



2022.3

Juan Pedro López (1724-1787)

*Second Mysteries of the Holy Rosary – Sorrowful*

1781

Oil on canvas

39 x 72 in.

Juan Pedro López (1724-1787) was born in Caracas on June 23, 1724 to *isleños*, parents from the Canary Islands.<sup>1</sup> Little is known of his artistic training, though several prominent artists were associated with his family, including the painter and gilder Fernando Alvarez Carneiro (c. 1670-1744) and his son Pedro Juan Alvarez Carneiro (1699-1761), with whom López later collaborated. In 1750, López married Juana Antonia de la Cruz Delgado, another *isleña*, with whom he would have twelve children. A year later, aged 27, he produced his first artwork, a painting of the *Baptism of Christ* for the baptistery of the Church of La Candelaria in Caracas (now lost).<sup>2</sup> During his three-decade career, Juan Pedro López would create more than 200 works, though he signed only three that we know of.

In 1781, near the end of his career, López received one of his most significant commissions.<sup>3</sup> He was tasked with creating a series of three paintings depicting the fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary for the Archconfraternity of the Holy Rosary at the Dominican monastery of San Jacinto. San Jacinto was founded on the eastern edge of Caracas in the late

<sup>1</sup> While Caracas had a comparatively small population of roughly 7,000 in the eighteenth century, more than a quarter of its creole population was of *isleño* extraction.

<sup>2</sup> Carlos Duarte, *Juan Pedro López: maestro de pintor, escultor y dorador 1724–1787* (Caracas: Fundación Polar and Galería de Arte Nacional, 1996), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Duarte, *Juan Pedro López*, 185.

sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> During its height in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the monastery was a center of learning and was host to numerous confraternities or lay religious groups, including one devoted to the Rosary and another to the Holy Name of Christ (Santísimo Nombre de Jesús).<sup>5</sup> Account books from San Jacinto tell us the date the series of the Mysteries of the Rosary was created, as well as the cost for the series: 129 pesos, 5 reales. Of that amount, López received only 45 pesos, or three pesos per scene. The rest of the expenses went to the canvas, frame, and gilding of the work.<sup>6</sup> While López's name is not included in the account books, the paintings are unmistakably by his hand. The series was displayed in the chapel of the Virgin of the Rosary alongside an altar commissioned from Gregorio and Juan Francisco de León Quintana intended to display the sculpted Marian image.<sup>7</sup>

The series, showing the joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries of the rosary is a testament to the Dominican devotion to the rosary. This panel, identified by a ribbon scroll (*filacteria*) at the top of the canvas, represents the Sorrowful Mysteries, five episodes from Christ's Passion, culminating in the Crucifixion at the far left. The episodes, reading right to left, begin with the Agony in the Garden. Christ kneels in the Garden at Gethsemane, cradled by the angel sent from heaven to "strengthen him" (Luke 22: 43), shown gripping a chalice and cross. The chalice in this instance is not so much a Eucharistic symbol as a reference to Christ's beseeching God, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).<sup>8</sup>

To the left of this scene is the Flagellation, with Christ somewhat unusually shown on his knees rather than standing, wrists bound to a half column as a Roman centurion and another man lash him across his exposed back. Though turned toward us, the edge of Christ's lacerated back is visible and rivulets of blood stream down his flank and left leg. Lying in the foreground of the scene is a rope.

At the center of the canvas, the seated Christ, draped in a pink robe (rather than the canonical purple) and bound at the wrists, is crowned with thorns.<sup>9</sup> One Roman uses a stick to force the crown on to Christ's head. Two other figures, one standing and the other kneeling, mock Christ with the words recorded in the Gospels, "Hail, king of the Jews!" (Matthew 27:29). The kneeling man offers Christ a reed as a scepter to further humiliate him. This shows Christ just before he is brought before the crowd by Pontius Pilate in the scene known in art as the *Ecce Homo*.

In the penultimate scene, condemned to die the death of a slave, Christ walks the path to Golgotha bearing the burden of the Cross, where he meets his mother, Mary. Behind him, a

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<sup>4</sup> Carmen Clemente Travieso, *Las esquinas de Caracas* (Caracas: Libros de el Nacional, 2001), 108.

<sup>5</sup> Fray Oswaldo Montilla, "Los conventos dominicos de Caracas y Mérida: frailes entre la infidencia y la independencia venezolana (1810-1830)" *Análisis. Revista Colombiana de Humanidades* 79, (2011): 202.

<sup>6</sup> It is possible that López himself undertook the gilding, which would have added 17 pesos to his earnings. Duarte, *Juan Pedro López*, 185.

<sup>7</sup> Mariolly Dávila Cordido, Orlando Marin Castañeda, Alejandro Niño Soto, and Walberto Badillo Jiménez, "Los retablos de las capillas de la Candelaria en Guarenas y del rosario en la iglesia de San Jacinto de Caracas: Un método gráfico para establecer su relación histórica" *Revista 180* 38 (2016): 5.

<sup>8</sup> Hector Schenone, *Iconografía del arte colonial: Jesucristo* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Tarea, 1998), 186.

<sup>9</sup> The seamless purple robe is mentioned at the Crowning with Thorns in both Mark 15:17 and John 19:2-5.

throng of angry Roman soldiers hastens his progress with a whip. This episode, highlighting Mary's grief and participation in Christ's suffering, was popular in Medieval devotional literature, including the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, Ludolf of Saxony's *Vita Jesu Christi redemptoris nostri*, and the visions of St. Bridget of Sweden.<sup>10</sup>

The final scene at far left shows the Crucifixion, Mary collapsed in grief at the base of the crucifix. Crowded behind her are the other female witnesses to the crucifixion, including Mary Magdalene. Standing across from them is John the Evangelist, wearing a green robe, who is frequently pictured in Crucifixion scenes.<sup>11</sup>

In each scene but the penultimate, López has reduced the background to a minimum, using purple and brown tones to give some indication of horizon or interior space. The spare details of the setting force the viewer to focus on the pathos of Christ as he endures each of the trials of his Passion. While each of the Mysteries is episodic, originating in the stages of the Passion narrative, López has reduced each to a devotional image intended for meditation.<sup>12</sup> As with other works by López, the artist has most likely drawn inspiration from European engravings

Notably, the episodes read left to right, a feature also found in the panel depicting the Glorious Mysteries (fig. 1) but not in that depicting the Joyous Mysteries (fig. 2). This may relate to the way that the panels were displayed in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary at San Jacinto. López also distinguished between the three panels by using different colored flowers at the top of the *rocalla* cartouches – blue for the sorrowful, white for the glorious, and pink for the joyous mysteries. Beneath each scene, a smaller cartouche originally featured text relating to each episode. These cartouches were painted over with floral designs later in the eighteenth century, perhaps because their source was thought to be unorthodox. In the 1970s, this overpainting was removed from the Glorious Mysteries panel (fig. 1).

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<sup>10</sup> Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art, Volume 2: The Passion of Jesus Christ*, trans. Janet Seligman (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1972), 78n61.

<sup>11</sup> While John the Evangelist is not explicitly mentioned in the gospels, John 19:26-27 mentions the presence of Christ's favorite disciple, who is traditionally understood to be John. See Schiller, *Iconography*, 89.

<sup>12</sup> On this impulse for the depiction of individual episodes of the Passion, see Schiller, *Iconography*, 73.



Fig. 1 Juan Pedro López, *Glorious Mysteries of the Holy Rosary*, 1781, oil on canvas, private collection.



Fig. 2 Juan Pedro López, *Joyous Mysteries of the Holy Rosary*, 1781, oil on canvas. Banco Mercantil, Caracas.

The paintings of the Mysteries remained at the Church of San Jacinto for less than a century. During the nineteenth century, the newly installed Republican government became increasingly

hostile toward the Church.<sup>13</sup> San Jacinto had been badly damaged in the 1812 earthquake and after the exclaustation of the monks in 1837, the monastic buildings housed the municipal seat, a prison, and an almshouse. In 1873, the destruction of the monastery was ordered (though it would not be carried out until the following year), and the possessions of San Jacinto, including its altars, religious artworks, liturgical vestments, and furniture were disbursed among the churches and family chapels of Caracas.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the fractious relationship between the government and the Dominican order, see Montilla, “Los conventos dominicos.”

<sup>14</sup> Montilla, “Los conventos dominicos,” 230. Carlos F. Duarte, in unpublished research, concludes that the series of the *Mysteries* was evidently given to Aristides Rojas for safekeeping. Rojas (1827-1894) was a prominent medical doctor who was also an avid historian and prolific writer. He was as well a collector, amassing a museum to hold not only his collections of books but also “ceramics related to the Revolution, oil paintings, indigenous objects, everything to do with beauty, with the sublime” (“objetos de cerámica relacionados con la Revolución, pinturas al óleo, objetos indígenas, todo cuanto tenía que ver con lo bello, con lo sublime”). See C. E. R., *Rasgos biograficos del Dr. Aristedes Rojas* (Caracas: Tip. La Semana, 1904), 4.