

[10]

JOSÉ CAMARÓN BONONAT

(SEGORBE, CASTELLÓN, 1731-VALENCIA, 1803)

Death of Saint Francis

1788

SEPIA INK WASH AND PENCIL/LAID PAPER. 150 × 210 MM

José Camarón is considered one of the most important Valencian artists of the second half of the 18th century. He worked as a painter, engraver and draftsman. Born in Segorbe, Castellón, in 1731 his training begins very young at his father's workshop, the sculptor Nicolás Camarón. He continues his studies with his uncle, Eliseus Bononat, painter of miniatures, and completes finally his training in Valencia and in Madrid, enrolling in the classes at the Fine Arts Academy of San Fernando. In 1754 he returns to Valencia where in 1768 he figures as one of the founders of the Academy of San Carlos. He became painting director of this institution, and from 1796 to 1801, general director. As a prolific painter, he explored other many genres and mastered all the techniques, although the scenes of genre, full of colour and grace, are his most innovative paintings. These are related to painters such as Antonio Carnicero or Luis Paret y Alcázar and are contained within the Spanish rococo. However, his most important works are two series of religious works of art, twenty altarpieces carried out between 1781 and 1783 for the cathedral of Valencia, and the series of paintings undertaken for San Francisco el Grande between 1788-1789 in Madrid. Among his production outstands also the great number of drawings that were created for engravings, or that in some cases he engraved himself. Amongst the most well known series of illustrations are the twenty-five drawings for *Life,*

greatness, and death of the Glorious Patriarch Saint Joseph and the thirty-one prints that he did for the edition of the *Quixote* of José Pellicer. After resigning from the direction of the Academy of San Carlos in 1801 his artistic activity ceases. Camarón dies in Valencia July 14, 1803, and is buried in the Chapel of the Souls of the church of Saint Stephan of the city.¹

The actual drawing depicts the *Death of Saint Francis*, and is a preliminary sketch for one of the six oil paintings commissioned to Camarón by the Real Patronato de San Francisco el Grande around 1786, for the cloister of said convent. Together with this theme he also depicted: *Saint Francis comforted by the angels, Saint Francis and the poor, Saint Francis, with a child in arms, in front of three women, The conversion of the wolf of Gubbio* and *The stigmatization of Saint Francis* (all of them owned by the Prado Museum and deposited in the church of San Francisco el Grande). This work is linked with another drawing that is shown in this exhibition, the design of Zacarías González Velázquez *Saint Francis giving his cape to a poor person*, preparatory also for another painting of the series San Francisco for the said church of Madrid.

Camarón interprets in the design, the purpose of our study, the detailed moment in the *Major Legend of Saint Francis*, written by San Buenaventura, at the news of the death of the Saint, a crowd approaches to see, watch over and kiss his dead body (*Major Legend of Saint Francis*, XV-3). In that way the Saint



José Camarón Bononat, *Death of Saint Francis of Assisi*, 1788. Madrid, San Francisco el Grande (deposited by the Prado Museum)

appears lying down on the floor and next to him a monk that is kneeling down, kisses his hand. At the left of the scene a group of monks seem to be crying over the death of the Saint. Behind this a woman is crying inconsolably, while in the background of the composition a crowd of figures, barely seen by light traces, seem to come nearer to take part in the vigil. In the centre, a glowing star conveys the soul of Saint Francis in his way up to heaven.

This work and the decorations for the San Francisco el Grande must be linked with a group of 4 drawings, more finished than the one that is presented here, that have appeared recently in the art market attributed to Mariano Salvador Maella². They actually are linked to the preparatory designs done by José Camarón to illustrate four of the themes that he painted for San Francisco el Grande. Among these drawings there is also a study for the *Death of Saint Francis of Assisi*, but however depicts a distinct moment of the *Major Legend* seen in our design. In this selected episode in which Saint Francis, before dying, gathers together all of his brothers around him, asking for a gospel book and begs that

1 For more information on the biography of this artist see Ossorio y Bernard (2868), pp. 119-120. Likewise an extensive monographic is currently being undertaken by Espinós Díaz (in press).



José Camarón Bononat, *Death of Saint Francis of Assisi*, 1788. Paris, Art market (2010)

a passage of Saint John be read to him (*Major Legend of Saint Francis*, XIV-5).

These four designs present common characteristics with our sketch: technique, composition, type of paper, size... Furthermore, all the scenes are conceived in a semicircle, which induces one to consider that perhaps in the beginning the works commissioned to Camarón were conceived in the shape of lunettes. Nevertheless, this idea must have been modified and the canvas that Camarón finally painted for San Francisco el Grande does not show this semi circular composition, but presents a rectangular format. It also has a closer point of view to the spectator; in fact in the actual painting the figure of one of Saint Francis's brothers, placed in a close-up, turns around and directly looks at the spectator, that indicates that the work was conceived to be seen at the level of this one. The actual oil painting is a combination of ideas expressed both in the first strokes of the theme, which would be the sketch of this exhibition, and the most completed design recently sold in Paris. However, the end result is much more dry and rigid, losing all its freshness that is seen in the initial sketches.

2 "Dessins Anciens et Modernes, Dessins et Sculptures des XIXe et XXe Pintures & Arts Graphiques", *Vente Piasa*, Jeudi 25 mars 2010, lot. 118.

