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Unidentified Artist

Mama Ocllo

Peru, Cuzco

c.1835-1845

Oil on canvas, 19 ¼ x 14.124 inches

In Inca legend, Mama Ocllo was the sister and wife of Manco Cápac. In an abbreviated telling of the legend, their father Viracocha, god of the sun, saw that mankind was living in ignorance without tools for hunting or agriculture, and without civility. Viracocha thus sent his son and daughter to help improve people's lives. Manco Cápac was given a gold scepter with which to strike the ground at intervals during their trek through the mountains. Where the scepter sank into the earth, the center of the empire would be built. Manco Cápac and Mama Ocllo emerged from Lake Titicaca to pursue this quest, and the result was the founding of Cuzco and the Inca

empire. Mama Ocllo was also considered a fertility goddess, and she was credited with teaching Inca women the art of spinning.

The Incas had no tradition of portrait painting, but rather quickly adopted this European genre. The earliest indigenous portrayals of Inca ancestors are found in Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's *Nueva corónica de buen gobierno* of about 1615 and Martín de Murúa's *Historia general del Perú* (ca. 1611-13) to which Guaman Poma may have contributed some drawings.ⁱ Throughout most of the colonial period, the descendants of the Inca kings proudly installed full-length portraits of their ancestors in their homes. A full-scale series of the Inca kings would begin with the founders of the empire, Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, and close with Huayna Cápac or Huáscar, but not the unfortunate Atahualpa. A set of three images of the "descent of the Incas to Guacayna [sic] who was the last" was sent by Viceroy Toledo in 1571 to the court of Philip II.ⁱⁱ For the Spanish king, the portraits were emblems of the vast territories in Spanish America that became part of the Spanish Monarchy. For the Incas of the colonial period, portraits of their ancient ancestors were status symbols, visual reminders to the Spanish authorities that Incas, too, descended from royalty. These portraits reflected the relationship between the Indians and the Spanish, a relationship fraught with conflict even as it achieved a certain *convivencia* over time.

The earliest documented series of portraits of the Inca in Peru are the eight canvases of "retratos de Ingas" and a portrait of himself left by the Cuzqueño Juan Quispe Tito to his daughter. The portraits appear again in family testaments in 1662 and 1665.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the genre appears to have become popular in the early eighteenth century, becoming a specialty of some artists' workshops. They were painted by creole as well as indigenous artists and were evidently collected as well by creoles and Spaniards of high social rank. A 1721 contract between the creole painter Agustín de Navamuel and *capitán* Cristóbal de Rivas y Velasco for 24 large paintings of Inca kings and their princesses (*ñustas*) makes clear that the genre was not only valued by the indigenous elite.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, a typology of portraits was established. Both the Incas and their princesses were pictured in interiors with the swags of drapery, tables, and heraldic devices typical of portraits of the Spanish and creole elite of the period. However, they wore traditional costumes. The princesses were dressed in the finely woven *cumbi* textiles that were one of the great achievements of indigenous artisans, with complex geometrical designs (*tocapus*) decorating the mantles (*llicllas*). The tunics worn by the princesses were decorated with a stylized design representing the revered *cantuta* blossom. As in *quechua* tradition, the princesses were accompanied by humpbacked dwarfs protecting their charges with feathered parasols.^{iv} This iconography is reflected in the Thoma painting, and as well in a mural painting attributed to Tadeo Escalante.



Fig. 1. Mural painting attributed to Tadeo Escalante, c. 1830, Molino de Acomayo, Quispicanchis, Cuzco.

This blossoming of Inca portraiture ended following the uprising fomented by Túpac Amaru II (José Gabriel Condorcanqui), who was executed in 1781. The royal inspector, José Antonio de Areche, believed that Túpac Amaru’s ability to mobilize the indigenous people had much to do with his claim to be descended from the Incas, of being “the absolute and natural master of those dominions and its vassals.”^v So there began an offensive against the politico-cultural program of the *curacas* to high social status. Even those who had remained faithful to the Monarchy were affected. Genealogical documents that supported the privileges of Inca nobility were publicly burned, the wearing of traditional costumes was prohibited, and portraits of Inca ancestors were to be turned over to the authorities. Undoubtedly, many were destroyed, but a large number were hidden, some recently discovered having been over-painted for their protection.

Following independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, the new Republic of Peru incorporated certain aspects of the Inca past into its patriotic rhetoric and visual culture. Nonetheless, Simon Bolívar decreed that the special recognition of the *caciques* and their hereditary titles was ended, because the new constitution “does not recognize inequality among the citizenry (*ciudadanos*).”^{vi} This decree marked the end of the Inca nobility of Cuzco, and therefore of the threat that had been posed by portraits of the Inca kings and their princesses, which were permitted once again.

In Cuzco, workshops facing a decline in their traditional market for religious subjects, turned out paintings of the Incas, many of them aimed at travelers from abroad who took them home as curiosities. Once politically charged, these portraits became instead romantic evocations of the historical past.

The Thoma painting of Mama Ocllo is typical of the genre of full-length portraits of her and Manco Cápac. The iconography retains traditional elements: her garments and the dwarf bearing a plumed parasol. However, the setting has been removed to the out of doors under a blue sky, and her accouterments now include a “mirror” representing the moon, a parallel to the sun (Viracocha) always pictured with Manco Cápac. The painting reflects in its style, with a bright palette and clear contours, a number of Inca portraits created around the same time (figs. 2 and 3).



Fig. 2. Unidentified artist, *Manco Capac*, c. 1835-1840, oil on canvas. Museo Inka, Universidad Nacional de San Antonio Abad del Cuzco.



Fig. 3. Unidentified artist, *Mama Raua Ocllo*, c. 1835-40, oil on canvas. Museo Inka, Universidad Nacional de San Antonio Abad del Cuzco.

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ⁱ *Converging Cultures: Art & Identity in Spanish America*, exh. cat., ed. Diana Fane (New York: The Brooklyn Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996), 239.

ⁱⁱ Luis Eduardo Wuffarden, “La descendencia real y el ‘renacimiento inca’ en el virreinato,” in *Los Incas, reyes del Perú* (Lima: Banco de Crédito, 2005), 211.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 212.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 226.

^v Quoted by Natalia Majluf, “De la rebellion al museo: Genealogías y retratos de los incas, 1781-1900,” in *Los Incas, reyes del Perú* (Lima: Banco de Crédito, 2005), 254.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 276.