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Arnao de Bruselas
The Conversion of Saint Paul, ca. 1545–53

ARNAO DE BRUSELAS (ARNAUT SPIERINCK)
(Brussels ca. 1515 – 1564 Logroño)

THE CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL, ca. 1545–53

Carved and polychromed wood
105 x 112 x 30 cm
41 ⅜ x 44 ⅛ x 11 ¾ in.

Provenance

Private collection, San Sebastián.

Literature

Various Authors, *La escultura en la ruta jacobea. Arnao de Bruselas*, Bancaja, 2006;
Barrón García, A., "Orígenes, formación y testamento del escultor renacentista Arnaut Spierinck, o Arnao de Bruselas", *Estudios de Patrimonio*, 2, Santander, 2019, pp. 65–120.



The sculpture is a high relief depicting the *Conversion of Saint Paul*. Saul, later Paul, was a Jew and a Roman citizen who, on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians, was thrown from his horse by a blinding light while he heard a divine voice saying: “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” Left blind, he was taken in by the Christian Ananias, recovered his sight and converted to Christianity. The relief shows the moment of the fall from the horse. The sculptor has skilfully grouped the figures of Saint Paul on his fallen horse and of three soldiers dressed in the Roman manner. Two of them are astonished by the portent, while a third hurries to help the saint. All of them, Saint Paul included, wear Roman military dress, but to mark Saul out as a Jew he wears a turban, whereas the soldiers wear helmets.

Saint Paul and his fallen horse are turned towards the right, while his head twists in the opposite direction, towards the supernatural light. The figures are held within a closed composition, from which only the rearing horse in the background projects. Particularly noteworthy are the precision with which the figures are rendered and the perfect anatomy of the animals. Saint Paul wears a cloak billowing in the wind, with broad, angular folds, and raises one arm to his head in a protective gesture. His face is minutely described: the outlined eyes are slightly open, the mouth reveals part of the teeth, and the long, forked beard of serpentine curls is equally detailed, all of which points to a highly skilled hand.

The soldiers repeat the same facial types, lean, with straight noses and pointed chins. Their hands, with long, splayed fingers, are particularly striking. The helmets are decorated with scrolls, except for that of the soldier attending to Saint Paul, which bears an acanthus leaf.

Although the figures are enclosed within a compact block, they are subjected to pronounced torsions, especially Saint Paul, creating a Mannerist sense of movement and tension. This is characteristic of Arnao’s style, which combines the polished technique acquired in the Zaragoza workshop of Damián Forment with the craftsmanship he brought from Flanders, where artists bearing the surname Spierinck, perhaps members of his family, are recorded in several surviving works, together with an awareness of the dynamic Mannerism of Alonso Berruguete. It seems unlikely that Arnao knew the Castilian master personally, but in the sixteenth century artistic ideas travelled from one workshop to another through drawings and sketches. Our sculptor’s style is, however, less violent than Berruguete’s, with a more restrained cadence. To these sources may be added the influence of Italian prints.

Suggestions from northern Europe can also be found in the present group, although no known print shares the arrangement of Arnao’s relief, which attests to the master’s inventiveness. Hans Baldung Grien’s print of 1508 in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, recalls the Saint Paul of the relief only vaguely, in the turbaned head and

the forked beard. Closer is a composition in the Rosenwald Collection of the same museum, in which the body of the horse is reversed with respect to Arnao's relief, although the position of Saint Paul's body is very different. The head of a soldier's horse in that print does, however, resemble that of the horse in the background of the relief, which belongs to one of the members of Saint Paul's retinue. Finally, a print by Lambert Hopfer (1525–1550) in Strasbourg shows a closer arrangement of horse and rider, although the armour and the rider's posture differ.

In conclusion, while it cannot be entirely ruled out that Arnao knew these or similar prints now unknown, there is no direct link between any of them and the present relief. If Arnao did know them, his inventiveness is evident in the way he avoided a literal copy, as other artists sometimes did, and introduced highly significant variations in the treatment of the main horse and in the contorted posture of the saint's head.

The relief's place within Arnao's oeuvre can be established by comparison with other known works by the sculptor. Soldiers' helmets with ear guards appear in works produced in collaboration with Andrés de Araoz, Juan de Goyaz and the Beaugrant brothers, as in an apostle from the altarpiece at Ábalos.

The helmets are interpreted similarly in other works by the master, such as the *Road to Calvary* of the altarpiece at Alberite. The same altarpiece offers further similarities in the relief of the *Resurrection of Christ* (fig. 1), both in the soldiers' military dress and in their strained poses. Acanthus-leaf decoration likewise appears on a soldier in the *Road to Calvary* of the altarpiece of Santo Domingo de la Calzada. That altarpiece was contracted by Damián Forment while Arnao was working in his shop, and this relief is thought to be by our sculptor.

A similar treatment of the turban can be seen in several of the master's works, such as the altarpiece at El Busto or the *Martyrdom of Saint John the Evangelist* at Grañón. Forked beards like Saint Paul's are common in his production, as in the *Saint Anthony Abbot* at El Busto, the *Saint Matthew* of the Lapoblación altarpiece and several apostles of the Genevilla altarpiece. Above all, however, the closest comparisons are the *Saint Jerome* in the attic of the altarpiece of Santa María de Palacio and, especially, the figure of Jesse in the same altarpiece (fig. 2), whose head seems almost a replica of that of the present Saint Paul.

All these works span a period from about 1545 to the altarpiece of Santa María de Palacio, contracted in 1553; after an interruption, Arnao completed its attic and crowning in 1558. It is therefore possible that the *Conversion of Saint Paul* is contemporary with the first phase of the Logroño altarpiece, although the absence of any documentation for the relief prevents a more precise date. The polychromy

shows fine flesh tones and glazes in Saint Paul's head and turban, and is less detailed in the soldiers' faces. The gilded areas all date from the sixteenth century. The polychromy of the flat surfaces, with scrolls and curving motifs, may date from the seventeenth century, or else from the sixteenth but by a less accomplished painter.

The reverse is characteristic of an altarpiece relief: being fixed against a flat surface, it did not need to be carved, as is usual throughout Spanish sculpture, not only in reliefs but also in figures in the round. Adze and gouge marks are visible where the block was roughed out to a flat surface so that it could be fitted against the back of the altarpiece. The iron fitting and the crossbar cannot be dated: the iron securing the soldier's arm is a wrought fixture used over many centuries, and the same may be said of the crossbar with its large nail. Some pieces may have broken when the relief was removed from the altarpiece and had to be secured, in which case these fittings would be modern, though of uncertain date. A large figure 3 in a modern hand is visible on the reverse, perhaps an inventory number added when the relief was separated from the altarpiece, or part of the catalogue of a collection.

In view of all the above, I believe that this magnificent relief of the *Conversion of Saint Paul* is the work of Arnao de Bruselas.

Jesús María Parrado del Olmo

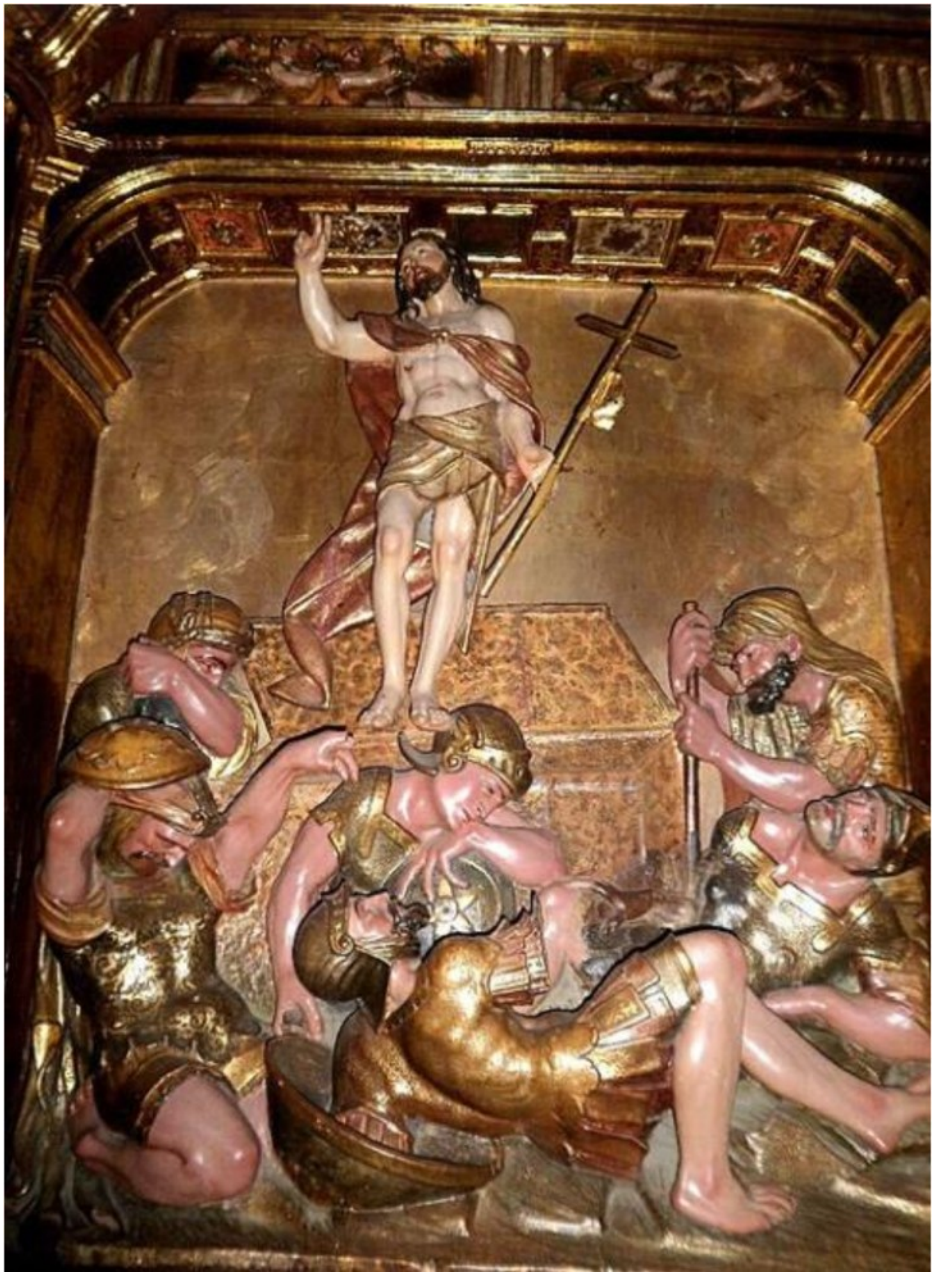


Fig. 1: Arnao de Bruselas, *Resurrection of Christ*, relief from the high altarpiece, 1550–55, polychromed wood, church of San Martín, Alberite (La Rioja)



Fig. 2: Arnao de Bruselas, *Tree of Jesse*, relief from the high altarpiece, 1553–58, polychromed wood, church of Santa María de Palacio, Logroño

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