

A closer look at

Juan Ribalta's *The Adoration of the Shepherds*



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BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO

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The small painting on copper of *The Adoration of the Shepherds* [fig. 1] by Juan Ribalta (Madrid, c. 1596/1597-Valencia, 1628) has long enjoyed critical acclaim; at least one distinguished art historian going so far as to declare it the masterpiece of this short-lived artist¹. The work was included over twenty years ago in a ground-breaking monographic exhibition devoted to seventeenth-century Valencian painting². This served to draw attention to its uniqueness in terms of its scale and support among the known paintings of the artist and his father, Francisco Ribalta (1565-1628), as well as their contemporaries in Valencia. Since then, it has attracted little scholarly attention.

The work is painted on the flat, un-etched back of a copper plate previously prepared for the production of a print. This represents the story of Saint Anthony (1195-1231) preaching to the fish at the Italian port of Rimini [fig. 2]³. Legend has it that Saint Anthony, who had found it difficult to convert to Christianity the large numbers of “infidel heretics” in Rimini by means of argument alone, was inspired to go to a coastal river and, standing on the bank between the river and the sea, began to preach to the fish. A great number of fish gathered to hear his sermon, as did local people and heretics. The latter “seeing this marvellous and manifest miracle, were touched to the heart with contrition and they all threw themselves at Saint Anthony’s feet to hear his sermon. Then Saint Anthony began to preach on the Catholic faith, and he preached so nobly that the heretics were all converted and returned to the true faith of Christ; and all the faithful remained in great joy, comforted and strengthened in their faith... ”⁴.

Ribalta has represented Saint Anthony in the centre of the composition, located on the farthest bank of the river, his finger pointing heavenward towards the divine source of his miracle, and with moored boats at the upper right. The heads of three fish can be seen in the river at the feet of the saint, with another at the right, swimming towards the congregation to “listen” to his sermon⁵. These fish are the focus of attention of a

1 See Gaya Nuño 1964. The author owes a debt of gratitude to Ana Sánchez-Lassa, Curator, for inviting him to study Ribalta’s copper at the Bilbao Museum and for her assistance and hospitality while at the museum. José Luis Merino Gorospe, Head of the Conservation and Restoration Department, is also to be thanked for his help during the study of the painting.

2 Valencia/Madrid 1987, pp. 215, 234, no. 66.

3 The subject matter has been considered to represent the preaching of St. Vicente Ferrer or St. Luis Beltrán, Valencian saints of the Dominican order. See, for example, Gallego 1979, p. 197; Kowal 1985, p. 276, cat. J-3; Valencia/Madrid 1987, pp. 215, 234. Directional references in the present text refer to the plate itself, rather than the resulting print.

4 The legend is here taken from the *Fioretti* of St. Francis of Assisi (1322-28), chapters XXXIX, XL. See Karrer 1979, pp. 169-257. See also Alemán 1607, book II, ch. XX, pp. 134-140.

5 A stone is represented in the river in the foreground, with an eel-like creature in the water at the far right.



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1. Juan Ribalta (c. 1596/1597-1628)
The Adoration of the Shepherds, c. 1620
Oil on copper, 15 x 29.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/205



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2. Juan Ribalta (c. 1596/1597-1628)
St. Anthony of Padua preaching, c. 1618
Etched copper plate, 15 x 29.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/205



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3. Juan Ribalta (c. 1596/1597-1628)
St. Anthony of Padua preaching, c. 1618
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Photomontage of a hypothetical print

bearded man who has fallen to his knees beside the saint and whose gesture expresses astonishment. The foremost kneeling figure on the nearest bank of the river stares intently down at the fish in front of him, his surprise registered by his opened left hand. A standing, long-robed man wearing a medallion at the far left of the composition also looks at the fish and throws his arms wide in amazement, while a caped figure in a conical hat, in the right-hand foreground of the composition, points out the miracle to a newcomer to the scene.

Saint Anthony was considered a "Spanish" saint because of his birth in Lisbon. However, it would appear that Ribalta also saw some relevance to the Valencian situation in the theme of Saint Anthony's conversion of heretics. The saint appears to exhort three men on the nearest bank of the river, who kneel in adoration at the miracle. The middle figure in this group is depicted in Arabic costume and with a prominent "hooked" nose⁶. His presence would have carried a particular resonance in Valencia, which was proud of the Christian re-conquest of the city from Muslim rule in 1240, just after the lifetime of Saint Anthony⁷. In Ribalta's own lifetime, the perceived problem of the heterodoxy of the local population resulted in the forced expulsion of the moriscos in 1609-10, an event still fresh in the memories of contemporaries⁸. The Arab in Ribalta's print, however, kneels on both knees and inclines towards Saint Anthony with open arms, shown reaching

6 The Arabic costume of the figure consists of a turban, a long tunic with sash and dagger, and open-backed sandals. For Arab costume, see Bernis 2001, pp. 461-488. The first figure appears to wear medieval costume and could be a high-born citizen of Rimini, perhaps one of the faithful who was confirmed in his faith by the miracle of St. Anthony. The last figure in the group may represent a Jew. The group of figures at the left of the composition, wearing strange-looking hats and one bespectacled, doubtless represent "heretics", perhaps Jews. Compare these, for instance, with the figures of the doctors in Francisco Ribalta's *Christ Disputing in the Temple* from the high altar of the parish church of Algemesí. Valencia/Madrid 1987, p. 130. The standing man at the left wearing a long robe and medallion and wide-brimmed, pointed hat may represent the prominent heresiarch called Bonovillo, who was converted by St. Anthony at Rimini. See Alemán 1607, book II, ch. XX.

7 See Ortí 1640.

8 For this, see Boronat y Barrachina 1992; Domínguez Ortiz/Vincent 1978. The author has profited from conversations on this subject with Grace Magnier, Department of Hispanic Studies, Trinity College, Dublin.

out to embrace the Christian faith embodied in the saint⁹. The image would appear to reinforce a consoling myth of the willing and sincere conversion of unbelievers to the Christian God, which was at odds with the reality of the predominant Muslim faith of the morisco population in this area of seventeenth-century Spain. Valencians may also have associated the figure of the Franciscan saint with images of the local Dominican saint Vicente Ferrer (1350-1419), who was often depicted with his right hand raised to heaven and whose sermons famously converted Jews and Arabs in the region¹⁰.

The lack of an inscribed dedication on the copper plate, or even a place for it, suggests that this print was an independent work, made on speculation, rather than a commission¹¹. It is signed “Ju Ribalta mano propia”, in inverted letters on the plate¹². The unconventional phrase “by my / his own hand” (“mano propia”) evidently reflects the artist’s pride in his achievement. This might suggest that the work is from the artist’s youth. On the other hand, the phrase may signify its experimental nature and the artist’s satisfaction in mastering an unfamiliar medium. It is also possible to read the inscription in light of Juan’s desire to distinguish his own work from that of his father, given the manifest similarity between them¹³. It may be, therefore, that the print dates from the time of his marriage in 1618 and his complete professional independence. Despite this, it is likely that Juan Ribalta was inspired to take up printmaking by the example of his father. An etching of the Sacrifice of Isaac by Francisco Ribalta, signed and dated 1599, was apparently made on his arrival at Valencia¹⁴. The dearth of original prints known or recorded by Francisco Ribalta, however, suggests that printmaking was less an abiding artistic interest than one to which he turned occasionally and for particular reasons. One such occasion was the campaign for the canonisation of the Blessed Francisco Jerónimo Simó (1578-1612), for which Ribalta made a portrait drawing and drawings of scenes from his life and death, which were engraved by the French printmaker Michel Lasne (c.1590-1667)¹⁵.

It has not been possible to locate any impressions of Juan Ribalta’s print, which means that the finer graphic qualities of the actual printed sheet remain unknown to us. The inverted photograph of the plate reproduced here gives an idea of the intended composition of the print; this shows, for instance, that Ribalta was careful to etch the figure of Saint Anthony in reverse, in order that, once printed, the saint’s proper right hand is the one raised to heaven [fig. 3]. Ribalta’s experience as a draftsman was doubtless brought to bear in designing this composition and can be seen in the arrangement of many figures in different planes in a small field, as well as the economy and fluency of their contours [fig. 4]. However, the somewhat schematic etching

9 The group of figures in the middle distance to the right of the saint —at least one of whom appears to be dressed in the short trousers of a sailor— is gathered around a man who covers his eyes with his fingers. This latter figure may represent an unbeliever, who blinds himself to the miracle which all can see.

10 See, for instance, Antist 1575.

11 On artist printmakers in seventeenth-century Spain, see Carrete 1987, pp. 350-381. On prints of religious subjects, *ibid.*, pp. 233-246; Portús/Vega 1998. A pair of landscape-format pictures on canvas by Juan Ribalta of St. Anthony preaching to the fish and the miracle of the genuflecting mule may have been made for Franciscan patrons, but the works are unknown today. M. A. de Orellana mentions these pictures in the collection of the painter Luis Planes(Orellana 1930, p. 123).

12 Kowal (1985, cat. J-3) came closest to a correct reading of the signature. In the word “propia”, the letter “i” is close in form to the “r”, although there can be no doubt as to the intended meaning of the word.

13 See A. Palomino 1988, III, pp. 142-143, and Orellana 1930, pp. 98-99 on the designation “Ribalta” being a sign of quality, without distinction between the authorship of father or son. See Orellana 1930, pp. 107 and 109 on Juan’s rivalry with his father.

14 This print was cited by F. Martí Grajales and J. M. Puig i Torralva (Puig i Torralva/Marti 1882, p. 93), but is unknown today. Juan de Roelas also made prints early in his career. Roelas’ copper plate for the *Elevation of the Cross*, signed and dated 1597, is in the Calcografía Nacional. See Angulo 1925, pp. 103-109. For the copper plate of his *Virgin of Sorrows*, after a sculpture by Juan de Juni, see note 20 below.

15 Ainaud 1957, pp. 86-9; Kowal 1985, pp. 209-211; Falomir 1998, p. 176; Portús/Vega 1998, pp. 161-162, 281-283. For Lasne, see Turner 1996, vol. 18 (s.v. Lasne, Michel), pp. 811-2. Although the exact circumstances of this project remain unknown and the print does not bear a dedication to a patron, the image was probably made after 1614, when the Inquisition in Spain prohibited the representation of Simó with a halo, which the print does not show, and 1619, the year of the edict ordering the elimination of his images from all altars. It is possible that the print was made at Antwerp, where Lasne is documented from 1617, and commissioned from a member of the circle of the archduke Albert of Austria, who was himself devoted to the beatus. Orellana (1930, p. 127) appears to have known the plate itself, which was destroyed by Pasqual Cucó.



4. Juan Ribalta (c. 1596/1597-1628)
Birth of Christ

Lead pencil and sepia wash on paper, 284 x 176 mm
Valencia Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 4/96

technique, characterised by relatively simplified hatching used to model the figures, perhaps reflects the approach of an artist more used to drawing on paper than on copper plates.

Despite Juan Ribalta's proud signature on the plate, he was evidently an inexperienced printmaker. His inexperience is revealed by the areas of foul-biting, where the acid has indiscriminately bitten into the plate, due to a breakdown in the acid-resistant ground¹⁶. Irregular patches of foul-biting in the contour and modelling of the habit of Saint Anthony have been extensively worked in drypoint with a fine needle by Ribalta. The problem is most noticeable, however, in the figure kneeling at the feet of Saint Anthony and has caused the artist to rework extensively the shoulder area and facial features of the figure in drypoint. Paradoxically, however, this has resulted in a loss of clarity in these areas¹⁷. The ink residues in the etched lines of the plate itself show that a number of proof states were taken from it. However, it has not been inked evenly; the ink has not taken well in some places, while in some areas of hatching ink blotches can be seen, as is the case with the standing figure with a pointed hat in shadow in the middle ground at the right of the composition. The plate is stained and has not been cleaned properly; encrusted pools of dried ink have caused oxidation in the area below the left knee of the first kneeling figure on the nearside bank of the river and in the contours of Saint Anthony and at the feet of the kneeling Arab figure. The plate has been given a margin of ruled lines very close to the edge of the plate on all four sides; these have not been respected, but have been drawn

16 On this effect, endemic in the inexperienced artist-printmaker, see Bury 2001, pp. 68-69.

17 Another area of ambiguity exists in the group of figures looking at the man covering his eyes with his fingers at the right-hand side of the plate in the middle ground. At the right of the group, Ribalta has excised a head with horizontal hatched thick lines of shadow, which have invaded the profile of the figure in a plumed hat and make this figure extremely difficult to read. Moreover, the foot of the erased figure remains.

over by the artist in working right to edge of plate¹⁸. The plate is not worn. While it is likely that a number of proof states were taken, the reasons why the plate was not put into full production are unknown. Perhaps this was due to the apparent inappropriateness of the optimistic theme of evangelisation in Valencia so soon after the forced expulsion of the recalcitrant morisco population of the region.

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Juan Ribalta's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* is the only painting on copper by the artist known today. It might have been a one-off work. He evidently took advantage of the opportunity to reuse a copper plate acquired for the production of a print as the support for an oil painting. Only a few other cases of such recycled plates have been documented in the hispanic context. One is the *Virgin of Bethlehem* by Mateo Pérez de Alesio painted on the back of his own print of *The Holy Family* [figs. 5 and 6]¹⁹. Another is a painting of the *Annunciation of The Virgin* on the back of a copper plate of the *Virgin of Sorrows* by Juan de Roelas [figs. 7 and 8]²⁰.

Paintings on metal supports, or *láminas*, as they were described in the period, were valued by collectors at Court, where Francisco Ribalta resided between 1581-1598²¹. Small format *láminas* of religious themes appear to have enjoyed a particular role in the decoration of oratories. The oratory of Philip III in the Madrid Alcázar is instructive in this respect; it contained pictures on a wide range of supports, as well as a reduced version on panel of Francisco Ribalta's painting of the *Vision of the Blessed Francisco Jerónimo Simó* (National Gallery, London) painted in 1612²². Paintings on copper were associated with Flemish specialists, but a number were probably imported Italian pictures²³. Perhaps in response to the latter, the Court artists

18 Traces of varnish, perhaps used in stopping out during the etching process, can be seen on the left-hand edge of the plate. On the other hand, these could be traces of varnish which have run over from a former layer of varnish on the painted side of the plate. D. Fitz Darby and Kowal noted cancellation marks in the head of the saint (Darby 1938; Kowal 1985, cat. J-3, p. 276). These authors appear to have interpreted as intentional cancellation marks the fine horizontal scratches on the surface of the plate, to be seen throughout the area of the sky and which pass through the head of the saint and other figures. These scratches are likely to have been caused by clumsy handling of the plate.

19 Phoenix/Kansas City/The Hague 1999, cat. 42; p. 39; cat. 44.

20 Buendía 1979, pp. 472-474; Martín González 1981, pp. 473-474; Carrete 1987, pp. 353-354. The painting appears to be by a hand other than that of Roelas.

21 A painting on a metal support was generally indiscriminately described as a "lámina" in documentation of the period, as opposed to "tabla" for wood panels and, of course, "lienzo" for canvas. See Pacheco 1990, p. 482; Palomino 1988, vol. II, p. 132 for preparing "láminas" for painting. See also I. Horovitz in Phoenix/Kansas City/The Hague 1999, pp. 69-70.

22 See Martínez Leiva/Rodríguez Rebollo 2007, pp. 196-201 for an inventory of the pictures, reliefs, altarpieces and fittings of the oratory of Philip III in the Alcázar in 1623. As the authors of the edition point out (*Ibid.*, pp. 202-3), a number of the pictures on metal supports were transferred to the oratories of Philip IV and Elizabeth of Bourbon. The painting on panel representing the vision of the Blessed Francisco Jerónimo Simó of Christ on the way to Calvary (*Ibid.*, p. 196 no. 1930) is likely to have followed Ribalta's painting of this subject in London. See MacLaren 1970, pp. 86-91; Falomir 1998, p. 176. See also the small pictures on metal supports in the oratories of the Duke of Lerma at La Ventosilla in 1605 (Schroth 1990, pp. 193-194, nos. 18-51) and the ducal palace at Valladolid in 1606 (*Ibid.*, p. 204, no. 123). The inventory of the collection of the Patriarch Ribera, archbishop of Valencia, also contained a considerable number of small paintings of religious subjects on copper. See F. Benito Domenech 1980, pp. 169-199, 203-212. A number of these appear to have been Italian pictures and some survive today. See, for instance, *ibid.*, p. 292, no. 154; p. 339, no. 302; p. 341, no. 310; p. 346, no. 335. See also a small copper from the late sixteenth century representing the *Agony in the Garden*, an inscription on which identifies the work as coming from the oratory of Andrés de Angulo, bishop of Segovia (1685-87), who evidently valued it for devotional purposes long after it was painted. Segovia 2003, cat. 4.

23 Many Flemish coppers are to be found in Spanish convents and monasteries, as well as museum collections. Flemish paintings on copper figured prominently among the lot of twenty-six pictures on a range of different supports given to Philip IV by Luis Méndez de Haro, Marquis of Carpio, and which were inventoried in 1636 in the room where the king read, in the summer quarters of the Alcázar. See Martínez Leiva/Rodríguez Rebollo 2007, pp. 106-111, 207. As regards Italian pictures, see Pérez Sánchez 1965, p. 232 for a copper of the *Descent from the Cross* by Federico Barocci in the Madrid collection of Pompeo Leoni, probably deriving from his painting of this subject in Perugia Cathedral (1567-1569). A *lámina* representing the *Flight into Egypt* in the collection of the Duke of Lerma at Valladolid in 1603 probably belonged to a lot of pictures sold the duke by Bartolomé Carducho in 1602 and perhaps imported from Florence. See Schroth 1990, p. 156, no. 149. *Ibid.*, p. 137, no. 38 for a painting of the *Flagellation of Christ* by Francisco Ribalta in Lerma's collection at this time. See Goldberg 1996, p. 537 for eight paintings on copper by some of the best Florentine artists representing the life of the Virgin ordered in 1607 for the oratory Margaret of Austria, queen of Spain.



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5. Mateo Pérez de Alesio (Matteo da Lecce) (1547-c. 1607)
Virgin of Bethlehem, c. 1604
Oil on copper, 48.3 x 39.2 cm
Leonor Velarde de Cisneros and Isabel Velarde Collection, Lima, Peru



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6. Mateo Pérez de Alesio (Matteo da Lecce) (1547-c. 1607)
The Holy Family, 1583
Etched copper plate, 48.3 x 39.2 cm
Leonor Velarde de Cisneros and Isabel Velarde Collection, Lima, Peru



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7. Anonymous
Annunciation of the Virgin, early 17th century
Oil on copper, 32.5 x 23 cm
National Collegiate Museum of St. Gregory, Valladolid
Inv. no. CE1098
Reverse



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8. Juan de Roelas (c. 1570-1625)
Virgin of Sorrows, 1594-1602
Etched copper plate, 32.5 x 23 cm
National Collegiate Museum of St. Gregory, Valladolid
Inv. no. CE1098
Recto

Eugenio Cajés (1575-1634) and Juan Bautista Maíno (1581-1649) occasionally painted them [fig. 9]²⁴. Pictures on metal supports by Francisco Ribalta are documented²⁵. On the other hand, the dearth of such pictures by Valencian artists of the period known today suggests that these did not form a part of their habitual practice.

The work may not have been an independent framed picture at all; it may have formed part of a piece of furniture.²⁶ Its size, shape and support are characteristics dictated by its former use as a copper plate for a print. However, the picture could have been let into the steps of an altar of a small chapel or oratory²⁷. It could conceivably have come from the base of a small moveable altarpiece or reliquary, a type of work which Francisco Ribalta painted.²⁸ Although the paintings which occupied the main fields of small altarpieces tended to be of a square or rectangular format, the small images which formed their bases could be of a horizontal shape. A small painting of *The Adoration of the Shepherds* in a landscape format appears in this location in an altarpiece made up of pictures painted on alabaster by Antonio Tempesta, probably for a Spanish client [fig. 10]²⁹. On the other hand, the fact that Juan painted on a used copper printing plate in his own possession, rather than one especially acquired and prepared for painting, may be significant in this respect. This makes it more likely, perhaps, that he took advantage of an opportunity to paint a small, independent work.

The Adoration of the Shepherds is obviously not the painting of a beginner. While its date of execution is considered to be c. 1620, its chronological relation to the date of the print is unclear. Despite the small size of the painting, determined, of course, by the size of the recycled copper plate, its technique is consistent with Juan Ribalta's larger works in oil. This may be because he was unused to working on this scale. It may be telling in this regard too that he has not adopted a miniaturist's approach, as was a convention in small-scale pictures on copper. Generally speaking, painters exploited the hard, smooth surface of this support to paint meticulously detailed works, which encouraged viewers to look closely at them, as can be seen in *The Adoration of the Kings* by Pietro de Lignis [fig. 11], a Flemish artist who worked in Rome. In Juan's painting, he appears to have painted directly onto the copper surface, without a preparatory layer, as is suggested

24 For Cajés' *Holy Family*, see Angulo/Pérez Sánchez 1969, p. 240, no. 140. The picture was sold at Sotheby's Madrid on 29 October 1991, lot 8. The author is grateful to Christopher González-Aller for his assistance in locating a photograph of this work. Cajés evidently painted other works of this type. He had been commissioned to paint a *Martyrdom of St. Stephen* for the Count of Osorno on a copper plate provided by the patron and characterised as "de gran estudio e trabaxo" by the artist himself in his last will and testament of 1634. See Agulló Cobo 1978, p. 37. For Maíno's copper of *St. John the Baptist*, see Angulo/Pérez Sánchez 1969, p. 317, no. 37. For his copper of the *Resurrection of Christ* at Dresden, see Hamburg/Dresden/Budapest 2005, cat. 22. Maíno's interest in painting on copper probably derived from works he had seen on this support by Orazio Gentileschi. Other court painters are also documented working on copper. See, for instance, the painting of the *Virgin of Populo* painted in one day on "una planchilla" by Juan de Rómulo and mentioned in the last will and testament of 1614 of the painter Juan Andrés de la Roble. Agulló Cobo 1978, p. 136. See Martínez Leiva/Rodríguez Rebollo 2007, pp. 109 (927), 208-209 for a *Holy Family* on an octagonal copper support and in an ebony frame, painted by the amateur artist Virgilio Malvezzi and given to Philip IV.

25 See Orellana 1930, pp. 124, 127 for a "lámina pequeña" of Christ Child in the Valencian convent of San Gregorio and another "lámina" of Christ at the Column owned by Orellana himself. See also note 28 below.

26 Religious subject matter would not necessarily militate against the idea that the work formed part of the decoration of a cabinet. See Aguiló 1993, cat. 270 for a Flemish *escritorio* from the first half of the seventeenth century whose interior contains coppers of Biblical subjects. See Aguiló 1990, vol. II, pp. 692-3 for an *escritorio* belonging to Margaret of Austria and sold from her estate in 1612, which was decorated with paintings of the Resurrection of Christ "en lámina pintado al olio", among others. See also Aguiló 1993, cats. 239, 242 for two Spanish *escritorios* from the second half of the seventeenth century which are capped by paintings on copper of the *The Adoration of the Kings* and *St. Michael*, respectively. The author is grateful to María Paz Aguiló for discussing with him the subject of paintings for seventeenth-century furniture.

27 Non-canvas supports, such as coppers, wooden panels, stones and glasses lent themselves to placement in liturgical furniture. The author is grateful to Ana García Sanz of Patrimonio Nacional for the opportunity to examine with her a number of examples of such works in the collections of the convent of the Descalzas Reales, Madrid, for which she is responsible. See, for instance, the small paintings on wood of the Life of St. Joseph which have been removed from the steps of the altar of the seventeenth-century chapel of St. Joseph in the convent of the Descalzas Reales, Madrid (*The Holy Family*, *The Flight into Egypt*, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*).

28 D. Angulo suggested that the painting could have formed part of the base of a portable domestic altar (Angulo 1971, p. 60). See Orellana 1930, p. 111 for "un Altarito ó Retablo pequeño" painted by Francisco Ribalta in an interior room of the sacristy of the Valencian convent of Santo Domingo. The main field was occupied by a painting of the *Assumption of the Virgin*, a picture of St. Vicente Ferrer preaching occupied the attic story and, in the base, St. Joseph working in the carpenter's shop. The same author mentions in the cell of "Fray Joseph Cubells" in the same convent a small panel painting of *St. Joseph* by Ribalta.

29 See Vannugli 2007, pp. 230-246.



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9. Eugenio Cajés (1575-1634)
The Holy Family, 1619
Oil on copper, 43.5 x 31 cm
Private collection



10. Antonio Tempesta (1555-1630)
The Adoration of the Shepherds
Altarpiece of God the Father, *The Adoration of the Kings*, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* and *The Annunciation*, c. 1605
Oil on alabaster, 7.2 x 20.7 cm
Segovia Cathedral Museum

by examination of some areas of surface loss.³⁰ The artist has handled small brushes with spontaneity and freedom as can be seen in the creamy texture of the landscape and river and the brushstrokes have registered with considerable immediacy on the rigid, non-absorbent surface of the copper.³¹ The finesse of the artist's texture is epitomised in the two pieces of straw in the right foreground, made up of a single, thin line of colour and accompanying cast shadow [fig. 12].

Ribalta's representation of *The Adoration of the Shepherds* is characterised by its relatively "naturalistic" character, so different from the monumental altarpiece by Giovanni Bizzelli in the church of the Patriarca Ribera [fig. 13]. Ribalta's large-scale version of the subject at Torrent, Valencia, [fig. 14] is a nocturne, in accordance with the tradition that Mary gave birth at midnight, and which afforded artists the depiction of a range of light effects. In his painting on copper, however, the figures are depicted in broad daylight, without halos,

30 On copper as a support, see Andrews 1977, pp. 169-170 and Horovitz 1999, pp. 63-92.

31 Palomino 1988, vol. III, p. 142; Orellana 1930, pp. 98, 124 noted that Juan's technique was "más suelta y golpeada" than his father's.



11. Pietro de Lignis (1577-1627)
The Adoration of the Kings, 1616
Oil on copper, 70 x 54 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid
Inv. no. P1556

12. Juan Ribalta (c. 1596/1597-1628)
The Adoration of the Shepherds, c. 1620
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Detail



heavenly light or divine accompaniment of any kind. The modulation of “realistic” illumination is particularly subtle at the narrative core of the scene, where the Virgin is depicted in half light, due to the shadow cast by the standing shepherd, and seen contre-jour against the well lit farmhouse in the distance [fig. 15].

Ribalta’s treatment of his subject may have been inspired by the arrival in Valencia in 1616 of Pedro Orrente (1580-1645), whose reputation was based on Bassano-like, rustic retellings of biblical subjects, of which one of the most appropriate was the adoration of the Christ Child by the shepherds. Although Francisco Ribalta trivialised the painting of his rival, his works may have encouraged his son to cast the scene as a “real” event³². The dog in the foreground of Juan’s composition —whose character is well observed and which is painted with particular attention to the texture of its white coat— can be seen as a direct reference to the works of Orrente. In accordance with Orrente’s approach, the humble figures of the shepherds in Ribalta’s paintings are depicted in a relatively dignified light. Two shepherds have arrived at the stable with humble gifts of lambs, themselves symbolic of Christ, an old woman with a chicken and the child with a basket of fruit. There is no equivalent here to the bestial shepherd depicted in profile nearest to Christ of the painting at Torrent. However, Juan may have intended a visual joke referring to the brutish nature of the shepherds in the way that the horns of the ox appear to emanate from the head of the kneeling blonde shepherd [fig. 16]³³.

Juan Ribalta has set the narrative in a realistic-looking open shelter for farm animals, with a farmhouse seen beyond. This vernacular construction consists of brick columns, buttressed by rough-hewn tree trunks, supporting wooden beams and a roof made from lattice work and covered with ceramic roof tiles. Grasses hang from the ceiling of the shelter and the sky can be seen through holes in it. Animals have evidently worn bare the earth floor, while grassy patches grow outside it in the foreground. A masonry wall and arch can be seen at the right, which probably represents a well. Ribalta’s concern for the authenticity of this feature can be

³² On Francisco Ribalta’s rivalry with Orrente, see Orellana 1930, pp. 116-119. See Kowal 1985, p. 111 for Juan Ribalta’s interest in Orrente’s painting.

³³ The shepherds were traditionally the butt of humour on the happy occasion of the Incarnation in theatrical performances, Christmas carols and imagery. See Cherry 2008, pp. 157-180.

13. Giovanni Bizzelli (1556-1612)
The Adoration of the Shepherds, 1586
Oil on canvas, 322 x 217 cm
Museo del Patriarca, Valencia



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14. Juan Ribalta (c. 1596/1597-1628)
The Adoration of the Shepherds, 1616
Oil on canvas, 67 x 133 cm
Parish Church of the Assumption of Our Lady, Torrent, Valencia



15. Juan Ribalta (c. 1596/1597-1628)
The Adoration of the Shepherds, c. 1620
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Detail



16. Juan Ribalta (c. 1596/1597-1628)
The Adoration of the Shepherds, c. 1620
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Detail

seen in the changes he made to the profile of the structure behind the ox and St. Joseph; the falling contour of a nondescript mound was changed into the stepped masonry construction of the well. The wooden poles which project from the top of the wall may have been used to lower buckets into the well. A white *alcarraza* standing on the top of the wall would be a suitable vessel from which humans could drink water; a white saucer before the manger would contain water for the dogs or chickens. The ox and the ass of St. Joseph, traditional in the representations of this subject, are located in this realistic setting. The ox is tethered by a rope attached to an iron ring set into the back wall. It would appear to stand on a step leading up to well, causing its hind quarters to be raised. It may be feeding from the trough, although the impression is given that the animal kneels before Christ, in accordance with the traditional telling of the story of the Nativity³⁴. The Christ Child is placed in a straw-filled manger of the animals, which is another traditional detail.

The lucid spatial organisation of the composition, in terms of the location and relative size of figures within an expansive field, suggests that the picture could be enlarged without any loss of coherence. This would apply too to the figures themselves, whose actions are clear and intelligible; this can be seen, for instance, in the pose of the standing shepherd leaning on his staff, with his left foot over his right. In terms of the narrative, Juan connects all of the figures to the central dramatic moment, where the Virgin reveals the newborn child to the shepherds. In order to guarantee the flow and unity of action among the different figures, the artist has perhaps overused pointing gestures; a child points the way to arriving shepherds, a kneeling shepherd identifies the Christ Child to a recently arrived companion and St. Joseph points out the child to two travellers.

St. Joseph is swathed in blue and green timeless "historical" robes; the Virgin Mary is dressed in a plum coloured tunic and blue cloak, which she uses to cover the Child. The shepherds, however, wear contemporary rustic clothes. In this respect, Ribalta appears to have emulated the practice of Orrente, in whose works biblical subjects are updated with lower-class figures in contemporary dress³⁵. The central shepherd in Ribalta's painting wears a red rustic *montera*, whose colour acts as a chromatic lure drawing the eye to

34 Vorágine, in *The Golden Legend* (Vorágine 1969, p. 50) tells how the ox and the ass, miraculously recognising the Lord, knelt before Him and adored Him.

35 See, for instance, Orrente's *Jacob Conjuring Laban's Sheep*, c.1612-1622, (Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art), in which Jacob is dressed as a contemporary shepherd, barefoot and in clothing very similar to the figure standing by the manger in Ribalta's copper. He carries a knife and rucksack, and is accompanied by his sheepdog. See Boston/Durham 2008, cat. 57.

the narrative core of the composition³⁶. He wears a long jacket (*sayo corto*) with attached sleeves and an empty gourd (*calabaza*) on a thin belt to carry water.³⁷ Another type of short jacket (*jubón*) would equally have been identified as the dress of rustic peasants by urban viewers of the painting³⁸.

The shepherds are barefoot. This is one of the most obvious signs of their poverty and, in this context, of their "apostolic" virtue as humble followers of Christ. The rustic short trousers (*calzones*) of the three barefoot figures are also ragged, as is the white cloth on which the Christ Child rests³⁹. A hole in the white trousers of the kneeling shepherd, through which the flesh of his thigh may be seen, is suggested by a touch of ochre-coloured pigment; a tear in the crotch of the red trousers of the shepherd carrying a lamb shows his white underclothes. The old woman wears a brown shawl over a long green tunic, with red trousers and shoes. Another figure in red jacket, green trousers and shoes may have just joined the group; while kneeling in adoration, a shepherd identifies the Christ Child to him. Two travellers also have the child pointed out by St. Joseph. One carries a traveller's staff and wears a hooded traveller's cloak of un-dyed wool, the twill and frayed edges of which are created with hatched brushstrokes⁴⁰. His once fashionable openwork trousers are now ragged, the stitching having come adrift, and he wears beneath these grey leggings tied at bottoms with string, and broken shoes. To his right a companion is shown peering in curiosity towards the crib, dressed in a red jerkin and striped, tasselled shawl.

While Juan Ribalta's beautiful *The Adoration of the Shepherds* is one of his most admired paintings today, there is some irony in the fact that it is an exception among his known works. Although both he and his father appear to have painted other small pictures on copper, these have yet to be rediscovered. In order to understand better the painting in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, the present article has taken a two-sided approach. Firstly, the object itself was re-examined, taking full advantage of the optimum conditions provided by a modern museum for this type of research. This close study has been particularly fruitful in terms of the information provided on the printing plate support of the picture. Secondly, an attempt was made to go beyond the self-imposed limitations of the traditional monographic treatment of the artist, by sketching in a broader context both for the print and the painting. Therefore, it has not been the intention here to revisit the question of the place of the painting in the work of the Ribalta family or the Valencian school, which has been successfully undertaken by others already, but rather to consider the function of both images, with reference to similar types of work in Spain at the time. Looked at from a wider perspective, of course, in making small paintings on copper, Spanish artists were no different from their peers throughout Europe and the New World⁴¹. It may be the case, then, that Ribalta's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* would begin to make most sense in a contextual study of the production and uses of small paintings in the seventeenth-century, including those on copper and other supports, which must surely be the next step of this research.

36 For the *montera*, see Bernis 2001, pp. 426-427.

37 For this type of *sayo*, ibid., pp. 395, 397, 404.

38 For the rustic *jubón*, ibid., pp. 397, 443.

39 For rustic *calzones*, ibid., pp. 397-403.

40 On the hooded capes of the lower classes in the period, ibid., p. 419.

41 See Peters Bowron 1999, pp. 9-30. The ground-breaking exhibition "Copper as Canvas" in the Phoenix Art Museum covered paintings from Italy, Northern Europe and South America, with Spanish art represented only with works by El Greco and Murillo, studied by William B. Jordan.

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