

Release Date: October 21, 2003

RARE 17TH-CENTURY STATUE OF SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS ACQUIRED BY THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART



Saint John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz)

Wood, polychromed and gilded with extensive sgraffito decoration (estofado)

Spain (probably Seville), c. 1675

Patrons' Permanent Fund

National Gallery of Art, Washington

Washington, DC--The National Gallery of Art has acquired a rare Spanish 17th-century polychrome wood sculpture of **Saint John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz)** (c. 1675) with funds from the Patrons' Permanent Fund. The statue is on view in Gallery 11 of the West Building, off the West Garden Court, now through April 30, 2004, when it goes to the Gallery's conservation department for restoration and cleaning.

"This acquisition is the latest example of the Gallery's commitment to sculpture as an integral part of our collection," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "It

also reflects the strengthening of our baroque art holdings. Spanish carved wooden sculpture is extremely important in the history of art, but good life-size examples are very rare outside Spain. This **Saint John of the Cross** is an exceptionally eloquent work, one that will appeal to many of our visitors."

The Sculpture

Painted in lifelike tones and gilded with extensive decoration, the statue corresponds closely to a work described in a document found in the Seville archives of a now-disbanded Carmelite convent, Nuestra Señora de los Remedios. According to the document, the Spanish convent commissioned the sculptor Francisco Antonio Gijón (1653-c. 1720) to make a life-size painted-wood statue of Saint John of the Cross on the occasion of his beatification in 1675. Though little-known today, Gijón was one of the leading sculptors of the Spanish Baroque working in Seville.

The statue, which is five feet five inches tall, is a superb example of the technique of *estofado* decoration, where one layer of paint is scratched to reveal another of contrasting color. The robes of **Saint John of the Cross** feature colored paint laid over gold leaf, then scratched away to show the gilding underneath, creating rich patterns. The saint stands with outstretched hands, holding in his left an open book from which a small mountain rises. The mountain is both a symbol of the Carmelite order, which traces its origins to twelfth-century Christians who lived in caves on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land, and a reference to Saint John's poem, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the book the saint holds. The right hand of the statue once held a feather-quill pen, now missing; also missing is a cross on top of the mountain.

Saint John of the Cross

Called by Thomas Merton "one of the greatest and most hidden of the saints," Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) was a cofounder, with Saint Teresa of Avila, of the "discalced," or shoeless, a branch of the order of The Carmelites of the Roman Catholic Church. In this reform movement, which advocated a more severe form of monasticism, the monks wore the sandals of the poor rather than the shoes of the upper classes; some of the more radical friars went barefoot to indicate their commitment to

poverty.

Because of his ardor in pursuing these reforms, John was imprisoned in Toledo in 1576. In his prison cell he began his famous *Spiritual Canticle* and *Songs of the Soul*. After an escape in 1578 considered by many to be miraculous, he went to Andalusia, where he wrote the remarkable mystical poems, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and *The Dark Night of the Soul*. John of the Cross was beatified in 1675 and canonized in 1726. He is today considered one of Spain's finest lyric poets.

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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