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*Our Lady of Mercy, called "the Pilgrim of Quito," entering a Town*

Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

Ca. 1730-35

Oil on canvas, 31 ½ x 50 3/8 inches

The second church built by the Mercedarian order in Quito, Ecuador, completed in 1627, was heavily damaged by the eruptions of Mount Pichincha in 1660 and 1698.<sup>1</sup> In 1700, work began on a new church, salvaging what could be saved of the old walls, destroying what was beyond saving. This was an enormously expensive undertaking (despite the inexpensive materials and cheap indigenous labor) and was partially underwritten by the monks themselves, the estates of their deceased brethren, and the generosity of members of the local aristocracy. The project was also paid for with donations (alms, jewels, even haciendas) gathered during pilgrimages to present-day Colombia and elsewhere in South America, during which a contingent of Mercedarians traveled with an image of the Virgin Mary said to have been given to Quito by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (King Charles I of Spain). This sculpture and her Mercedarian caretakers traveled ceaselessly, ending with a final remittance to Quito of 1,000 pesos and the completion and consecration of the church in 1736. By then, the mission of the *Peregrina de Quito* had taken the sculpture to Spain. It remained in Cadiz until the Spanish Civil War, when it burned in 1936 in an anticlerical assault on the church that been its home for two centuries.

We know what the traveling sculpture looked like from the detailed description by Bartolomé Arzans de Orsúa y Vela, the contemporary historian of Potosí, Bolivia. Orsúa y Vela's description of the entry of the *Peregrina de Quito* into Potosí in March of 1732 is an invaluable eye-witness account:

Its [the image's] miracles are admirable, its beauty singular, a wooden sculpture, well-proportioned, a little more than a *vara* [approximately 33 inches] high; they can make it stand and sit, which they do, on a ladies' side saddle on which it enters cities and towns. The black velvet hat that it wears adds to its beauty, and finally the emotion with which it is seen, received, and venerated by everyone has been and is incomparable.<sup>ii</sup>

An inscription on a painting by the Potosí artist Melchor Pérez Holguín records the entrance of the *Peregrina de Quito* into that city in March of 1732 (fig. 1). This painting and others with similar compositions created mostly in Cuzco were undoubtedly based on engravings, many of which were distributed to the faithful to promote a devotion to the "Pilgrim of Quito."



Fig. 1. Melchor Pérez Holguín, *Our Lady of Mercy, called "the Pilgrim of Quito,"* oil on canvas, 167 x 108 cm. Museo del Convento Franciscano, Potosí.

Although no documentary evidence has appeared that would ascertain an entry of the *Peregrina de Quito* into Cuzco, it would seem unlikely for this important center of the viceroyalty to have been overlooked during the years of tireless travel in search of alms. These two paintings in the Thoma Collection may document that event in the absence of a detailed written account like that by Orsúa y Vela.

In this painting, as in another similar composition in the Thoma collection (2012.022), the Virgin and Child travel on a donkey, which has been handsomely decked out for this important task. Orsúa y Vela wrote that the richly dressed image entered Potosí on a small mule (*machuelo*), seated on a side saddle garnished with silver, with the Christ Child in her arms.

The appearance of the Virgin and Child is enhanced by the canopy lifted over their heads by silver staffs carried by Mercedarians. The elaborate brocades of the garments and hats of the holy figures give them an air of glittering otherworldliness that distinguishes them from their plainly clothed attendants. The Virgin of Mercy is identified in the painting by the emblems of the order: the shield on her breast, and a scapular, and set of manacles at her side. The latter symbolizes the Mercedarian dedication to the redemption of captives, first those imprisoned in North Africa by Moorish pirates, then the indigenous people of the Americas who are “saved” from ignorance.

To the left of the *Peregrina* is a Mercedarian who may represent the superior of the order in Cuzco and who leads the donkey. All the men to the left and behind him are the founders and outstanding representatives of the religious orders: Saint Peter Nolasco, founder of the Order of Mercy, and his co-founder Saint Raymond Nonnatus, recognizable by the lock that keeps him silent; Saint Dominic of Guzmán, founder of the Dominican order, in his black and white habit; Saint Cajetan, founder of the Theatines; and others not so clearly identifiable. The bearded figure in red might be intended to be Saint Augustine, but he holds an image of the Christ Child more appropriate for Saint Anthony of Padua. To the right and following the holy figures are generically secular figures representing magistrates and other important citizens. It is their presence that suggests the likelihood that this painting represents a real entrance into Cuzco, not a generic event. We are reminded of the set of paintings representing the Corpus Christi processions in Cuzco, of which no one has doubted the specificity of place.

In the background, tapestries or other textiles or paintings, flutter from the windows of tile-roofed houses, decorating the route of the procession. In his description of the entry into Potosí, Orsúa y Vela wrote about city streets decorated from “roofs to the ground” with “so much silk tapestry, canvases with lovely paintings and gilded frames, *láminas* and mirrors.”<sup>iii</sup> The flowers on the ground are likely to have been real petals of blossoms carpeting the way. And the colorful birds reflect their appearance in so many Cuzco paintings.

Another aspect connects the work to Cuzco: the elaborately carved and richly gilded frame that is related to furniture created there during the seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries.<sup>iv</sup>

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

<sup>i</sup> See Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, “Our Lady of Mercy, Called the ‘Pilgrim of Quito:’ Travels of a Devotion and its Image in Art,” *Hispanic Review Journal* 20, no. 5 (2019), 433-450.

<sup>ii</sup> Bartolomé Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela, *Historia de la Villa Imperial de Potosí*. Edited by Lewis Hanke and Gunnar Mendoza, vol. 3, *año de 1732* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965).

<sup>iii</sup> *Láminas* can be prints on paper, or paintings on canvas or copper or wood or glass, so we cannot know what exactly Orsúa y Vela is referring to.

<sup>iv</sup> I am grateful to Jorge F. Rivas for assuring me that the style of the frame accords with the date I suggest for the painting itself.