

The beginning of the work MARIA

Years of working with malleable matter; the movement of the hands holding and shaping in the silence instilled by closing the eyes; the tangible discovery of what is yet unknown to you and that brings you to knowledge.

On a spring day in 1995 Sister Teresa Cañamàs, Headmistress of "La Purísima" School for Deaf Children in Palma de Majorca, asked me to sculpt an image of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, for her community. To help me better understand what she expected, she showed me a statue in chalk of the Immaculate Mary in the corridor of their Convent cloister: large, dressed in blue, with a sweet face, a crown of stars and the moon at her feet. That image confused me. About to leave for Mexico, I carried her request inside me, which had become a kind of "seed". In Mexico, I was still confused, since all the images of Mary there, so distant, reminded me of the Immaculate one in the corridor of the convent; however my confusion and the popular devotion became "the water" that made the seed inside me germinate. On a fine morning, while visiting a market in Puebla I found some wax. Wax is the material with which I usually work and, despite the fact that this Mexican wax was a little crude, it reminded me of marble and I felt attracted by it.

Back in Spain I remained in Barcelona for a few days before returning to Majorca. To overcome my confusion I had decided not to think about Mary any more, but I felt like trying that wax: the desire to mould it and a feeling of obligation had combined inside me. I did not require anything else to begin work and so, in the silence instilled by closing the eyes, I discovered within the void between my hands something I hadn't known before. A tangible reality was slowly taking shape and gaining all its significance while being held in the hands. I recognised among my memories of Mary the images that I had seen in Mexico as well as the Immaculate one in the corridor of the convent. I recalled my visions during a visit to Nazareth: Mary's well, towards which it seemed I had seen Her walking; Her house in that great Church dedicated to Her.

I began to retouch the shape with anxiety to perfect it, opening and closing my eyes, a little distracted by my craft as a sculptor. My eyes allowed me to look at Her from different angles, seeing moments of Her life. All that I had recognised from my memories appeared once again.

In July that year, an article by writer and priest Miquel Ambròs Albertí was published in 'Brisas' magazine in Palma de Majorca, recounting the story of the birth of this image and my qualms concerning it. When showing him I had asked: "but... can one hold the Madonna in one's hand?" He answered me by citing the first epistle of St. John: *We herald that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, contemplated and have touched with our own hands: The Word of Life.*

Reassured, I went to see Sister Teresa to show her the result. She was not there and I found her nephew, Vicent, a long time friend. Miquel Ambròs had accompanied me.

Announcing that the statue was finished, I showed it to him. With emotion, his hands quickly moved to pick her up, holding her close to his heart and saying "my mother". That reaction impressed me. I asked him to ensure that my original in wax reached his aunt. Days later I learned from Vicent that the image had been welcomed with amazement. Sister Teresa had expected something else from me and, when I met her again, she couldn't understand how I had come up with that result, but she told me that while holding Her we were also being held by Her. This helped me to comprehend many other more important things.

I then showed the sculpture to my poet friend Carles Duarte. He was fascinated and wrote the poetry that completed my work in words. "The hands are a haven where I learn to invoke you".

This marvellous poetic intuition with which he ends his verse also defines everything about my work: the hands as an instrument for concrete knowledge, preceding and causing the abstract knowledge.

I understood the road was the right one and felt really proud. But, not long after, I was chastised for it.

In September of that same year I realised, with determined clarity that the shape I had modelled had not yet reached its perfection and, although the image had already been reproduced in eight wooden copies for the Franciscan Sisters of "*La Purísima*" School, with the surprise and disapproval of all, I stopped everything.

Having spent almost two and a half years with long sojourns in Africa, which had become the new "water", on the 8th January 1998, in my studio in Majorca, I finally succeeded, after many attempts, to find the definitive form. The modifications had resulted in a precise balance and looking at her from different angles, the moments of Mary's life, already apparent in the first version beyond my actual intention, were much clearer. The new shape, from a horizontal perspective, also revealed the profile of a dove.

Perhaps that same evening or the next day a new path began. The shape had originated from the encounter between hands and wax. I felt that my work, all I could and had to do alone, was finished: it then became a project, to share with others, and also to have others executing it.

I could touch and look at that simple form in wax. Touch and sight had become complementary. I remembered the image of the Immaculate Mary in the corridor of the convent. Large, distant, almost inaccessible to touch and then I suddenly imagined my sculpture distancing itself from the hands and becoming larger, belonging to the external space. I felt as if this distancing would then, inevitably, lead back to the hands: the surprise of holding what we see and passing from being distant to being close, intimate. The intimacy suggested to me a reduction, until disappearing in to one's very hand. These three moments of perception: the enlargement (only through sight), then the original size (hand held, touch and sight) and, finally the smaller version (only touch), translated into aesthetic moments that spurred me on to discover other moments inside of me, enabling me to communicate what my memory contained.

The multiplicity of the images of Mary had always troubled me, all different, so many - how many? Perhaps I wanted to respect this diversity, thinking of it as an adaptation of the representation of Mary to the different cultures, but I also wanted to reaffirm its oneness. This step was easy: St. Joseph and wood. Different types of wood became the garments of Mary, coming from many places and therefore many cultures; but the form would always be the same. How many garments? It was very evident: the years of Her Son on the earth, 33. I had taken another step forward, but it was still not enough. In fact the image once in the hands could not be viewed, expressing all its beauty and I had still not solved the problem of how to present Her without making use of the hands. I asked myself: what if the hands could not be seen? I toyed with the impossible to find in the end the "solid air" that could hold Her: glass. So I imagined thirty-three glass cylinders, at the top of which I could place, with the desired inclination, leaning forward, the thirty-three images dressed in woods from everywhere. As a logical development, Jesus' years on the earth inspired me: I would make the glass cylinders rise up from the earth.

The moments of perception, following the line of my work, also had to be those of the sense of smell and of hearing. I looked for the stimulus of fragrance in cedar and cypress woods to accompany us in our encounter with Mary. It didn't take long for me to realise that I had to search for them in the earth of Majorca: plants and shrubs from the island, gathered in spring, became the fragrance that would always accompany the image.

It was necessary to find a composer of music for Mary. Not finding him at the start, I chose a repertoire of Marian music. Arriving in Assisi I met the one perhaps predestined to it: Father Joseph Magrino, chapel-master of the Sacred Convent of St. Francis. In this way the music, inspired by this image of Mary and its installation came about. I have already heard the piano version, played by Don Giuseppe, before its transcription for string, wind and soprano. It is a wonderful piece of music, bringing us closer to the mystery of Mary.

The search for the different woods was difficult and I knew very little. It was one surprise and discovery after another, assisted by "tailors" specialising in exotic timbers, and wood-turning carpenters. My work, one by one, was to clean and finish bringing out in a natural way, the feel, and the beauty of each wood, its veins and light.

By now I had succeeded in gathering all the elements needed to complete the installation, but the "container" for the encounter between those entering it and the experience, also sensory, of Mary, was missing. Beyond each person's faith, entering had to facilitate the contact with oneself through an experience that leads us to the Mother of Jesus or, at least, to the Mother of all, the earth.

I chose to present MARIA in Barcelona, in a religious space and had the opportunity to accomplish this first installation in December '98 in the Diocesan Museum of Barcelona.

During those days in Barcelona I saw the reaction of visitors and the media. It was for me a surprise to find out just how much this image did indeed reach everybody. The proof was in the requests which followed to have her exhibited elsewhere: since then the exhibit has visited (except in one case) churches and cathedrals following a choice, not only Catholic, but also universally Christian, evident in the Lutheran Evangelical Church of Alte Nikolaikirche in

Frankfurt, where I was invited to exhibit almost three years later. Along this path my desire to recover religious spaces, examples of our culture, of our Christian identity, was strengthened.

Those people who have worked with me have often heard me say we need not worry, because MARIA knows where she wants to go. From Barcelona onwards all the requests for exhibitions have led to "containers" that seem deliberately made for it and on two occasions my intention to restore religious and artistic patrimony was put to the test: with the Chapel of St. Gil Frederich in the Cathedral of Tortosa and the Church of *Sant Antoniet* in Palma de Majorca. The design of the installations was adapted to each place and changed every time, always making me feel that the last was even better than the preceding ones.

By the end of the Jubilee Year 2000, in its twelfth presentation, MARIA returned home to Mallorca. When I was offered the Church of *Sant Antoniet*, I immediately visualised the installation, and being motivated by my vision, I succeeded in having the church restored. The support of the Bishop of Majorca Monsignor Theodore Úbeda, whose words introduce my work on this occasion, was decisive.

The elliptical plan of *Sant Antoniet* suggested that the geometry of the whole had to be circular. Below, the strip of earth becomes the omega letter and above, a closed circle that circumscribes the alpha, both capitals. In the centre is the table on which replicas of the sculpture are available to be touched and held by those who have entered. The vision of the Alpha-Omega had taken shape inside me and I wanted to accomplish it in Assisi. Thanks to Monsignor Vittorio Perì, Prior of the Cathedral Church of St. Rufino, and to NESHER Cultural Association, *Santa Maria delle Rose* now hosts MARIA.

Since December '98, the thirty-three images in wood have been enriched by the gazes of many, preserving the memory of the places that have welcomed them. As of January 20th 2002 they have reached Santa Maria delle Rose to stay, giving me the impression that my job was finished. But I was wrong, because I have lately learned that the Archbishop of Santiago de Compostela, Monsignor Julià Barrio Barrio, has christened MARIA as the "Star of the Path" and wants to welcome her forever in a church in his Diocese. However, these thirty-three images of MARIA in wood are unique and cannot be repeated.

In '99, when I completed the first enlargement in Carrara marble, I felt an unsettling aesthetic desire to make the thirty-three sculptures in marble; marbles from every corner of the planet. At that time a technical adventure of this kind was unthinkable, but I did not give up and so began a new journey to communicate MARIA, in the splendour and purity of marble, on the path to Santiago de Compostela.

My gratitude goes to all those who have helped me and are sharing this project with me.

 Guido Dettoni della Grazia

Barcelona, springtime 2002