

A New Date for the Choir Screen from Valladolid

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THE NEED FOR ORIENTING artistic investigation toward the study of private patronage and its direct effect on the history of the fine arts is becoming ever more evident. In Spain, this source has yet to be fully exploited; when it is, many present unknowns will undoubtedly be clarified. The case under study here may serve as an example: the dating of the iron choir screen from the cathedral of Valladolid, acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1956, and heretofore believed to be of seventeenth-century construction. A new look at the documentary sources in addition to the stylistic evidence will encourage a dating almost a century later.

In 1668 the chapter of the cathedral decided to consecrate the part of the structure that had thus far been erected, despite numerous difficulties. At this time it was decided to place the choir in the center of the nave. The visibility of the architectural whole was thus subordinated to a conservative instinct, contrary to the wishes of the architect himself.¹ In order to close off the choir, the ironworker Pedro Juan wrought two screens for the back part of the choir and put in place the balusters of the corridor that led to the two organs.² J. J. Martín González suspected that the “reja de delante de el coro,” made by the same artist, is that in the Metropolitan (Figures 1, 2). He observed, nonetheless, that the amount paid for the 592 kilograms of iron was only part of the total

price of the screen contracted for in 1668, since the Metropolitan’s screen weighs 13,636 kilograms. Although the account book that was missing in 1960 has been recovered, it is of no help in this matter since no related payments are recorded nor is the choir project mentioned.

The presence of such seventeenth-century decorative motifs as the *piedras y gallones* (which imitate precious gems) in the uppermost frieze and the small twisted columns among the bars, together with other markedly rococo decorations, has led some scholars to suggest that the Metropolitan’s screen was wrought in the mid-seventeenth century and altered in the eighteenth. Contradicting this is the information concerning the history of the screen given by M. Castro in his *Episcopologio vallisoletano*. In his biography of Isidro Cosío y Bustamante, Bishop of Valladolid, Castro affirms that “among the many benefices and donations which he made to this church it must be noted that he bore, with his own funds, the cost of the iron railings between the choir and the sanctuary and the choir screen, which was put into place on the seventh of December 1763 and was painted and gilded the following year.”³ When the bishop died in 1774, the chapter “resolved to place his coat of arms on the choir screen in order to perpetuate his memory for having underwritten its cost.”⁴ Later, it was decided to substitute for his arms those of the

1. J. J. Martín González, “Noticias documentales sobre la catedral de Valladolid,” *Boletín del Seminario de Arte y Arqueología de la Universidad de Valladolid* (1960) p. 195.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 189 ff.

3. M. Castro Alonso, *Episcopologio vallisoletano* (Valladolid, 1904) p. 321.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

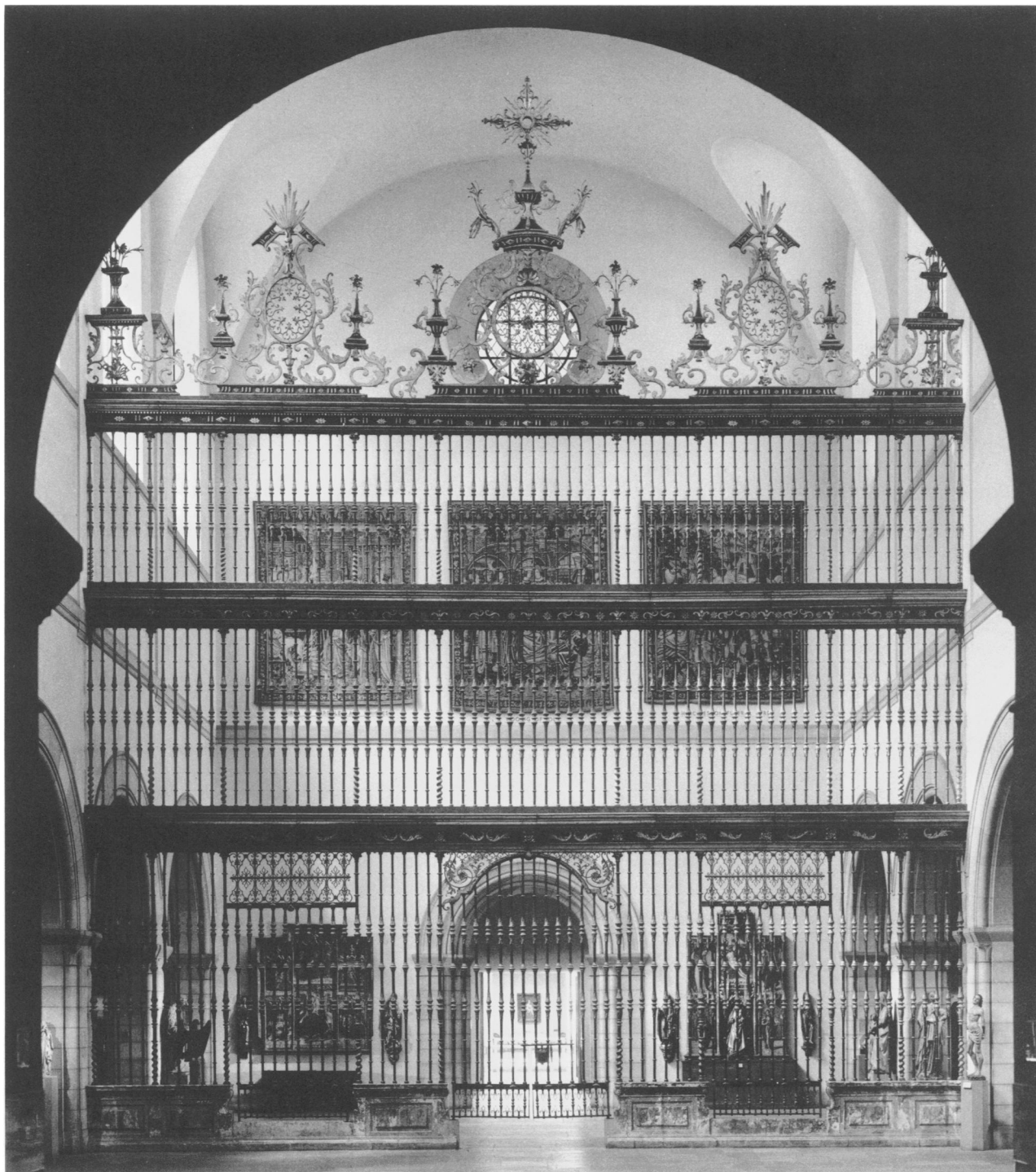


FIGURE 1

Choir screen from the cathedral of Valladolid, attributed to the Amezuía family of Elorrio, erected in 1763 and painted and gilded in 1764. Wrought iron, partially gilt, and limestone. H. 52 ft., W. 42 ft. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of The William Randolph Hearst Foundation, 56.234.1

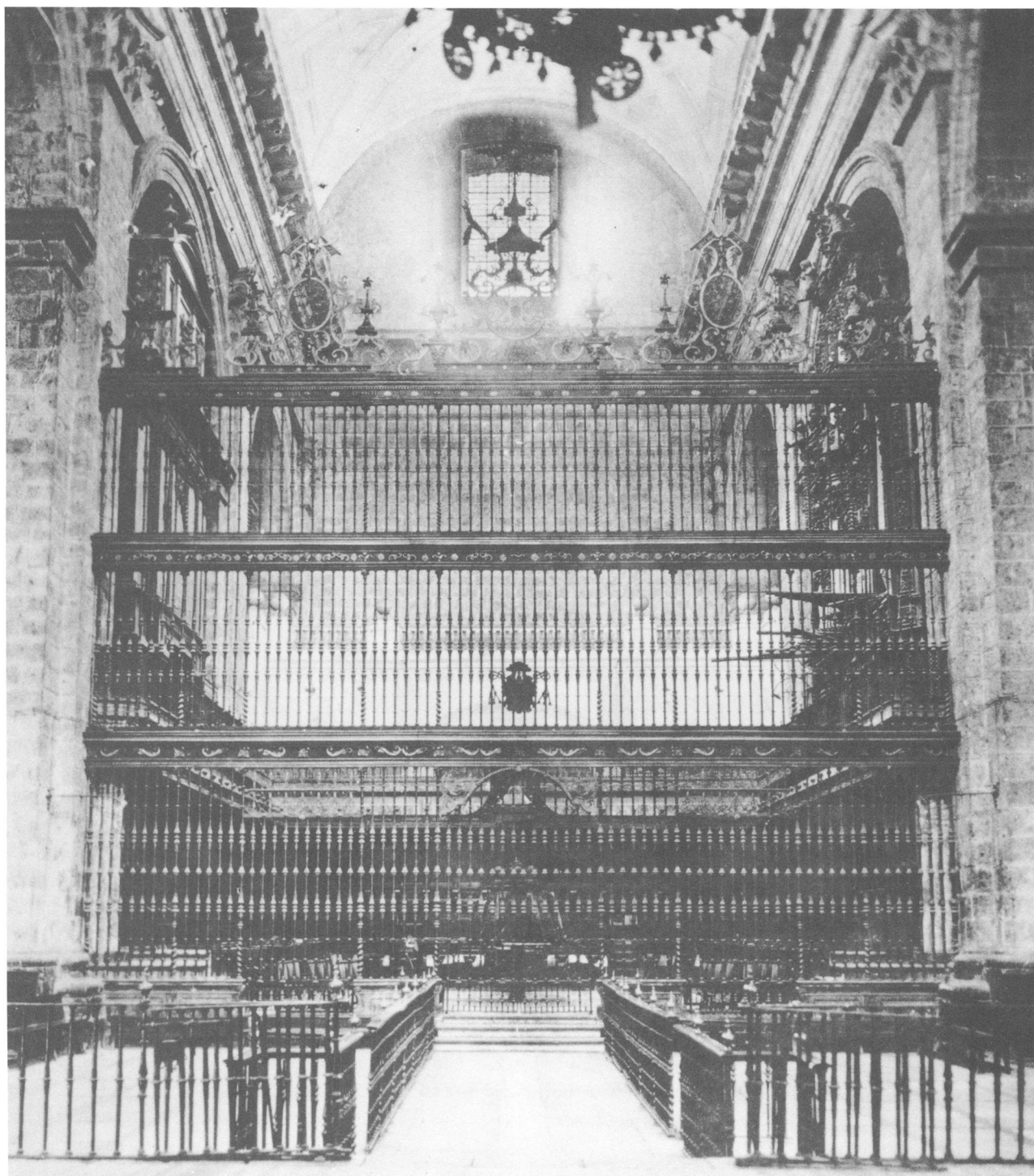


FIGURE 2
The screen in the cathedral, before 1922

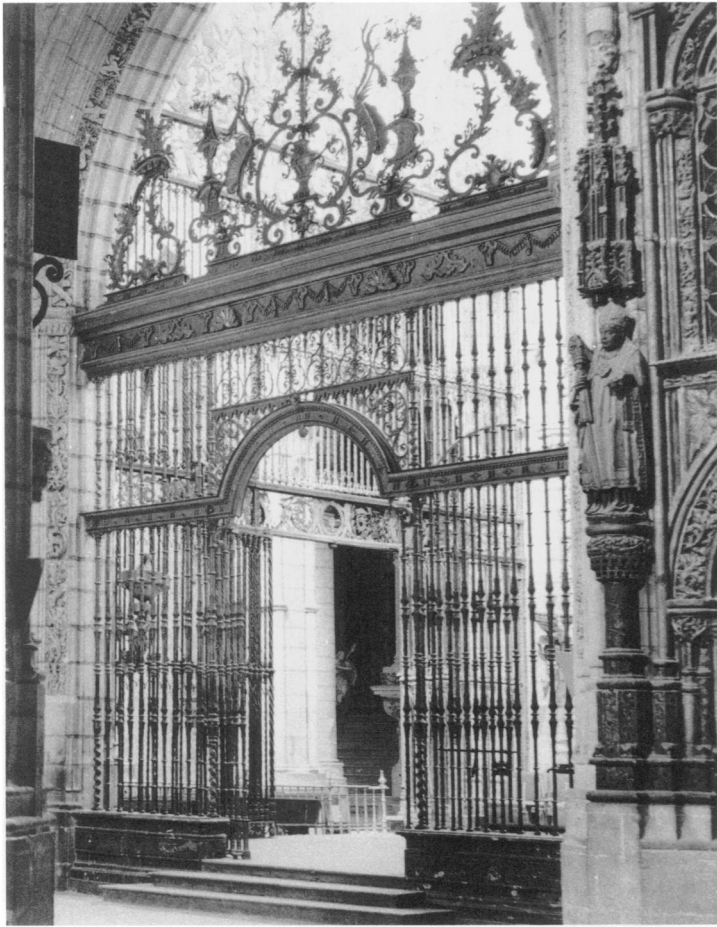


FIGURE 3
Sanctuary screen by Rafael Amezúa, Cuenca Cathedral (photo: MAS)

chapter and to add this inscription: "The Illustrious Isidro Cossio former Bishop of this City donated this screen and railings."⁵ By 1904 the painted inscription had been erased by time, but the "badly blurred and deteriorated" chapter arms were still conserved, as can be seen in an old photograph.⁶

As the screen was a private donation of the bishop, no annotations concerning it are to be found in the cathedral's account books. Only the life of the donor remains to be analyzed in order to see whether he had any contact with master ironworkers.

Isidro Cosío y Bustamante, the future Bishop of

5. Ibid.

6. Reproduced by J. J. Rorimer, "It Was Just Yesterday," *Studies in the History of Art Dedicated to W. E. Suida* (London, 1949) pp. 10–16.

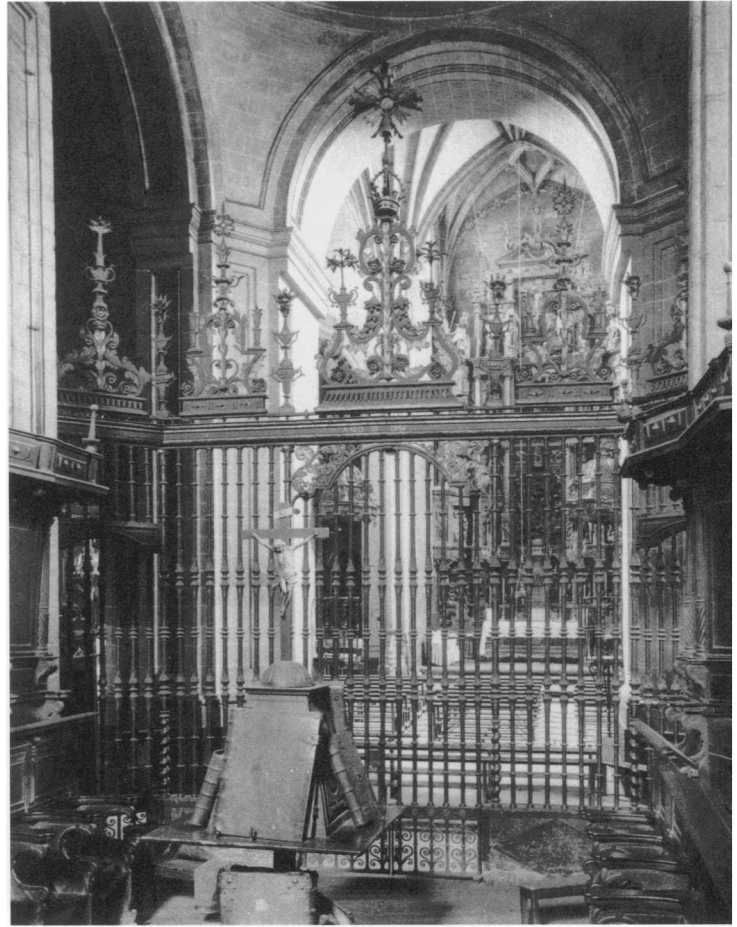


FIGURE 4
Choir screen by Gaspar Amezúa, Santa María del Palacio, Logroño (MAS)

Valladolid, was born in the diocese of Palencia in 1700 and studied for the priesthood in Oviedo and Salamanca. After his ordination he was sent to Villanueva de la Jara, Cuenca, and was later named Archdeacon of Moya, an important office among the dignities of Cuenca Cathedral. Here, I believe, lies the key to his later involvement with the Valladolid screen.

In 1740, during the bishopric of José Flórez Osorio, two screens wrought by Rafael Amezúa, an ironworker from Elorrio, Vizcaya, were placed on either side of the sanctuary of Cuenca Cathedral (Figure 3).⁷ Of rather reduced dimensions, these screens con-

7. A. González Palencia, *Biblioteca conquense V* (Madrid, 1949) p. 302.

sist of two vertical sections topped by an elegant crest. As in the Metropolitan's screen, small twisted columns form part of the bars and the *piedras y gallones* motif is present in the frieze, while the delightfully rococo crest illustrates the imagination and ability of Rafael Amezúa.

His work in Cuenca Cathedral is very similar to the choir screen in the church of Santa María del Palacio, in Logroño (Figure 4), wrought in 1746 by Gaspar Amezúa, also a native of Elorrio and presumably related to Rafael.⁸ The Logroño screen consists of only one vertical section and a crest. It is decorated with the same twisted columns, the same *piedras y gallones* motif in its frieze, and similar rococo ornament in the door spandrels and crestwork,

although this last element is more restrained than in the Cuenca crests, and there is a serenity about the whole that is almost neo-Renaissance.

Seventeen years separate the Logroño and Valladolid screens, but ironwork was always one of the most conservative of the arts, and the same patterns and motifs persisted in the work of the Amezúa family when they came to make the Valladolid screen. In the crestwork of the screen one may appreciate a great formal clarity, and even the capricious *rocaille* is clearly silhouetted in space. In the Valladolid screen the Amezúa family culminated the process of simplification of their art, and in it, too, there is a premonition of the aesthetic change that had already begun to make itself felt in the other arts.

8. J. M. Ruiz Galarreta y S. Alcolea, *Logroño y su provincia* (Barcelona, 1962) p. 16. One Gaspar Amezúa, son of Antón Amezúa and Magdalena de Egurrola and brother of Gregorio, Juan Bautista, and Agustín, was Magistrate of Elorrio in 1732: Santos de Pagadigorra Múgica, *Matrícula y padrón de los caballeros hijosdalgo de esta muy noble y muy leal villa de Helorrio (1575-1831)* (Bilbao, 1965) pp. 271, 355.