

*The Virgin of Sorrows Statue at
St Paul Shipwreck Collegiate Church, Valletta (Malta)*

An 18th Century Spanish sculpture by Antonio Asensio de la Cerda

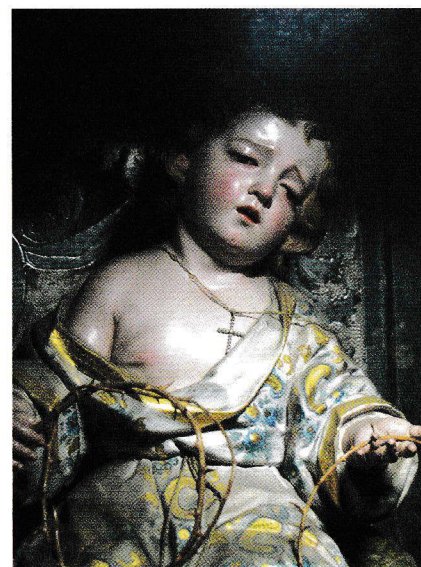
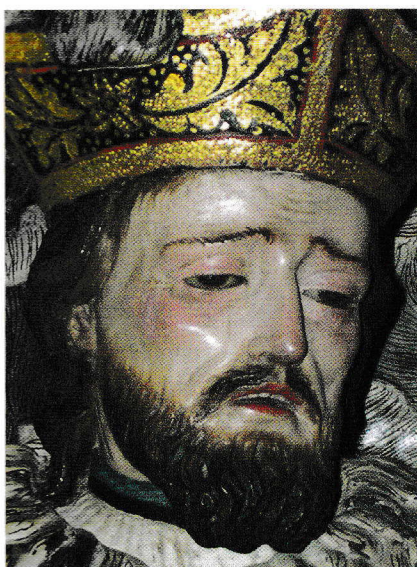
The study of 18th century Baroque Sculpture in the city of Málaga (Andalusia, Spain) is by no means complete. In 2007, Dr. Sergio Ramírez González Ph.D. together with the authors published a study on a previously unknown family of three sculptors of unquestionable prestige in the Andalusian artistic context of the period. The family line starts with Pedro Asensio de la Cerda and his son Vicente Asensio, who followed in his father's footsteps from their workshop in the capital. A third member of the family, Antonio Asensio, brother and uncle respectively, was an itinerant artist who worked in different Andalusian provinces and whose work was also exported outside Spain as in the case of the statue of the Virgin of Sorrows at St Paul Shipwreck Collegiate Church in Valletta.

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(Left) Antonio Asensio de la Cerda.
Saint John Nepomuk (1771). Church of
"los Remedios", Olvera (Cádiz, Spain).

(Right) Antonio Asensio de la Cerda.
Child Jesús of the Thorn (c. 1760-1770).
Monastery of the Caridad, Ronda
(Málaga, Spain).



The Asensio family of sculptors

Existing documents reveal that in the 18th century, there was in Málaga, a family of notable sculptors boasting a long tradition within the artistic context of the city at the time. Research reveals the existence of an extended family of three sculptors. The family line starts with Pedro Asensio de la Cerda whose son, Vicente, and brother, Antonio, played the role of collaborators and students, working either from the workshop

or in their own right as in the case of Antonio Asensio who ventured beyond the boundaries of Málaga.

Between the 16th and 17th centuries and the beginning of the 18th, the cities of Seville and Granada were among the most prominent centres of Andalusian sculpture and by extension of Baroque Spain. From 1730 onwards, the decline of the former cities boosted the emergence of Málaga and Antequera as artistic

centres supported by the towns' economic and commercial boom. It is not clear why the brothers Pedro and Antonio Asensio de la Cerda left their home town of Cieza in the Kingdom of Murcia (Spain) –where Pedro was baptized in 1703 to settle in the Andalusian region, in the province of Malaga. Since 1658, the city had had a certain prestige in sculptural material thanks to the presence of a prestigious artist born in Granada, Pedro de Mena y Medrano (1628-

1688), one of Spain's most important sculptors, who had set up his home and workshop here when he was hired to sculpt the choir stalls of the Cathedral of Malaga. After Mena's death in 1688, other sculptors tried to continue the work. Around 1740, Pedro Asensio de la Cerda together with another foremost sculptor, Fernando Ortiz (1717-1771) were graduated to the Academy of San Fernando in Madrid for Pedro Asensio's work in the Spanish Royal Court.

In 1728, Pedro Asensio de la Cerda married Rosalia Rodriguez Avalos in the parish church of San Juan (Saint John) in Malaga. Some time before this date, probably between 1720-1725, his brother Antonio is likely to have moved to Malaga. Pedro had already settled in Malaga early in the 1730s where he engaged in the art of sculpture until his death sometime between 1771 and 1775. It is likely that at a very young age, Antonio Asensio arrived at Malaga, protected by his brother Peter, and where he must have come in contact with his brother's sculpture studio and where he would have taught him the techniques and intricacies of the trade until finally setting out on his own in order to pursue a career away from the city of Malaga according to the documents. The reason for this move by Antonio Asensio is not yet known.

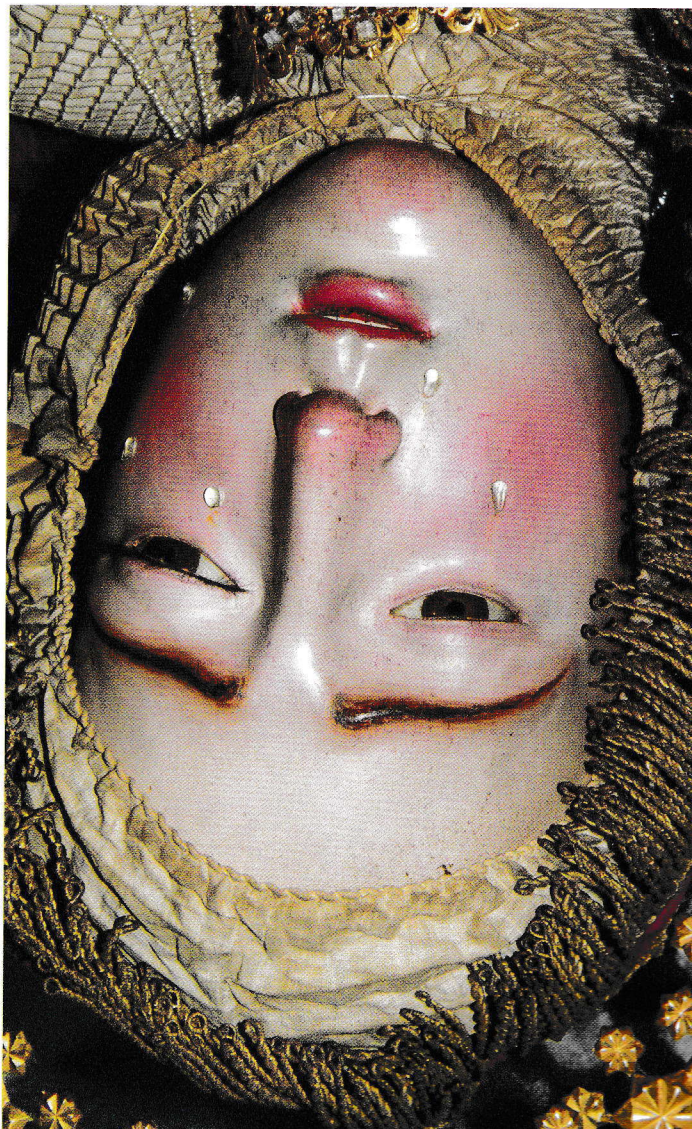
As a result, Pedro and his son Vicente Asensio de la Cerda assisted a relative to acquire sculptural skills after which Antonio Asensio de la Cerda became the embodiment of the independent artist, liberated from the confines of the family studio whose style is typical of their time, consolidating the prestige of the city of Malaga as a sculptural centre of the first order in 18th century Andalusia. Antonio Asensio de la Cerda, Virgin of Sorrows (c. 1770-1771) (detail), Saint Paul Shipwreck Collegiate Church.

Iconography and sculptural treatment of "Dolorosas" imagery by the Asensio family

There is an iconographical issue capable of uniting the creative energies of the three members of the Asensio family, particularly with Antonio. What determines the similarities and differences between them is undoubtedly the Virgin of Seven Sorrows or "Virgen Dolorosa" as the subject is known in Spain. Plastic and expressive treatment of this subject was predominant in the production of Pedro, Vicente and Antonio Asensio de la Cerda allowing attribution to be made in view of their prolific production. This does not mean that the Asensio

family did not execute other iconographic genres, as confirmed by several sculptures contracted and/or signed by Pedro and Antonio Asensio. However, the fact remains that perhaps, for them no other genre attracted similar dedication as the iconography of the Virgin of Sorrows which has a prominent place in Spanish sculpture in its devotional and processional versions. The popularity of the famous Virgin of Soledad (of Solitude) carved by Gaspar Becerra in 1565 for the third wife of the King

of Spain, Philip II, the Queen Elizabeth of Valois, was the catalyst for the emergence of this iconographical subject. Throughout the 17th century, the "Dolorosa" represented the ubiquitous theme of pain. The contributions of Pedro de Mena and José de Mora, the latter, another Baroque sculptor who worked in Granada were essential to abundant output of such a theme during and after the Baroque period. Generally speaking, "Dolorosas" concentrate their dramatic and painful tension in two focal points: the face and clasped





Tombstone of the Grech family in Saint Paul Shipwreck Collegiate Church.

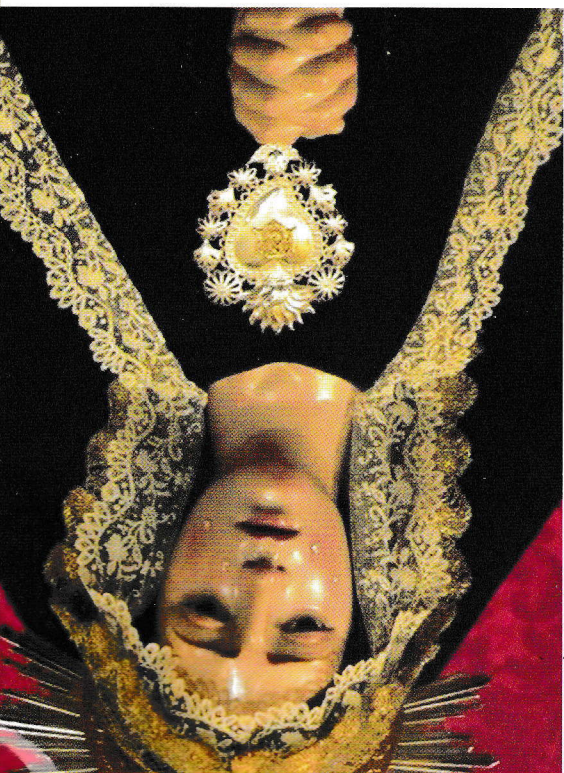
hands, and the garments that help to maintain visual attention in both expressions. In Málaga, the influence of Pedro de Mena's models was felt from the 18th century to the present, creating a myriad of sequels of varying quality and degrees of success as well as authenticity when compared to Mena's original. The busts of the "Dolorosa" became a staple among those sectors of local Baroque patrons who discovered in the possession of such images a religious object perfectly oriented for satisfying their craving for devotional "consumption." The study of these kinds of religious artistic pieces is extremely complicated due to alterations and manipulations added and inserted almost from the moment of their creation especially in the case of "Dolorosas" that are meant to be dressed with magnificent costumes and other decoration.

The Asensio family and Fernando Ortiz are undoubtedly the great creators of the typological iconography of the "Dolorosa" in 18th century Málaga. The works of Asensio de la Cerda result in a series of related pieces that have been widely distributed in churches and convents of the city and province of Málaga and even other Andalusian provinces. All these sculptures demonstrate a similar plastic treatment leading to a common attribution to a famous worker in imagery. A study of the amazing similarities noted amongst the various depictions, leads to the assumption that they were mass produced save for the introduction of variations and modifications requested by the patron, apart from the skill and ability of the sculptor entrusted with the job. Ultimately it is only particular features that distinguish it. In addition to his affiliates with members of the family workshop, various sculptures signed by Antonio Asensio are the main and undisputable references that permit several important works of sculpture to be attributed to him. Unlike his brother and nephew who were more interested in portraying sentimental, weepy females, the aesthetic and iconographic schemes of "Dolorosas" followed by Antonio Asensio clearly represents the triumph of 18th century pain as evoked by the young and delicate woman whose suffering expresses natural fragility rather than actual dramatic tension. The diffusion and success of models by Antonio Asensio de la Cerda is epitomized by the bust of Virgin of Sorrows found at St Paul Shipwreck Collegiate Church in Valletta.

(Top) Vicente Asensio de la Cerda (attributed). Virgin of Sorrows (c. 1775-1783). Parish Church of Saint Peter (Málaga, Spain).

(Middle) Antonio Asensio de la Cerda. Virgin of Sorrows (c. 1770-1771). Parish Church of Saint John (Málaga, Spain).

(Bottom) Antonio Asensio de la Cerda (attributed). Virgin of Sorrows (c. 1770-1771)(detail). Saint Catherine Monastery (Valletta, Malta).



The History and artistic value of the Virgin of Sorrows in Valletta

According to available documents, on the 20th May, 1813, the Collegiate Chapter of St Paul Shipwreck granted the brothers Cayetano and Vicente Grech and their sister Rosalia Grech all natives of Germany and apparently from the parish of San Juan (Saint John) in Malaga, the patronage of the Chapel of San Cayetano with the right, and of their descendants, to be buried in the vault. For this purpose, it was necessary for the Collegiate Chapter to withdraw the assignment of the burial to the widow of Antonio Parisati, whose family had enjoyed its use until the arrival of the Grech family. Although the altar of the chapel of San Cayetano had been erected in 1656, the Grechs enriched it splendidly, as recorded by a marble ledger-stone originally located on the floor of the same chapel, since placed next to other ledger-stones in the main nave of the church.

In the text on the tombstone, dated 1811, the Grechs express their affection for the image of the "Virgin Dolorosa" (Deiparae Dolorosae Virgini) that they had brought from Spain (cuius iconem ex Hispania translatam), from Malaga to be exact, where they or their relatives had ordered it, almost certainly from Antonio Asensio de la Cerda around 1771. According to our hypothesis, it is quite possible that the Grech family arrived from Malaga to flee the ravages of the War of Independence that devastated the city in 1810. After settling in Valletta, the Grech family chose the Collegiate Church as the repository for their image beneath which they would also be buried. In this sense, although the final award of the altar is documented in 1813, the new arrivals had expressed their wishes to the Chapter earlier in 1811 when perhaps the first alterations and architectural interventions in the chapel were

executed according to the demands of its new patrons. Quite clearly, the Grechs' fortunes and economic wealth must have greatly influenced the Chapter in its decision to grant them such a privileged location in the temple. Since then, the Virgin of Sorrows continues to welcome visitors to St Paul Shipwreck Collegiate Church in Valletta from within her brass niche above the altar of St Cayetano, which is also adorned with the Grech family coat of arms.



Antonio Asensio de la Cerda, Virgin of Sorrows (c. 1770-1771), Saint Paul Shipwreck Collegiate Church

In the sculpture, the use of formal solutions reveals deep emotions contained in an atmosphere of deep lyricism. The perfectly oval face, with tiny and exquisitely defined features, shows haste in execution but does not exclude the natural qualities provided by the lips that together with the two rows of teeth, effectively simulate sobbing. The undecided look, lost in the infinite and trembling lips eludes any expressionist and declamatory hint, betting on intimacy and serenity that

enhances the head, softly tilted to one side. The fall of the eyelids and the hands clasped to the chest, with crossed fingers, completed by the pearly flesh polychrome tones, with porcelainized texture, contribute to the coveted and introverted idealist aura forming the composition. In this sense, St Paul's Virgin of Sorrows is perhaps one of the most successful "Dolorosas" sculpted by Antonio Asensio de la Cerda. Modelling and the oval contour of the face are represented according to accepted canons of art and are harmoniously conjoined with expressive resources as eloquent as the head tilted to the left side. On the other hand, there is no suggestion that distorts expressionist silent mysticism that overwhelms the evocation of the character of Maria in the drama of Calvary in her unequivocal condition such as a "heroine" of the Passion, recalling the popular medieval *Lauda Stabat Mater Dolorosa*. Antonio Asensio's desire is to emphasize special plastic aspects processing features, rounding the tip of the nose, defining silhouette of chin that is barely altered by the dimple sunken surface and mild skin as well as the puckering eyebrows that are essential to clothe the droop of the languid eye. The polychrome pink tones and texture complements the porcelainized plasticity and its full meaning, beauty, religious fervor, devotional and aesthetic dimension, complemented by the joined and gathered hands in prayer.

One further fascinating subject for research could be the investigation of the presence in Malta of similar Baroque sculptures from Malaga, which can be attributed to the same Antonio Asensio de la Cerda as in the case of another "Virgin Dolorosa" which is preserved in St Catherine's Monastery Church in Valletta.