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Saint Luke Painting the Virgin

Melchor Pérez Holguín (c. 1660-1732)

Bolivia, Potosí

c. 1714

Oil on canvas, 32 ½ x 22 4/5 inches

Melchor Pérez Holguín was one of the most original of all Spanish colonial painters. He was born in Cochabamba, Bolivia around 1660, but spent his entire career in Potosí. Despite his tie to this one place, Holguín's paintings made their way to La Paz, Sucre, Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, Madrid and elsewhere. The artist's last known work was painted in 1732.

Holguín was probably apprenticed in Potosí to an unknown artist during the 1670s. Although he must have been familiar with paintings from Cuzco that reached Potosí through the thriving art market, his style is distinctly different from the works created in Cuzco that exerted such a powerful influence on other colonial artists in the Andes.

Holguín's early career, beginning in the 1680s, is characterized by his paintings of ascetic Franciscan saints in monochromatic tones of brown and silvery grey. His *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Museo de la Casa Nacional de Moneda, Potosí), *Saint John of God* (Museo Nacional de Arte, La Paz) and *Ecstasy of Saint Peter of Alcántara* (Museo Nacional de Arte, La Paz) are among his best-known works from the late seventeenth century.

Holguín soon became a confident master of religious paintings on large scale. Major commissions include an *Allegory of the Triumph of the Catholic Church* (1706) and *The Last Judgment* (1708), now in San Francisco, Potosí and a series of paintings on the life of Saint Peter Nolasco, founder of the Mercedarian order (La Merced, Sucre). He also painted for the Jesuits of Potosí an immense *Crucifixion* based on a print after Rubens (now San Francisco, Potosí), and, in 1716, *The Entry of the Viceroy Archbishop Morcillo de Auñón into Potosí* (Museo de América, Madrid), a richly detailed evocation of the society and culture of a city.

The two Holguín paintings in the Thoma collection representing the Evangelists Saint Mark and Saint Luke are from several sets of bust-length figures of the Evangelists with their emblems (St. Matthew and the angel, St. Mark and the lion, St. Luke and the ox, Saint John and the eagle), which may have been painted around the same time.ⁱ These sets are scattered today, with a few in the Museo Nacional de Art in La Paz, others in the Museo de Charcas in Sucre, and also in the Museo de la Casa de la Moneda in Potosí.ⁱⁱ

A painting of Saint John is signed and dated 1714 (Sucre, Bolivia: Museo de Charcas), suggesting an approximate date for the series. The canvases are all of very similar dimensions and there is not much variation in style, suggesting that the artist was responding to a demand based on the first successful representations of the Evangelists to create others.

Although Holguín's paintings are notable for their originality of style and composition, he also used European prints as sources of inspiration. There were engravings representing the Evangelists created by European artist such as Raphael Sadeler, which might have been offered to Holguín as models for a commission. But Holguín was rarely slavish in his use of print sources. It is also possible that his ascetic saints, with their sorrowful or frowning expressions and gaunt physiognomies, and his pensive Evangelists, were inspired other graphic sources such as the Johannes Wierix engraving representing the Flemish painter Frans Floris (fig. 1).

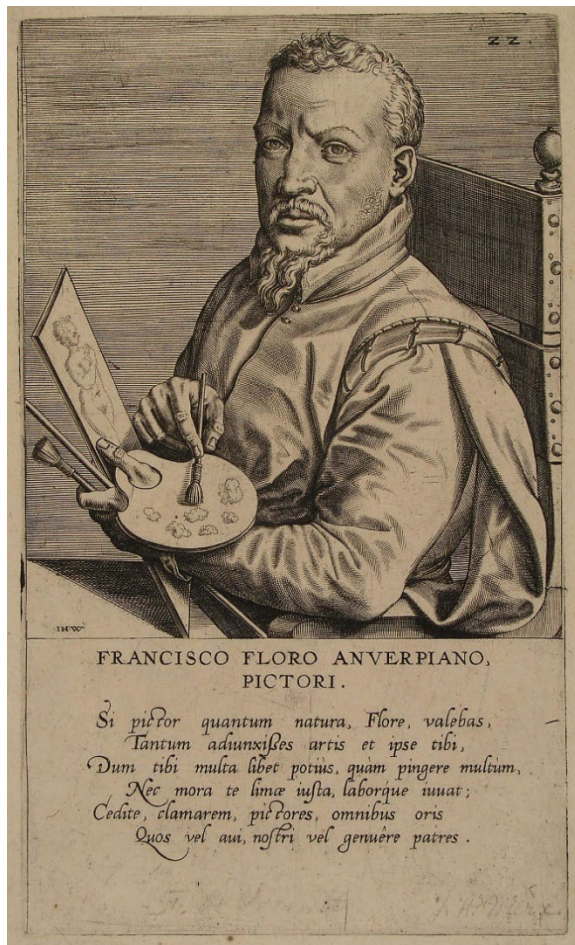


Fig. 1. Johannes Wierix, engraving, *Francisco Floro Anverpiano Pictori*, 23 x 13 cm. Brussels: Bibliothèque Royale Albert I^{er}, Brussels.

Despite the troubled furrowing of his brow, Holguín's Saint Luke is the epitome of a distinguished European artist at work, here painting the Virgin as *Mater Dolorosa*. It is not a self-portrait of Holguín, whose appearance we know from images of a bandy-legged, somewhat balding fellow in *The Entry of the Viceroy . . . into Potosí* and, possibly, in the *San Salvador de Horta* in the Convent of Santa Teresa, Potosí.

Holguín's highly personal style is notable for the way in which he habitually dwarfs the bodies of his figures so that their heads are comparatively larger than is anatomically correct. That is true of the figures of Saint Mark and Saint Luke in the Thoma paintings, a stylistic quirk that allows a greater concentration on the face than on the body of the figure.ⁱⁱⁱ

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ⁱ Mesa and Gisbert mention a painting of an Evangelist dated 1718, but do not say which figure it represents nor its location. However, if their reference is accurate, that would give a window of several years during the second

decade of the eighteenth century when these paintings were created. See José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert, *Holguín y la pintura virreinal en Bolivia* (La Paz: Librería Editorial “juventud,” 1977), 197.

ⁱⁱ Mesa and Gisbert mention other paintings that were either by Holguín’s workshop or later copies after his works. One such painting they describe is clearly a copy of the Thoma *Saint Luke*. Mesa and Gisbert, *Holguín y la pintura virreinal*, 200.

ⁱⁱⁱIt is hoped that a young scholar will undertake a monographic study of this important Spanish colonial artist. In the meanwhile, see Mesa and Gisbert and, more recently, Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, “The Art of Painting in Colonial Bolivia 1600-1825,” in Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, ed., *The Art of Painting in Colonial Bolivia/El arte de la pintura en la Bolivia Colonial* (Philadelphia, PA: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2017), 1-67.