

BLUMKA



José Díaz Dos Santos, attributed to
Sleeping Christ Child

Portugal, probably Aveiro

Last quarter 17th century

Terracotta, painted and gilded
29 x 28 cm

Provenance:

Privat Collection, Portugal until 2016

Comparative Literature:

A.Nogueira GONÇALVEZ, *Inventário artístico de Portugal. X, Distrito de Aveiro: Zona do Norte*, Lisbon, 1981

H. W. JANSON, 'The Putto with the Death's Head', in: *The Art Bulletin* 19, 1937, S. 423-49 and complementary W. STECHOW, 'Homo Bulla', in: *ibid*, 20, 1938, S. 227-228.

The sleeping Christ Child lies peacefully on a richly decorated bed. Its left hand rests on a skull that references the crucifixion on Golgotha. The bed is elaborately decorated with ornamental shells, flowers and festoons of fruit, heads of angels and birds. Four putti support the bed on their slight shoulders, like four figures of Atlas. Stylistically, the opulent ornamentation is comparable to the interior decoration of the church of *Igreja de Jesus* in the convent of Aveiro, in the north of Portugal. The convent was dissolved in 1874 and, since 1911, has housed the municipal museum.



Igreja de Jesus, Aveiro



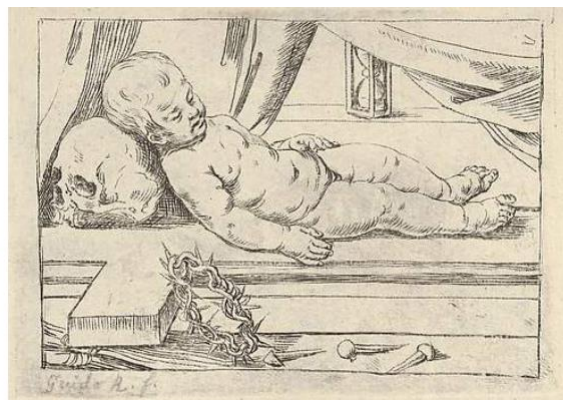
José Dias dos Santos: Sleeping Christ Child, signed in the back, dated 167...
Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lissabon
(Information kindly given by Maria João Vilhena de Carvalho, curator, sculpture collection, MNAA)



The sleeping Christ Child that first appeared around 1500 in depictions of the Virgin Mary, is to be seen within the context of the Passion. Sleep is frequently placed on a level with death in Christian art. St. Augustine even speaks of Christ's death on the Cross as 'sleep'. To underline this, the Christ Child was often depicted sleeping on a cross from the 16th century onwards, as a direct reference to the crucifixion, as for example in works by Bartolomé Estéban Murillo and Guido Reni.



Bartolomé Estéban Murillo (1617– 1682), Sleeping Christ Child, oil on canvas, 48,3 x 36,3 cm, Private Collection



Anonymous, Sleeping Christ Child, Italian, 17th century, etching after Guido Reni, (1575–1642), 9,5 x 13 cm

Sleep is also considered the guardian of eternal youth which is why children are frequently depicted asleep without any other attributes. These small scale sculptures were popular from the 17th century onwards and were inspired by an ivory carving of a small boy created by François Duquesnoy, a netherlandish sculpture acitve in Rome. Without any attributes these little figures are open to many interpretations, such as youth or the sleep of death, and were often associated with the Christ Child.



François Duquesnoy, (1597–1643), circle of, Sleeping Child, c. 1650, Ivory, h. 4.5 cm, l. 15 cm, Victoria & Albert Museum, inv. no. 202-1874

The Motif of the sleeping child

Since antiquity, sleep and death – Hypnos and Thanatos, twin brothers and ‘children of the dark night’ – have been portrayed as children. Hypnos on his own is shown as a winged youth with the ‘water of forgetfulness’ and poppies. The Athenian sculptor Praxiteles is said to have created him as a sleeping youth. A bronze cast of this ancient work was made that is reputed to have been in the large collection of the patron of the arts, Isabella d’Este, in Mantua, in the 15th century. This work from antiquity inspired the many winged putti of the Renaissance. Cupid, the son of Venus, is also depicted as a winged putto, together with his bow and arrows. The motif of a putto with a skull also emerged around this time. The earliest known example is on the reverse of a bronze coin depicting Marc Antony as a boy. The winged putto is leaning on a skull. Next to him is a mourning youth, his hands concealing his face in despair. Above this scene are the words: IO SON FINE (I’m the end’).



Giovanni Boldú, active c. 1454–77, medal, cast bronze
The earliest coin with this motif dates from 1458

The winged putto and skull as an allegory of the transience of time is since to be found in graphic works on paper, painting and sculpture. It is hard to distinguish such depictions from the sleeping Christ Child with a skull – the sole difference to the putto being the lack of wings. The transitions are fluid as is also the case with the Christ Child discussed here: that is not on a cross but bedded on soft cushions. Various iconographic traditions merge here: the Christ Child is not actually lying down but supports its head on its angled arm – a posture often associated with melancholy. Nevertheless, the figure seems to be asleep, its eyes are closed. The other hand rests on a skull – that is two things in one: an allegory of mortality and a reference to Christ's death on the cross. The relaxed facial expression with a smile on its lips is a testimony to the child's serenity. It accepts its fate and, even in the presence of death, sleeps trustingly. In our figure Christ Child and the putto have come very close to each other in both content and form. The little putti supporting the bed are, interestingly, very unusual for a traditional cradle scene with the Christ Child and appear more like younger siblings of our sleeping putto.



The veneration of the Christ Child in its cradle dates back to the 12th century. This cult was launched by the reputed discovery of the Redeemer's crib by the Knights Templar. This veneration reached its peak in the 15th and 16th centuries in convents. Miniature cribs were often given as presents to nuns when they first entered a convent. Clothes to dress figures of the Christ Child and accessories for different occasions were intricately made by hand.

