

THE PAINTINGS OF DAMIÀ FORMENT

The honor of the unexpected discovery of the style of Damià Forment as a painter belongs to the Aragonese scholar, Abizanda y Broto, but it must be pointed out at once that, having made this important contribution to our knowledge of Spanish art, he eventually obscured Damià's pictorial personality by asserting, quite wrongly as we shall see, that his style shows him to be identical with the painter of the early Renaissance in Aragon who in the great convent of Sijena did two retables of which pieces have survived. In the second volume of his *Documentos para la historia artística y literaria de Aragón (siglo XVI)*,¹ Abizanda published Forment's contract to do the paintings of a retable at San Mateo de Gállego, just north of Saragossa, and revealed that the paintings are in part preserved. The contract, dated March 31, 1523, does not name the spot at San Mateo de Gállego for which the retable was to be made, and, although the extant panels were found in the Ermita de Santa Engracia, whence they have been removed to the Saragossa Museum, the retable's original destination may well have been the parish church,² since it has often happened in Spain that retables done for principal churches have been relegated to outlying *ermitas* when their modes had become antiquated. In any case, the subjects of the extant panels leave no doubt that they were sections of the retable of the contract.

1. Saragossa 1917, pp. 192-195.

2. In his monograph on *Damián Forment* (Barcelona 1942), 32, ABIZANDA declares that the retable was actually ordered for the *Ermita*, which he here describes as that of St. Barbara, but the contract that he had published in 1917 fails so to specify. In 1917 he called the building the Ermita de Sta. Engracia; and the designation of 1942 as *de Santa Bárbara* is perhaps an erratum on his part, although the building originally dedicated to St. Engracia may have taken on a new patroness, St. Barbara.

It is from the predella that these four panels derive, and we do not need to concern ourselves with the themes that the contract demands for the paintings of the other sections since they have perished or degenerated into such hopeless dilapidation as to be valueless for a study of subjects or style. The curious thing is that Forment, who was more essentially a sculptor, should have been asked to do only the paintings and that it is explicitly stated in the document that he was not obligated to execute the one piece of sculpture, the statue of St. Engracia at the centre of the retable, which in 1942 was still to be seen over the high altar of the Ermita. The contract requires that the predella shall comprise a Pietà in the middle, which has disappeared, and the four extant scenes from the story of St. Engracia at the sides. The themes of the scenes are her arraignment before Dacian, her flagellation (the same episode that is depicted in the remains of Bermejo's altarpiece devoted to this peculiarly Aragonese virgin martyr),³ her dragging behind a horse, and her laceration on the *eculeus* (Figs. 1 and 2); and, since these events, as embodying the regular accounts of her martyrdom, can have to do only with St. Engracia⁴ and since the panels, only about thirty centimetres high, must belong to a predella, they most surely once constituted pieces of the retable of 1523 and so are soundly documented works of Damià Forment.

It was in his monograph of 1942 on Forment⁵ that Abizanda championed the identity of this artist as a painter with the Sijena Master, but it requires, in my opinion, no more than a casual glance at a few reproductions of the Sijena Master's works, as for instance the illustrations published in Bertaux's Catalogue of the Saragossa Exhibition of 1908,⁶ to be entirely convinced that the Sijena Master's bold and bluff Aragonese types and methods lie at the opposite pole from the gentle Valencian manner of Forment's paintings. Despite the fact that he had now transferred the sphere of his activity from his home in València to Aragon, even his sculpture at this period in his career during the first third of the sixteenth century still retained a good deal of Va-

3. See vol. IX of my *History of Spanish Painting*, p. 819. For a detailed account of the passion of St. Engracia, consult ALONSO DE VILLEGAS, *Flos sanctorum* I (Madrid 1593), 624.

4. Even if the Ermita was originally dedicated to St. Barbara, the panels cannot come from some other retable honoring her in the edifice, since it is not related of her that she was dragged by horses.

5. Pp. 25-26.

6. Plates 13-15.

lencian tranquillity and mildness, however much with artistic sensitiveness he bestowed upon his carved forms the somewhat greater amplitude and monumentality that sculpture requires. In any case, as a painter he must be credited to the Valencian school, although his one documented work in this phase of the Fine Arts was done after he had emigrated to Aragon and although no traces of his pictorial attainments are recognizable with *absolute* surety in Valencian territory.

Abizanda⁷ conjectures that Damià Forment may be the author of the paintings in the retable of the high altar in the parish church of Binèfar (in the province of Huesca and northwest of Lleida), since his receipt of June 6, 1525,⁸ proves that he was paid for labor on the monument. Unfortunately the document is not quoted in full by Abizanda, who thus fails to reveal whether it specified the artist's activity on the paintings as well as the few sculptured pieces, but we may take it for certain that the receipt does not mention the paintings, inasmuch as, if it did, Abizanda would undoubtedly have so stated in support of his supposition that they also were Forment's creation. Since the retable perished in 1936, the question is now a purely academic one; but even the dim representations of the scenes in the photograph of the whole structure in the Mas Archive (No. 32724 C), corroborating the notes that I took at Binèfar in 1930, demonstrate that we have no right to entertain the idea that as a painter Forment could have collaborated in the monument.⁹

For our purposes we do not need to rehearse the details of his life, which comprise the beginnings of his artistic career at València in the opening years of the Cinquecento, his long, busy, and honorable residence in Aragon whither he had moved at least by May 1, 1509, and his employment at the end of the thirties on the sculptured retable of the high altar in the cathedral of the Castilian town of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, where on December 22, 1540, he made his will, dying shortly thereafter. Ready sources for the details are August L. Mayer's article in the Thieme-Becker *Lexikon* and Abizanda's discussions of

7. Monograph on Forment. 25 and 33.

8. ABIZANDA, *Documentos*, II (1917), 206.

9. Prepossessed with the thought that the Sijena Master and Forment are identical, Abizanda in one place (monograph, p. 25) speaks of the former as responsible for the Binèfar paintings, but, although the Sijena Master is actually not the same as Forment, I am forced, on what evidence is at my disposal, to reject him also as the paintings' author. Certainly neither Forment nor the Sijena Master

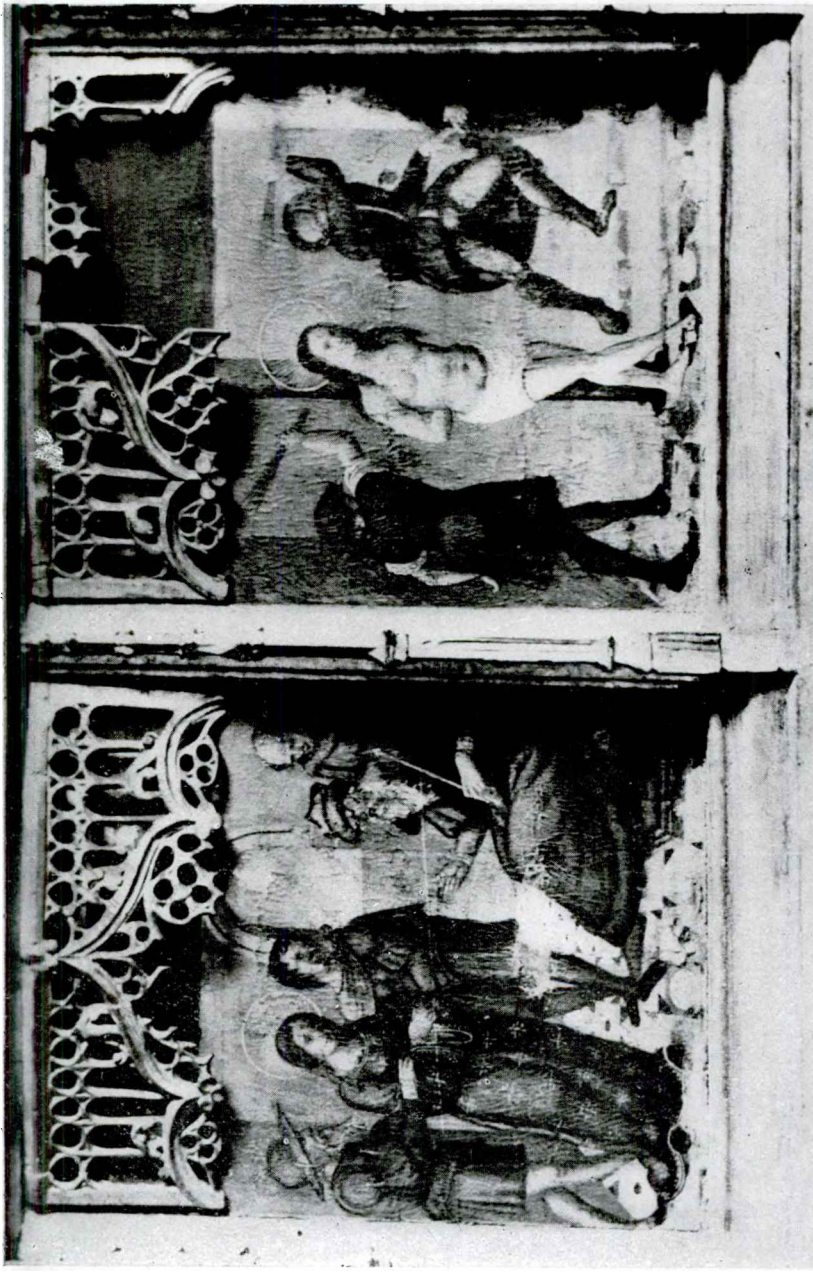
the sculptor in his *Documentos para la historia artística y literaria de Aragón* and in his separate monograph on Forment; but to these should be added the new information, particularly in regard to his activity in Catalonia, contained in the articles by Xavier de Salas in «Anales y Boletín de los Museos de Arte de Barcelona» I (1941), 79, and II (1942), 35.

The style of Damià Forment as a painter reveals little or no awareness of his Aragonese environment but is part and parcel of the contemporary Valencian school, so similar especially to the art of the Cabanyes Master¹⁰ as to be scarcely distinguishable from it. A slightly diverse cast in the feminine features is almost the sole factor that differentiates his countenances from those of this Master, but it should be very definitely pointed out that the nude of St. Engracia's body in the scourging, probably by reason of Forment's preponderantly sculptural nature, is sturdier than the Cabanyes Master's naked forms and the object of much more anatomical attention. Despite the fact, however, that the types and draperies of his carvings are in general analogous, the manner of his paintings is decidedly gentler than that of his sculpture, approximating particularly in this respect the Cabanyes Master's modes. The gentleness cannot be explained by the consideration that he was dealing at San Mateo de Gállego with the small scenes of a *predella*, for it is a note that runs all through the other paintings that with a high degree of probability we shall ascribe to him, although in one or two instances we shall find a somewhat greater resemblance to the robustness of his statuary. The real reason must be that, a true artist, he felt the distinction between the varied demands of sculpture and painting.

A few detailed but superficial parallels to his carvings are not lacking. The Flagellation of Christ in his retable of the high altar in San Pablo at Saragossa, which he had executed shortly before his commission at San Mateo de Gállego, provides in the postures of the scourgers nearly exact counterparts for the henchmen who perform a like task upon the body of St. Engracia, and this relief also contains an

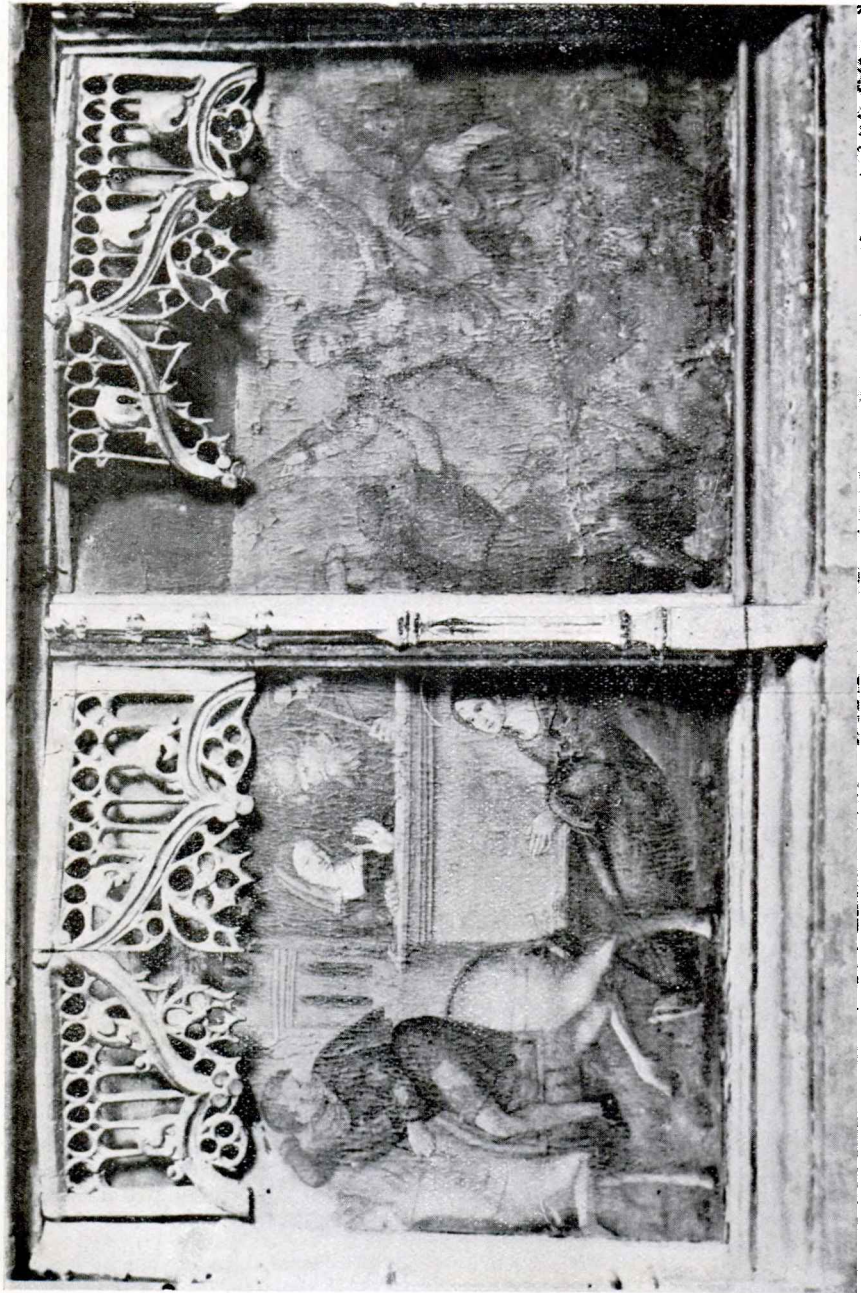
had any connection with the two separate panels that are perhaps still preserved in the church of Binèfar and have been photographed by the Mas Archive. Nos. 32725 and 32726 C, representing Christ before Caiaphas and the boiling of Sts. Julitta and Quiricus.

10. For my discussions of this painter, see the indices of vols. VI, VII, and IX of my *History of Spanish Painting*.



Pl. I. — Damià Forment. Arraignment and Flagellation of St. Engracia, Sections of a Predella from San Mateo de Gállego. Museum, Saragossa.

(Photo Mora.)



Pl. II. — Damià Forment. Dragging of St. Engracia and her Torture on the *Eculeus*. Sections of a Predella from San Mateo de Gállego. Museum, Saragossa.

(Photo Mora.)

example of the custom of placing spectators of an episode in balconies which often appears in Forment's sculptures and which we perceive in the painted panel representing St. Engracia dragged by a horse.

There are two further panels in Aragon that with much reason may be attributed on stylistic grounds to Forment, but the justness of the attributions will become clearer through the additional evidence contributed by paintings at València which likewise it can be persuasively argued that Damià executed. One of the latter, in the possession of Don Francisco Díaz de Brito but deriving¹¹ from the great Carthusian monastery of Valdecristo in Valencian territory near Segorbe, displays the Madonna holding the Child and worshipped by a pair of angels and by the kneeling Sts. Joachim and Anne (Fig. 3). Other sacred *motifs* are consigned to medallions simulated as inlaid in Our Lady's rich marble throne of the Renaissance, at the top the blessing Father and Dove of the Holy Spirit, as well as the Annunciation, and at the bottom busts of three whitehabited monastic saints, one of whom the accompanying inscription has enabled Saralegui¹² to denominate as St. Bernard of Clairvaux and in the other two of whom he tentatively would like to recognize, the inscriptions being illegible, the patrons of the Carthusian Order, Sts. Bruno and Hugh of Grenoble.

It is immediately obvious that we are in the presence of a style at least arrestingly similar to that of the predella from San Mateo de Gállego. In the first place, the affiliations with the Cabanyes Master are again so close as almost to deceive us into thinking that we have to do merely with one of his late phases; but the modelling is harder and cleaner than he ever cultivates, and the types again are plainly, though slightly, diversified from his standards, especially the St. Joachim. The more sculptural modelling is what we should expect from Forment, naturally apparent to a greater degree in the larger panel of the Díaz de Brito Collection (90 centimetres in height) than in the daintier scenes of the Aragonese predella. The very existence of a manner intimately akin to that of the Cabanyes Master and yet not his in both the predella and the Valencian panel would go far towards implying a single authorship. But the ties are drawn still more tightly than this.

11. See a section of an article in the «Archivo español de arte», XIX (1946), 143, by LEANDRO DE SARALEGUI, who tentatively assigns the panel to the school of Vicente Juan Masip, the father of Juan de Juanes.

12. *Op. cit.*, 145.

The types in the predella and the panel approach identity. The enthroned Virgin vividly recalls the feminine spectator of St. Engracia's torture at the tail of the horse, and the various representations of the martyr herself fall within the same class of humanity. The St. Joachim is only a somewhat more powerfully drawn version of the kind of old man who appears at the extreme left in the episode of the laceration upon the *eculeus* and also as one of St. Engracia's guards in her arraignment. The Holy Child, who belongs very plainly to the Renaissance rather than to the mediaeval tradition, resembles impressively the Infant held by the sculptured Madonna at the centre of Forment's retable in the monastery of Poblet. If, as I am strongly inclined to believe, the Díaz de Brito picture is a work of the sculptor, it throws further light upon him in the guise of a painter. We perceive now not only the relationship to the Cabanyes Master but also, especially in the St. Joachim, an acquaintance with the achievements of Vicente Juan Masip, the father of Juan de Juanes. The background of the picture, where we descry St. Joseph, in diminutive scale, trudging forward at the left, places the author among the most delightful of the many good landscapists that the Valencian school produced during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

In a number of instances in my studies I have conquered the temptation to ascribe to known painters works that lay in their orbits but did not quite satisfy me as by their hands, and this abnegation on my part has not seldom been rewarded by the eventual emergence of nearly allied artistic individualities to whom the doubtful productions could finally be attached. The painter of the Díaz de Brito picture affords a case in point, since he proves to be the author of a panel in regard to which¹³ I was loath to follow Saralegui in an attribution to the Cabanyes Master himself, a version of the *Anna selbdritt* in the Provincial Museum, València (Fig. 4). The Virgin and St. Anne duplicate the representations of these personages in the painting owned by Señor Díaz de Brito, and the Child also corresponds in anatomy, posture of the legs, and even largely in the type of head and face. There can be no possible doubt that the two pictures are by the same hand, and the *Anna selbdritt* supplies further evidence that this is the hand of Damià Forment, since the Virgin illustrates the sort of robustness of physique

13. Vol. VI of my *History of Spanish Painting*, p. 430, n. 1.

beyond the Cabanyes Master's standard that we observe in the scourged St. Engracia.

Of the two paintings in Aragon persuasively assignable to Forment on internal evidence and thus, like the predella from San Mateo de Gállego, executed after his emigration from València, the one now in the Museum of Saragossa is in subject both anomalous and somewhat enigmatic (Fig. 5). Nothing is known of the panel until it was found in the Hospicio Provincial of the city in 1915, but the venerable Aragonese scholar, Don Mariano de Pano,¹⁴ seems to have discerned its general theme (although I cannot follow him in his interpretation of all the details) and its probably ultimate provenience. He believes that it comes from a pious institution of Saragossa, the Colegio de las Vírgenes, which is now extinct but the edifice of which is still preserved, and that it represents Our Lady enthroned and surrounded by women of the religious Order who comprised the institution, seated on the pavement. Constituting a kind of lay Order and consisting of maidens not bound by strict vows, it received papal approval in 1531, shortly after its foundation. The habit was at first a simple garment of coarse cloth, but Pano states that Pius IV, whose pontificate covers the period from 1559-1565, changed it to a white wimple and a blue mantle, on one shoulder of which was a red cross, i. e., practically the habit of the earlier established Order of the Conceptionists, and that at the same time this pope placed the Colegio de las Vírgenes under the patronage of the Deputies of the Realm of Aragon.

Since the seated members of the Order wear the habit alleged to have been granted them by Pius IV and since Pano elucidates the men seen in the view of a city in the left background as the Deputies, he logically dates the panel in the vicinity of 1570; but the style unmistakably proves that it must have been painted about the time of the earlier papal confirmation in 1531, thus obtruding the first of the several puzzles in which the picture involves us. The natural explanation would be that Pano was wrong in thinking Virgins of the Colegio not to have adopted the white and blue habit until the period of Pius IV and that the persons whom he guesses to be the Deputies are only the figures of *genre* so often scattered through the backgrounds of the paintings of the time, not meant as any specific characters. No sooner, however,

14. In an article in the «Boletín del Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes», I (Saragossa 1917), 18-20.

have we proposed this explanation than we are confronted by another difficulty, the fact that at the back of the still Gothic church in which the persons of the picture are imagined as ensconced there are introduced, in the same diminished scale as the so-called Deputies, women in the coarse cloth of the Order's original habit, four of them standing in devotional attitudes but a fifth, at the extreme right, in prayer before a gold tabernacle of the Blessed Sacrament. With his desire to read very definite meanings into all the figures in the background, Pano divines that the five women are engaged in the Eucharistic cult of the Forty Hours, which was one of the Order's privileges, and that the lady in front of the tabernacle is the first rectress, Ana González. Are these forms in the offing meant to embody a reminiscence of the first days of the Order, which almost immediately assumed the habit worn by the seated members in the foreground? Or are the nuns at the front of the picture instead Conceptionists and those at the back representatives of the related Colegio de las Vírgenes?

In any case, I should be disposed to predicate that one of the fundamental ideas of the picture is the Immaculate Conception, which may well have been a principal devotion in the Colegio de las Vírgenes as well as among the at least partly affiliated Conceptionists. The central figure can hardly be some virgin martyr or anyone else than Our Lady, and, since she is depicted in the unusual guise, when treated as an object of cult, without the Child and since she is reading in a book while the nuns, also holding tomes, gesticulate in modes that imply discussion with her, it is to be surmised that they are engaged in a conference upon the evidence for the Immaculate Conception in sacred literature. In the lower part of the panel, beneath and in front of the pavement of the simulated church, there is featured a garden of various flowers, so entirely extraordinary an element in Spanish art of the period that it must have a symbolical meaning. Pano conjectures that the flowers stand for the maidens of the Colegio, but I should regard the garden as rather the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Songs, IV, 12, which was regularly taken as a symbol of Mary's perpetual virginity, an idea intimately connected with the opinion that she herself had been immaculately conceived. It is possible, however, that, as the picture probably once adorned the College of Virgins, the virginity of Our Lady was the topic of her conversation with the nuns. We may question whether any hidden significance attaches to the two birds perched

upon the parapet that encloses the garden, since the Valencian painters of the time sometimes introduced birds for no other purpose than the filling of spaces or decoration.¹⁵

Whatever be the solutions to the enigmas of these and the other subordinate details that have troubled us, it can scarcely be doubted that the general subject of the panel concerns the Colegio de las Vírgenes or that the panel once adorned its convent. Pano appears to understand that the picture might have been consigned to the Hospicio Provincial by the Deputies of the Realm, who would naturally choose this charitable institution as a repository for the belongings of the defunct Colegio de las Vírgenes, which also had been under their charge.

Despite my long study of the panel, I had never been able to fit it into the Aragonese school or to make it accord with the style of any of the masters in the near-lying parts of Castile who could easily have received commissions in Aragon, such men as Andrés López and Antonio de Vega or Juan de Pereda;¹⁶ but, as soon as I perceived that it must be Valencian, the likelihood at once loomed that the author was Damià Forment, since he was an artist of València known to have painted in Aragon at the time when the picture must have been executed. Concrete support for the likelihood is forthcoming when we seek internal evidence. The general manner conforms to what we find in the predella from San Mateo de Gállego, and the Virgin's face is actually very similar to that of St. Engracia undergoing flagellation and torture on the *eculeus*. She is also the closest approximation, in the paintings that we are connecting with Forment, to his sculptured representations of the Madonna. The men in the left distance, in whom Pano would wish to see the Deputies, resemble the types of the Cabanyes Master, Forment's nearest pictorial relative. If we have been right in ascribing to Forment the panels at València and if we bring them also into the comparison, the probability of his authorship of the painting of the Colegio de las Vírgenes approaches a fact. It is hard, if not impossible, to believe that the person who did the St. Anne in both Valencian panels was not also the creator of the virtually identical maidens of the Colegio in the picture in the Saragossa Museum, and the Madonna in the Valencian panels is hardly distinguishable from Mary holding converse with these maidens. The tenacity of the old Spanish love of

15. Vol. VI of my *History of Spanish Painting*, p. 302.

16. *Ibid.*, vol. IX, chapters XII and XIII.

decorative accentuation by gold is betrayed in the brocade of her gown and of the canopy under which she sits.

The second painting in which I should like to see Forment's hand after his departure from València is a panel that I know only in a reproduction in the periodical «Aragón»,¹⁷ where its location is not revealed (Fig. 6). The subject is the peculiarly Aragonese theme of the Virgin of the Pillar appearing to St. James Major and one of his companions in the experience (Torquatus?).¹⁸ The ties with the predella of San Mateo de Gállego are perhaps more numerous and tangible than in any of the other instances. The angels included in the assembly are facially very similar to the various representations of St. Engracia; the Holy Child, particularly in the treatment of the head and hair, might grow into any one of the youths who take part in the scenes of martyrdom; the nude of His body exhibits the same kind of more careful, sculptural modelling, unusual in Valencian painting of the period, that we have noted in the scourged St. Engracia; and, to select a Morellian detail, the hands are correspondingly delineated in both the panel of the Virgin of the Pillar and in the predella from San Mateo de Gállego. But analogous hands appear in the two pictures at València which, if my provisional attribution for them is accepted, furnish still further comparisons to bolster Forment's authorship of the panel at Saragossa. The Virgin does not really resemble very closely in countenance her representations in the two Valencian pictures, but the Child, even in muscularity, is definitely alike. Since the picture in the Díaz de Brito Collection also includes angels, we can now introduce them into the question, and we find that the types, clad in vestments such as they wear in the Cabanyes Master's works, nearly duplicate the celestial spirits who accompany Our Lady in her manifestation on the pillar. Both paintings, furthermore, admit landscapes, which turn out to be of precisely the same sort, particularly in the rising mountains on each side, in the bits of architecture of antiquity or of the Renaissance, and in the insertion of a castle on an eminence at the right. At the centre of Paolo da San Leocadio's now

17. August, 1936, p. 159. My friend, Don Mario Miguel Nadal of the Saragossa Museum, with his usual scholarly interest and unflinching kindness, undertook for me the most exhaustive investigations to discover the picture's location, but he writes me that neither the records of the periodical «Aragón» nor any other sources of information at Saragossa have rewarded his efforts.

18. See vol. VIII of my *History of Spanish Painting*, pp. 288-290.



Pl. III. — Danià Forment (?). Madonna, Angels, Sts. Joachim and Anne.
Díaz de Brito Collection, València.

(Courtesy of Don Leandro de Saralegui.)



Pl. IV. — Damia Forment (?). *Anna selbdritt*. Provincial Museum. València.
(Photo Mas.)



Pl. V. — Damià Forment (?). Our Lady and Members of the Colegio de las Vírgenes at Saragossa. Museum, Saragossa.

(Photo Mas.)



PL. VI. — Damià Forment (?). The Virgin of the Pillar
Appearing to St. James Major.

unhappily destroyed retable over the high altar of the Colegiata at Gandía, there was tangible precedent for the Virgin of the Pillar, and this a *sculptured* precedent, the statue of the Madonna, which, though generally and probably with justice believed to be not by Damià but by his father,¹⁹ yet would naturally embody the manner of the son's beginnings.

No one of the four panels that I have endeavored to ascribe to Damià Forment, in addition to the documented predella of San Mateo de Gállego, affords perhaps quite adequate evidence to establish its right to be set in the rank of his undoubted achievements, but the whole congeries of interrelationships of the four with one another and with the predella goes far towards confirming him as their author and thus towards rounding out our conception of him as a painter.

CHANDLER R. POST

Harvard University, Cambridge (Mass.).

19. See especially TRAMOYERES I BLASCO in «Archivo de arte valenciano», IV (1918), 15, n. 1.