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RARE TERRACOTTA BUST ACQUIRED BY MEADOWS MUSEUM

*Research uncovers new information about
Spanish Baroque sculpture*

DALLAS (SMU) – The Meadows Museum has acquired the first terracotta sculpture attributed to Spanish Baroque master Juan Alonso Villabrille y Ron. In-depth research conducted by museum staff members sheds new light on the identity of the bust-length sculpture’s subject and its historical significance. When the sculpture was initially offered to the Museum it was believed to depict St. Jerome, Doctor of the Church. Meadows curators’ research, however, determined that the subject is in fact St. Paul the Hermit.

Villabrille y Ron is considered one of the most important Spanish sculptors of the Late Baroque period because of his mastery of technique. In addition, he taught another renowned sculptor of the period, Luis Salvador Carmona, and worked for the court in Madrid in the early eighteenth century. The quality of his work was such that he received commissions to create sculptures for some of the most important monuments in the city, such as the Puente de Toledo and the façade of the former Hospicio Provincial (now the Museo Municipal de Madrid). This sculpture is the first terracotta work to be attributed to Villabrille y Ron; not many examples of Spanish terracotta sculptures from the period have survived. Most of the works attributed to Villabrille y Ron are of polychromed wood or stone.

“Villabrille’s sculpture is a work of staggering realism and powerful emotion, and it provides an excellent complement to our already strong collection of works from the Baroque period,” said Mark A. Roglán, director of the Meadows Museum. “The acquisition of this prime example of Late Baroque sculpture will increase our ability to educate our visitors on this rich and versatile era in Spain by using objects that exemplify the style of the period. The students who use our Museum as a learning space and the visitors who come for pleasure will have an enriched experience because of this unique and beautiful example of Spanish sculpture.”

When the sculpture was initially offered to the Museum it was believed to depict St. Jerome, Doctor of the Church, who retired as a hermit to the Syrian Desert for three years’ penance. Meadows’ curators, however, took note of the subject’s prominently positioned woven reed garment, a vestment not present in any of the many other existing depictions of St. Jerome, and concluded the likeness had been misidentified. Their research determined that the subject is in

fact St. Paul the Hermit, the first hermit saint of the Christian church, who is always shown as an old man wearing a woven reed garment made of palm leaves sewn together. Various experts in the field of Early Modern religious iconography, including George Washington University Professor Barbara von Barghahn and Richard P. Townsend, independent art historian, have confirmed the amended identification.

Mark Leonard, chief conservator at the Dallas Museum of Art, consulted on the research project, offering assistance with the international technical analysis of the work, which included an examination by Dallas-based independent conservator of objects Csilla Dennis, and testing of paint and terracotta samples in locations as far afield as Oxford, England. Analyses of paint samples using various techniques [PLM (polarized light microscopy), EDS (energy dispersive X-ray spectrometry), SEM (scanning electron microscope), and XRD (X-ray diffraction)], determined that the pigments used on this work are consistent with seventeenth-century availability. Also, TL (thermoluminescence) testing, points to a date as early as the eighteenth-century. These technical exams, in addition to stylistic comparisons with other works by Villabrille y Ron, confirm that the sculpture can be dated circa 1715, making it a prime example of the Late Baroque style.

Museum curators worked with Dr. Nancy Rollins of Children's Medical Center to arrange an on-site mobile x-ray of the sculpture to assess its internal stability. The resulting images provided insight as to how the sculpture was put together and offered a view of the internal armature supporting it. Overall, the sculpture is in remarkably good condition considering its age and material, Roglán said.

About the Donor: Jo Ann Geurin Thetford, SMU '69, '70

Funding for the acquisition was provided by Jo Ann Geurin Thetford in honor of Luis Martín, SMU Emeritus Edmond and Louise Kahn Professor of History. Thetford has served SMU in a number of capacities since 1995, and was honored with the Mustang Award in 1999, SMU's highest honor given to those whose longtime service and philanthropy have had a lasting impact on the university. She currently serves on SMU's Central University Libraries Campaign Steering Committee, on the board of trustees at Austin College, and is a member of the Meadows Museum Advisory Council. She has concluded terms on the SMU-in-Taos Executive Board, SMU's Development and External Affairs Trustee Standing Committee, the Presbyterian Mo-Ranch Assembly, and as Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). Thetford was born in Fort Smith, Arkansas, obtained a bachelor's degree from Texas Christian University, and resides in Graham, Texas, where she serves as president of Southern Bleacher Co.

About the Honoree: Luis Martín, Professor Emeritus of History, SMU

Martín is a native of Seville, Spain. He received his undergraduate degree in Classical Studies from San Luis College, Puerto de Santa Maria, Cadiz, Spain, and earned a Master of Philosophy degree from Recuerdo College in Madrid in 1952. He received a Licentiate of Sacred Theology from Boston College in 1960, and a Ph.D in Latin American History from Columbia University in New York in 1966. Early in his career, he taught at Sophia University in Tokyo and then at the University of Puerto Rico before coming to Southern Methodist University in Dallas some forty-five years ago. Now a Professor Emeritus, he still offers a few classes at the Meadows Museum and the University of Texas, Dallas, and continues to do executive seminars in the corporate world. He has served as a panelist on the National Endowment for the Humanities and was named to the Royal Order of Civic Merit by King Juan Carlos of Spain.

About the Meadows Museum

The Meadows Museum is the leading U.S. institution focused on the study and presentation of the art of Spain. In 1962, Dallas businessman and philanthropist Algur H. Meadows donated his private collection of Spanish paintings, as well as funds to start a museum, to Southern Methodist University. The museum opened to the public in 1965, marking the first step in fulfilling Meadows' vision to create a "Prado on the Prairie."

Today, the Meadows is home to one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of Spanish art outside of Spain. The collection spans from the 10th to the 21st century, and includes medieval objects, Renaissance and Baroque sculptures, and major paintings by Golden Age and modern masters.

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