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Unidentified Artist

Peru, possibly Lima

Saint Catherine of Siena

Seventeenth century

Oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 28 1/3 inches

During the late sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century some artists from Spain and Italy were attracted to the Viceroyalty of Peru, especially to Lima, by the new opportunities offered there. We know very little of how Mateo Pérez de Alesio or the recently rediscovered Italian artist called Juan Bautista Planeta might have brought a European influence to bear on painting in the viceroyalty for lack of works to use for comparison.ⁱ We know even less about the Spanish artists who came to South America. This painting certainly reflects a European prototype, and the face of Saint Catherine is very similar to that of other female saints in works surely created in Peru. However, the image of Christ Crucified, with its somewhat awkward rendering of the anatomy and the odd facial expression suggests a local hand at work.

Saint Catherine Benincasa, called Saint Catherine of Siena, was born in that Italian city in 1347. She made a vow of virginity at the age of seven, and entered the Sisters of Penance of

Saint Dominic, a lay branch (called Third Order) of the Order of Preachers at the age of sixteen. Her mystical experiences began in childhood and continued throughout her life, but Catherine Benincasa was also a practical woman. A supporter of Pope Gregory XI, she was instrumental in establishing peace between the pope and the League of Florence and other Italian cities and she also stood by Urban VI in his opposition to the schismatic papacy established at Avignon. Catherine died in 1380. About 300 letters “written” by her (she could not write, but dictated instead) exist, as well as her *Dialogue of Divine Providence*, an exchange of questions and answers between Catherine and God that she dictated between 1377 and 1378.

Images of Saint Catherine of Siena abound throughout Spanish America, for most of the convents of the feminine branch of the Dominican order throughout the Spanish colonies were dedicated to her.ⁱⁱ In the art of South America, as in Europe, Saint Catherine of Siena is represented in basically two different ways. There are narrative series based on events in her life, events chronicled in detail by her confessor and follower Raimondo di Capua in his *Leyenda Mayor*, such as those ensembles of paintings found in Quito, Cuzco, Arequipa, Córdoba, and Buenos Aires that depend on sets of engravings by Jan Gerritz Swellinck and Philip Galle.ⁱⁱⁱ These series of as many as twenty paintings were installed around the cloisters of convents in order to inspire the nuns and novices of the order by the exemplary life of their famous forbear.

The other way of picturing Saint Catherine of Siena is like the image in this painting, in which the symbolic elements emphasize her spirituality. In his advice on how to represent Saint Catherine, the Spanish painter and theorist Francisco Pacheco advised that, although no actual portrait of her exists, she was reported to have been quite beautiful and so she should be painted thus, wearing the habit of her order.^{iv} Pacheco dwelt on the iconographic issue of whether the stigmata, the wounds on Catherine’s hands should be shown, and, if so, how. When Catherine received her stigmata (manifestations of the wounds of Christ Crucified, famously also received by Saint Francis of Assisi), she begged Christ, out of humility, to let her feel the pain he suffered, but not to let the wounds be visible to the world. Then, how to indicate the existence of the stigmata in a painting? Pacheco quotes Roberto de Licio:

If Saint Catherine did not have wounds that were visible to others, why paint them? I answer that invisible things cannot be painted without visible signs. Not God himself, nor the angels, have bodies, but they are painted, and the angels do not have wings but their lightness and speed are suggested by them. And the soul is not visible, so, if they want to paint how the soul leaves the body, they paint the soul as visible. I say it is the same with the wounds.^v

This explains why the stigmata on Saint Catherine’s hands in this painting seem so superficial: they are but signs of the invisible.

An eyewitness account of Catherine’s last illness and death in 1380 suggests how a devotional image such as this could serve as a guide to the prayers of a devout member of the Third Order:

Catherine had been lying on the bosom of Mother Alessia and now succeeded in rising, and with a little help began to sit up, leaning against the same mother. In the meantime we had put before her eyes a pious picture, containing many relics and various pictures of the saints. She, however, fixed her eyes on the image of the cross set in it, and began

to adore it . . . certain in her most profound feelings of the goodness of God . . . Finally, after the example of the Saviour, she said: “Father, into thy Hands I commend my soul and my spirit,” and thus sweetly, with a face all shining and angelical, she bent her head, and gave up the ghost.^{vi}

The composition of the painting is iconic: Catherine is shown wearing the crown of thorns she adopted in imitation of Christ, with the lilies symbolizing her virginity and the skull as a *memento mori*, the reminder of the death that awaits us all. The image of Christ on the cross that she holds close to her breast is unique to her iconography. It is not the expected object with the figure carved from ivory or cast in metal and attached to the wooden cross. Here Christ appears as a small representation of the Son himself, in the flesh, in the last moments of his Passion.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

ⁱ Javier Chuquiray, “Trayectoria artística del pintor Juan Bautista Planeta en Lima. Nuevas noticias y atribución,” *Revista del Intituto Riva-Agüero* 4, no. 2 (October 2019): 335-362.

ⁱⁱ Héctor H. Schenone, *Iconografía del arte colonial: Los santos*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Fundación Tarea, 1992), 213.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a thorough study of one such series, see Andrea Jáuregui and José Emilio Burucúa, “Análisis histórico e iconográfica de la serie dedicada a Santa Catalina de Siena que se encuentra en el monasterio de la santa en Córdoba (Argentina),” in *Una serie de pinturas cuzqueñas de Santa Catalina de Siena: historia, restauración y química* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Tarea, 1998).

^{iv} Francisco Pacheco, *El arte de la pintura*, ed. with intro. and notes by Bonaventura Bassegoda i Hugas, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Cátedra, 2001), 701.

^v “Si Santa Catalina no tuvo llagas visibles para los otros, por qué se las pintan? Respondo que, las cosas invisibles no se pueden pintar sino con señales visibles, Dios, encunto Dios, ni los ángeles no tienen cuerpos y se les pintan, y no tienen los ángeles alas y su ligereza y velocidad se sinifica con ellas; y la alma no es visible, y, si quieren pintarla como sale del cuerpo la pintan visible. Lo mismo digo de las lagas.” *Ibid.*, 703.

^{vi} Quoted from Giuliana Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena* (London: G. Chapman, 1998), 339-40, 343-44.