



2020.017

Unidentified Artist

The Death of St. Joseph

Perú

1698

Oil on canvas, frame 59 7/16 x 48 5/8 in.

Inscribed at lower left: *Josseph 1698*

The earliest representations of Saint Joseph in Western art depict him as a white-bearded man, so senescent that he is sometimes pictured fallen asleep in scenes of the Nativity. It was Jean Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, who:

“...systematically reworked St. Joseph’s images from that of an aged, ineffective attendant to a vigorous, youthful man who was the divinely-appointed head of God’s household, a paragon of perfection who had been sanctified in the womb and was thus incapable of sin, the protector of God’s plan for salvation, an industrious provider for the Holy Family, and, along with his spouse Mary, an exemplar of holy matrimony.”ⁱ

Gerson’s “rehabilitation” of Saint Joseph was followed by Saint Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444), who promoted the Holy Family as the paragon of family life, the most excellent example of Catholic matrimony. In the sixteenth century, the foremost promoter of the virtues of Saint Joseph was Saint Teresa of Ávila, who founded several Carmelite monasteries dedicated to him. In the *Book of Her Life* (1562-65), Saint Teresa of Ávila described an ideal monastery, one devoted to the early Carmelite rule of poverty, prayer, and solitude, as a recreation of the

stable in which Christ was born, and the House of Nazareth, where he was raised by Mary and Joseph, as “a heaven, if one can be had on earth.”ⁱⁱ

Her description finds visual expression in a series of early-seventeenth century engravings by Hieronymous Wierix on the infancy of Christ (*Jesu Christi Dei Domini Salvatoris Nri Infantia*), charming scenes of daily life at the home and carpenter’s workshop in Nazareth. These engravings were extremely popular sources for paintings throughout the Andes during the colonial period.

The death of Saint Joseph is not mentioned in the canonical Bible. Saint Joseph’s death appears first in the seventh-century Egyptian *History of Joseph*, called *Oriental History*, later popularized in the *Summa of the Gifts of Saint Joseph* (1522) by the Dominican friar Isidore of Isolani, and again in the 1597 *Summary of the Excellencies of Saint Joseph* by the Carmelite friar Jerónimo Gracián. The death of Saint Joseph does not appear in art at all before the sixteenth century, and only after the Council of Trent (1545-1563) did the subject become widespread as Joseph came to be seen as the patron of a Good Death, “the companion who could guide the dying through the last rite of passage.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The composition of this painting of the Death of Saint Joseph dated 1698 contains elements that are familiar from prints and paintings of other subjects, particularly representations of the Birth of the Virgin. The figure lying in a bed enclosed with draperies recalls the figure of Saint Anne in paintings of that subject, and the Virgin Mary accompanied by angels in the foreground recall the women attendants who prepare a fortifying broth for the new mother. The very different subject calls for the presence of Saint Michael the Archangel who gestures toward the Holy Spirit and God the Father, come to take Joseph’s soul. Jesus stands at bedside, while the weeping Virgin Mary watches from the foot of the bed. Three angels carry a prayer book, a candle and Joseph’s emblematic flowering rod.

The *Mystical City of God* is a history of the life of the Virgin Mary written by the Spanish Franciscan nun María de Ágreda (1602-1665). In it she tells the reader that Mary sought out Jesus when she realized that Joseph would soon die, reminding him:

“Be mindful, my Son, of the humility and love of thy servant; of his exceeding great merits and virtues; of the fidelity and solicitude by which this just man has supported Thee and me, thy humble handmaid, in the sweat of his brow.”^{iv}

For nine days and nights Saint Joseph was accompanied always by Jesus or Mary:

“By celestial command the holy angels, three times on each of the nine days, furnished celestial music, mixing their hymns of praise with benedictions of the sick man. Moreover, their humble but most precious dwelling was filled with the sweetest fragrance and odors so wonderful that they comforted not only Saint Joseph, but invigorated all the numerous persons who happened to come near the house.”^v



2011.057

Death of Saint Joseph

Peru or Bolivia

18th century

Oil and gold on canvas, 63 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches

We see the musical angels in this painting, performing on three stringed instruments and a triangle, but can only imagine the fragrance. Jesus stands at the head of his father's bed, while Mary, in another adaptation from paintings of the Birth of the Virgin Mary, prepares broth with the help of several angels. Stylistically, the painting is naïve in its composition, with all the figures appearing close to the picture plane, but the brushwork is refined and the embellishments of gold are restrained.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

ⁱJoseph F. Chorpenning, OSFS, "Icon of Family and Religious Life: The Historical Development of the Holy Family Devotion," in *The Holy Family as Prototype of the Civilization of Love: Images from the Viceregal Americas*, exh. cat., ed., Joseph F. Chorpenning, 3-39 (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 1996), 4.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, cat. no. 34, p. 219-20.

^{iv} <http://www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/DEATHJOS.HTM>.

^v Ibid.