



Unidentified artist

*Jesus, Mary, and Joseph with Saint Elizabeth and the Infant Saint John*

Peru

18<sup>th</sup> century

Oil on canvas

55 5/16 x 39 3/4 in.

At the center of this image, the Christ Child tenderly embraces his cousin, John the Baptist. Christ stands on a cradle, nude but for a white cloth around his hips, arms outstretched to caress the face of his cousin. Behind him sits the Virgin, one hand draped protectively across his hip. The infant Saint John, wearing his typical camel hair garment, leans across his aunt's lap but does not return the affectionate gesture of his cousin. Holding him up is his mother, the visibly older Saint Elizabeth, in robes of pink and green. Somewhat obscured by the family cluster is St. Joseph, who presides over the scene with his characteristic lily.

Images of the Holy Children embracing circulated widely across early modern Europe, particularly Italy and the Low Countries (fig. 1). In some images, they are accompanied by their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, occasionally with additional saints. The Thoma painting is heavily indebted to a composition known as the *Small Holy Family* attributed to Raphael's workshop

(Louvre Museum, inv. 605; fig. 2) that circulated in engravings such as this one by François de Poilly (1623-93, fig. 3).<sup>1</sup> These images derive from an episode in the apocryphal texts on the infancy of Christ, when John the Baptist greeted the infant Christ upon his return from exile in Egypt.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1 Joos van Cleve and workshop, *The Infants Jesus Christ and Saint John the Baptist Embracing*, 1520-25. Art Institute of Chicago. This work is one of many based on a now-lost painting by Leonardo da Vinci.

<sup>1</sup> The painting is thought to have been created by Giuliano Romano or possibly Giovanni Francesco Penni, with the design attributed to Raphael. Several prints after this painting were created, the first by Giovanni Jacopo Caraglio in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Other engravings were created by Jakob Frey (1681-1752; Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden inv. A 89965), and various versions of Poilly's engraving circulated, one retouched by Charles Simonneau for publication in the *Recueil Crozat* in 1729. See for example British Museum inv. 1855,0609.96 and 1917,1208.1533 and Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden inv. A 89967 and A 89963.

<sup>2</sup> Other apocryphal texts place this moment of greeting when the Holy Family fled to Galilee or when Saint Elizabeth fled with the Infant Saint John from the Massacre of the Innocents.



Fig. 2 Raphael and workshop, *Small Holy Family*, c. 1518-19. Musée du Louvre, inv. 605.



Fig. 3 François de Poilly (1623-93), *The Virgin and Child with St Elizabeth and the Infant Baptist* [*The Small Holy Family*], c.1643-1683. The Royal Trust Collection.

The painter has recreated the scene from the print faithfully, even going so far as to replicate the delicate braided hairstyle of the Virgin. There are other notable differences between the print and the painting, primarily in the figure of St. Joseph, who is painted in a distinctly different style from the other figures and does not quite cohere with the scene, disrupting Raphael's pyramidal composition. The rocky outcropping in the painting has taken the place of what appears to be a ruined building behind the Holy Family in the Poilly print. The turban-like headwrap worn by St. Elizabeth has been replaced by a simpler cloth that drapes over her hair. Additionally, the painter has added a sheaf of wheat in the bottom right corner of the painting, recalling the transubstantiation of the Eucharistic wafer into Christ's flesh. Only faintly visible in the painting are the delicate nimbuses above the heads of the Holy Family.

Other European copies of the *Small Holy Family* did include the figure of Saint Joseph, such as this painting by the circle of Scarsellino (1550/51-1620, fig. 4). While some later versions of the print include St. Joseph, such as this early nineteenth-century engraving by Alessandro Mochetti (fig. 5), it is not clear whether earlier engravers might have made a similar addition to Raphael's composition. It may be that author of the Thoma painting included the father of Jesus of his own volition or at the behest of the patron who commissioned the work.



Fig. 4 Circle of Scarsella, called lo Scarsellino, after Raphael, *La Piccola Sacra Famiglia*, 16<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas. Auctioned at Sotheby's Olympia, July 3, 2007.



Fig. 5 Alessandro Mochetti, *Sacra Famiglia*, early 19<sup>th</sup> century, engraving. Inventario dei beni storici e artistici della diocesi di Firenze.

The rosy cheeks that have been added to the figures, as well as the face of Joseph indicate that the Thoma painting was created by an artist working in 18<sup>th</sup> century Peru. Poilly had a relationship with the Jesuit Order, which may offer one explanation as to the circulation of the image to South America.<sup>3</sup> The work eschews the *brocateado* typical of Cuzco painting in this

<sup>3</sup> Kristen Windmuller-Luna, "Giulio Romano's The Little Holy Family in Africa: Identifying an 18th-Century Ethiopian Painting," *Journal18* (December 2016), <https://www.journal18.org/1210>.



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period, suggesting that the person for whom it was created had a particularly European sensibility.