



Unidentified artist
Saint Joseph and the Christ Child
After 1789
Oil on canvas mounted to board
Dimensions

Inscription: El Yllmo Dr Dn Fra Cirilo de Barzelena obispo Auxiliar de la Ysla de Cuba concedio 40 dias de Yndulgencia a los que rezaren una Salve a esta SSma Ymagen. Año de 1789.

Painting in late eighteenth-century Havana was practiced largely by free Afrodescendants and artists of color, working under a guild system rather than an artistic academy. Remarkably little art survives from before the nineteenth century, and few works can be definitively attributed.¹ Notable practitioners included Nicolás de Escalera, whose work largely consists of religious painting, and Vicente Escobar, who produced primarily portraits. Escalera, while one of the only significant artists of his era, is often dismissed in scholarship as an “epigone of Spanish Jesuit Baroque... a byproduct of the worst aspect of Murillo.”² It is possible that this work showing St. Joseph and the Christ Child was produced by an artist working in Escalera’s

¹ Guy Pérez Cisneros, *Características de la evolución de la pintura en Cuba* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2000), 12-15.

² “epigono del barroquismo jesuitico español, es un subproducto de la peor vertiente de Murillo.” Jorge Rigol, *Apuntes sobre la pintura y el grabado en Cuba* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1983), 60. See also Pérez Cisneros, *Características*, 18.

orbit in Havana; while there are some stylistic similarities to Escalera's work, there is no reason to attribute the work to Escalera himself.

Mentions of Saint Joseph, the earthly father of Christ, are scant in the New Testament. Apocryphal texts recounted that Joseph was aged, which influenced his visual depiction as a sleepy old man relegated to the background behind his much more significant wife and child.³ Joseph's fate as a marginal figure began to change with bolstering from important theologians including Jean Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of Notre Dame and the University of Paris, who recast Joseph as a robust young man and head of the Holy Family. Gerson also proposed that Joseph was, like his wife, assumed to heaven after his death.⁴ In the sixteenth century, Joseph was invoked in the Franciscan efforts to convert the people of Mexico and his cult was ardently promoted by Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), a devotion that carried readily to Carmelite institutions in Spain and the Americas.

Images showing the standing St. Joseph holding the Christ Child began to proliferate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Latin America. The Thoma painting builds on the iconography established in the Counterreformation era and found in the work of Murillo and Alonso Cano. Lacking established formulas for depicting the earthly father of Christ, artists drew on Marian pictorial conventions, showing Joseph cradling his stepson or walking with him in nature.⁵ These types were transmitted to the Americas, and are well represented in other works in the Thoma collection from Ecuador (2019.069 and 2019.081) and Guatemala (2016.033). There are a few documented examples from Cuba by Nicolás de Escalera (1734-1804, fig. 1) and Agustín Rodríguez. In the Thoma painting Joseph, with his flowering rod tucked into his elbow, gently cradles and gazes lovingly down at the Christ Child, who holds the globus cruciger, sign of his position as Salvator Mundi. This feature, while not common, is found in paintings by Francisco Camilo, Juan Correa, and José de Paez (fig. 2). The blues, pinks, and ochres of the costumes recall a palette popular in the second half of the eighteenth century in Mexico and the Caribbean.

³ Charlene Villaseñor-Black, *Creating the Cult of Saint Joseph: Art and Gender in the Spanish Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 23. For a full accounting of Joseph's rise as a devotional figure, see 21-39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24. See also Joseph F. Chorpenning, OSFS, "Icon of Family and Religious Life: The Historical Development of the Holy Family Devotion," in *The Holy Family as Prototype of the Civilization of Love: Images from the Viceregal Americas*, exh. cat., ed. Joseph F. Chorpenning (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 1996), 4

⁵ Villaseñor Black, *Creating the Cult*, 98-107.



Fig. 1 José Nicolás de Escalera, *San José y el Niño*, 18th century, oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Cuba, Havana.



Fig. 2 José de Paez, *San José y el Niño Jesús*, 18th century, oil on canvas. Colección Andrés Blaisten, Mexico City.

The inscription on the reverse of the panel locates this work in eighteenth-century Cuba. It reads: “The Most Illustrious Doctor Don Francisco Cirilo de Barcelona conceded 40 days of indulgence to those who pray a salve to this Holy Image. 1789.” Cirilo de Barcelona was the auxiliary bishop of Cuba, born Francisco Antonio Pablo Sieni (1731-1809). Sieni was a Capuchin, and following the custom of his Order, changed his surname from Sieni to Barcelona, the city of his birth, and his first name to Cirilo (sometimes written as Cirillo or Cyrilo); thus, he was known as Cirilo de Barcelona throughout his ecclesiastical career.



Fig. 3 Alessandro Mochetti (1760-1812), *Fr. Cirillus Sieni*, plate 35 in *Ritratti degli uomini illustri dell'istituto de' Minori Capuccini promossi, o destinati a dignita ecclesiastiche* (Rome: Salomoni, 1804). Austrian National Library, Vienna.

Cirilo de Barcelona (fig. 3) began his long career in the Americas in Mexico as a missionary, where he remained for 20 years. During the Spanish conquest of West Florida, he served as the chaplain to Bernardo de Gálvez's troops.⁶ Thereafter he went to Cuba, where he was pastor and then later vicar of the church of San Luis in New Orleans. In 1784, he was appointed as the auxiliary bishop of Cuba, after a request by the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Santiago José de Echavarría y Elguezúa, for help with administrating the territories of Florida and Louisiana. When the diocese was partitioned three years later, Cirilo de Barcelona remained auxiliary bishop of the new diocese of San Cristóbal de La Habana, which included Florida and Louisiana. He remained in his position until 1793 and returned to Spain in 1799, where he died in 1809. During his lifetime, he was renowned for his piety, zeal, and knowledge of jurisprudence.⁷

⁶ Rose Meyers, *A History of Baton Rouge, 1699-1812* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 52.

⁷ Sigismondo da Venezia, *Biografia serafica degli uomini illustri che fiorirono nel francescano istituto per santità, dottrina e dignità fino a nostri giorni*, vol. 1 (Venice: G. B. Merlo, 1846), 815.



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