

# *Visualizing Imperium: The Virgin of the Seafarers and Spain's Self-Image in the Early Sixteenth Century\**

by CARLA RAHN PHILLIPS

*The Virgin of the Seafarers (1531–36) by Alejo Fernández was designed as the central panel of an altarpiece for the chapel in the House of Trade's Hall of Audiences in Seville. Little attention has been paid to the central panel and almost none to the four side panels, yet they are crucial to our understanding of how the Spanish monarchy defined its mission overseas. The iconography of the altarpiece as a whole made visible Spain's self-image as the creator and guarantor of a militant, evangelical Christian empire, dedicated to spreading the Gospel as well as fomenting trade and colonization.*

The year 2003 marked the five-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Casa de Contratación, or House of Trade, in Seville. Barely a decade after Christopher Columbus (ca. 1451–1506) returned from his first voyage across the Ocean Sea, and long before any European knew the full extent of the lands that he and others were exploring for the Spanish crown, Queen Isabel (1451–1504) and King Ferdinand (1452–1516) moved to assert royal control over whatever those expeditions might find. They gave the House of Trade jurisdiction over commerce, as the name implied, and also over shipbuilding, navigation, map- and instrument-making, and migration. In effect, the royal bureaucracy would govern the new lands in the name of the crown, while the House of Trade would oversee virtually every official contact between Europe and the embryonic Spanish Empire.<sup>1</sup>

To commemorate the quincentenary, the Spanish government sponsored an exhibition in Seville from December 2003 to February 2004.

I explored some of the ideas in this essay in a paper presented at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference held in San Francisco in October 1995, and in an informal lecture series in the Department of Art History at the University of Minnesota in May 1996. Patricia J. Kulishek, then a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, provided valuable assistance in the early stages of my research. I am also grateful to the Minnesota Humanities Commission for a "Work in Progress" grant that funded a research trip to Madrid and Seville in the summer of 2003, and to the John Carter Brown Library, where I was Andrew W. Mellon Senior Fellow in the fall of 2003. The perceptive and expert comments of Judith Berg Sobréand and the anonymous *RQ* reader helped me greatly in the final revisions of the text.

<sup>1</sup>For an overview of the activities of the House of Trade in its first decade of existence, see Mena-Garcá.

Installed in the handsome Casa de la Provincia, the exhibition included maps and portraits, artifacts and ship models, samples of medicinal plants, and the like — all evoking the exchanges overseen by the House of Trade. For the cover of the exhibition's catalogue, the organizers chose the painting now known as *The Virgin of the Seafarers*, although it did not appear with the rest of the exhibition. Instead, it remained nearby in the Sala de Audiencias (Hall of Audiences) for the House of Trade's original quarters, inside the Reales Alcázares (Royal Fortresses). Sometime before 1536, officials at the House of Trade commissioned the painting as the central panel of an altarpiece that they installed in the Hall of Audiences, so that the room could also serve as a chapel. Scholars date the painting to 1531–36 and now attribute it to Alejo Fernández (ca.1470/75–1546). Flanking the Virgin are panels depicting St. Sebastian, St. James the Great (called Santiago in Spain), St. Elmo, and St. John the Evangelist. These panels are thought to be the work of someone other than Alejo, perhaps a member of his workshop or another known artist.<sup>2</sup> When Josephe de Veitia Linaje wrote his famous analysis of Spain's Atlantic Fleet system in 1672, the chapel of the House of Trade still “formed in effect a single body with the place destined as the Hall of Audiences,” presumably with its altarpiece still intact (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

Many functions of Spain's Atlantic trade moved to Cádiz in 1717, along with its merchants, leaving the sixteenth-century Casa Lonja de Mercaderes (Merchants' Exchange) near the Alcázares largely unused. From 1785 onward the Casa Lonja became the General Archive of the Indies, housing the millions of documents produced by Spain's imperial bureaucracy and the House of Trade.<sup>4</sup> The altarpiece in the House of Trade's sixteenth-century chapel and Hall of Audiences did not make the move to the Casa Lonja, and at some point it was disassembled. When Narciso Sentenach y Cabañas wrote about the art and architecture of Seville in 1885, he mentioned only “some panels representing St. Sebastian and other saints in the chapel of the Alcázar,” but he did not associate them with an altarpiece, nor with the painting now known as *The Virgin of the Seafarers*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>For the various attributions, see Martín Cubero, 51, and the items referred to in the bibliography, 59–66. This sixty-six-page pamphlet provides a useful listing of scholarship about Alejo as of 1988, along with document transcriptions, a bibliography, and a catalogue of his work. Since then, the authors of general surveys have adopted the standard consensus, but nothing new has appeared.

<sup>3</sup>Veitia Linaje, 284. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

<sup>4</sup>For an overview of the history and holdings of the Archive of the Indies, see the illustrated *Archivo General de Indias*.

<sup>5</sup>Sentenach, 33.



FIGURE 1. Alejo Fernández et al. Altarpiece of *The Virgin of the Seafarers*, 1531–36. Seville, Reales Alcázares, Hall of Audiences. Copyright Patrimonio Nacional.

Seven years after Sentenach wrote, Spain celebrated the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's first voyage across the Atlantic and the beginning of the Spanish Empire, which by 1892 existed only as a few scattered pieces of territory and a widespread cultural presence in its former dominions.

After a brief war with the United States of America in 1898, Spain lost the last remnants of its empire in America and Asia, prompting Spanish intellectuals to make an anguished reexamination of Spain's national identity and goals. Some analyses questioned the value of empire altogether and blamed Spain's imperial career for many of the national failings they perceived in their own times. Other writers countered that criticism with a defense of Spain's imperial legacy, among them Manuel de la Puente y Olea, who in 1900 published a lengthy study of the geographical works of the House of Trade.<sup>6</sup> Three years later Manuel Ruiz del Solar y Ozuriaga wrote a brief but very important pamphlet for the four-hundredth anniversary

<sup>6</sup>Puente y Olea.

of the House of Trade.<sup>7</sup> In the pamphlet Ruiz del Solar relates how he had come across mention of an altarpiece of the Virgin and four saints — St. John, St. James the Great, St. Sebastian, and St. Elmo — in a 1536 inventory of the House of Trade's headquarters in the Alcázar.<sup>8</sup> Recognizing that four paintings still hanging in the Hall of Audiences depicted the four saints named in the inventory, Ruiz del Solar located the central panel with *The Virgin of the Seafarers* hanging elsewhere. When the director of the Archive of the Indies, José Gestoso y Pérez, examined the panel, he wrote Ruiz del Solar that it resembled images of the Virgin by several artists who worked in Seville, but especially those by Alejo Fernández and Pedro Fernández de Guadalupe.<sup>9</sup> The art historian Jiménez Fernández attributed it to Alejo in 1922, and later scholars have confirmed that judgment.<sup>10</sup> Although modern scholars rarely mention Ruiz del Solar, thanks to his discovery the scattered elements of the altarpiece were eventually reunited and restored to their original place in the Hall of Audiences. In that setting they are well placed for the visual enjoyment of the millions of tourists who visit Seville every year, but they remain isolated from their full context and from scholars trying to understand the evolution of Spain's empire in the Americas.<sup>11</sup>

To aid in that understanding, this essay will discuss the historical context and meaning of the altarpiece commissioned by the House of Trade in the early 1530s, when Spain was assimilating lessons from the first generation of its overseas experience and situating that experience within its self-image as the head of a global empire. The context of the altarpiece includes several elements: the milieu of the artists who created it; the audience to whom it was addressed; and the meaning and significance of the composition and its iconography. In examining that context, the discussion that follows will rely upon several assumptions: 1) that each part of

<sup>7</sup>Ruiz del Solar y Ozuriaga.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., provides the citation AGI, 40–6-1/2. The modern citation is AGI, Contratacion, 4879.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 6–8.

<sup>10</sup>Martín Cubero, 63, cites Jiménez Fernández, but the article could not be located for this study.

<sup>11</sup>Generations of modern scholars working on colonial Spanish America, transatlantic trade, and the competition for empire have relied heavily on the records at the Archive of the Indies, climbing the magnificent rose-colored marble staircase to the archive's reading rooms. In 2003, as Spain celebrated the five-hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the House of Trade, the Casa Lonja was undergoing another transformation to better serve public needs. The reading rooms and many of the documents from the archive have been moved across the street to another remodeled historic building (the Casa de la Cilla) that provides better facilities for scholars.

the altarpiece was meant to communicate ideas and aspirations that drew from Spanish history and religious beliefs at both the local and national levels; 2) that together, the five parts of the altarpiece defined in visual terms what officials at the House of Trade understood and wished to convey about the meaning and purpose of the empire; and 3) that they commissioned the work with the expectation that those who viewed the altarpiece would understand its meaning in the most direct and unambiguous terms. The discussion will first examine the role that visual imagery played in communicating substance and feelings in early sixteenth-century Spain. Then it will examine the background and career of Alejo Fernández in Seville, one of the most dynamic cities in Europe, the gateway to the Spanish Empire. Finally, it will examine the five parts of the altarpiece: the central panel of the Virgin, and the four saints who surround her.

As to the importance of visual communication, the gradual triumph of literacy and of the written and printed word has become so intertwined with the history of modernity that historians have often tended to disparage verbal and visual communication in early modern times as the inferior tools of uneducated and unsophisticated people. Recent historians are discovering the error of that approach. Fernando Bouza, for example, has brilliantly evoked the mental outlook of early modern Spain, reminding us that a person's voice and speech were considered true indications of their character, and that rhetorical skills, particularly those that seemed natural rather than tutored, were highly valued among the social and political elite. In the opinion of many Spaniards and Portuguese at the time, the primary value of writing lay in its ability to recall the human voice or an absent loved one, and as an aid to memory in general.<sup>12</sup>

Visual images also served as an aid to memory, useful for preparing the mind for meditation and prayer. Michael Baxandall's analysis of the religious function of visual images in fifteenth-century Italy is still one of the best discussions of its kind, and is equally applicable to Spain.<sup>13</sup> Even as print culture spread in early modern Spain, visual imagery remained strong, reinforced by the focus on interior prayer advocated by sixteenth-century Spanish religious figures such as Teresa of Ávila (1515–82) and Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556). Some Iberian writers, disparaging their own written art, considered visual imagery the most authentic form of communication, because it reached the viewer directly and was therefore a truer expression of meaning than spoken or written words. Moreover, visual imagery could

<sup>12</sup>Bouza Alvarez, 2000, 24–31, 42–47; Bouza Alvarez, 2004, is the English translation.

<sup>13</sup>Baxandall, 1972, 40–71. For the power that images were believed to hold for good or for evil, see also Scribner.

reach anyone with eyes to see, whether or not they were literate or even spoke the same language as the artist. This characteristic helps to explain the importance of visual imagery for Catholic religious education in Europe and in missionary efforts abroad.<sup>14</sup>

Evangelization held a prominent place among the goals of the monarchy from the earliest days of Spain's overseas exploration, but the House of Trade's first quarters did not include space for a chapel. To remedy that lack, the young Emperor Charles V (1500–58) issued an order in November of 1526 that the officials create one. Although he issued the order in Granada, he may have discussed the idea with officials in Seville earlier in the year, during the several months he resided in the city for his wedding.<sup>15</sup> Typically, patrons set the theme for a commissioned work of art, and the artist decided how best to portray it. How did officials at the House of Trade decide on the images to be included in the altarpiece they commissioned? What meaning did they want those images to convey? Although there is no extant record of what they had in mind, we can be sure that they gave the matter serious thought. Everything we know about the relations between patrons and artists in the sixteenth century points in this direction. There may have been disagreement among the body of officials, so that the final commission represented a set of compromises rather than a singular vision. Individuals may have been replaced or changed their minds, so that the tenor of the discussion shifted. Presumably Alejo and other artists would have been part of the discussions at some point, and the officials at the House of Trade would have had to approve the design before Alejo and his colleagues set about creating it. Presumably also, the officials would have checked on the artists' progress from time to time, perhaps suggesting additions or changes as the altarpiece took shape.

The ability to maintain a constructive relationship with patrons was one mark of a successful artist, and Alejo Fernández was one of the most famous and successful artists of his generation. Beyond that, very little was known about his life until recently. In the late nineteenth century, art historians such as Narciso Sentenach y Cabañas usually assumed that he was Spanish, judging from his name, his long career in Spain, and his use of characteristic Spanish faces in his paintings. Far from being interested only in things Spanish, however, Sentenach was the first to argue that Northern European models had a great influence on Spanish Renaissance

<sup>14</sup>For example, see Buser, based upon the famous set of iconographic prescriptions by Gerónimo Nadal (1507–80) known as the *Evangelicae historiae imagines* (Antwerp, 1595); a modern Spanish edition is *Imágenes de la historia evangélica*.

<sup>15</sup>Ruiz del Solar, 15.

composition.<sup>16</sup> He also credited Alejo with introducing elements from the Italian Renaissance into the dominant Hispano-Flemish style of his time, notably by the use of Italianate architectural forms and a greater naturalism in face and gesture.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, the triumph of Italian Renaissance style in southern Spain would make *The Virgin of the Seafarers* appear somewhat old-fashioned compared to the dominant style of the early 1530s, when it was painted.

By the mid-twentieth century scholars had found documentary evidence that altered many older views about Alejo.<sup>18</sup> Diego Angulo Iñiguez devoted his career to studying the Spanish Renaissance, particularly its debt to Northern European artists and artistic styles.<sup>19</sup> Angulo Iñiguez came to agree with those who argued that Alejo Fernández, despite his name, was of Northern European ancestry, a man who described himself in one document as “Master Alexos, German painter.” It is not clear if Alejo’s immigrant father Leonisio/Dionisio arrived in Spain as a widower with Alejo in tow, or if the boy was born in Spain to Leonisio and his Spanish wife, Juana Garrido. In any case, there is general agreement that he was born ca. 1470–75. Alejo first appears in the records in Córdoba in 1496, when he married María Fernández, the daughter of Pedro Fernández, a prominent Cordoban painter. José Camón Aznar speculated that Pedro Fernández was Alejo’s teacher as well as his father-in-law.<sup>20</sup> That Alejo’s brother, Jorge, also used the surname Fernández suggests that they were both trained in Pedro Fernández’s workshop in Córdoba. Angulo and others agree that Alejo adopted his wife’s surname, as his own father had done when he married Juana Garrido.<sup>21</sup> Such relationships and naming practices would not have been unusual in late fifteenth-century Spain.

Whether or not Alejo ever visited Italy as part of his professional training remains unclear. He could have adopted Italianate architectural elements and other features of Renaissance style during a visit to Italy, or he could have modeled his own work on engravings and paintings that he saw in Spain or that were described to him. There is no doubt, however,

<sup>16</sup>Silva Maroto.

<sup>17</sup>Sentenach, 29–31.

<sup>18</sup>Martín Cubero, 15–33, includes the full texts of many of the documents.

<sup>19</sup>Angulo Iñiguez, 1925, is an important early work on this theme.

<sup>20</sup>Camón Aznar, 363.

<sup>21</sup>Angulo Iñiguez, 1954, 128–29; Angulo Iñiguez, 1946, 7, raises the possibility that Alejo was German, though the author does not appear to be persuaded. Confusion about Alejo’s ancestry remains, even in recent surveys of Spanish art history such as Avila et al., 204, which has Alejo arriving with his widowed immigrant father, who first married María Fernández and, later, Juana Garrido.

that he fully understood the new style, and adopted its elements as he and his patrons saw fit. Nor is there any doubt that by the first decade of the sixteenth century Alejo had reached maturity as an artist, already well known in Córdoba and elsewhere in Andalusia.

Alejo's brother Jorge was a sculptor who worked on the Cathedral of Seville as early as 1504–05. In 1508 both Jorge and Alejo moved to Seville to add their talents to the massive retablo for the main altar, which would become one of the largest in Christendom. According to Jesús Miguel Palomero Páramo, Alejo had responsibility for planning the layout for the second major phase of work, which lasted from 1508 to 1512.<sup>22</sup> The German Pieter Dancart had designed the first phase, which commenced in 1480, and Alejo and Jorge may have been chosen for the work because their Northern European background would help maintain stylistic continuity in the design.<sup>23</sup> Based on stylistic and documentary evidence about the retablo, modern scholars attribute most of the forty-four scenes in the completed structure to Jorge and Alejo, the former sculpting and the latter painting and gilding the figures and their framework.<sup>24</sup> Near the beginning of his residence in Seville, Alejo also produced a large *Epiphany*, one of the four paintings that remain of the seven he completed for the cathedral (fig. 2). The composition of the scene owed much to earlier models, including the engravings of Martin Schongauer (which were well known and admired in Spain), but Alejo's magnificent portraits of the king kneeling in the foreground and St. Joseph in the background give the painting its distinctive character.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most intense phases of the construction and decoration of the Cathedral occurred in 1525–26, as a large group of artists and craftsmen worked to complete an expansion of the area around the main altar in time for the wedding of King Charles I (Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire) and Isabel of Portugal (1503–39).<sup>26</sup> Although the expansion was not quite finished in time for the wedding, the city of Seville exerted every effort to create a lavish setting for their young emperor-king. Alejo, as well as other prominent artists and craftsmen, worked on the seven triumphal arches for the emperor's official entry on 11 March 1526. As the royal

<sup>22</sup>Palomero Páramo, 94.

<sup>23</sup>Morón de Castro, 134.

<sup>24</sup>Palomero Páramo, 94–96.

<sup>25</sup>Angulo Iniguez, 1946, 13–14. Alejo's *Epiphany* currently hangs in the Sacristía Alta attached to the Cathedral.

<sup>26</sup>Hernández Díaz, 49–50.





FIGURE 2. Alejo Fernández. *Tabla de la Epiphanía*, 1508–09. Seville, Cathedral. Copyright Cabildo Catedral de Sevilla.

chronicler Prudencio de Sandoval later described the scene, the arches were located at intervals along the route from the Macarena Gate at the northern end of the city to the Cathedral in the center and celebrated the qualities that defined the perfect Christian prince. The first five arches — devoted to Prudence, Fortitude, Clemency, Peace, and Justice — showed the emperor demonstrating the celebrated virtues, together with other sculptures, allegorical emblems, and Latin verses. The three Christian virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity occupied the sixth arch by themselves, without a representation of the emperor.<sup>27</sup>

The seventh arch, in front of the cathedral, represented Glory — the presumed reward for exercising the qualities extolled in the first six. The seventh arch was commissioned jointly by Pedro Pinelo, on behalf of the Cathedral chapter, and the notary Pedro Coronado, on behalf of the Ayuntamiento (city council), presumably indicating a vision shared by Seville's religious and secular leadership.<sup>28</sup> In one part of the arch, Fame heralded the arrival of Charles and Isabel, while Glory crowned each of them. In another scene, Charles sat atop Fortune's wheel, thrusting his sword into the axle to hold it in place. Representatives of his various domains — Spaniards, Italians, Germans, Flemings, and American Indians (representing, by extension, all the peoples of the world) — also appeared on the arch, urging him in a Latin caption to "Conquer, reign, and exercise imperium" over them. In case spectators might miss the point, at the top of the arch all the Virtues crowned Charles, who stood with a globe beneath his feet, and the Latin inscription, "Here reigns Charles over all the globe / And with reason he has subjected the world."<sup>29</sup> The image of Charles and his consort holding dominion over all the world could not have been clearer.

The triumphal arches projected an ideal vision rather than reality. Charles was only twenty-six years old in 1526, largely untested, and his power and the religious unity of his empire were both in doubt at the time. Charles had presided over the Diet of Wörms in 1521 as the defender of a unified Christian community against a challenge from Martin Luther (1483–1546), and he would struggle through the 1520s and 1530s to hold that community together. In the truism of the time, Charles and his advisers held a vision of "peace among Christians and war against the infidel," the latter meaning the Ottoman Turks and their Muslim client states along the North African littoral. The Islamic powers challenged the

<sup>27</sup>Sandoval, 81:163–65.

<sup>28</sup>Buendía and Sureda, 155.

<sup>29</sup>Sandoval, 81:166.

Habsburgs by land in Central Europe and by sea in the Mediterranean and the Ocean Sea (Atlantic Ocean). Corsairs from North Africa regularly launched raids on the Iberian coasts in both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, pillaging and kidnapping people to hold for ransom. The coasts of Andalusia on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar were particularly vulnerable to raids from North Africa, which is one of the reasons that the inland city of Seville remained the official gateway to trade with Spain's American empire in the sixteenth century.

Charles's European rivals included Roman Catholic powers as well as Protestant ones, which added to the pressures that the young emperor faced. War with France and the Ottomans dominated his concerns through the 1520s and 1530s, along with a series of religious conclaves designed to heal the breach opened up by Martin Luther's challenge in 1517. Although Charles and his ministers were able to bring most of the Christian states together to defend against Ottoman expansion in Eastern Europe, "peace among Christians" remained an elusive ideal. Even worse, the "war against the infidel" would suffer a major blow in 1535, when France signed an alliance with the Ottomans that greatly enhanced their striking power in the Western Mediterranean. This alliance — the scandal of Christendom at the time — did not last long, but it undoubtedly added to the sense in Spain that Catholic Christianity was under siege from all sides. This was the Old World context in which Alejo Fernández would paint his altarpiece for the House of Trade in the early 1530s.

The New World context provided a much more hopeful scenario, both for the political power of the Iberian lands under Charles Habsburg, and for the potential addition of untold numbers of souls to the Catholic Christian fold. The first generation of Spanish expeditions across the Atlantic — those led by Christopher Columbus and the dozen or so other explorers authorized by the crown — often transported friars and priests as well as soldiers, adventurers, and colonists. The next generation of expeditions brought vast lands and their peoples under the aegis of Charles Habsburg as the King of Castile. Hernán Cortés (ca. 1485–1547) conquered the Aztec Empire of Mexico in the early 1520s, and, although he is remembered primarily as a military figure, he also took quite seriously his responsibility for evangelizing New World peoples. Impressed by the piety and dedication of the first twelve Franciscans to arrive in Mexico in 1524, Cortés wrote the emperor asking for his help in getting papal approval for Franciscans and Dominicans to set up missions and "administer the sacraments of ordination and confirmation."<sup>30</sup> In his judgment, the monastic

<sup>30</sup>Ricard, 21.

orders would be far better spiritual guides for the Indians than secular bishops and priests.

Expeditions launched southward from New Spain into Central and South America, and westward into the Pacific Ocean, also included missionaries among their number. In fact, missionaries were the first Europeans to explore a number of areas in the Americas during the 1520s and 1530s. Although the conquest of the Inca Empire of Peru by the Francisco Pizarro (ca. 1471–1541) and his followers can hardly be characterized as a missionary effort, they were adept at portraying their actions as part of the expansion of a militant Christianity. The inhabitants of Seville were often the first to hear news about the various conquests in the Americas, and officials at the House of Trade commissioned the altarpiece for their chapel as they worked to establish control over the often confused, unstable, and unpredictable process of empire building.

Although the situation in both Europe and the Americas in 1526 demonstrated that Charles Habsburg had not yet reached the peak of his powers, Alejo Fernández clearly had. Scholars agree that he had formed his own workshop by then and was carrying out commissions for works of art all over Spain. Alejo dominated artistic production in Seville, despite the presence of notable artists such as Cristóbal de Morales and Cristóbal de Cárdenas, whose sister-in-law the recently widowed Alejo married in 1525. At that point he had a considerable fortune in property, cash on hand as earnest money for artistic commissions, and several black and “Indian” slaves to help in his workshop — the latter presumably from Spain’s American empire.<sup>31</sup> One of the “Indian” slaves, Juan de Güejar or Guejar, identified in the documents as a legal resident (*vecino*) of Seville, was evidently a trusted assistant of Alejo’s. In August of 1523 Alejo gave him full power of attorney to collect debts on his behalf all over Andalucía.<sup>32</sup> When officials at the House of Trade commissioned an altarpiece for their headquarters a few years later, Alejo Fernández was undoubtedly their city’s best-known artist. They had every right to expect that he would fulfill their collective vision, though it is arguable that an artist of his stature would not expect to be supervised too closely.

We cannot know what passed through Alejo’s mind as he settled on a set of themes and laid out his composition, but he would not have taken his responsibility lightly. Art at the time — especially religious art — was supposed to communicate a clear and unambiguous message to the viewer. Its value as a medium of spirituality depended upon the skill of the artist

<sup>31</sup>Angulo Iníguez, 1946, 8–9.

<sup>32</sup>Martín Cubero, 25.

in conveying that message. The modern notion that meaning is a personal transaction between a work of art and each individual viewer would have been an alien concept — even a dangerous one — in sixteenth-century Seville, though Spain was not unique in demanding that art follow religious orthodoxy. Ambiguity and personal definitions of the meaning of a work of art could lead to misinterpretation and heresy of one confessional stripe or another, endangering the soul of the viewer.

We can assume that Alejo and his potential audience shared a spiritual and temporal milieu, even if the circumstances and reactions to that milieu would differ from one individual to the next. We can also assume that Alejo's composition was based not only on the personal and professional experience that came from several decades of living and working in Seville, but also on the prevailing norms for the presentation of religious subjects. In trying to see *The Virgin of the Seafarers* through sixteenth-century eyes, we can hope to recapture a sense of how Spanish officials defined Spain's colonial mission and how the premier artist in Seville presented that vision to the men and women who visited the House of Trade.

The only documentary notice we have about the altarpiece is a brief item in the inventory first noted by Ruiz del Solar. On Sunday, 12 November 1536, an unnamed official made note of the “chambers, buildings, and objects that each chamber contains in the House of Trade of the Indies of Their Majesties, which resides in this city of Seville.” His inventory reads like a verbal tour, beginning with a description of his progress through the principal gateway on the street, then past a massive iron chain defining the space and into the large main patio of the building. Next on the route was “the chapel of the House [of Trade] which is inside in the salon where audiences are held, which is all painted, and in it an altarpiece of Our Lady, and the sides of the altarpiece are painted with the images of St. John and St. James, and St. Sebastian, and St. Elmo; and a grill of painted wood in front of the chapel; and a large font of holy water made of glazed clay; and a large cross and on it a painted [image of the] Crucifixion.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI), Contratación 4879 B, fols. 4–4v, first noted by Ruiz del Solar, 2. The original text reads: “- yten la capilla de la casa questa dentro en la sala donde se haze abdiencia, questa toda [p]intada, y en ella un retablo de Nra Señora; a los lados estan pintados en el dho retablo [SanJua]n y Santiago y San Sebastian y San Telmo, y una rrexa de palo delante de la capilla pintada; y una pila de agua bendicha de barro vedriada; y una cruz grande y en ella un crucifixo pintado.” The material in brackets represents text transcribed by Ruiz del Solar in 1900, but which is now deteriorated or obscured by the binding.

The official taking the inventory mentions the center of the altarpiece first — the painting now called *The Virgin of the Seafarers* — and then her flanking saints, in what was arguably their order of importance. In other words, unconsciously and instinctively, his eyes followed the track that modern cognitive science would predict for viewers of a work of art: from the center to the periphery, and from the most important elements to the least.<sup>34</sup> It is not certain that the altarpiece was arranged in 1536 as it is today. Nonetheless, using the current arrangement as a guide, the order in which the official lists the various elements suggests that his eye moved from the Virgin at the center to St. John the Evangelist at the lower right, and then clockwise to St. James the Great at the lower left, St. Sebastian at the upper left, and St. Elmo at the upper right. The discussion of the altarpiece that follows will trace that same trajectory.

A very large figure of the Virgin, standing in heaven on a layer of clouds, dominates the central panel (fig. 3). She wears an elegant gown of cream and gold brocade, tightly fitted at the bodice and cinched by a red belt with gold tassels. The gown's broad funnel sleeves are lined in red and drape over tight wrappings around her wrists and lower arms. Her cloak billows out behind her like a black mainsail, providing a background for the scene and bringing it all under her protection. She stands with her arms open in benediction, the palm of her right hand upturned as if to receive mercy from heaven, and the palm of her left hand upturned but extending downward, as if to convey that mercy to the people gathered around her. Her head inclines gently to her right, and her lowered gaze takes in both the figures beneath her outstretched cloak and the maritime scene beneath them all. Her face is broad and nearly flat, with very little definition to the features and a sweet, bland expression. The image has sometimes been called *Our Lady, the Seafarers' Refuge*, to indicate her patronage of all who sail the seas, but more commonly it is known as *The Virgin of the Navigators* (*Virgen de los Navegantes*) or *The Virgin of the Seafarers* (*Virgen de los Mareantes*), the title preferred here.<sup>35</sup>

Her pose resembles images of the Virgin of Mercy (*Virgen de la Misericordia* in Spanish), a beloved medieval symbol of protection that could be shown with or without the Christ child.<sup>36</sup> Without the child, she is often depicted as slim and young, not yet as the mother of Christ. In

<sup>34</sup>Solso, 133–50. I am grateful to Dr. James McIlwain for introducing me to the literature on cognitive science. For a discussion of visual perception by an art historian, see Baxandall, 1972, 29–40; Baxandall, 1985, 1–40.

<sup>35</sup>Ruiz del Solar, 4, uses the title *Nuestra Señora, amparo de los navegantes*.

<sup>36</sup>See the discussion in Shearman, 99–107.

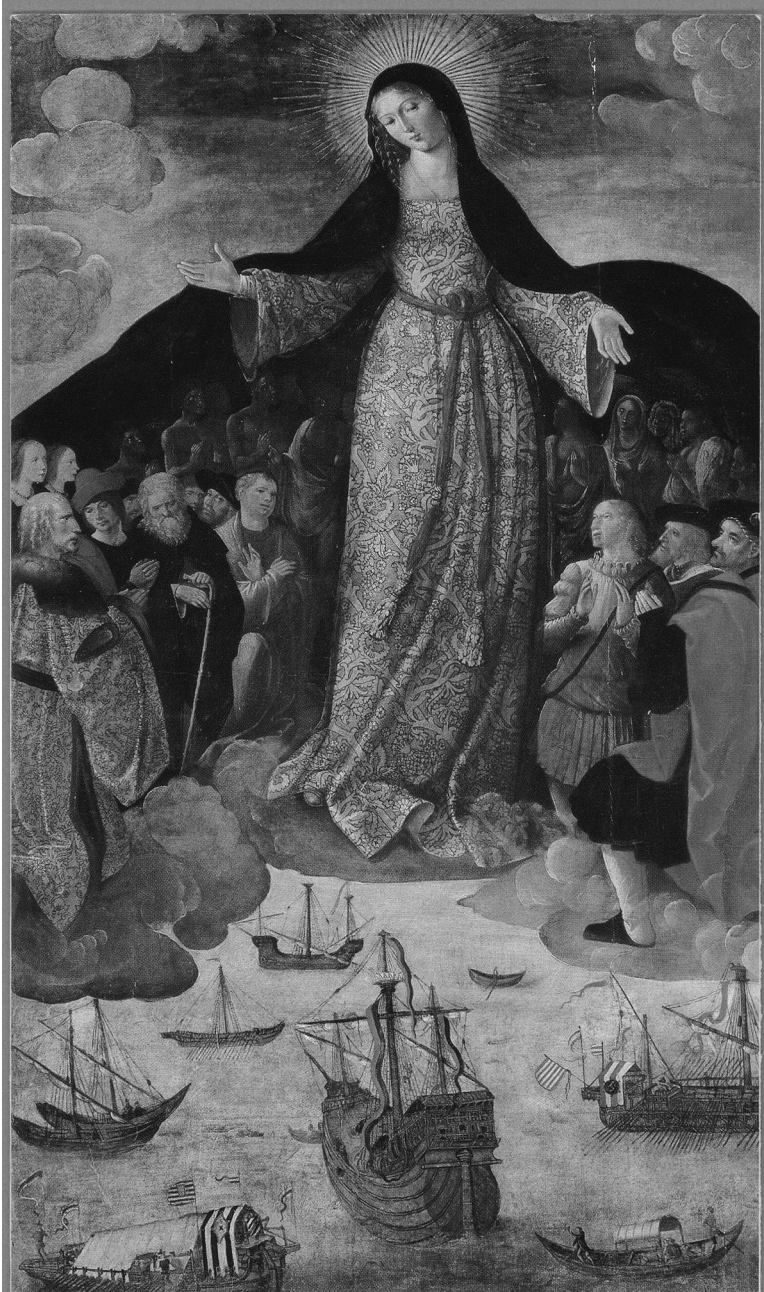


FIGURE 3. Alejo Fernández. *The Virgin of the Seafarers*, 1531–36. Seville: Reales Alcázares, Hall of Audiences. Copyright Patrimonio Nacional.

German such an image is called a *Schutzmantelmadonna* (literally, a “protective-cloak-Madonna”), signifying the iconographical importance of the Virgin’s extended, protective cloak. Perhaps the best-known Spanish antecedent to the Virgin in Alejo’s composition is a 1485 painting by Diego de la Cruz, created for the influential monastery of Las Huelgas near Burgos. Called *The Virgin of Mercy with the Catholic Kings*, the composition shows the Virgin, three times the size of the other figures in the painting, standing in the same plane alongside them. Her cloak shelters the abbess and some nuns from Las Huelgas on the right side of the composition and on the left the royal family — Queen Isabel of Castile, King Ferdinand of Aragon, and three children — plus a cardinal. Whether or not Alejo knew Diego de la Cruz’s painting, they both used the traditional iconography of an extended cloak to depict the Virgin’s protective powers, which explains why modern scholars generally interpret *The Virgin of the Seafarers* as a manifestation of the Virgin of Mercy.

Yet Alejo’s rendition also suggests another image with particular resonance in Seville: the sculpted image of the Virgin of the Kings, patroness of the city. Legend has it that in 1248 King Ferdinand III (1198–1252) carried an image of this Virgin into the battle against the Muslims that regained Seville for the Christian side. In the words of Susan Verdi Webster, the image served the citizens of Seville “as a visual symbol of their liberation from the Moors and their devotion to Christianity and the Virgin.”<sup>37</sup> The Virgin of the Kings occupies the place of honor in the Royal Chapel of the Cathedral of Seville, which contains the body of Ferdinand III. As with many other late medieval sculptures, her face was “very flatly modeled, and the features . . . primarily defined by polychromy.”<sup>38</sup> Today, seated with the Christ child on her lap and usually dressed in a cone-shaped gown and standard head-covering, there is little to differentiate her from many other images of the Virgin, despite her historical importance.

In the sixteenth century, by contrast, her distinctive appearance in procession inspired a sense of wonder among the faithful, above all because she moved. The Virgin of the Kings was one of the first religious images in Spain designed as an articulated framework, with only the head, hands, and feet sculpted and painted. The image of the Christ child, added later, was similarly constructed. Beneath her gown, an array of joints, cables, and pulleys made the image moveable. In the words of an early seventeenth-century abbot, “from the chair she can be made to stand upright, because the whole body is devised with an artifice such that [it seems] a human

<sup>37</sup>Webster, 77–78.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 79.



body stands before you, with all the parts controlled by clothing that is tightly fitted to the body, so that they [the parts of the body] never come out of adjustment.”<sup>39</sup> Fully erect, she stood nearly six feet tall and could be made to move her head, arms, and torso in ritual bows when the occasion demanded — actions that struck her devotees with awe. Her image was carried in procession on many important occasions, for example in August of 1532, when virtually the whole municipal and religious establishment of Seville took to the streets with the Virgin of the Kings to pray for a victory of the forces of Charles V against the Ottoman Turks. In November of that same year they repeated the ritual in thanks that the emperor’s forces had broken the Turkish siege of Vienna.<sup>40</sup>

The tightly fitted bodice and inner sleeves of the Virgin’s costume in Alejo’s painting, together with the character of her face and the attitude of her head and hands, is consistent with the sixteenth-century appearance of the standing Virgin of the Kings. Another similar detail is the hair. The Virgin in Alejo’s painting has bright golden ringlets that stand out against her black cloak. The hair for the Virgin of the Kings was originally made of “fine cords formed from strands of twisted silk covered with golden shafts and attached to the skull with very thin nails.”<sup>41</sup> Although most of the golden shafts have long since worn away, enough of the silken tresses remain to suggest how they would once have appeared. A fitted bodice and golden hair are not attributes unique to the Virgin of the Kings, but they are unusual compared to most images of the Virgin associated with Seville. Given Alejo’s long residence in the city and his close association with its Cathedral, there is no question that he was familiar with the Virgin of the Kings, her attributes, and her significance for the citizenry as a symbol of victory against the infidel. This does not prove that Alejo consciously borrowed attributes of this image for his *Virgin of the Seafarers*, but the similarities are nonetheless striking and would have reinforced the relationship between the city of Seville and the success of new crusades across the ocean.

Most of the attention to Alejo’s painting has concentrated on the figures gathered in two groups in the foreground beside the Virgin. Scholars have assumed that the distinctive portraits represented famous persons from the early decades of Spain’s overseas exploration, and there is no reason to question that assumption. Alejo gained fame for his naturalistic portraits, and he could have seen virtually everyone of importance in

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 80, quoting Alonso Sánchez Gordillo (1561–1644).

<sup>40</sup>Carrero Rodríguez, 83–84.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 31.

Spanish exploration — from royalty to explorers and bureaucrats — either as they passed through Córdoba, where the painter lived until 1508, or in Seville, where he lived from 1508 until his death early in 1546.<sup>42</sup> Presumably, many of the people who visited the chapel of the House of Trade in the Hall of Audiences would also have recognized those faces, at least in the early sixteenth century. With time, collective memory faded, and modern scholars have had to speculate about the identity of each of the portraits, mostly inferring from their resemblance to other known portraits or to verbal descriptions.

One of the three men in the group at the right of the composition kneels among the clouds wearing a short, light-colored costume with a pleated skirt and a military air, reminiscent of a Roman soldier. With pale skin and fair hair, he is generally thought to represent one of the Spanish *conquistadores* in the Americas, but no one has made a persuasive case for his identity. The most prominent figure, down on one knee, wears a black costume and hat with light-colored leggings and a crimson cape. He has been variously identified, but he seems to best resemble Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico. Cortés returned to Spain for several years in the late 1520s and spent time at the emperor's court. The German artist Christoph Weiditz depicted him at court in 1529 wearing a short black costume very like that in Alejo's composition.<sup>43</sup> The third portrait, visible only from the chest up, is of a man presumably in his thirties, with a long straight nose, bright red hair, and a short red beard; he wears a soft black cap or beret. Scholars have often identified this figure as the Emperor-King Charles I, because he bears a strong resemblance to the many known portraits of Charles as a young man. Alejo had ample opportunity to observe Charles in 1525–26, during the young emperor's sojourn in Seville for his wedding.

The group in the left foreground among the clouds includes seven men and two young women, each with distinctive features. Few have commented on the possible identities of the young women, though they may represent members of the royal family; the one on the left resembles portraits of Isabel of Portugal, Charles's bride. The figure with the cane and long white beard is sometimes thought to be Amerigo Vespucci (1451–1512), though Ruiz del Solar argued that it was Doctor Sancho de Matienzo, who served as the first head of the House of Trade from 1503 until his death in 1521.<sup>44</sup> Matienzo commissioned countless works of art,

<sup>42</sup>Angulo Iniguez, 1954, 128–33.

<sup>43</sup>Weiditz, pl. iv.

<sup>44</sup>Ruiz del Solar, 12.

including a painting of the Virgin by Alejo for an altarpiece in Villasana de Mena, Matienzo's hometown near Burgos.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Diego Angulo Iñiguez pointed out that the figure does not resemble a known likeness of Matienzo.<sup>46</sup> The much younger man in the red hat is usually thought to be one of the Pinzón brothers (probably Martín Alonso), who made the first transatlantic voyage with Columbus in 1492.

The most distinctive and controversial figure on the left is the white-haired man outfitted in a sumptuous fur-trimmed robe of gold brocade, kneeling in profile before the Virgin. His garb contrasts sharply with the simple robes of all of his companions; not even the Virgin is as richly attired as he. Who might the figure represent? The pose and the garb immediately suggest the depiction of a royal personage in the role of a donor. Following that logic, some have argued that the gold-robed figure must represent a king, most logically King Ferdinand of Aragon, the co-sponsor (with his wife Isabel of Castile) of Columbus's first voyage.<sup>47</sup> However, the figure bears no resemblance whatsoever to the known portraits of Ferdinand of Aragon, and the artist could easily have seen Ferdinand in Seville during the king's five-month sojourn there in 1511.<sup>48</sup> Even more telling, his wife, Queen Isabel of Castile, is nowhere to be seen. It would be difficult to argue that she is one of the two demure ladies at the back of the group, given that the conquests in the Indies pertained not to Aragon but to Castile.

Many who reject King Ferdinand as the model for the regal portrait in the gold robe argue that the figure represents Christopher Columbus.<sup>49</sup> Those doubting this designation usually argue that the rich costume would have been inappropriate for a mariner, however distinguished, especially if we assume that the modestly-dressed red-haired figure on the right side of the composition is the Emperor-King Charles. We shall return to the figure in the gold robe later. For now, let us simply assume that — despite his regal attire — the figure is neither King Ferdinand nor his grandson the Emperor-King Charles.

In the background beneath the Virgin's sheltering cloak stands a multitude of dark-skinned men (on the left) and women (on the right), who are generally taken to represent all the peoples to be brought under the protection of the Virgin as a result of Spanish exploration. Yet they are not

<sup>45</sup>Buendía and Sureda, 50.

<sup>46</sup>Angulo Iñiguez, 1946, 25.

<sup>47</sup>Ruiz del Solar, 6–8.

<sup>48</sup>Rumeu de Armas, 370–72.

<sup>49</sup>For example, Angulo Iñiguez, 1946, 25.

dressed in costumes that would distinguish them as Caribbean islanders, Aztecs (Mexico), Tlascaltecs, Incans, Pacific islanders, or Asians. Instead, all of the men and women seem to be wearing simple white wraps or loincloths. Why?

The reason does not seem to have been a lack of knowledge on the part of the artist about how non-Europeans looked and dressed. Alejo Fernández could have seen representatives of at least some of the various societies incorporated into the Spanish Empire on the streets of Seville. Guanches from the Canary Islands and African slaves had been brought to Spain in the late fifteenth century, and Columbus brought back a group of Tainos from the Caribbean islands in 1493. After the founding of the House of Trade in 1503, the non-European population of Seville grew, both from Africa and from the Americas. Hernán Cortés brought a group of Mexica to Spain in the late 1520s, and they captured the public's imagination as they passed through Seville on their way to the court of Charles V.<sup>50</sup> Like Cortés, they were painted by Christoph Weiditz at Charles's court, wearing characteristic clothing. Moreover, Alejo reportedly owned Indian as well as African slaves.<sup>51</sup> As he presumably could have painted the world's peoples more distinctively, why did he depict them as he did?

Some have assumed that he painted them as a generic multitude because he accorded them little importance in the drama of exploration, evangelization, and empire.<sup>52</sup> It makes better sense to argue that the figures in the background were central to that drama, representing the untold multitudes who would be evangelized and baptized once Spanish missionaries had spread the knowledge of Christ. Writing in 1900, Manuel Ruiz del Solar observed that the painting was "evidently allegorical of the activities of the House of Trade," combining the Virgin with prominent individuals from the early sixteenth century and with the figures of male and female Indians, but that was the extent of his analysis.<sup>53</sup> Had he thought about the matter further, he might have recalled that simple cloth wraps were the traditional garb for adult baptisms.

Ruiz del Solar noted that the 1536 inventory of the chapel included a large glazed-pottery baptismal font of the type commonly sent to the Indies. There were many fountains on the grounds and in the patios of the Alcázar, but most of them were made of stone or marble. By contrast, the

<sup>50</sup>Weiditz, pls. xi-xxiii.

<sup>51</sup>Angulo Iniguez, 1946, 8.

<sup>52</sup>For example, Honour, 26, argues that Indians were, "reduced to the role of 'extras' in the great drama of European expansion. . . ."

<sup>53</sup>Ruiz del Solar, 4.

font sharing the space defined as both a chapel and the Hall of Audiences was the type sent to the Indies to baptize new converts, and it was present along with the altarpiece in 1536. In other words, Alejo's painting can be seen as symbolically bringing converts to the baptismal font. Seen together, Alejo's central panel and the baptismal font sacralized the secular space of the Hall of Audiences, emphasizing evangelization as a central element in Spain's colonizing mission.

At the base of the composition, seen through parted clouds, Alejo included an assortment of vessels associated with the early decades of overseas exploration: a large carrack, or *nao*, in the center beneath the Virgin, two one-masted lateen caravels, one three-masted or full-rigged caravel, and a galley and various other oared vessels and small boats. Alejo could have seen all of these vessels in Seville simply by strolling down to the banks of the Guadalquivir River a few hundred yards from the Cathedral. In his painting, the ships anchor the base of the pyramid-shaped composition and bring the whole of the maritime world under the protective gaze of the Virgin. Given that the House of Trade commissioned the painting, the presence of so many representative ships seems natural and appropriate. Nonetheless, the prominence and specificity of the ships are somewhat unusual, almost distracting the eye from the central figure of the Virgin. Alejo would not have found a model for such a composition in German engravings or in Spanish depictions of the protective Virgin. What inspired him?

One possible model resided in Italy: the final fresco in Bernardino Pinturicchio's cycle of the life of Pope Pius II (r. 1458–64), painted for the Piccolomini Library in the Cathedral of Siena ca. 1500 (fig. 4). The late fifteenth-century humanist and diplomat Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (1405–64), later elected Pope Pius II, devoted his pontificate to military crusades against the growing power of the Ottoman Turks. Pinturicchio's final fresco shows the ailing Pius II in Ancona, where he had traveled to bless ships leaving for the last crusade of his pontificate. The left background includes a number of ships in the harbor, representing the long-awaited Venetian contingent that would carry the crusaders to the Holy Land. In the center of the fresco Pinturicchio shows the pope seated on his throne in full regalia, elevated above the figures gathered around him. The most prominent figure kneels in profile in the left foreground, wearing a rich gold-brocade robe trimmed with fur. Scholars generally agree that his robe, white hair, and distinctive features identify him as the Doge of Venice, Cristoforo Moro (r. 1462–76), who accompanied the crusade. There is less agreement about the identity of the two turbaned



FIGURE 4. Bernardino Pinturicchio. Fresco of *Pope Pius II at Ancona*, ca. 1500. Siena Cathedral, Piccolomini Library. Photo courtesy of Scala/Art Resource.

figures near the doge, though by extension they represent the Islamic world that the crusade hoped to conquer and perhaps convert.

Did Alejo Fernández find inspiration for the composition of *The Virgin of the Seafarers* in Pinturicchio's fresco of Pius II at Ancona? There is no

doubt he could have known about the work, as Pinturicchio had completed the cycle of twelve frescoes by 1505–07.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Pinturicchio and the Umbrian school that flourished in the late fifteenth century have long been named as possible influences on Alejo, whether or not he ever visited Italy.<sup>55</sup> Besides including a maritime scene, both Pinturicchio's fresco and Alejo's painting feature a pyramid-shaped composition dominated by a large figure in the center. Alejo has long been credited with introducing Italian compositional styles into Spanish painting, and Pinturicchio would have been an apt model for him to follow.

The figures in gold-brocade robes kneeling in the left foreground are also strikingly similar in both compositions. Did Alejo model the figure in his painting on Pinturicchio's doge? And if so, why? He can hardly have expected ordinary Spaniards to recognize such a figure as a Venetian doge. Nonetheless, the theme of a crusade against Islam in Pinturicchio's fresco may have inspired Alejo to evoke a similar theme in his altarpiece. Christian crusading had special resonance in Spain, after centuries of warfare against Muslim powers in Iberia and around the Mediterranean. Moreover, at the time that Alejo was painting his altarpiece, Charles V and his allies forced the Ottomans to end a siege of Vienna and launched a successful attack on Tunis.<sup>56</sup> In other words, a crusade against infidels and the defense and extension of Christianity would have been appropriate notions to include in the iconographical program of *The Virgin of the Seafarers*. But how could Alejo evoke these complicated issues efficiently? The kneeling figure in gold brocade in *The Virgin of the Seafarers* may provide an answer to that question.

As indicated above, the gold-robed figure has sometimes been identified as Columbus, who — despite his fame — was probably not painted in his lifetime.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, several of his contemporaries left written descriptions of the explorer's physical appearance. The earliest is attributed to Angelo Trivigiano (or Trevisan), secretary to the Venetian ambassador to the court of Ferdinand and Isabel. When the court resided in Granada in 1501, Trevisan met Columbus and became well acquainted with him. He described Columbus as "Genoese, a man of tall and imposing stature,

<sup>54</sup>Misciattelli, 32–36. The best-known fresco in the cycle shows the young Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini on a diplomatic mission, wearing a bright blue cape and riding a white horse.

<sup>55</sup>Angulo Iñiguez, 1954, 10–11.

<sup>56</sup>Lane, 246.

<sup>57</sup>For an extended discussion of the various Columbus portraits, see Phillips, 1992b; see also Phillips, 1992a, a briefer version of 1992b.

ruddy-complexioned, of great intelligence, and with a long face. . . .”<sup>58</sup> Bartolomé de Las Casas (ca. 1474–1566), who was a teenager when Columbus returned from his first voyage in 1493, saw him in Seville, accompanied by a group of seven Indians and the exotic trappings that caused a sensation among the citizenry. In the *Historia de las Indias* he wrote decades later, Las Casas describes Columbus as “tall-bodied rather than of middling height; the face long and authoritative; the nose aquiline; the eyes gray-green; the complexion pale, with a tendency to turn burning red; the beard and hair fair when he was a youth, but which soon turned gray with his troubles.”<sup>59</sup> In describing Columbus’s triumphal procession to meet the king and queen in Barcelona, Las Casas said that the explorer “had such a great and authoritative presence that he looked like a Roman senator, his venerable face covered with a gray beard, and his modest smile showing well the joy and honor with which he came.”<sup>60</sup> Many other writers followed the same lines as these early descriptions, including the bureaucrat and historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, who published his multi-volume general history of the Indies in 1535.<sup>61</sup>

At the same time, Alejo was finishing *The Virgin of the Seafarers*. He may or may not have been aware of the written texts describing Columbus, but he did not need them to know what the famed explorer looked like. Columbus spent considerable time in Córdoba in the 1490s, when he was in his late forties: Alejo might have seen him there. Columbus also stayed in Seville from the fall of 1504 to the spring of 1505, the time in which Alejo’s brother Jorge was working on the Cathedral of Seville. Jorge, at least, might have seen Columbus then, and it is possible that Alejo spent some time in the city as well. If by the 1530s Alejo needed reminding about Columbus’s physical appearance, he could have consulted senior officials at

<sup>58</sup>Trivigiano, 3: “Christophoro Colombo Zenovese homo de alta & procera statura rosso de grande ingegno & faza longa. Sequito molto tempo li serenissimi Re de Spagna in q lung parte andauano. . . .” See also Hilton, 107–08.

<sup>59</sup>Las Casas, 1:29: “Lo que pertenecía a su exterior persona y corporal disposición, fué de alto cuerpo, mas que mediano; el rostro luengo y autorizado; la nariz aguileña; los ojos garzos; la color blanca, que tiraba a rojo encendido; la barba y cabellos, cuando era mozo, rubios, puesto que muy presto con los trabajos se le tornaron canos. . . .” In 1493 Columbus was in his early forties, so Las Casas’s description of the young Columbus must have come from hearsay evidence.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 333: “tenía grande y autorizada persona, que parecía un senador del pueblo romano, señalaba su cara veneranda, llena de canas y de modesta risa, mostrando bien el gozo y gloria con que venía.”

<sup>61</sup>Fernández de Oviedo: the description of Columbus appears in bk. 2, chap. 2 (117:16 in the 1959 edition).



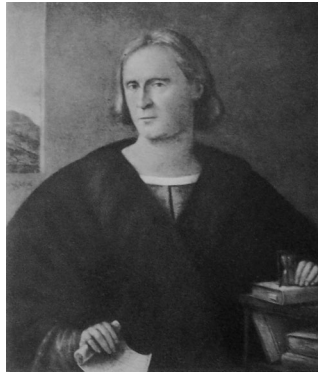


FIGURE 5. Lorenzo Lotto. *Portrait of Christopher Columbus*, 1512. Formerly Chicago, J. W. Ellsworth Collection. Reproduced from Bianconi, vol. 1, between pls. 34–35.

the House of Trade or Columbus's son Ferdinand, who lived in Seville from the late 1520s until his death in 1539.<sup>62</sup> In short, although Alejo presumably had no portraits to follow in depicting Columbus, he could rely on his own experience or that of others in Seville who had known the explorer well. Over time, however, the knowledge of Columbus's physical appearance faded, and few of the later so-called portraits of the explorer agree with contemporary written descriptions.

How then do we link the written descriptions of Columbus with the face of the kneeling figure in gold brocade? A portrait of Columbus by Lorenzo Lotto provides the key (fig. 5).<sup>63</sup> Signed and dated 1512, it shows a man, in the words of Bernard Berenson, "Bare-headed, smooth-faced with long grey hair parted in middle; wears ceremonial furs over a tunic that leaves the throat bare; in his right hand a chart of the 'Indies' partly unrolled, while the left touches an hour glass which rests on a volume of Aristotle lying on a desk. . . . Said to have been painted for Domenico Malipiero, Venetian senator and historian, at the instance of his correspondent, Angelo Trevisan, secretary to the Venetian envoy at Granada. An intellectual, rather supercilious face, showing great determination. There is no reason for doubting that it was meant to be Columbus."<sup>64</sup> The Lotto

<sup>62</sup>*Christopher Columbus Encyclopedia*, 1:135–37.

<sup>63</sup>Reproduced from Bianconi, vol. 1, inserted between pls. 34–35.

<sup>64</sup>Berenson, 30. The current whereabouts of the portrait could not be ascertained. Berenson authenticated it in 1956 on the basis of a photograph supplied to him by The Knoedler Gallery in New York. The gallery could supply no information about the painting as of 1991.

portrait is one of the few that adhere closely to written descriptions of the explorer. Moreover, its connection to Angelo Trevisan — the author of the first published description of Columbus — adds support to the likely accuracy of the depiction. Lotto's Columbus can easily be seen as a younger version of the gold-robed figure in Alejo's *Virgin of the Seafarers*, and the later history of the Lotto portrait reinforces that link. It was discovered and authenticated a year before the fourth centenary of Columbus's 1492 voyage and was officially recognized in Spain as the most authentic likeness of the explorer. Despite the doubts of some scholars, it served as the model for many medals, stamps, and other memorabilia during the quatracentenary.

The Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla undoubtedly knew about the Lotto portrait and its official recognition in 1892. He also assumed that the gold-robed figure in *The Virgin of the Seafarers* depicted Columbus, using it as one of the models for his own dramatic full-length portrait of the explorer in 1910.<sup>65</sup> Sorolla painted nine large oil studies for the portrait, as well as several dozen small sketches, all of which he donated to The Hispanic Society of America in New York. One of the small sketches — the only one in color — is a detailed copy of the head of the gold-robed figure from *The Virgin of the Seafarers*. Sorolla labeled his pencil sketch of the same head "Colón" — that is to say, Columbus.<sup>66</sup>

Assuming that the gold-robed figure was meant to be Columbus, a man known for wearing a simple Franciscan robe in his later years, why would Alejo Fernández depict him in a manner incongruous with Columbus's sartorial habits and unique among the prominent figures arrayed at the Virgin's feet? The contention here is that the artist presented Columbus in a way that viewers would associate with the European magus-king in countless versions of the Adoration of the Magi (also known as the Epiphany), a central event in Christianity, and one that Alejo himself painted several times in his career.<sup>67</sup>

The only biblical reference to the Epiphany occurs in a few brief passages in the Gospel of Matthew, describing how "wise men from the east" followed a brilliant star to pay homage to "he that is born King of the

<sup>65</sup>*Departure of Columbus From the Port of Palos*, Mariner's Museum: Newport News, Virginia. See Muller, 65.

<sup>66</sup>The author examined all of Sorolla's studies for the Columbus portrait in the storage collection at The Hispanic Society of America.

<sup>67</sup>Works of art depicting that event may be titled *The Epiphany*, *The Adoration of the Magi*, or *The Adoration of the Kings*. For the purposes of this essay, the titles will be treated as equivalents.



FIGURE 6. Luca di Tomme. *Adoration of the Kings*, 1360–65. Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum.

Jews.”<sup>68</sup> The Gospel mentions three items that the wise men brought with them as gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold honored Christ as king, frankincense recognized him as God, and myrrh evoked his humanity and death.<sup>69</sup> In theological terms, the Epiphany marked the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles in the persons of the magi, who represented by extension all the peoples of the world. Some Christian texts suggested that

<sup>68</sup>Matthew 2:1–12: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, ‘Where is he that is born king of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. . . .’ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.” See the discussion of the Epiphany in Schiller, 95–114.

<sup>69</sup>Isaiah 60:6 also mentions gentiles coming to the Lord, bringing gifts of gold and incense.

the magi were kings as well as wise men; Spanish avoids the argument by calling them *Reyes Magos* (magi-kings). As one of the transforming events in the life of Christ, the Epiphany was frequently depicted in religious art, as in the painting by Luca di Tomme from 1360–65 (fig. 6). Whether or not the Christian faithful understood its full theological significance, they would have had no difficulty associating depictions of the magi with the religious feast of the Epiphany celebrated on 6 January.

In recent years, several excellent and exhaustive studies of the magi in history and art have appeared.<sup>70</sup> Judging from these and older studies, there is little doubt that a standard composition for depicting the Epiphany characterized Western European art by the early sixteenth century. The key elements of that tradition for the argument presented here had emerged much earlier: the magi-kings represented the three ages of man as well as all the peoples of the earth; the eldest king represented Europe; and Europe took precedence over the middle-aged king (who usually represented Asia) and the youngest king (who usually represented Africa).

Hans Memling painted one of the most influential examples of the emerging artistic consensus in a triptych traditionally dated 1464 (fig. 7) that paid homage to *The Adoration of the Kings* by his teacher Rogier van der Weyden, who had died that year.<sup>71</sup> In the central panel of his triptych, Memling placed the old European king in the first position, kneeling on both knees before the Virgin and Child, with his crowned hat on the ground before them and his gift on a side table. The middle-aged king occupies second position in the order of precedence: beginning to kneel, holding his crowned hat in his left hand, and proffering his gift with his extended right hand. The striking figure of a young black king occupies the third position, just arriving at the right, holding his gift in his right hand, and sweeping his crowned hat from his head with his left hand. Together, the *Adorations* by van der Weyden and Memling are thought to have influenced many subsequent depictions of the Epiphany, either directly or through the widespread dissemination of an engraving by Martin Schongauer that borrowed several details from their works.<sup>72</sup> As noted above, Diego Angulo Iníguez long ago established the influence of

<sup>70</sup>Kaplan; Merras; Trexler. The classic study of the Epiphany in literature and art before 1500 is Kehrer: Kehrer's evidence is strong for Central Europe, less complete for other parts of Europe, but all later studies rely on his work to some degree.

<sup>71</sup>Van der Weyden's *Adoration* is in the Alte Pinakothek of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen in Munich; Memling's 1464 *Adoration* is in the Prado Museum in Madrid.

<sup>72</sup>Devisse, vol. 2, pt. 2, 131–33.



FIGURE 7. Hans Memling. *Adoration of the Magi*, 1464. Madrid, Prado Museum.

Schongauer's engravings on artists working in Spain, including Alejo Fernández.<sup>73</sup>

The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries witnessed the high point of artistic interest in the Epiphany. The stunning overseas discoveries initiated by Columbus held the promise of fulfilling prophecies concerning one of the most important mandates in Christianity: the need to bring the Christian message to all peoples in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ, the Last Judgment, and the Apocalypse. Columbus and subsequent explorers encountered peoples previously unknown to Europeans, peoples who did not know Christ or (in some interpretations) who had once known Christ but had lost that knowledge. The figure of the aged European magus-king of the Epiphany neatly summarized a thousand years of Christian theology regarding the mandate to carry the Christian message to the peoples living in darkness without it.

In nearly all depictions of the Epiphany in the early sixteenth century, the magus-king representing Europe continued to be depicted as the first among equals, the leader of the gentile nations, his advanced age connoting Europe's preeminence in accepting the Christian message and carrying it to others. *The Adoration of the Magi-Kings* that Alejo Fernández painted for the cathedral of Seville shortly after his arrival in 1508 included all the

<sup>73</sup>Angulo Iñiguez, 1925.

typical elements (fig. 2). The old European king kneels in distinguished profile wearing sumptuous robes of gold brocade, with his crown deposited at the Virgin's feet, while the Asian and African kings wait their turns to approach the Holy Mother and Child. Alejo would also paint at least three other *Epiphanies* in the course of his career in Spain; there is no indication that he deviated from the standard iconography.<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere in Europe, many other artists also turned their hands to depictions of the Epiphany. Despite minor variations in composition, they followed the established conventions very closely, particularly the placement of the old king representing Europe kneeling as the first to honor the Virgin and Child. In more than two hundred depictions of the Epiphany surveyed for this essay, the spatial arrangement of the magi-kings nearly always accorded the preeminent place to the old king and nearly always depicted him in a similar fashion. Because of such consistent iconographical conventions, viewers would have recognized the gold-robed figure in Alejo's *Virgin of the Seafarers* as the European magus-king, merely by his pose and his costume, and most of them would have associated the figure with evangelization.

The Catholic monarchs Isabel and Ferdinand emphasized evangelization as a goal for the lands claimed in their names. Columbus shared the same vision, believing that he was destined to be a bearer of Christ, like his namesake, St. Christopher.<sup>75</sup> Many later explorers and conquerors sponsored by the Spanish crown, including Magellan and Cortés, also identified evangelization as one of their primary duties. Under Charles V, a steady flow of royal and ecclesiastical bureaucrats sailed across the ocean to administer the Spanish colonies and spread Christian beliefs and practices among the local inhabitants. Officials at the House of Trade in Seville not only handled the paperwork for their travels but also arranged for the creation and delivery of religious art, baptismal fonts, and other supplies to aid in communicating the Christian message. Among others, they commissioned Alejo Fernández to paint various sculpted images that were sent to the West Indies in 1513.<sup>76</sup>

Missionary orders and priests adapted a range of European images and texts to make Christianity comprehensible and appealing to peoples elsewhere in the world: the Epiphany became one of the most useful and

<sup>74</sup>Cubero, 43–45, 53, lists but does not discuss their compositions; Angulo Iñiguez, 1946, 14, discusses only the *Epiphany* in the cathedral.

<sup>75</sup>See *The "Libro de las Profecías of Christopher Columbus."* Columbus compiled this collection of Holy Scriptures over a period of decades, in the belief that they provided a guide to his destiny as a "visionary evangelist" (92).

<sup>76</sup>Ruiz del Solar, 15.

popular of those images.<sup>77</sup> Fray Toribio de Benavente, the early Franciscan missionary known as Motolinía, noted that the Epiphany was “celebrated by [the Indians of Mexico] with great rejoicing, for it seems to them that it is their own feast, and on [Epiphany] they often reenact the play in which the magi-kings offer their gifts to the child Jesus.”<sup>78</sup> Although Motolinía’s history was not published until 1546, it was based on his experiences in the 1520s and 1530s, and testifies to the early importance of the Epiphany in Spanish missionary efforts.

When officials at the House of Trade commissioned an altarpiece for their Hall of Audiences, an allusion to the Epiphany would have been an appropriate element in the composition. It has been argued here that Alejo Fernández chose to present Columbus in the pose and in the garb of the European magus-king of the Epiphany because of the rich symbolism that such an identification would convey. Columbus was the first to discover the populous lands across the Ocean Sea as a representative of Europe to the peoples awaiting the Christian message. In a lucky coincidence, Columbus’s physical features agreed well with countless depictions of the European magus-king, including Alejo’s own *Epiphany* from 1508, which may well have inspired the painter to make the connection between Columbus and the European magus-king.

The main problem with the connection suggested here is the absence of the Christ-child from Alejo’s composition. The Epiphany is, of course, centered on the child and his tripartite identity as king, God, and man. The European magus-king traditionally presents him with gold in honor of his sovereignty, and by the time Alejo painted the altarpiece the New World had rendered impressive amounts of golden booty from the Aztec conquest and the early days of the Inca conquest. It is arguable, however, that the evangelical role of the magi-kings had less to do with bringing gifts to the Christ-child than with bringing the gift of Christ to those who did not yet know him. In other words, in the evangelical context Christ was the gift, and the European magus-king was the Christ-bearer. The magi-kings also connoted Christian crusading against the infidel, as a prelude to evangelization and conversion. With that in mind, Pinturicchio’s fresco of Pius II initiating the Fourth Crusade (fig. 4) merits another look. Might

<sup>77</sup>Ricard, 194–206, discusses the Epiphany theme among the “edifying plays” employed in evangelization, calling it the “most characteristic play” of the ones we know were performed (201).

<sup>78</sup>Motolinía, 119. The English Dominican and later apostate Thomas Gage testified to the continued importance of Epiphany celebrations in New Spain in the mid-seventeenth century.

this famous evocation of Christian crusading also contain a visual allusion to the Epiphany, with the gold-robed Doge Cristoforo Moro as the pre-eminent European magus-king and the two figures in Muslim garb as the other two kings? At the current state of research, this can be no more than an intriguing possibility.

In the altarpiece commissioned by the House of Trade in Seville, the link between Christian crusading and evangelization strengthens as we pass from *The Virgin of the Seafarers* to the side panels flanking the Virgin and her entourage. Scholars have paid almost no attention to the four figures that serve as the Virgin's guard of honor. Even Diego Angulo In'iguez, who seems to have assumed that Alejo painted them, mentions only St. Elmo, arguably the least important member of the quartet. Angulo sees all four as a "simple frame for the image of the Virgin," but they represent much more than that.<sup>79</sup> Together, they complete the visual analogy of the emerging Spanish Empire as inspired by faith, established through conquest, and extended through evangelization.

Whether or not Alejo painted the four saints flanking the Virgin, he would have planned the altarpiece as a whole to reflect his patrons' commission, working with assistants or other artists to complete the work. One model for the overall design may have been the altarpiece Alejo painted ca. 1520 for the founder's chapel of the University of Seville. The lower half of the chapel's large altarpiece, generally called the Retablo de Maese Rodrigo, features the Virgen de la Antigua from the Cathedral flanked by the four fathers of the Western Church.<sup>80</sup> As symbols of Christian learning, they served as ideal companions for the Virgin in an academic setting. By analogy, the four saints chosen to accompany *The Virgin of the Seafarers* were appropriate to the religious mission of Spain overseas, which extended the crusades against the infidel across the ocean in order to disseminate and defend the Catholic faith. Each of the four figures had devoted followers somewhere in the Kingdom of Castile, and each represented aspects of Spain's overseas enterprise.

St. John the Evangelist, the youngest of the apostles, was by tradition one of the four gospel writers of the early Christian church. In his various manifestations, St. John the Evangelist had a strong following all over Castile, and artists depicted him in the several guises and stages of his long life. In the lower right panel flanking *The Virgin of the Seafarers* he is shown on the island of Patmos, where he was exiled for his faith (fig. 8). Although

<sup>79</sup>Angulo In'iguez, 1946, 24.

<sup>80</sup>Angulo In'iguez, 1954, 134. See the University of Seville's Website for a long view of the nave and altarpiece: [http://www.personal.us.es/alporu/sedes/sede\\_1.htm](http://www.personal.us.es/alporu/sedes/sede_1.htm).





FIGURE 8. Anon., School of Alejo Fernández. *St John the Evangelist*, 1531–36. Altarpiece of *The Virgin of the Seafarers*. Seville, Reales Alcázares, Hall of Audiences. Copyright Patrimonio Nacional.

the artist depicts him as a young man, perhaps modeled on Albrecht Dürer's painting of the evangelist, St. John would have been quite old by the time of his exile on Patmos.<sup>81</sup> Accompanied by his emblematic eagle, writing in a book on his lap, and with various ships in the background, he gazes upward toward a vision of the Virgin and Child in heaven and, in the same line of sight, beyond them toward the face of the Virgin in the central panel of the altarpiece.<sup>82</sup>

By tradition, on Patmos John wrote the Book of Revelation, also known as the Book of the Apocalypse, which was famous in the Middle Ages as a guide to the future. In medieval Spain, St. John's apocalyptic connotations remained vivid in the minds of faithful Christians, and the commentary on the Apocalypse by the ninth-century author known as Beatus of Liébana was copied many times, illustrated by stunning

<sup>81</sup>The classic Renaissance Spanish treatise about how to depict religious figures is Pacheco. As a citizen of Seville, father-in-law of Diego Velázquez, and noted painter in his own right, Pacheco's treatise distilled prior traditions of Spanish iconography and had great influence on future traditions. He discusses the life and proper iconography for St. John the Evangelist in fols. 560–561.

<sup>82</sup>Ferrando Roig, 156.

and terrifying manuscript paintings.<sup>83</sup> Both Queen Isabel of Castile and Christopher Columbus believed that St. John had prophesied Castile's discovery of new lands beyond the seas; the island of Puerto Rico and its first town were named in his honor.<sup>84</sup> Many Christians at the time also believed that the discovery of new lands and peoples (and their subsequent evangelization), would lead in due time to the fulfillment of prophecies in the Book of Revelation, including the Apocalypse.<sup>85</sup>

St. James the Great, the apostle and patron saint of Spain known as Santiago, had a close association with Galicia in the northwest, where tradition held that his body had miraculously arrived after martyrdom by King Herod. The town of Santiago de Compostela became the most important pilgrimage site for Christians in medieval times after Jerusalem and Rome. Because of this association Santiago was often depicted in the guise of a pilgrim, walking with his emblematic staff and water gourd, and wearing a broad-brimmed hat adorned — and often pinned up in front — with a scallop shell. During the medieval reconquest of Iberia from the Muslims, Santiago was believed to appear on the field of battle to aid Christian forces. In that guise he became known as Santiago the Warrior or Santiago the Moor-Slayer. It is one of these representations of Santiago that appears in the lower left panel flanking *The Virgin of the Seafarers* (fig. 9). He rides a white horse with distinctive leather straps across its rump and brandishes a sword in his upraised right hand, while with his left hand he holds a battle flag. He wears body armor and a broad-brimmed hat with a scallop shell affixed to its upturned brim. At his feet lie the weapons and severed heads and body parts of his enemies. The panel as a whole strongly resembles another depiction of Santiago from the same epoch by an unnamed painter of the “Castilian School.”<sup>86</sup> In both versions, as in many others, the iconography leaves no doubt of his identity as Santiago the Moor-Slayer: militant defender of the Christian faith, implacable enemy of heresy, quintessential Christian soldier.

Spanish soldiers invoked the aid of Santiago in their earliest battles of

<sup>83</sup>Wixom and Lawson: the issue in which this article appears is devoted to the “Cardeña Beatus” manuscript at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

<sup>84</sup>The pertinent passage from St. John appears in Revelation 21:1: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.”

<sup>85</sup>Liss, 34–36, 119–24, 136–37, 154–58. For a broader examination of Christian European beliefs and assumptions about the universe in the late fifteenth century, see Flint.

<sup>86</sup>*Santiago en la Batalla de Clavijo* (844), Anon. “Castilian School,” very early sixteenth century. Madrid: Museo de Lázaro Galdiano.



FIGURE 9. Anon., School of Alejo Fernández. *Santiago the Moor-Slayer*, 1531–36. Altarpiece of *The Virgin of the Seafarers*. Seville, Reales Alcázares, Hall of Audiences. Copyright Patrimonio Nacional.

conquest in the Americas and attributed their victories to his intervention.<sup>87</sup> Over time, hundreds of towns in the Americas were named for Santiago, and countless devotions and reenactments of crucial battles occurred, and still occur, in his honor. When portrayed as Santiago the Indian Killer he symbolized the extirpation of idolatry and heresy as a necessary adjunct to evangelization. His attributes also lent themselves to amalgamation with powerful, violent, and capricious local gods, particularly the storm-god Illapa in Peru, so that Santiago would come to exemplify the complicated reception of Christianity in the Americas.<sup>88</sup> For Spain's vision of its overseas mission, however, Santiago remained the perfect Christian warrior.

St. Sebastian occupies the upper left panel flanking the Virgin and represents the Christian as martyr as well as militant warrior (fig. 10). Tradition holds that Sebastian was a member of the palace guard of the Emperor Diocletian (ca. 243–316). Discovered to be a Christian, he was

<sup>87</sup>Heliodoro Valle, 8–13, lists places named for Santiago in Spanish America; *ibid.*, 19–37, chronicles the most important stories of his miraculous interventions. The book as a whole discusses and illustrates the saint's importance in local beliefs and rituals.

<sup>88</sup>Gisbert, 28–29, 195–200.



FIGURE 10. Anon., School of Alejo Fernández. *St. Sebastian*, 1531–36. Altarpiece of *The Virgin of the Seafarers*. Seville, Reales Alcázares, Hall of Audiences. Copyright Patrimonio Nacional.

sentenced to be shot with arrows by his own comrades in arms. After surviving that attack, he protested about the treatment of Christians to the emperor himself and was then beaten to death and thrown into a Roman sewer.<sup>89</sup> Often venerated as one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers because of his defense of other Christians, St. Sebastian served as an ideal intercessor for victims of the plague in the late Middle Ages. By the early sixteenth century most depictions emphasized his role as a victim of Roman persecution during the first martyrdom. Typically, he is shown clad in no more than a loincloth, tied to an architectural column or a tree, pierced by arrows in various parts of his anatomy, and wearing a resigned expression. One example is a painting by Perugino, a contemporary of Alejo, currently in the Louvre, but there are countless others.<sup>90</sup>

Many representations of St. Sebastian in Spanish art followed the standard iconography, but there was another tradition that recalled his full history and his role as the patron saint of soldiers and sailors. St. Sebastian was particularly venerated in the northern Basque country in Spain, where the city of San Sebastián was named in his honor. Many of Spain's finest mariners came from the Basque country, including countless thousands of men who sailed in fleets to the Indies, so it is no wonder that St. Sebastian had a strong following in Seville, the gateway to the empire. The St.

<sup>89</sup>Ferrando Roig, 246.

<sup>90</sup>*Saint Sebastian*, Perugino, ca. 1490–1500. Paris: Louvre Museum.

Sebastian flanking *The Virgin of the Seafarers* wears a military costume that evokes his role as a soldier. The costume is very similar to that worn by gentlemen soldiers in the early sixteenth century, including hose and a short, apron-like tunic with a fitted waist over a long, full-sleeved shirt. He stands holding a long cross and one end of his unflexed bow with his right hand, and the guard of his sword with his left hand. The tips of both weapons rest on the ground; in other words, they are displayed to indicate that he is a soldier, but they are not brandished for combat. He wears a hat and gazes downward, tilting his head at the same angle as the Virgin's head in the central panel. Only the short shaft of an arrow protruding from his right breast reminds the viewer of his martyrdom.

A very similar depiction of St. Sebastian was painted around 1480 for the church of San Benito de Calatrava in Seville, and would have been a likely model for whomever painted St. Sebastian for *The Virgin of the Seafarers'* altarpiece.<sup>91</sup> Another representation of St. Sebastian as a Roman soldier was painted around 1486 in northern Castile or Aragón, with the saint wearing a very similar costume but sitting rather than standing.<sup>92</sup> Two similar images exist in Barcelona, both wearing a more elaborate costume than the examples from Seville and northern Spain.<sup>93</sup> Unlike the representations showing St. Sebastian as a defenseless victim, the military accoutrement in these depictions identifies him as a heroic convert, willing to do battle and face martyrdom rather than renounce his new faith or his coreligionists. Taken together as part of the honor guard of *The Virgin of the Seafarers*, St. Sebastian and Santiago represent a militant, expansionist Christianity, courting death through martyrdom or meting it out, all for the sake of the true faith.

The final member of the quartet flanking the Virgin was St. Elmo — San Telmo in Spain — a figure beloved among seafaring populations in Spain, Portugal, and elsewhere in Europe, and enjoying particular devotion in Seville (fig. 11). Sailors prayed to St. Elmo as their protector during storms at sea, when they believed he made his presence known by strange lights in the rigging called St. Elmo's fire.<sup>94</sup> He is usually identified in Iberia

<sup>91</sup>*San Sebastián*, Anon. artist in the circle of Juan Sánchez de Castro, ca. 1480. Seville: Museo de Bellas Artes.

<sup>92</sup>*San Sebastián*, Juan de la Abadía the Elder, ca. 1480. Madrid: Museo Lázaro Galdiano.

<sup>93</sup>Panel by P. Alemany, fifteenth century. Barcelona: Cathedral; Anon., fifteenth century. Barcelona: Museo Diocesano.

<sup>94</sup>"St. Elmo's fire" is the name given to electrical arcing generated by certain conditions during storms: see Pérez-Mallaína, 243–44.



FIGURE 11. Anon., School of Alejo Fernández. *St. Elmo*, 1531–36. Altarpiece of *The Virgin of the Seafarers*. Seville, Reales Alcázares, Hall of Audiences. Copyright Patrimonio Nacional.

as a thirteenth-century priest born in Fromista, Palencia, who died in 1246 as Bishop of Tuy on the border between Galicia and northern Portugal; but other traditions differ from this story in nearly every respect.<sup>95</sup> The various legends associated with him agree only that he was a bishop and that his attributes linked him with seafaring. In the Iberian tradition, local believers in Spain and Portugal attributed many miracles to the pious Bishop of Tuy and began to revere him as a saint shortly after his death, although he was not officially canonized until 1741.<sup>96</sup>

In the altarpiece commissioned by the House of Trade, St. Elmo is shown standing near the shore, his white robe and black cloak blown by a storm. Despite the legend identifying him as a secular priest and bishop, he appears to be wearing the tonsure and habit of the Dominicans, a medieval monastic order founded by a Spaniard and long associated with missionary efforts. That tradition continued in the New World, where Dominicans arrived in the 1530s. In the altarpiece St. Elmo holds a very large model of a ship in his right hand and gazes downward past that model toward a nearly identical ship in the maritime scene below the Virgin in the central

<sup>95</sup>For example, Farmer, 159–60, identifies him either as a bishop in the Italian Campagna, martyred ca. 300, or a Syrian bishop named Erasmus of Antioch.

<sup>96</sup>Alonso Romero, 66–67, notes that St. Elmo's fire could have a rather more ominous aura in Brittany, signifying the death of someone in a crewmember's family.

panel of the altarpiece. He holds a large candle, evocative of St. Elmo's fire, in his raised left hand. Because of the popularity of St. Elmo in Seville, local residents in the early sixteenth century would easily have identified the ship and candle as his attributes. In contrast to the visions of warfare, martyrdom, and apocalypse symbolized by his companions, St. Elmo presents a softer image, joining with the Virgin — whose cloak is very similar to his own — to offer protection and solace to all who sailed the dangerous seas linking Spain with its empire to spread the Christian message.

Overall, the altarpiece commissioned by the House of Trade and painted in the early 1530s was designed to portray the official vision of Spain's creation of a Christian empire across the ocean. The central panel portrays the Virgin providing divine protection to the enterprise as a whole. Her entourage of kings, mariners, soldiers, ships, and peoples brought to Christianity, together with the flanking saints, evokes diverse aspects of that enterprise: courage and conquest, faith and fortitude, peril and protection, and the promise of biblical prophecies fulfilled.

Most people visiting the House of Trade's chapel in the early sixteenth century would have recognized much of the imagery and understood at least its more obvious aspects. An intelligent and educated observer would have recognized and understood virtually all of it. The gold-robed figure kneeling in the left foreground before the Virgin would have presented the only mystery. His pose and rich garments would have suggested a royal donor, but the head of Columbus on this figure would have seemed incongruous, particularly if the observer knew anything about Columbus apart from his physical appearance. Upon further reflection, the intelligent observer would have understood that the figure represented the first king of the Epiphany and the thousand years of Christian tradition that the Epiphany implied for the conversion of the world. In the guise of the European magus-king, Columbus reinforced the notion that the Spanish Empire represented the fulfillment of biblical prophecy to bring the Christian message to all the peoples of the world. With *The Virgin of the Seafarers* and the quartet of saints providing her guard of honor, the altarpiece conveyed how the House of Trade — and the monarchy it represented — defined the meaning and aims of Spain's emerging empire. Viewers who saw Alejo's altarpiece as they entered the House of Trade were presented with that collective vision and implicitly invited to share it.

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