

SEVILLE DISPATCH

A Glow-Up Gone Awry

A restoration of a beloved figure of the Virgin Mary causes an uproar. “The Macarena cannot be made up!”



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Reporting from Seville, Spain

Published Aug. 12, 2025 Updated Aug. 14, 2025

The Macarena needed to get some work done.

On this, many in Seville, a city with a die-hard devotion to a sorrowful 17th-century wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, agreed. In June, members of the Brotherhood of the Macarena, entrusted for centuries with protecting the image, sent her out from her shrine for some touch-ups. But the Macarena — pronounced just like the song belted by a local duo that conquered ballparks and bar mitzvahs throughout the 1990s — came back from a restorer’s workshop with a full eye job.

Her glow-up gave her longer lashes, a smokier look in her gaze and changes to her skin and nose. Outrage among locals, many wearing Macarena medallions and bracelets, spread to Seville tapas bars adorned with Macarena posters, where television sets play the Macarena’s pre-Easter procession on a continuous loop.

“It was not good work,” Salvador Fernández, 84, a longtime brotherhood member, said with anguish on a recent morning after bowing before the Macarena, who wept her glass tears in the high altar in the basilica that bears her name.

“It was like she got makeup,” his wife, Consuelo Murga, 75, said. “And the Macarena cannot be made up!”

More than a makeover gone awry, the botched restoration has become the scandal of Seville’s summer, injecting infighting and political instability into the 18,000-strong brotherhood, one of the scores of religious groups connected to various sacred images

entrenched in Seville culture. It also has inflamed southern resentments against northerners who, learning of the outcry, have mocked Seville's folkloric ways.



Visitors in line at the Basilica, in August. Ilvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

Above all else, the episode revealed a deep reverence for the Macarena, with everyone from traditionalists with hard-right politics to aficionados of drag-queen culture coming to her defense.

It all started innocently enough.

In May, the brotherhood's board asked Francisco Arquillo Torres, a professor of restoration at the University of Seville, to do a light cleaning of the statue. Professor Arquillo, 85, had worked on the figure enough over the years to be called the "doctor of the Virgin."

He proposed a general check up, but also the removal of stains in a tear duct, an inspection of the eyelashes and tears and a surface cleaning. The brotherhood agreed, and so the Macarena went under the brush.

Assisting was the professor's son, David, himself a professor of restoration at the

university. In 2013, he had presented a paper to a meeting of plastic surgeons in Barcelona pointing out the similarities in procedures for both human and wooden patients, including “peels, reconstructive surgery, facial reconstructions, hair micrografts, pigmented lesions, skin luminosity and hydration.”

The Arquillos decided — according to a report later issued by the brotherhood — to wait until the Macarena was back in the basilica to reapply her eyelashes, just before redressing her in her traditional sumptuous, embroidered mantle and heavy golden crown.



The 17th-century wooden statue of the Virgin Mary stands behind the altar of the basilica during services. During Holy Week, she parades through the city on a giant float. Ilvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

But as workers carefully repositioned the Macarena in her shrine, some brotherhood officials noticed something amiss.

They tried, without success, to contact the professor and get him back to the basilica. Nevertheless, they decided to open the church on the morning of July 21 for public veneration, even hailing the Macarena’s triumphant return on social media. It was a bad decision, the brotherhood’s leader, Elder Brother José Antonio Fernández Cabrero, later

told a local newspaper, attributing his failure in judgment to the “emotional shock” of the Macarena’s appearance.

Devotees of the Virgin piled in to get a good look at her. Among them was Jorge Pulgar Salgado, 35, a new member of the brotherhood, who had delayed a weekend getaway with his boyfriend to check on the Macarena.

Mr. Pulgar, an enthusiast of both Holy Week processions and drag queen pageants (“I’m like the Anna Wintour of Holy Week”), said later that he sat in the front pew and looked up with horror.

“Mother,” he said he thought. “What happened to you?”

The brotherhood officials went into emergency mode.

By the afternoon, they had summoned to the church the professor (who, like his son, declined to comment for this article) and other local restorers, including an eyelash specialist and, per the brotherhood, a “craftsman in applying artificial hairpieces.” They closed the church, and the experts went to work.

When the church reopened later that day, the Macarena had shorter eyelashes. But devotees said things had gotten even worse. The restorers convened again that night but only altered her expression more.



The Macarena in March 2024. Jose Manuel Vidal/EPA, via Shutterstock



And the Macarena on July 23, after the restoration had been completed. Joaquin Corchero/Europa Press, via Getty Images

Before and after — and after and after — pictures made the rounds around the web and city. The next evening, Mr. Pulgar joined protesters demanding transparency and answers. And so the board members agreed to send the Virgin to experts for X-rays for a better picture of her condition, and called for a vote on what to do next.

But in the week before the vote was to be held, conspiracy theories swept the brotherhood. Many members said they suspected that board members tried to rush the restoration to gain advantage in November elections. The theory was that, by moving fast, the board could claim success in getting the Macarena in good shape for the main event of next spring's Holy Week procession, when she would traverse the city on a huge float adorned with burning candles.

On the evening of July 29, more than 1,800 brothers packed the church, but also spillover rooms in surrounding buildings, where speakers and closed-circuit television were set up.

As Elder Brother Fernández, who declined a request for comment through a brotherhood spokesman, expressed remorse for what had happened, church members called for his

resignation and shouted insults. He then gave the floor to Pedro E. Manzano Beltrán, a leading conservator from a regional institute.



“It was not good work,” said Salvador Fernández, left, a longtime member of the Brotherhood of the Macarena, entrusted for centuries with the protection of Seville’s Madonna. “It was like she got makeup,” said his wife, Consuelo Murga, “And the Macarena cannot be made up!” Ilvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

Over the course of an hour, and with the visual aid of X-rays, Mr. Beltrán painted a picture of bungled interventions, with overpainting and improperly applied new eyelashes doing a job on the Macarena’s face. He said he had found deeper problems, possibly requiring insect eradication.

In a later email, he said a significant restoration was necessary to undo the damage and “recover the image’s personality.”

At the meeting, Professor Arquillo and his son defended their work. They said that the Macarena’s eyelashes had been applied last to avoid damage by spray paint, and that when she was dressed, her lashes were accidentally moved before they could dry, causing damage.

They held up their own photos and shouted, “This is the Virgin as I left her,” said Mr.

Pulgar, adding that the Macarena, from her shrine above the altar, “was watching the whole time.”

The brotherhood members voted overwhelmingly for another restoration, which is set to begin on Tuesday, though some members, like Rosita Portillo, 62, the owner of a Macarena-decorated restaurant around the corner, handed in a blank ballot. “I’m not taking sides,” she said.

The meeting let out at nearly 4 a.m., and in the days after, Seville tried to move on, with faithful lining up to visit the Macarena.

But over beers in Seville’s Macarena-devoted hangouts, members of the brotherhood commiserate, cast aspersions on the Elder Brother, his northern origins and ways (“He drinks Coca-Cola with red wine!”), and offer technical appraisals.

“Everyone thinks they are a sculptor,” said Sergio Bermúdez, 40, who owns the Rosa de San Gil bar behind the basilica. Seville, he said, needed to focus on fixing the Macarena’s face, “not who is guilty.”



Sergio Bermúdez serving drinks at the Rosa de San Gil bar, where many have gathered to discuss the restoration of the Macarena. Ilvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

Father Amador Domínguez Manchado agreed. After celebrating mass in the basilica on Sunday evening, he said he had confidence that the next operation would be a success.

“If a doctor performs surgery on a face, imagine what a restorer can do,” he said, adding that regardless of how the Macarena looked, it was what was inside her, or rather what she inspired in others, that mattered. “If you wear false eyelashes, you’re still the same person.”

Roser Toll Pifarré contributed reporting.

Jason Horowitz is the Rome bureau chief for The Times, covering Italy, the Vatican, Greece and other parts of Southern Europe.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Face-Lift That Not Even a Mother Could Love