



2021.44

Unidentified artist, Ecuador

Saint Anne Commends the Young Virgin Mary to God

After 1779

Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

This devotional work is somewhat unusual in its focus on Saint Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary. Neither Anne nor her husband, Joachim, is identified in the Bible and they appear only in the New Testament apocrypha, where the couple is belatedly and joyously able to conceive the Virgin after twenty years of infertility. While devotion to St. Anne reached its height in Europe in the mid-15th century, she remained popular in Mexico long after her popularity in Europe had waned.¹ In early modern Mexico, Anne was depicted a variety of iconographies, including Holy Family scenes (known as “los Cinco Señores”), the Holy Kinship, St. Anne Triplex, Nativity of the Virgin, and the Education of the Virgin. Her reach in South America has yet to be systematically studied, but many of these iconographies can be found in the Andes.

¹ Charlene Villaseñor-Black, “St. Anne Imagery and Maternal Archetypes in Spain and Mexico” in *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas, 1500-1800*, eds. Allan Greer and Jodi Bilinkoff (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3-4.

At the center of this work, set in an interior space with a cut stone wall and checkerboard marble floor, sits Saint Anne holding the young Mary in her lap. On the floor at her feet is a lily, typically a symbol of the Virgin representing her purity.² Behind them stands Saint Joachim, depicted as a barefoot old man, his hands clasped at his chest. That Anne is the primary subject of devotion in this work is indicated by her large gold nimbus, far more prominent than her husband's. Each of the three figures gazes heavenward at God the Father, seated in the clouds with a globus cruciger resting under his right palm and cherubs' heads at his feet. Visible through an archway, beyond a swath of blue curtain, is a Flemish-style landscape dotted with buildings and karst outcroppings.

Set into an elaborate *rocalla* cartouche at the bottom of the frame is an inscription reading:

El Yllmo. y Rmo. Señor Dr. Don Antonio Cauallero, y Gongora Meritissimo Arzopo. de Sta Fe concedio 80. dias de ingulgenia, á los q. con deuocion rezaren un Pe. nro, y Ave Maria a esta Ymgaen de Sra. Sta. Anna. Año de 1779.

The Most Illustrious and Reverend Doctor Don Antonio Cavallero y Gongora, Most Meritorious Archbishop of Santafé de Bogotá granted eighty days of indulgence to those who devoutly pray an Our Father and Hail Mary to this image of Our Lady Saint Anne. 1779.

The work is presumably a copy after an original image to which the Archbishop of Bogotá, Antonio Caballero y Góngora (1723-96), authorized a plenary indulgence, sparing devotees 80 days in purgatory for their prayers to the mother of the Virgin Mary. It may also be an elaboration of a printed indulgence that circulated in Góngora's archbishopric.

Caballero y Góngora, born to a wealthy *hidalgo* family in Spain, began his ecclesiastical career there, training in Córdoba and Granada before taking up the position of canon of the Cathedral of Córdoba in 1753. In 1776 Góngora arrived in the Americas to take up an appointment as the bishop of Mérida. Only a year later, Charles III promoted Góngora to the Archbishop of Santa Fe de Bogotá; he arrived in Cartagena in 1778. Beginning in 1782, Góngora simultaneously served as the Viceroy of Nueva Granada, a post he held until 1788.

Gongorá was a prototypical Enlightenment intellectual, devoting himself to science, culture, and numismatics. During his years of ecclesiastical service in Spain, he amassed an impressive library and art collection, including works by Murillo, Rubens, and Titian, much of which he would leave to the city of Bogotá upon vacating his seat and returning to Spain in 1789.³ In the 1750s, Góngora also authored a biography on the poet José Antonio de Porcel y Salablanca. During his tenure in Colombia, Góngora would later give assistance to the Royal Botanical Expedition of 1783, led by José Celestino Mutis.

It is possible that some archival reference to the indulgence authorized by Góngora may be found among his edicts from 1779. Granting indulgences was Góngora's purview as

² Lilies are also often found in images of the Immaculate Conception where the stems branch out from the chests of Anne and Joachim toward the Virgin, who stands on the flower. See for example a work by Baltasar Vargas de Figueroa at the Iglesia de las Nieves in Tunja, Colombia. See Villaseñor-Black, "St. Anne," 19-20.

³ On Góngora's collecting, see Jesús María Ruiz Carrasco, "Entre España y América. La colección del prelado ilustrado Antonio Caballero y Góngora," *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* 29 (2020): 405-433.

archbishop, and he did so at various points during his tenure in Spain and Colombia.⁴ While the inscription might suggest that the painting was authored in Bogota, the work itself bears a stronger resemblance to the influence of Quito in its palette of blues and reds and moderate application of gold. The use of *rocalla* framing the inscription is likewise a feature of Quito painting. Notably, the original frame of the artwork survives, and the reverse includes slots into which candle holders could be placed to illuminate this votive image.

While Saint Anne is often depicted with her adult daughter in Mexican and South American painting, images of the young Virgin Mary and her mother, St. Anne typically show the Virgin standing at the side of her mother, learning to read or walking hand in hand with both parents after a model by Rubens, as in 2018.079.⁵ Less common are images that show the young Virgin sitting in her mother's lap or standing at her side, being presented to God the Father in heaven (fig. 1). It is possible that the original votive image derived from an engraving of Saint Anne teaching her daughter to read, as in this example after Rubens (fig. 2), which shares some compositional elements with the Thoma painting. However, until a closer print source surfaces, this remains purely speculative.

⁴ C.f. David Quintero O., "Ciencia ilustrada y el temor a lo divino: Discursos de Antonio Caballero y Góngora en torno a la epidemia de viruela en el Nuevo Reino de Granada (1782-1783), *Allpanchis* 88 (2021): 60.

⁵ On the iconography of the education of the Virgin, see Villaseñor-Black, "St. Anne," 6-7, 11-12, 20. See also Charlene Villaseñor-Black, "Gender and Representation in the Early Modern Hispanic World," in *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World*, ed. Merry E. Weisner-Hanks (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 91-93.



Fig. 1 Unidentified artist, *Santa Ana y la Virgen*, oil on canvas. Monasterio Capuchinas, Santiago, Chile.



Fig. 2 Gaspar Huybrechts after Peter Paul Rubens, *Saint Anne teaching the Virgin Mary*, engraving. Wellcome Collection, London.



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