



1999.014

Birth of the Virgin Mary

Unidentified Artist

Peru

Eighteenth century

Oil on canvas, 46 ½ x 64 inches

Although the Council of Trent wanted in principle to do away with apocryphal legends regarding holy figures, the church was also realistic about just how much it could change the hearts and minds of the faithful. The life of the Virgin as recounted in Jacopo da Voragine's *Legendi di Sancti Vulgari Storiado* (called *The Golden Legend*) had disseminated and popularized stories of the life of the Virgin so widely that they had become truth to the faithful. The church therefore hedged, saying, in effect, that legends that were not detrimental to the souls of Catholics could be accepted as subjects in art, if they were to appear within parameters set by theologians. Johannes Molanus wrote in his 1570 treatise on orthodox iconography that "The Tridentine synod reproves books that teach lascivious things, so much more must they be prohibited in paintings, and especially in sacred images. The tongue speaks to the ears, painting speaks to the eyes; painting is much more persuasive than speech."ⁱ One image that Molanus explicitly disapproved of was the nude Christ Child.

When Francisco Pacheco wrote his *Arte de la pintura*, published posthumously in 1649, a handbook of painting and iconography surely available to Spanish Colonial theologians and artists, he described a couple of prints picturing the Birth of the Virgin and then described how he would paint the scene:

I would arrange this story in this way: Saint Anne in the bed, seated, supported by pillows, with clothing and headdress of white cloth, covered with a shawl; a servant who

brings her something to eat on a plate; Saint Joachim seated at bedside and another old woman who shows the baby girl wrapped in her swaddling clothes; and the old saint looking at his very beautiful daughter with joy and admiration. Warning that one should avoid, in any case, painting Our Lady nude (as most do). And this is what I said at the beginning that one must avoid in this painting; and if we do not show the Child Jesus that way, we should not show the Virgin, his Mother, that way for greater reason, as she is a woman.ⁱⁱ

The Peruvian painter of the *Birth of the Virgin* in the Thoma Collection was either unaware of Pacheco’s proscription on the infant’s nudity, or ignored it, or simply figured that newborn girls are always nude at first. This accords with the matter-of-fact presentation of sacred stories told in Spanish colonial paintings.

The Thoma painting offers the traditional iconographic elements of the story in a setting filled with details that give us a glimpse of life in eighteenth-century Peru. Saint Joachim was said to have been a wealthy man, and this is reflected in the stuffs, the carved bedstead, and the fur trim of his robe. The bed is recognizable as the kind carved of cedar wood and gilded that had pride of place in the bedrooms of the well-to-do in Cuzco. As in the painting, these “state” beds were placed on a platform reached by a set of three steps: “In Cuzco, these structures were placed so high above the ground that one traveler commented on the risk of suffering an accident by falling onto the tile or brick floor.”ⁱⁱⁱ The canopy and red velvet drapery were used to keep out the drafts during the chilly Andean nights. The elaborately embroidered bedspread trimmed with Flemish lace, the carpet covering the platform, and the blue and white patterned basin reflect objects either imported from the far east (the basin) or created in Cuzco under the influence of Asian designs. These elements transform a perfectly orthodox European composition into the local and contemporary.

The artist does not let the demands of Renaissance perspective discourage him: in the background, in a peculiar “walk-in fireplace,” a woman warms cloths near a fire and another female figure bears a candle. Over the infant Mary (though actually against a far wall) shines a star surrounded by wispy heavenly clouds. The star bears the anagram of the name Maria (see 1997.008).

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

ⁱ Translated from Pacheco’s paraphrase of Molanus. See Francisco Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura*, ed. and with intro. by Bonaventura Bassegoda i Hugas, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Cátedra, 2001), 580 and n. 46 and 47.

ⁱⁱ “Yo dispusiera esta historia desta manera: Santa Ana en la cama, sentada, arrimada a las almohadas, con tocas y ropas blancas de lienzo, abrigada con una mantellina; una criada que le lleva en un plato algo de comer; San Joachín sentado a la cabecera y otra mujer anciana que le muestra la niña envuelta en sus mantillas; y el Santo viejo mirando su bellísima hija con alegría y admiración. Advirtiéndolo, con esto, se huya, en todo caso, de pintar a Nuestra Señora desnuda (como hacen los más). Y esto es lo que dixé al principio que tenía que advertir en esta pintura;

y si la escusamos en el Niño Jesús, en la Virgen, su Madre, con más razón, por ser mujer.”

Ibidem.

ⁱⁱⁱNatalia Majluf, *Art in Peru: Works from the Collection of the Museo de Arte de Lima* (Lima: Museo de Arte de Lima and Promperú, 2001), 183.