 x 174.5 cm  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Inv. no. 69/276

The apocryphal tradition of St. Ann's triple matrimony, recounted in the Golden Legend, became popular—as Reau<sup>25</sup> noted—above all from 1406 on. This was due to the vision of St. Colette of Corbie, abbess of a convent in Ghent, where St. Ann appeared to her, with her three daughters and their sons, as well as the Virgin's cousin, St. Elizabeth, with her son St. John the Baptist. As represented by Herrera, the theme became especially popular in the Low Countries.

I should stress here that St. Ann's three husbands usually appear in 15th-century and early 16th-century mediaeval iconography, particularly in the Low Countries; in Herrera's painting, however, they are nowhere to be seen. They are included, for instance, in a canvas from the early decades of the 16th century in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum [fig. 8]. The painting shows the enlarged Holy Kinship, with St. Ann's husbands next to the Virgin's other sisters and their respective children, a theme typical in northern European and Flemish painting, of which a number of examples still survive<sup>26</sup>. The Council of Trent took great pains to deny the tradition in view of St. Ann's long period of barrenness, and this may be the reason why the rare Spanish examples concentrate on portraying only her three daughters: the Virgin Mary, Salome and Mary of Cleophas, and their

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., t. 1, vol. 2, pp. 147-149.

<sup>26</sup> Apart from the ones proposed by Moreno 1994, pp. 34-36, particularly for St. Ann's Family, another enlarged Holy Kinship, from the Antwerp area and dated c. 1520, featuring St. Ann's and the three Marys's husbands with their respective children, came up for auction recently. See *Important Old Master Paintings, Part I, including J.M.W. Turner's "Giudecca, La Donna della Salute and San Giorgio"*. New York: Christie's, 2006, pp. 58-59, no. 24.



9. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*The Holy Kinship*, c. 1650  
 Oil on canvas, 156 x 126 cm  
 Private collection, Madrid



10. Francisco Rizi (1614-1685)  
*The Holy Kinship*, c. 1640  
 Oil on canvas, 163 x 135 cm  
 Condesa de Casa Loja Collection

respective children. This is a subject Herrera would return to very late on, in Madrid, in a painting of uneven quality<sup>27</sup> produced around 1650 [fig. 9], although still of interest because it is crowned by portraits of God the Father and the Child, who plays with the Dove of the Holy Spirit, between His mother and St. Elizabeth. Missing from the painting, curiously enough, is St. John the Baptist, and only the heads of the other characters are shown, all of them done in looser, more relaxed brushwork of much lower quality in comparison with the mastery exhibited in the Bilbao painting studied here. The painting was almost certainly produced as an aid to private prayer, which would account for the somewhat perfunctory execution.

Francisco Rizi's *The Holy Kinship*, from the collection of the Countess of Casa Loja [fig. 10]<sup>28</sup>, takes the same iconographic approach as the Bilbao painting. A preliminary sketch by Rizi is in the Library of the Palacio Real. Painted by Rizi in the early stages of his career, probably in 1640<sup>29</sup>, the work portrays the same characters except for St. Ann. Her three daughters are however there: the Virgin Mary, Salome and Mary of Cleophas and, once again, the cousin, St. Elizabeth, who on this occasion holds the child St. John the Baptist, while, on the far side, St. John the Evangelist plays with the lamb in the presence of his brother St. James the Elder, dressed as a pilgrim, and his other cousins. As in Herrera's painting, St. Ann's three husbands have disappeared, following the Tridentine guidelines and avoiding the pitfalls of legend.

Herrera most likely painted the Bilbao *Holy Kinship* around the time he was working for the Colegio de San Buenaventura. The impasto and colouring certainly support this dating, and the work is probably before 1636-1637, since that was when he finished the gilding on the reredoses that were to house the paintings.

27 Placed for public auction at *Sotheby's Peel & Asociados. Pintura antigua y dibujos*. Madrid, 18 May 1993, no. 16.

28 Madrid 1986, p. 242, no. 66.

29 In the contract for this work, Francisco Rizi undertook to produce a painting on the theme "The relations of Our Lord in accordance with a drawing I have made" for Fr. Francisco Manuel. Cf. Barrio 1981.



11. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*Four Cherubs' Heads*, c. 1635  
Pen on laid paper, 20.5 x 26.2 cm  
Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence  
Inv. no. 10510 S



12. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*The Holy Kinship*, 1636-1637  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail of the Cherubs



13. Francisco de Herrera el Viejo (c. 1590-1656)  
*La Sagrada Parentela*, 1636-1637  
 Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao  
 Detalle of Zachary



14. Francisco de Herrera el Viejo (c. 1590-1656)  
*Apóstol*  
 Aguada sobre papel verjurado. 14,9 x 10 cm  
 Hamburger Kunsthalle, Alemania  
 Inv. no. 38560  
 Detalle

We should therefore bring the date forward to 1634, already proposed by Galilea Antón<sup>30</sup>. When he executed the work, Herrera was clearly at the high point of his career<sup>31</sup> and fame, and the quality achieved here is not easily to be found in the rest of his work, particularly in view of the unevenness of much of his production. Apart from the monumental scale he gives the characters, and the charm of the children's faces, one major feature are the cherubs, very much associated with his drawings, and for which he must have done sketches or outlines. Indeed, it is too often forgotten that the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe of the Uffizi possesses heads of cherubs Herrera produced in preparation for this painting. The work in question is a study of *Four heads of cherubs* (formerly in the Santarelli collection) [fig. 11]<sup>32</sup>, which can be linked to the angels in the upper part, under God the Father's blue cloak [fig. 12]. The angel on the far left staring straight ahead is identical, as is the one appearing in the lower part looking down, with wings either side of his head, thereby revealing the preliminary study for this group of figures. Likewise, on the far right of the painting, [fig. 13], Zachary rests his head on one of his hands, repeating exactly the gesture of the figure in the wash entitled *Apostle*, now in the Kunsthalle in Hamburg [fig. 14]<sup>33</sup>. It was probably an interchangeable drawing for different figures in Herrera's repertoire.

The beauty of the work, particularly the very Flemish, Martin de Vos-style ochre-flavoured colouring, and the rich impasto, undoubtedly came into its considerable own after the last restoration in 1992<sup>34</sup>, thanks largely

30 Galilea Antón 1992.

31 In Lafuente Ferrari's view, this painting dates from the finest moments of the artist's career and, in discussing the style, he describes it as "the real Herrera." Cf. Lafuente Ferrari 1953, p. 238. Mayer refers to this painting as *The Holy Family with St. Ann and St. John the Baptist* and relates it, in terms of dates, to another by Herrera, *Christ with Sts. John, Peter and James* from the Louis-Philippe collection, and a *San Pedro* from c. 1640. Cf. Mayer 1947, p. 323.

32 Angulo/Pérez Sánchez 1985, p. 24, no. 41, plate XIV.

33 Ibid., p. 20, no. 18, plate VI.

34 See Bilbao 1992, with a technical report by Ana Sánchez-Lassa and María José Ruiz-Ozaita.



12. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*The Holy Kinship*, 1636-1637  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Detail of St. Joseph



16. Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656)  
*St. Joseph*  
 Oil on canvas, 166 x 114 cm  
 Private Collection, Madrid

to the extra light flooding the painting, and the rich, gold-toned palette. This also helps to explain, more than ever before, the confusion mentioned earlier leading to the wrongful attribution to Juan de Roelas, the other leading artistic light in Seville in the early decades of the 17th century, as the spearhead of budding naturalism. However, some of Herrera's types in this painting are entirely characteristic of his repertoire. The head of St. Joseph on the far left of the painting [fig. 15] makes this clear, as Herrera would use this model later on in different versions of *St. Joseph with the Child*, in some of which, like the one that appeared only recently on the art market [fig. 16]<sup>35</sup>, the colouring is very similar, in the flesh tones of the face and the treatment of St. Joseph's robes, in blues and ochres, and also in the rich pink of the Child's tunic, a colouring similar to the one used for the child St. John the Evangelist in the foreground of the Family.

This wealth of types and models, together with the bravura brushwork, made Herrera's a source for other artists. Both the young Murillo and Zurbarán himself put Herrera's type of the Virgin in profile, as employed here, to good use. Zurbarán took good note of the model for his *Virgin with Child* in the Havana National Museum, and we come across the profile of the child in Herrera's work nuzzling up to St. John's lamb, in the profile of one of the children in Murillo's *St. Diego Feeding the Poor*, now in the Museum of the San Fernando Fine Art Academy in Madrid.

So, once again, Herrera was a beacon for artists who produced their best results in the following generation, even imitating his impasto and the way he had of concentrating the visual contents of his paintings. Some of the most idiosyncratic of the Baroque masters found solid early sustenance in Herrera's work.

35 The physical model for St. Joseph closest to the one in this *Holy Kinship* is the one recently unveiled by Valdivieso in Madrid 2007, pp. 44-45, no. 14.

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