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PARLIAMENTARY CONTROVERSY OVER THE PYXIS OF ZAMORA



The controversy over the Pyxis of Zamora reached Parliament at a time of heightened public awareness of the crisis in Church-State relations, as well as other scandals related to the disposal of artistic heritage (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003).

It should be noted that while other countries, such as France, England and the United States, could boast of their prestigious and, in some cases, new museums, Spain saw many of its works of art and heritage treasures sold abroad to form part of private collections or museums in other countries.

The first intervention in Parliament, which was to be the flame that would light the fire, was made by the Conservative MP Guillermo Joaquín de Osma y Scull, who had previously been warned by the discoverer of the pyxis, Manuel Gómez-Moreno, about the sale of this artistic treasure of Spain's heritage.

On hearing the news, MP Osma publicly announced the sale of the pyxis by the clergy of Zamora, sent the daily ABC a report of this fact and a photograph of the object, expressing his indignation. He also wrote to the Nuncio, told the President of the Government, José de Canalejas, and his political boss, Maura, what had happened; he telegraphed the Governor and the Bishop of Zamora and prepared his intervention in Congress (Gómez-Moreno, 1995). In this way, MP Osma sparked a controversial debate and initiated an investigation into the events (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003).

Specifically, in the daily record of the parliamentary sessions of 10 March 1911, the following was recorded as part of his speech, "*The fact, gentlemen, is that, in yet another very regrettable case of the exploitation of the wealth of our churches, which has come to be regarded as proverbial, our Spain is poorer today, although it may not seem so to us, than it was a few days ago. A work of art has been sold which at the same time was, and is wherever it is found, a historical document: in both ways of incalculable value*".

And he continued, *"There was that ivory box, whose historical interest lies in the inscription and dedication carved on it, the last one remaining in Spain, of the four similar ones that had been passed down over time; three of them went, years ago, to museums abroad; the last copy that remained in Spain was also the most complete, the most interesting because of its inscription, the oldest copy of all those we have known; and it has been sold"*.

Guillermo de Osma's speech on the situation of the Pyxis of Zamora led to the participation of the President of the Government, Canalejas, who supported State intervention to put an end to abuses and greed (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003).

Specifically, that same day, 10 March 1911, President of the Government Canalejas, according to the daily record of the parliamentary sessions, intervened with the following words, *"I cannot admit that the mere possession, the mere possession by the Cathedral Chapter, by any religious institution, of such a jewel, authorises it to sell it freely; if it is a sacred thing, it is outside the trade of men; if it is part of the national heritage, it must be guaranteed by the effectiveness of the exercise of the intervention of the Public Power"*.

After the speeches by Osma and Canalejas, the ultra-conservative MP Manuel Senante y Martínez spoke in reply, defending the Church's right to sell its heritage without conforming to the prescriptions of canon law. He also justified this right to sell to meet the pressing needs of the Church, given the hardship that Spain was going through (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003).

The parliamentary controversy became public and was reported in the press in Madrid (ABC, El País, El Imparcial, El Universo, etc.) and locally in Zamora (El Heraldo de Zamora and El Correo de Zamora). The latter newspapers, El Correo de Zamora - more traditional and Catholic - and El Heraldo de Zamora - of liberal ideology - spread the controversy among their readers with opposing arguments and positions.

Canalejas stood firm, standing against the commercialisation of works of national artistic heritage, and on 13 March 1911, according to the daily record of the parliamentary sessions, once again at the request of the MP Guillermo de Osma, he confirmed the situation of the pyxis as follows, *"It has been confirmed that the pyxis in question and another of less importance that also belonged to the artistic treasure of the same cathedral are in Madrid, and I am pleased to announce to the House that tomorrow both pyxides will be deposited in the possession of the State"*. His involvement proved to be key to the subsequent recovery and purchase by the State of the Caliphal pyxis.

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