

[2]

JUAN ANTONIO DE FRÍAS Y ESCALANTE

(CORDOBA, 1633—MADRID, 1669). ATTRIBUTED TO

Venus and Cupid

C. 1660

CHARCOAL OR SOFT BLACK CHALK ON WHITE PAPER

89 X 166 MM

Until the 19th century the depiction of the female nude was solely confined to mythological subjects such as Venus, nymphs and the Three Graces or to the depiction of Eve in religious compositions. In line with the prevailing morality of the day, these were the only nude female figures that could be depicted in paintings or sculpture. Despite this fact, numerous artists were the subject of criticism by writers and intellectuals who considered that such works encouraged lust and lasciviousness.¹ It was not until the 19th century that artists such as Goya, with the *Naked Maja*, followed by figures such as Ingres with the *Grand Odalisque* and Manet with *Olympia* who ventured to depict a female nude for its own sake. However, prior to that date numerous artists used mythology as a pretext to depict this subject. Among the most celebrated examples is Titian's series known as the *Poesie*, which was inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The canvases in this series were painted as a direct commission for Philip II and are characterised by their focus on the eroticism and beauty of the naked female figure. Another example is Rubens's painting of *The Three Graces*, acquired by Philip IV at the posthumous sale of the artist's possessions after his death in 1640.

The Spanish royal collection contained numerous examples of such mythological and erotic works. They were also to be found in aristocratic collections, many of which reflected royal aesthetic taste. As a result it is easy to understand why

The "Rokeby" Venus (London, National Gallery, NG2057) by Velázquez belonged to the Marquis of Carpio, who was close to the monarch and was a great connoisseur of painting.²

The manner of presenting the figures of Venus and Cupid in the present drawing recalls Velázquez's "*Rokeby*" *Venus*. However, in the present work the figure of the goddess is seen from the front, not from behind, and Cupid holds up a curtain rather than a mirror. Nonetheless, the similarity between the two works suggests that the creator of this sheet was familiar with Velázquez's paintings, either the London canvas or other similar ones such as the *Venus and Cupid* painted for the Salón de los Espejos [Hall of Mirrors] in the Alcázar in Madrid, a work that Velázquez painted for Philip IV but which was lost in the fire in the Alcázar in 1734.³ The present artist would thus have been based in Madrid in the mid-17th century and would have moved in court and aristocratic circles, which were the only ones that could have brought him a commission to depict a subject of this type.

The present drawing is executed in charcoal or soft black chalk on white paper. The thick, at times slightly blurred strokes, the manner of creating the shadows with a continuous zigzagging line and the way in which the fingers are defined with parallel strokes all identify this sketch as the work of Juan Antonio Frías y Escalante. The few known drawings by the artist all share this free and energetic use of charcoal, evident, for example, in *Saint Joseph* (Museo del

Prado, D-361) and *Galatea* (Galleria degli Uffizi, inv. no. 10156S). Escalante was born in Cordoba in 1633 where he initially trained, possibly in the studio of Antonio del Castillo. He moved to Madrid in the late 1640s and entered the studio of Francisco Rizi. Through his association with Rizi and his own presence at court Escalante encountered the work of the Venetian painters, particularly Tintoretto and Veronese, from whom he copied their "style of composition and graceful poses".⁴ In addition to this influence, Escalante made use of Flemish prints, some of which he copied almost exactly, while also looking to Alonso Cano's elegant models. With regard to the latter influence, the Cupid in the present sheet is notably similar to the small angel in the lower part of Cano's drawing of *Two Angels holding up a Curtain* (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, inv. B.235).⁵ The present drawing also reveals certain stylistic and thematic parallels with other drawings attributed to Cano such as *Venus, Cupid and a Satyr* of around 1645-1650 (Uffizi, inv. 10260S)⁶ and the *Female Nude* in the Museo del Prado (D-6320).⁷ These works are among the few depictions of the nude in Spanish Golden Age art.

No mythological paintings can be securely attributed to Escalante at the present time, nor are there any documentary references to such works. However, a small oil on the subject of *Andromeda* that was formerly in the Spanish

royal collections has recently been attributed to the artist (Museo Nacional del Prado, P-195),⁸ the composition of which is a faithful copy of a print on the same subject by Agostino Carracci. In addition, the drawing of *Galatea* in the Uffizi is definitely considered to be a work by his hand.⁹ Finally, the Prado has a sketch of *Venus and Adonis* attributed to the 17th-century Madrid School (D-282). Its technique, sense of movement and preference for diagonal cross-hatching suggest that it is by Escalante, as Pérez Sánchez and López Torrijos noted.¹⁰

Escalante was an enormously gifted artist, revealing himself as a consummate draughtsman in the drawings mentioned above and as a notable colourist in his paintings. Despite the fact that his career was cut short by his death from tuberculosis in 1669 at the age of thirty-six, he left a corpus of highly imaginative and dynamic works that point to his great potential. The present drawing of *Venus and Cupid* is a rarity and an extremely significant work within the Spanish tradition, given that it is one of the few known 17th-century mythological sketches. His great expressive power and sensual, poetic forms place Escalante on a level with Cano or Velázquez and he should be seen as one of the few artists who ventured to transgress the moral codes of the day in order to offer a complete depiction of the female nude.

1 In 1626, in his *Discursos Apologéticos*, Juan de Butrón attacked the subject of the nude: "The fact that paintings of female nudes incite lust can be proved by the examples of history. What effects have nudes brought about other than coarse desires and even abominable deeds?" Some years later writers such as Pacheco and Palomino criticised the depiction of nudes for the same reasons. See: López Torrijos (1995), p. 272.

2 On this issue see: Pita Andrade (1952) and Pérez Sánchez (1960). Other works that should be mentioned in this context include the painting attributed to Velázquez's son-in-law Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo in the collection of the Duke of Arcos in 1693, which was described as: "A Portrait of Venus of more than a *vara* high and seven *quartas* wide, copy of Titian, Ju.º Bautista, del mazo, valued at seventy-seven *reales*". Published in Burke and Cherry (1997), pp. 963-968.

3 Martínez Leiva and Rodríguez Rebollo (forthcoming publication), no. 106 in the 1686 inventory.

4 Palomino (1715-1724/1947), p. 966.

5 Escalante made use of figures of angels by Alonso Cano in a number of his own works, including the canvas of *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (church of the Maravillas, Madrid) and in his compositions on the subject of Saint Joseph.

6 Pérez Sánchez (1972), p. 83, cat. no. 87 and Véliz (2011), p. 424, cat. no. 93.

7 Véliz (2011), p. 422, cat. no. 92.

8 On this painting, attributed to Luca Giordano until 1970, see Buendía (1970), pp. 36-37; Carreño, Rizi and Herrera (1986), p. 309, cat. no. 142 and more recently, Delgado Martínez (2001), p. 267, cat. no. 6. With regard to its provenance, the painting is mentioned for the first time, attributed to Giordano, in 1745 in the country house of the Duke of Arcos. See Aterido, Martínez Cuesta and Pérez Preciado (2004), vol. II, p. 393, cat. no. 373.

9 Pérez Sánchez (1972), p. 114, no. 128, and Delgado Martínez (2001), p. 319, cat. no. D-8.

10 In 1972 Pérez Sánchez referred to it as a Madrid School work attributable to Carreño, Cerezo or Escalante. See Pérez Sánchez (1972), p. 163, and López Torrijos (1995), p. 291.

