

Painted in 1468, *Saint Michael Triumphant over the Devil*, which was acquired by the National Gallery in 1995, is unquestionably the most important early Spanish painting in Britain. The first documented work by Bartolomé Bermejo (about 1440–about 1501), a fifteenth-century Spanish artist by whom only about 20 paintings are known, it depicts the Archangel Michael defeating the devil, in the form of a hybrid monster, with Antoni Joan, lord of Tous, kneeling nearby. The work is remarkable for its mastery of the oil-painting technique, influenced by Netherlandish painting and unrivalled by Bermejo's contemporaries in Spain. This can be seen in his sensitive use of colour, the astonishingly detailed depiction of cloth and jewels, and in the reflections in Saint Michael's gleaming armour. Following the painting's detailed technical examination and conservation, this book presents a fascinating account of this rare work, placing it in the broader context of Bermejo's career in fifteenth-century Spain.

LETIZIA TREVES is The James and Sarah Sassoon Curator of Later Italian, Spanish, and French Seventeenth-Century Paintings at the National Gallery, London.

PAUL ACKROYD, RACHEL BILLINGE, GABRIELLA MACARO, DAVID PEGGIE and MARIKA SPRING are members of the Conservation and Scientific Departments at the National Gallery, London.

LORNE CAMPBELL was formerly George Beaumont Senior Research Curator at the National Gallery, London.

TOBIAS CAPWELL is Curator of Arms and Armour at The Wallace Collection, London.

AKEMI LUISA HERRÁEZ VOSSBRINK is The CEEH Curatorial Fellow in Spanish Paintings at the National Gallery, London.

JOAN MOLINA FIGUERAS is Professor of History of Art at the University of Girona.

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BARTOLOMÉ BERMEJO Master of the Spanish Renaissance

Letizia Treves

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The National Gallery's *Saint Michael Triumphant over the Devil*

LETIZIA TREVES

Saint Michael Triumphant over the Devil by Bartolomé Bermejo is unquestionably the most important early Spanish painting in Britain and counts among the most notable acquisitions made by the National Gallery in recent memory. When the painting was purchased in 1995, it changed ownership for only the second time in its 500-year history. Largely out of sight, first in the church in Tous near Valencia, and then in a private collection, *Saint Michael Triumphant* (fig. 6) was not widely known. Its presence in the Gallery has coincided with rising interest in Bermejo: two major exhibitions devoted to the artist in the last few years; important archival discoveries; and the conservation, technical and scientific investigation of Bermejo's works, further advancing our understanding of his painting methods and technique (see pp. 99–113).¹

For an artist about whom so little is known, every picture, signature, document and inscription is significant. It is, for example, the frame of Bermejo's last-known painting, the *Desplà Pietà* (see fig. 21), that tells us where the artist was born.² But Bermejo's story begins with his *Saint Michael Triumphant*, painted 22 years earlier. It is one of only two signed works by the artist and the first painting for which we have a document. A receipt (fig. 3), dated 5 February 1468, details a down payment of 16 *libras*, 13 *sueldos* and 4 *dineros* (towards a total remuneration of 50 *libras*) that the artist received from the Valencian knight Antoni Joan for a retable (altarpiece) of Saint Michael.³ Bermejo is described in the document as a painter and as a citizen of Valencia ('pictor, civis civitati Valentie'), while Joan is defined as a knight, resident in that same city ('militi, dicte civitati habitator'). The altarpiece was to be dedicated to Saint Michael ('sub invocatione beati Miquaelis') and was destined for the church of the same name in Tous, Joan's stronghold on the River Júcar. Reference is made to another document stipulating the appearance ('modo et forma') of the retable, indicating that the iconography and format of the work had already been established.

FIG. 4
Joan Reixac (about 1413–before 1495), *Saint Michael the Archangel*, 1455, from the altarpiece *Our Lady of the Angels and the Eucharist*, in the main church at the charterhouse of Valldecrist. Mixed medium on panel, 198 x 65 cm. Museo Catedralicio de Segorbe, Spain.



FIG. 5
Attributed to Gonçal Peris Sarrià (about 1380–1451), *Saint Michael vanquishing the Devil*, early fifteenth century. Tempera and gold on panel, 183.4 x 92 cm. Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, NG 1021.



Michael is shown as an angelic warrior, brandishing the sword he will use to defeat the devil; a representation presumably requested by Joan, himself a knight.

Although the National Gallery painting is far superior in quality to anything being produced in Spain at that time, Bermejo must have had recourse to the works of his Valencian contemporaries and, in particular, to Gonçal Peris Sarrià (about 1380–1451) and Joan Reixac (about 1413–before 1495). The latter painted the same subject in 1455 (fig. 4), in the side panel of a retable dedicated to the Eucharist for the Carthusian monastery of Valldecrist.⁴ Peris's *Saint Michael vanquishing the Devil* shows the archangel standing in a rocky landscape, a monstrous creature beneath his feet (fig. 5).⁵ Bermejo's first-hand knowledge of both paintings seems likely, as Peris and Reixac each dresses Saint Michael in extravagant armour and sets the figure against a punchworked gold-leaf background.

Bermejo's *Saint Michael* wears elaborate fire-gilded armour, fretted with pearls and gemstones, over a chain-mail undergarment.

FIG. 6
Saint Michael Triumphant over the Devil with the Donor Antoni Joan, 1468. Oil and gold on wood, 179.7 x 81.9 cm. The National Gallery, London, NG6553.





The Armour of an Archangel

TOBIAS CAPWELL

Our Lord God has three orders of knighthood. The first is the order of angels who fought against Lucifer ... their chief is Michael the Archangel... Our Lord God has a second order of knighthood: of the Martyrs... [the] other knights... are the good kings of the earth...¹

In *Saint Michael Triumphant over the Devil with the Donor Antoni Joan* (see fig. 6), Bartolomé Bermejo sought to create a tangible vision of the Archangel Michael in human form. To this end, he studied real armour and meticulously reproduced it, combining it in his imagination with a profusion of the costliest materials – gold, jewels and velvet – the like of which would (almost) never have been seen on earth.

Armour was such an effective way of communicating status that it could also be used to visualise the invisible, giving form to the knights of the transcendent realm – the warrior angels and saints. The Archangel Michael's accoutrements proclaim his supremacy over all other fighting men, his armour as rich (if not richer) than that of any king or emperor.

In the fifteenth century it was common for knights to believe that they were chosen by God to wield divine power in defence of their faith and people. They were part of a brotherhood that included not only earthly warriors but also saints and angels. The highest echelons of chivalry in the human world reached only part way up a pyramid of knighthood that extended into and through the heavenly realm to God himself, from whom its power flowed. Knights therefore felt a special affinity with mystical beings believed to be their heavenly counterparts.

On earth, the knightly hierarchy was expressed through personal adornment, especially the decoration of arms and armour. Gold was an emblem of knighthood, most famously displayed on the gilded spurs and sword; the degree to which gilding extended on to the armour was determined by the precise rank of the wearer, and also of course by his means; some could afford more gold than others.



FIG. 66
Saint Michael Triumphant,
before restoration.

FIG. 67
Saint Michael Triumphant,
after cleaning before
restoration.



Originally, the blue edges would have been covered by a gilded frame with tracery mouldings through which the colour would have been partially visible, framing the work in much the same way as had been done for Bermejo's *Saint Dominic of Silos* (see fig. 25) and for his *Triptych of the Virgin of Montserrat*, known as the *Acqui Terme triptych* (see fig. 30). The blue borders were retouched in the recent restoration (fig. 68) but are concealed behind the rebate of the current frame. The panel, which has retained its original thickness, is in good condition: the vertical joins between the planks have remained remarkably



FIG. 68
Saint Michael Triumphant,
after restoration.

FIG. 69
Saint Michael Triumphant,
infrared reflectogram.



well-adhered over the past 450 years, apart from a small section of a join at the right, which had moved, so disrupting the paint in Saint Michael's face and chain-mail collar.

For the most part, the restoration did not present difficulties in the reconstruction of the missing areas, though several passages were more problematic (figs 67 and 69). After consultation, the missing words in the Latin text on the left page of Antoni Joan's book, *misericordiam tuam*, were reconstructed, but the second word in red could not be established with any certainty and was left unrestored (fig. 70).³ The previous

1479

14 April: Bermejo and Martín Bernat are contracted to paint an altarpiece of *The Virgin of Mercy* for Juan de Lobera's family chapel in the church of Santa María del Pilar in Zaragoza. In documents spanning 1479 to 1482 Bermejo is described as living in Zaragoza.

1482-3

6 May 1482 – 10 May 1483: Bermejo receives a salary for polychroming the doors of the retable on the high altar of Zaragoza's cathedral, La Seo. These payments mark Bermejo's last recorded presence in Zaragoza.

1486

24 September: Bermejo's wife, Gracia de Palaciano, is sentenced by the Inquisition in Zaragoza for knowing only part of the Credo and engaging in 'Jewish practices'.

7 October: Bermejo is named as one of two painters – the other is Jaume Huguet – tendering for the contract to paint the organ shutters in the church of Santa María del Mar in Barcelona.

1490

Bermejo completes the *Desplà Pietà* for the Archdeacon Lluís Desplà in Barcelona.

1495

27 March and 5 May: Bermejo receives payments for providing designs for a stained-glass window for the baptismal chapel in Barcelona Cathedral, realised by the maker of stained-glass windows Gil Fontanet.

1500-1

Bermejo receives payments for producing stained-glass window designs for the figures of Faith (on 5 May 1500) and Hope (on 11 May 1501). The windows were installed in 1501 and 1503 respectively, in the trading room of the merchants' exchange building (Llotja de Mar) in Barcelona.

This is the last time Bermejo is recorded in the city, and these are the last surviving documents relating to the artist, suggesting that he probably died shortly thereafter, in Barcelona.

