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Unidentified Artist
Peru, Cuzco
Our Lady of La Antigua (*Nuestra Señora de La Antigua*)
Eighteenth century
Oil on canvas, 63 x 53 ½ inches

The devotion to Our Lady of La Antigua was first documented in the year 1012, in the town of Santa María La Antigua in the present-day Spanish province of León. It is more closely associated, however, with the sainted King Ferdinand of Castile who wrested the city of Seville from the Moors in 1248. One night during the siege of Seville Ferdinand prayed to the Virgin of the Kings, a particular Sevillian devotion, for her aid. The Virgin Mary called him by name, saying “You have a constant protector in my image of La Antigua that you love so much and that is in Seville,” and she promised him the victory he sought. An angel helped him enter the city and enter the mosque where there was a wall painting of the Virgin Mary. It was hidden from view, but became clear as he watched, and Ferdinand was able to see the image that had been painted on the wall centuries earlier. This mosque was later incorporated into the right aisle of the Cathedral of Seville, where the original image of La Antigua occupies a Baroque altarpiece.

The first Spanish town established in the Americas was Santa María de la Antigua del Darién, in what is now Panama, the country of which she is patroness. Francisco López de Gomara, in his *Historia general de las Indias*, recorded that when the conquistador Martín Fernández de Enciso and his men were greatly outnumbered by Indians, he took an oath of loyalty from his hundred Spaniards, and prayed to Our Lady of La Antigua for her protection. He promised to send a large quantity of gold and silver to “la Antigua de Sevilla” and to build a church and establish a town to be called Santa María del Antigua del Darién.¹

In the original painting in the Cathedral of Seville (fig. 1) the Virgin Mary, crowned by angels, stands erect with the Christ Child carried by her left arm, and with a single rose in her right hand. The background, with a geometric pattern decorated with stars, is entirely gilded. Copies of the painting abound, and many were brought to the Americas from Spain and then copied again by colonial artists.



Fig. 1. *Our Lady of La Antigua*, Cathedral of Seville.

The first copy sent to Lima from Seville arrived in 1544. It is now in the Cathedral of Lima (fig. 2). “La Antigua” became the patroness of the University of San Marcos in Lima, which was founded in 1551. Another revered version is in the Cathedral of Cuzco (fig. 3).



Fig. 2. *Our Lady of La Antigua*, Cathedral of Lima.



Fig. 3. *Our Lady of La Antigua*, Cathedral of Cuzco.

The Peruvian artist who created the Thoma version was both completely true to the original in his depiction of the figures and their gold background, and quite original in the design of the fictive altar the painting inhabits. The image is surrounded by an oval nimbus and the suggestion of an epiphany, a mystic apparition (as perhaps seen by King Ferdinand III), is intimated by the drawn curtains to either side of the canvas. On a stepped altar are burning candles that might reference Candlemas, or the Feast of the Purification, which is explicitly referred to in the original painting. There, the phrase *Ecce Maria venit ad Templum* (Here Mary comes to the temple) appears on a cartouche carried by angels. Four wingless putti bearing four of the instruments of the Passion of Christ: three nails, a flagellum, a ladder, and the sponge

soaked in vinegar that would be offered to quench Jesus's thirst. In the center of the composition is the word *Caritas* (charity).

This painting of Our Lady of La Antigua is a fine example of the ways in which colonial artists could both reproduce time-honored iconographies and introduce original touches that make a painting unique.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

¹ Francisco López de Gomara, *Historia general de las Indias y vida de Hernán Cortes*, prologue and chronology by Jorge Gurnia Lacroix (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1979), 86. See also Magdalena Vences Vidal, *Ecce Maria Venit. La Virgen de la Antigua en Iberoamérica* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma México/El Colegio de Michoacan, A.C., 2013).