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Unidentified Artist

Peru, Ayacucho

Eighteenth century

Encaustic polychrome and gilt on carved alabaster with inlaid mica, black pearls, and faux pearls, 13 3/8 x 9 5/8 x 1 7/8 inches

After his visit to Huamanga (now Ayacucho) in the Viceroyalty of Peru in 1626 the chronicler Bernabé Cobo described the alabaster available in the region as so soft it could be cut with a

knife.ⁱ Spanish immigrants used the easily carved stone, called “piedra de Huamanga,” to create small sculptures from at least the late seventeenth century, establishing an artisanal tradition that continues today. These small works are found in Quito, Ecuador; Salta, Argentina; and Santiago de Chile, their wide dispersal testifying to an extensive trade network.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the works carved in “piedra de Huamanga” are entirely of religious subjects, although in a variety of formats. Individual saints were carved in the round, but bas-reliefs were a popular way of representing multi-figural narrative scenes, such as this *Baptist of Christ*. Many of the works were polychromed, but this work is rare in that the artist added black pearls and mica, inlaid with adhesive.

It is fortunate that this carving can be compared to another version of the Baptism of Christ in a private collection in Lima (fig. 1). They were created in the same workshop, though they are not by the same hand. It is clear in the Lima piece that there were originally many more pearls.



Fig. 1. Unidentified artist, *Baptism of Christ*, *piedra de Huamanga*, polychromed, with gilding and embedded black pearls, 45.5 x 39.5 x 6 cm. Private collection, Lima.

The two pieces clearly share a print source, upon which many of these carvings were based. However, the source has not been followed slavishly. In the Thoma work, the Holy Spirit and musical angels oversee the main event, while in the Lima sculpture, it is God the Father who witnesses the Baptist of Christ from on high. Jesus stands calf-deep in the River Jordan while Saint John the Baptist anoints him with water from a seashell. The latter is accompanied by his lamb and an angel bearing a banderole reading “Ecce Agnus Dei.”

The artists diverge most radically in other decisions. The Lima work probably followed the model closely by including large fish in the river, while the Thoma piece instead suggests a rocky river through the bits of inlaid mica. Both works are inlaid with black pearls, many of which have been lost over time. The Thoma work was restored at some time in the recent past by the substitution of faux pearls for the original black. It is probable that the signature on the reverse of the stone, “Julio González,” is the name of the restorer, as *pedra de Huamanga* carvings from the period were always unsigned.

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¹See Natalia Majluf and Luis Eduardo Wuffarden, *La piedra de Huamanga: lo sagrado y lo profano*, exh. cat. (Lima: Museo de Arte de Lima, 1998).