



Unidentified Artist  
Peru, Cuzco  
The Child Mary Spinning  
Eighteenth century  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 inches

The presentation of the Virgin Mary in the temple by her parents Saints Anne and Joachim was narrated in one of the apocryphal gospels that are stories not found in the canonical Bible. According to the Jesuit Pedro de Ribadeneira, whose life of the Virgin Mary was first published in 1616, she was three years old when she entered the temple:

This holy child was received into the number of other virgins, to the great contentment of them all, and then was made to shine in that material house of God, she who was to be his spiritual temple. There she learnt to spin perfectly wool, linen, and silk, to sew and work sacerdotal robes, and all that was needful for the service of the temple, and after to serve and clothe her precious Son, and make his seamless garment, as Euteimius saith.<sup>i</sup>

According to Ribadeneira, Mary's parents died when she was eleven years old, and she was married to Joseph at the age of thirteen years and three months. During the intervening years she remained in the service of the temple.

The "Child Mary Spinning" has its origins in Spanish paintings, such as this one in the Denver Museum of Art (fig. 1). The composition may have traveled to South America as a



Fig. 1. Unknown artist, *Virgin Mary Spinning*, ca. 1700, oil on canvas. Denver Museum of Art, Gift of Engracia Freyer Dougherty for the Frank Bowers Freyer Collection, 1969.353.

painting or as an engraving, but it may have been popularized through a print made in Peru. A locally made graphic source would explain a certain odd construction found a number of colonial paintings, which is that the Virgin Mary is seated on her chair very awkwardly. This is true of the Thoma painting as well as a version in the Museo Pedro de Osma in Lima (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Unidentified artist (Cuzco), *Virgin as a Child Spinning*, second third of the eighteenth century, oil on canvas, 112.5 x 80.5 cm. Museo Pedro de Osma, Lima.

It is likely that paintings of the girl Mary spinning entered the convents of Colonial South America, for the young novices would devote much of their lives to the handwork of creating the richly embroidered altar cloths, chasubles, dalmatics, and other ecclesiastical textiles that play a role in the rites of the church. The subject would have provided a perfect exemplum for a girl entering a cloister, to remind her of Mary's life among the virgins of the temple which

Ribadeneira describes as exemplary. He wrote that Mary learned to read Hebrew, meditated on holy scripture, which she understood perfectly, and:

She was never proud, she kept silent, her words were few and only when necessary, her very deep humility, virginal modesty, and all the virtues were so perfect in her that they drew her to the eyes, and stole the hearts of everyone; because she seemed more a girl from Heaven than one born here on earth.<sup>ii</sup>

In the Thoma painting the young Mary is seated, though awkwardly, on a seventeenth-century style “friar’s” chair. She wears a little cape around her shoulders pinned with a brooch bearing the rubric of her name, and a cloth band with a golden diadem in her hair.<sup>iii</sup> The floral frame, a borrowing from Flemish painting, is frequently seen in Spanish Colonial art. The brocaded upholstery of the chair, the lace and embroidery of Mary’s garments, and her halo are all touched with gold. This addition of stenciled or painted gold onto oil paintings is called, as it was in early contracts, *brocateado*. It is also sometimes termed *sobredorado* (over-gilding) and has also been described as *escarchado* (frosting).<sup>iv</sup>



Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

*Christ Child Pricked by a Thorn*

Eighteenth century

Oil and gold on canvas, 33 ¼ x 16 ½ inches

In the Viceroyalty of Peru, the image of the Virgin Mary spinning was sometimes paired with a pendant painting showing Christ as a boy with the crown of thorns, upon which he has pricked his finger, in his lap. There is a pair that is still together in the Convent of Santa Teresa in Potosí.

The legend of the Christ Child pricked by a thorn originated in the *Speculum vitae Christi* by Ludolf of Saxony (c. 1295-1378), a series of meditations on the life of Christ. In one episode, the Christ Child is weaving thorny branches into a crown when he pricks his finger, prompting a premonition and reflection of the pain he would suffer later in his life.

The boy Jesus is seated on a “friar’s chair” with its leather seat and backrest tacked to a simple wood frame. His simple brown garment is embellished with gold stenciled designs, his halo is of finely drawn golden rays, and the wooden chair has been gilded. He holds in one hand the other that has been pricked by the crown of thorns. The composition is framed by a painted garland of flowers. There was an inscription at the upper left of the canvas, now illegible, which likely named the donor of the painting. Although the “Christ Child with a Thorn” and the “Child Mary Spinning” are linked as pendants in colonial Spanish America and they both have roots in Sevillian paintings of the seventeenth century, their sources are unrelated in Spain.



Fig. 3. Francisco de Zurbarán, *The House at Nazareth*, ca. 1635-1640, oil on canvas, 165 x 218 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund, 1960.117.

The “Christ Child Pricked by a Thorn” may have originated in the painting by the Sevillian Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664) representing “Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth” (fig. 3).<sup>v</sup> As Mary looks on pensively, the boy Jesus pulls a thorn from his finger, the thorn being a premonition of the Crown of Thorns and his crucifixion.



Fig. 4. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Christ Child with a Thorn*, c. 1630. Museo de Bellas Artes, Seville.

Zurbarán also painted an abbreviated version of the composition (fig. 4), in which Jesus appears without his mother. A print after this painting, which would reverse the composition, may be the source for a work (fig. 5) by the Bogotá painter Gregorio Vázquez de Arce.



Fig. 5. Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos, *Christ Child with a Thorn* (*Niño de la Espina*), oil on canvas, 111 x 84 cm. Museo de Arte Colonial, Bogotá. Photo: Oscar Monsalve.

These two images that were popular devotional subjects in Spain emigrated to South America either as original oil paintings or as engravings to serve as models for works of art from Bogotá to Cuzco.

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<sup>i</sup> Pedro de Ribadeneira, *The life and death of the most glorious Virgin Mary, mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, . . . (Montreal: Louis Perrault & Cie, 1835), 8.

ii “Nunca estaba ociosa, guardaba silencio, sus palabras eran pocas, y graves, y quando eran menester, su humildad profundissima, la modestia virginal, y todas las virtudes tan en su punto, y perfeccion, que atraia à sí los ojos, y robaba los coraçones de todos; porque mas parecia Niña venida del Cielo, que criada acà en la tierra. Translated from Pedro de Ribadeneira, *Flos sanctorum* (Madrid, 1716-1717), 1:61.

iii Luis Eduardo Wuffarden notes the “supposed identification of the Virgin spinning with the imperial Inca ñustas [princesses] suggested repeatedly by scholars such as Mesa-Gisbert and Gradowska. According to such interpretations, the Virgin would be dressed in the Andean *lliclla* closed by the *tupu* or ornamental clast of prehispanic origina. However, the presence of all these elements in its Spanish precedents demands a more cautious reading.” Translated from Wuffarden, *Los siglos de oro en los virreinos de América: 1550-1700* (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Conmemoración de los Centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V, 1999), 346.

iv *Museo Pedro de Osma* (Lima: Fundación Pedro de Osma G., 1995), 76.