

## Paintings on Embossed Copper Plates from Bolivia

In Potosí, Bolivia, a posthumous inventory of the property of the painter and printmaker Salvador Hidalgo included two presses and three plates ready for printing.<sup>1</sup> Hidalgo evidently worked from the late sixteenth into the seventeenth centuries. Printmaking in the Viceroyalty of Peru seems to have first been practiced in Lima, where Antonio Ricardo and then Francisco del Canto had their printing shops. The earliest known engraving on copper printed in the Viceroyalty of Peru, depicting Saint Rita of Cascia, was created in Lima in 1574.<sup>2</sup> Local artists could have learned how to engrave copper plates from the Italian artist Mateo Pérez de Alesio, whose prints first appeared in Lima around 1612-1613.<sup>3</sup> In short, copper plates were available in the Viceroyalty of Peru from the late sixteenth century, and there were craftsmen to know how to work both silver and copper.

Although the use of copper may indicate a connection to printmaking, the techniques of embossing, incising and chasing were normally practiced by silversmiths. These works in the Thoma collection are a hybrid of techniques, metalworking and painting. Although they have usually been dated to the eighteenth century, the frame on the Thoma Our Lady of the Rosary was probably made in the seventeenth century, suggesting an earlier date for their creation.<sup>4</sup> Paintings executed in oil on embossed copper plates (fig. 1) have been found in considerable numbers in collections in La Paz, Bolivia, which may have been the location of the workshop that created them.<sup>5</sup> Their subjects are varied, suggesting that they were made both for the art market, which would explain how a number are found today in Argentine collections, and on commission, responding to the special devotions of clients. A common source for these small works of art is indicated by the repetition of the interior framing element, but also by the placement of lilies at the lower corners and by the putti at upper right and left. Otherwise, the painting styles are quite varied, suggesting a number of workshop hands and perhaps a long period of activity spanning the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

### **2021.45 *Allegory of Obedience***

This dense composition weaves together biblical episodes, allegorical images, and personifications of vices into a message about the submission of human desire to divine will. The work draws directly from an engraving by Hieronymus Wierix (fig. 2), adapting it into the framing device typical of this genre of coppers from Bolivia. Many of the Bolivian coppers in the Thoma Collection are based on engravings (see for example 2020.97 and 2021.20), but this one is uniquely complex. Wierix's engraving was likely brought to South America by the Jesuit Order. A work whose deciphering would require a high level of erudition would likely have been made for a learned client.

At the center of the composition is an angel (his wings labeled *velociter* to indicate his alacrity), who gracefully bears on his back the heavy burden of a slab of stone (labeled

humiliter or “humbly” and here rendered in red paint), an anchor (perseveranter/ “steadfastly”) and a column (fortiter/ “bravely”), a guitar (hilariter/ “cheerfully”) tucked under his arm. By his side are a child (simpliciter/ “simply”) and dog (libenter/ “eagerly”). Together these figures represent the ideal of man’s unquestioning obedience before God.

At left and right are eight animal figures personifying vices, a rabbit representing pusillanimity, a peacock as vanity, and along with others representing disobedience, self-will, sloth, melancholy, curiosity, and inconstancy. Each creature bears a bow and shoots arrows at the figures in the central scene, hoping to strike them down. Demarcating these personifications from the central scene is Latin inscription from the book of Psalms: “Ecce peccatores intenderunt arcum paraverunt sagittas suas in pharetra, ut saggitent in obscuro rectos corde” (For look, the wicked bend the bow, they have fitted their arrow to the string to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart. Psalm 11: 2).<sup>6</sup>

Presiding over the central scene is Christ crucified, representing the ultimate expression of obedience to Divine will. Framing him is the inscription “Christus factus est pro nobis obediens vsqve ad mortem” (Christ became obedient for us unto death) which derives from Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians (Philippians 2:8). As a counterpoint to Christ’s sacrifice is the expulsion from the Garden of Eden at the bottom of the frame, showing the repercussions of human disobedience and curiosity. Squeezed into the lozenge typically reserved for the title of the avocation depicted in these Bolivian paintings on copper is an extract from Genesis 3:17, when God castigates Adam for obeying Eve instead of his own commandment and banishes them from paradise.

At the corners are additional episodes drawn from the Old Testament (along with their citations) that represent the imposition of divine will on man and the consequences of defying it. At the top left is the sacrifice of Isaac, depicting Abraham with his sword raised high, stilled by the hand of an intervening angel (Genesis 22). Across from it at the top right is Joseph before his father Israel, commanded to go find his brothers who will sell him into slavery (Genesis 37). At bottom left the prophet Samuel announces to Saul that he will be king of the Israelites (1 Samuel 9). At the bottom right is an obscure episode from 1 Kings 13 in which a “man of God from Judah” defies the word of God in accepting bread and water and is killed by a lion on his journey home. Standing over his prone body are the self-satisfied lion and his abandoned mule.

- Kathryn Santner

## **2002.003 *Our Lady of Copacabana***

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Copacabana on the shores of Lake Titicaca is still an important pilgrimage site for the Aymara Indians of the region. The Virgin Mary appears

as Our Lady of Candlemas (la Candelaria), as the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin is held on February. She thus appears with a candle, and in many representations, a basket of doves. Even in this highly stylized image, the body of the Christ Child leans away from his mother. The sculpture of Our Lady of Copacabana was created by an indigenous artist, Tito Yupanqui. The priests complained that the head of the Christ Child blocked the view of the face of the Virgin Mary. Miraculously, the figure of the infant moved so that Mary could be fully visible. The rhomboids surrounding these figures probably refer to the actual presence of mirrors or sheets of polished silver that attracted the light of many candles, a few of which are arrayed on the altar below. In fact, the whole composition represents the cult figure on the altarpiece in the sanctuary. To the right are Saint Joseph and the Christ Child. To the left is Saint Augustine, whose religious order was the first responsible for this important sanctuary.

- Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

## **2004.008 *Our Lady of the Rosary with Saint Dominic***

The painting of Our Lady of Copacabana discussed above bears no inscription, though the iconography identifies the subject for us. The painting representing the iconic Dominican subject of the Virgin Mary offering the Rosary to Saint Dominic of Guzman, however, is carefully inscribed "N.Senora deL Rosario." The composition differs distinctly from that representing Our Lady of Copacabana, offering the viewer a more natural arrangement of naturalistically painted figures.

- Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

## **2015.038 *Saint Francis Xavier***

Saint Francis Xavier was born in 1506 to a noble family in the Basque country of Spain. He studied and taught at the University of Paris and planned a career in teaching. His friend, Ignatius of Loyola, convinced him instead to use his talents to spread Christianity. Francis Xavier was one of the founding members of the Company of Jesus (the Jesuits), along with Ignatius of Loyola, and was the first Jesuit missionary. Called the "Apostle of the Indies," Francis Xavier spent ten years in the East Indies, India, and Japan, baptizing thousands and working miracles. He died in 1552 at Sancian (Sangchuan Island), China of a fever contracted on one of his long missionary journeys. He was beatified by Pope Paul V in 1619, and canonized, along with Saints Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and Carlo Borromeo on March 12, 1622 by Pope Gregory XV.

In this artwork, Saint Francis Xavier is pictured with his two most common symbols, the stem of lilies and a small carving of Christ Crucified. The trees and buildings to either side of him may represent the exotic lands through which he traveled.

- Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

## **2018.080 *Saint John Nepomucene (St. John Nepomuk)***

This work illustrates another favorite Jesuit saint, John of Nepomuk (c. 134-1393), who lived in faraway Bohemia (now Czech Republic). He was drowned in the Moldau River in Prague on orders from King Wenceslaus IV of Bohemia. It was later said that John of Nepomuk, who was confessor to Queen Johanna, defied the king's demand that to reveal the secrets of the confessional. Wenceslaus sought the priest's word to prove the rumor that his wife had a lover. John of Nepomuk is thus revered, especially by the Jesuits, as a martyr who defended the Seal of Confession.

In the painting, the bridge from which John of Nepomuk was thrown into the river can be seen at the far left, as well as the five stars that appeared over the river at the time of his murder. The details on the right side of the painting are more difficult to read. From the base of the Crucifix held in the saint's proper left hand, is lightning that destroys the figure of heresy and an eagle below. A Jesuit biretta held by an angel seems to stop both flames and a serpent emerging from the weapon held by the heretic. Further research might reveal the meaning of these iconographical details, which are not usual in depictions of Saint John of Nepomuk.

The unknown painter has given full credit for the composition to the Augsburg engraver Johann Balthasar Probst (1673-1750). John of Nepomuk was revered long before he was beatified in 1721 and canonized in 1729. As he is here shown with a halo of golden rays and his emblematic five stars, the image was probably created after canonization.

It is rare to find a work like this in its original frame, which bears the names of Jesus at the top and of the Virgin Mary at bottom.

- Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

## **2018.079 *The Young Virgin Mary with Saints Joachim and Anne***

The composition of this painting on copper clearly refers to the well-known subject of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph walking together in a landscape, a subject borrowed from the repertoire of Peter Paul Rubens that became widely popular in Spanish America. However, the cast of characters is here changed, so that we see the young Virgin Mary walking between Saints Joachim and Anne. The inscription, though, omits Anne, giving priority to her husband. The "P" following his shortened name means that he is the "Padre" (father) of the Blessed Virgin Mary. At the top of the composition God the Father appears with the Holy Spirit. According to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, symbolized here in the moon and the coiled serpent beneath the girl's feet, God conceived of Mary as the earthly mother of his son Jesus Christ "before all time."

The generous application of gold to the oil painting suggests an eighteenth-century date for this work. It is entirely possible that a workshop created these very successful works of art over a period of decades.

- Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

## **2018.078 *Nativity***

This work was undoubtedly based on a print, because print sources underlie all the other identified paintings created in this workshop in Bolivia. Mary and Joseph (with his flowering rod) adore the Christ Child in the manger. The lowly ass and ox look on. Musical angels perform lullabies while others at the top of the composition hold a banner reading “glory on high.” A subject appealing to all Catholics like this one may have been painted for the art market. Some other subjects such as the Saint John of Nepomuk discussed above were more likely made on commission. If this workshop found success in the art market, it is likely that other painters in the region of Charcas, now Bolivia, also created works that found wide distribution. This possibility has been little studied, but the attribution of a number of works in Chile to the region (called since the nineteenth century “Alto Perú”) as well as the plentiful works of art in Argentina, where artistic activity during the early colonial period seems to have been limited, certainly attest to the possibility.

- Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

## **2019.038 *Our Lady of Copacabana***

This work differs from those discussed above in several significant ways. The most obvious difference is the framing design, which has been completely revised, with the addition of Solomonic columns and the absence of putti. However, the composition, which includes the iconic image of Our Lady of Copacabana with the Christ Child leaning out from her torso, as well as Saint Joseph and the Christ Child, and Saint Augustine, includes the same elements as inv. no. 2002.003 because they are both based on the same print. It is possible that this version is later, perhaps from the same workshop but created with an eye to updating the style. Or, it may have been created in a different workshop seeing to replicate the success of the earlier works by changing the framing elements and adding mica to the materials.

- Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

## **2020.097 *Our Lady of Mercy with Saints Peter Nolasco and Raymond Nonnatus***

This small oil on copper depicts the Virgin of Mercy sheltering two Mercedarian saints under her mantle. The Virgin, presiding over the scene, wears the robes of the Order and bears its emblem on her breast. The Mercedarian Order emerged during the Reconquest of Spain through the efforts of Saint Peter Nolasco (1189-1256), its founder, to ransom Christian captives from the Moors in North Africa and provide them spiritual aid. While few details Nolasco's life were recorded, he is known to have participated in battles against the Moors during the Reconquest and later was appointed as a tutor to King James I of Aragon. Raymond Nonnatus (1204-1240), at right, likewise dedicated himself to the ransom of Christian captives, becoming Master General of the Order in 1222. Through his continued liberation efforts, Nonnatus fell captive himself and was freed through the efforts of the Order in 1239.

When the Mercedarians arrived in South America in 1532, they dedicated themselves to the indoctrination and salvation of indigenous populations. This small work was almost certainly used in private devotion by someone with a particular devotion to the Madonna of Mercy or the Mercedarian Order.

That these works originated from print sources is clearly evidenced by an almost identical work in the Museo de Arte Nacional in La Paz (fig. 3).<sup>7</sup> This iconography was widely disseminated across the Americas and countless variants derive from an engraving by Pieter (or Pierre) de Jode (1656-1639) showing the Virgin of Mercy sheltering the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor, Mercedarian saints, and various freed captives.<sup>8</sup>

- Kathryn Santner

## 2021.20 *Saint Augustine of Hippo*

Much like 2009.015, this work on copper depicts Saint Augustine (354-430 CE) in his study. Typical of his iconography, the saint appears dressed in Bishop's vestments and sits in a friar's chair at his desk. Scattered across the desk and floor are books and an inkwell that refer to Augustine's role as one of the four Latin Doctors of the Church. Augustine was renowned for his prodigious theological writings, among them the *Confessions* and the *City of God*. In the saint's proper left hand, he holds up his attribute, the flaming heart, signifying his ardent love of God, and he gazes heavenward at the divine light streaming down from heaven.

This work on copper, like others in the Thoma collection, derives from an as-yet unidentified engraved source; nearly identical works are found in private collections in Argentina (fig. 4) and Mexico (fig. 5). The missing source likely follows the design of this anonymous eighteenth-century engraving from the Austrian National Library (fig. 6). However, details common to the works on copper – including the cat curled up at Augustine's feet – but not present in the engraving suggest that it is not the immediate source.



- Kathryn Santner

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1. Teresa Gisbert and José de Mesa, *Historia del Arte en Bolivia. Período Virreinal* (La Paz: Gisbert y Cia. S.A. and Fundación Simón Patiño, 2012), 125.↵
  2. Illustrated in José Abel Fernández, *Grabadores en el Perú. Bosquejo histórica, 1574-1950* (Lima: Didi de Arteta, 1995), 22. ↵
  3. See Francisco Stastny in *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper: 1575-1775*, exh. cat. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), cat. no. 42, pp. 247-50; cat. no. 43, p. 251. Publication of the dissertation of Emily C. Floyd on printmakers in colonial South America is eagerly awaited as there is much to be learned from her research.↵
  4. This date is suggested in a study of the frame by the Chicago Conservation Center, Inc., dated October 29, 2004. The frame is described as a Spanish variant on a Dutch cabinet frame, of ebonized wood with raised moldings, decorated with inlaid tortoiseshell and metal strips and circle patterns.↵
  5. Gisbert and de Mesa, *Historia del Arte en Bolivia*, 127. The authors assert that a plate like this one would have been used for printing before being painted with oils. This is incorrect. See also Teresa Gisbert, "Salvador Hidalgo y el grabado en Charcas," *Anuario de Estudios Bolivianos, Archivísticos y Bibliográficos* (Sucre) 12 (2006): 127-150.↵
  6. N.B. The engraving cites the text as Psalm 10, which it is in some numbering systems.↵
  7. My thanks to Emily Floyd for sharing this image with me.↵
  8. See Hector Schenone, *Iconografía del arte colonial: Santa María* (Buenos Aires: EDUCA, 2008), 432. ↵