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Saint Joachim and the Young Virgin Mary

Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

ca. 1725 or later

Oil on canvas, 54 x 37 ½ inches

Saint Joachim, husband of Saint Anne and father of the Virgin Mary, was not a figure of much note in the Middle Ages, not even receiving individual attention in Jacopo da Voragine's thirteenth-century compendium of lives of the saints, the *Legendi di Sancti Vulgari Storiado*, popularly called "The Golden Legend." From the eleventh century through the Renaissance, Joachim appears in art either with Saint Anne at the moment they meet at the Golden Gate of Jerusalem, the moment of the miraculous embrace that gave life to the Virgin Mary, or among the crowd of onlookers present in paintings of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. Following the Council of Trent, images of the Embrace at the Golden Gate, a wholly apocryphal episode in the events leading to the birth of the Virgin Mary, were discouraged, and Saint Joachim largely disappeared. The iconography of the Thoma Collection painting is thus quite unusual, with Joachim holding the tiny figure of the Virgin in his arms, as Saint Joseph holds the Christ Child in many Spanish and Spanish colonial paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.ⁱ

Joachim was accorded his own feast day on March 20 by Pope Julius II (r. 1503-1513). In 1572 Pius V suppressed the office of Joachim in the Roman Breviary, but devotion to the saint

continued. He was revered for his sacrifice in having given his beloved daughter to the temple when she was three years old. The Jesuit Pedro de Ribadeneyra praised Joachim in his *Flos sanctorum*, first published in 1599/1600 and in a later edition of 1716-1717, a book highly regarded for its scholarship and orthodoxy:

And Joachim had a greater Love for his daughter than had Abraham for his Son; and yet for all of this he giveth her to God, and passeth over the rest of his days without her. How loath are we to deprive ourselves of what we love! What Difficulty do we make to give to God what he demands of us! Let us learn at least by this Example to dispossess ourselves of the inordinate Love of all Creatures, to stick to the Creator of them.ⁱⁱ

In 1724 the short-lived King Luis I of Spain petitioned Pope Benedict XIII to declare Joachim's feast day of March 20 *de precepto* throughout all Catholicism. The pope did not grant the whole request, but he did, on 14 August of that year, declare the celebration of Joachim's feast day a requirement in the "kingdoms of Spain, and America, subject to King Luis."ⁱⁱⁱ It is possible that the Thoma Collection painting was created in response to this event, or soon thereafter. Catholics with a special devotion to Saint Joachim were disappointed in 1738 when Pope Clement XII moved Joachim's feast day to the Sunday after Assumption, when it would be thenceforth shared with that of Saint Anne.^{iv}

Saint Joachim and the Young Virgin Mary is a fine example of painting in Cuzco in the eighteenth century. The Flemish style landscape, rendered in dark greens and hazy blues, provides an imaginary setting for the imposing figure of the saint with his tiny daughter. As typical of paintings by Cuzco artists, the gold stenciling (*brocateado* or *sobredorado*) both enlivens and flattens the surface of the figures. This decoration imitates the treatment of textiles on polychromed sculptures, which in turn mimics actual brocades woven through with gold threads.

We know that the workshops of the Cuzco school created massive numbers of paintings. In order to be so productive, Cuzco artists must have worked as "committees," as was the norm in large Flemish workshops such as that of Peter Paul Rubens. It is probable that several painters contributed to this canvas: one skilled in landscape painting, one adept at painting the human figure in a style very close to European models, and another skilled at applying the delicate, lacy gold overlay.

These paintings not only found a market throughout South America but were purchased by travelers who took them home to Europe and, later, to the United States. In 1830 an Englishman wrote of his travels in Peru:

I also procured a set of paintings on religious subjects by the Indians of Cuzco, who are celebrated for their ingenuity in painting. They imitate the finest colouring, particularly of the flesh, with wonderful exactness; but, considering they have had no school nor competent instruction, it cannot surprise that their faces, though generally very pretty, are always without character or expression. In their drapery, they exercise their own fancy, which they imagine (and no doubt it suits the taste of their customers) is the more to be admired the more costly the performance; and under this impression, we find the robes of the Virgin, of Joseph, and of all the favorite saints, profusely covered with shining gold

and silver, so elaborately executed, as to be capable of exciting the envy of the most ingenious Chinese that ever painted the full-dress robe of a mandarin.^v

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ⁱ The entry on Saint Joachim in the *Bibliotheca sanctorum* (Rome: Istituto Giovanni XXIII nella Pontificia Università Lateranense, 1961-1969) 6: 466-71) does not mention a single European painting outside of Spain of this type.

ⁱⁱ Quoted from Pedro de Ribadeneyra, *The lives of saints and other feasts of the year, according to the Roman calendar. Written in Spanish by the Reverend Father Peter Ribadeneira . . . ; Translated into English by W.P. Esq.* (London, 1730), 249.

ⁱⁱⁱ José Mariano Gregorio de Elizaldo Ita y Parra, *Dia festivo proprio para el culto, y rezo del Señor San Joachim el veinte de marzo de cada año concedido con motu proprio por especial privilegio á la Magestad del Señor Don Luis I. rey catholico de las Españas, que en paz descance. Por la santidad de Benedicto XIII. de felice recordacion, para que se observe, y guarde en todos los reynos, y dominios sujetos á la corona de España. El que subsiste no obstante el nuevo decreto de la santidad de Clemente XII. de gloriosa memoria. Dictamen que diò el Dr. y Mro. D. Joseph Mariano Gregorio de Elizalde Ytta y Parra . . .* (Mexico City: Imprenta de F.X. Sánchez, 1744), n.p. King Philip V of Spain abdicated in favor of his son Luis on 10 January 1724. King Luis I, aged seventeen, died of smallpox on 31 August, only two weeks after Benedict XIII declared the feast of Saint Joachim *de precepto*. Philip V then returned to the throne, thus essentially ruling from 1700 until his death in 1747. See John Lynch, *Bourbon Spain, 1700-1808* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1989), 81-84.

^{iv} Elizalde Ita y Parra, n.p.

^v Edmond Temple, *Travels in Various Parts of Peru including a Year's Residence in Potosí, in two volumes* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), 1: 405-6.