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Our Lady of Valvanera

Unidentified Artist

Peru

Seventeenth century

Oil on canvas, 54 ½ x 38 ½ inches

Our Lady of Valvanera, the patroness of the Rioja region of Spain, has been the object of a cult following and pilgrimages since at least the fifteenth century. The polychromed wood sculpture of her dating from the Romanesque period is enshrined in a Benedictine monastery at Valvanera. In 1530 the Italian humanist Lucio Marineo Siculo compiled a list of the twelve most important shrines in Spain: Valvanera was on his list.

According to the legend, the sculpture was carved by Saint Luke and brought to Spain in the first century A.D. Saint Athanasius and a group of Christian ascetics who lived in the caves

around Valvanera attributed special powers to the image and built a sanctuary to house it. When the Moors invaded Spain in 711, a man named Arturo hid the sculpture in the hollow of a tree to protect it, and the bark of the tree grew over the hollow to completely enclose the image. At a later date, a thief and murderer named Nuño Oñez was about to rob a farmer, who prayed to the Virgin Mary. Oñez was struck by such contrition that he became a Christian hermit. One night he envisioned Our Lady of Valvanera in a tree that looked like a beehive, on a hill from which a spring flowed. The next day Oñez told the priest Dominico de Brieua of his vision and they went out to find the image. Indeed, they found, atop a hill, an oak tree that housed a swarm of bees with a spring of fresh water at its base. They removed the image from its natural sanctuary, and the Benedictines who cared for the shrine after 1063 built a large monastery around it. The kings of Aragon and Castile made Our Lady of Valvanera their special protector. Queen Isabel visited the shrine in 1482 and King Philip II sent a friend there to pray to the image on his behalf. The cult of the Virgin of Valvanera came to the Americas early on and was widely disseminated by devotees who established confraternities in her honor.

The Thoma Collection *Our Lady of Valvanera* follows the iconography of the Romanesque sculpture in its most characteristic details. The Virgin is seated, holding the child in her lap, her proper right arm around him. In her left hand she holds a piece of fruit, perhaps an apple. The child is awkwardly facing proper right, while his torso turns sharply enough so that his feet point in the opposite direction. His pose is explained by the inscription on the open pages of the book he holds in his left hand: “He averted his face so as not to see a sacrilege” (Bolbio el rostro por no uer un Sacrilegio), an event that the inscription dates to 1251. Christ blesses the world with his right hand, two fingers pointing upward.

The robes of the Virgin and child are deep yellow, or ocher, and the linings are green instead of the more usual blue, perhaps due to a discoloration of smalt. The artist could have used a print as his guide, as a whole series of prints based on a woodcut prototype from around 1638 were created during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As was usual with such cult images, its story had been published along with the engraved image more than once. In Francisco Ariz de Valderas’s *Historia de la antiquísima imagen de nuestra Señora de Valvanera* (Alcalá de Henares, 1608) the engraving does not represent the actual sculpture,ⁱ though there is a “verdadero retrato” (true image) on the title page of Diego Sylva y Pacheco’s *Historia de la Imagen Sagrada de María Santísima de Valvanera* (Madrid, 1665).ⁱⁱ However, the Thoma painting is so specific with regard to color and details that it might be modeled on a painting, perhaps one brought from Spain by an immigrant to Peru from the Rioja region of the peninsula.

Although the seventeenth-century painting adheres so closely to the recognizable characteristics of the revered Romanesque image, its style is considerably up-dated, the figures are portrayed with delicate features and gentle expressions.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

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- i María de los Angeles de las Heras y Núñez, “El grabado y la iconografía de la Virgen de Valvanera,” *Lecturas de Historia de Arte*. EPHIALTE. Instituto Municipal de Estudios Iconográficos Vitoria-Gasteiz, no. 4 (1994), 285.
- ii Illustrated in Blanca García Vega, *El grabado del libro español. Siglos XV-XVI-XVII*, 2 vols. (Valladolid: Institución Cultural Simancas, Diputación Provincial de Valladolid, 1974), vol. 1, fig. 978.