



2017.50
Unidentified Artist
Ecuador, Quito
San Luis Beltrán Baptizing an African Slave
1750.
Oil on canvas, 39 ½ x 29 ½ inches.

Inscription at bottom of canvas: *S: Ludovicus Bert: Indianaru[m] apostolado S.O.P: viva religionis, ac mortificac[i]o[n]is Valanetii Hisp. a[n]jo [...]6 post praedicatu[m] in Indiis Evangeliu[m] cu[m] maximis miraculis, et urberrimo Fructu Martyrio obit [...] aetis 55 in SS: [...] relato a Clem. X. 12 Apr [...]*

San Luis Beltrán (in English, Saint Louis Bertrand) was born in Valencia, Spain in 1526, joined the Dominican order in 1544, and was ordained in 1547. In 1561 he left Seville on a galleon headed to America, arriving at the Dominican monastery at the port city of Cartagena, where he continued the parochial ministries in which he had been active in Valencia. In the present painting, San Luis Beltrán is pictured baptizing an African slave, many of whom landed in Cartagena, one of several Spanish American cities that received slave ships. However, Luis Beltrán was determined to perform his missionary goals in the interior of the New Kingdom of Granada. He is credited by his contemporaries with great success at converting the native populations of the Magdalena region of present-day Colombia, while annoying the Spanish *encomenderos* (landowners) for criticizing their rapacious treatment of the Indians. After seven years of proselytizing in the jungles of the New Kingdom of Granada, Luis Beltrán was appointed prior to the monastery of Santo Domingo in Santa Fe de Bogotá in 1568, and he returned to Spain in 1569, where he died in Valencia of natural causes in 1581.

The composition of this painting is related to a thesis sheet illustration by the eighteenth-century Klaber workshop in Augsburg, published by 1762. The subject of Saint Francis Xavier baptizing a native has been adapted to a representation of San Luis Beltrán baptizing a Black slave. The mezzotint in turn must be based on a version published earlier, as this unidentified artist dated his painting 1750.¹



Fig. 1. Klauber workshop. Mezzotint. After a design by Johann George Bergmüller (1688-1762). By 1762. Museo Diocesano Tridentino.

This painting includes a number of symbols related to San Luis Beltrán’s life as a missionary in the Americas. To the right is a palm tree indicative of the region in which he actively proselytized and the cross emblematic of the Catholic faith he instilled among the natives there. Two of the many miracles recorded by his fellow travelers are represented, both of them related to his defense of indigenous peoples from his Spanish countrymen. In one instance, it was said that he was poisoned. He vomited up a snake and then suffered no further ill effects. The chalice with a snake is one of his recurring emblems in art. In another instance, a Spanish *encomendero* was going to shoot him, but the threatening musket was miraculously transformed into an image of Christ Crucified. In this painting, the weapon instead shoots forth a small image of Christ Crucified. Stories of San Luis Beltrán’s many miracles include the subjugation of dangerous beasts, putting out fires, and curing the sick with Rosary prayers. He was said to have the gift of tongues: he could preach to the Indians in Spanish, but they would hear him in their own languages.

Luis Beltrán’s sanctity was recognized in his lifetime. When he died in Valencia in 1581, the artist Juan Sariñena was called upon to paint his portrait (fig. 1). This “true image” of Luis Beltrán pictures him with his eyes closed and his arms in the position in which they were placed

when his body was displayed for public viewing. The inscription at the top of the canvas identifies the subject and is accompanied by the monograms of Jesus and Mary.



Fig. 1. Juan Sariñena, “*Vera effigies*” of the Venerable Luis Beltrán, 1581-1582, oil on board Museo Goya/Colección Ibercaja/Museo Camón Aznar, Zaragoza.

The renown of Luis Beltrán’s piety and the records of his miracles assured that he would not wait long for sainthood. San Luis Beltrán was beatified in 1603 by Pope Paul V, and declared patron of the New Kingdom of Granada by Pope Alexander VII (r. 1655-1667). He was canonized on April 12, 1671 by Clement X, as noted on the damaged inscription at the bottom of the Thoma canvas). His life and works were thereafter celebrated by the Dominican Luis Loarte in his *Historia de la vida, milagros y virtudes del glorioso san Luis Beltrán, del orden de predicadores* (Madrid: Francisco Sanz, 1672).ⁱⁱ

Although San Luis Beltrán was best known for his work with the native people of the New Kingdom of Granada, he is pictured here baptizing an African slave wearing the trappings of a prince. When Luis Beltrán first arrived in Cartagena, he very likely baptized the slaves arriving at that port, as did his later colleague, the Jesuit missionary Pedro Claver (1580-1654).

The New Kingdom of Granada was established as an Audiencia in 1549 and remained that until 1717 when the Viceroyalty of New Granada was created. Under either political designation, the region comprised what is now the countries of Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Ecuador. From the mid-seventeenth century, San Luis Beltrán was recognized as the patron saint of this entire region of Spanish America and he is still a patron saint of Colombia. It is likely that this painting was created in present-day Ecuador as the pale palette seems closer to the style of paintings created in Quito than the darker tonalities found in Colombian painting around 1750. The painting is likely based on a print created to disseminate the cult of the saintly figure. In his native Valencia, the life and death of San Luis Beltrán were the subject of paintings by Jerónimo

Jacinto de Espinosa (1600-1667), which, like engraving, were intended to both honor a native Valencian and to maintain the recognition of his piety and miracles by the church authorities who would argue for his beatification and canonization (figs. 2 and 3).



Fig. 2. Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa, *Death of San Luis Beltrán*, 1653, oil on canvas, 354 x 227 cm. Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia.



Fig. 3. Jerónimo Jacinto de Espinosa, *Miracles of San Luis Beltrán*, 1655, oil on canvas, 315 x 221 cm, Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia.



Fig. 4. *Saints Louis Bertrand and Rose of Lima*, San Domenico, Venice. Photo: Robert Simon.

San Luis Beltrán is best known for his miracle-filled seven years in Spanish America, perhaps due to the dramatic gifts of his hagiographer. In reality, he returned to an active life in Valencia and spent many more years there as a master of novices and preacher than he had in the New Kingdom of Granada. His close association with the Americas is reflected in this (fig. 4) painting of him alongside the first American born saint, Rose of Lima.

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ⁱ Kindly brought to our attention by Almerindo Ojeda. See PESSCA 6006A/6006B.

ⁱⁱ More recent sources include Vicente Galduf Blasco, *Luis Bertrán. El santo de las contrastes* (Barcelona: J. Flors, 1961) and Miguel Llop Catalá, *La vida valenciana en la predicación de San Luis Bertrán* (Valencia: Nácher, 1982).