



Acc. no.

The Christ Child with Symbols of the Passion on His Apron

Unidentified artist

Peru

c. 1700

Oil on canvas with gold? The halo?, 37 ½ x 20,5 inches

2016.010

Unidentified artist

Peru

Child Christ with Symbols of the Passion on His Apron

Late 17th or early 18th century

Oil on canvas, 38 ¼ x 28 ¾ inches.

The image of the Christ Child wearing an apron bearing the symbols and instruments of the



Passion is rare in Spanish colonial art. Several paintings that can be ascribed to artists working in Cuzco may reflect a single engraving that might have circulated in that artistic center. The engraving by Nicolas de Mathonière (fig. 1) was published in Paris in the early seventeenth century and evidently it, or a close version thereof, made its way to the Viceroyalty of Peru.ⁱ

There are several existing European paintings of the subject, one of which is in the Fred Jones Jr Museum of Art at The University of Oklahoma (Norman, OK).

A painting in the Brooklyn Museum (fig. 2) closely replicates the iconography of the engraving, including the orb offered in Christ's proper right hand, the position of the fingers of his left hand, and his moderately long coiffure. The addition of a floral frame and the positioning of the figure on an altar decorated with vases of flowers and a cloth trimmed in

lace are typically *Cuzqueñan*.

Two earlier works, datable stylistically to the early seventeenth century, suggest that the print circulated in Cuzco quite early on. In the painting in the Priet-Gaudibert collection (fig. 3) an artist influenced by the international Mannerist current at the time absorbed the image into a composition that includes the Virgin Mary and a Franciscan. Another early representation is faithful to the engraving in that the symbols on the apron are nearly exactly replicated (fig. 4). The Christ Child in this painting is walking hand in hand with Saint Joseph. At the lower left corner is Saint Catherine, perhaps the name saint of the donor of the painting.ⁱⁱ

These repetitions representing the Christ Child wearing a white apron suggest that there is a meaning behind them, but this writer has not yet discovered what that might be. The inscription on the engraving is not helpful. In Latin, it is the verse from Saint Paul to the Philippians, 2:10: "That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth." The scapular, a small woolen square hanging from the neck and under the clothing of the Roman Catholic faithful, had its origins in the habits of the monastic orders as a work apron. In modern Freemasonry, a white lambskin apron symbolizes innocence and purity. Is there a connection between the work apron of ancient stonemasons, the scapular worn by members of Catholic religious orders, and the white apron worn by the Christ Child in these painting? It is hoped that further research will discover the meaning of this rare appearance in Spanish colonial art.



Fig. 1. Nicolas de Mathonière (1573-1640). *In nomine Iesu, omne genus flectatur/celestivum terrestrium et infernorum*. Early 17th century engraving.



123. *Christ Child with Passion Symbols*. Peru, late 17th century. Oil on canvas, 39 1/8 x 31 3/4 in. (99.4 x 80.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Elizabeth Clare, 64.207*

Fig. 2. Unidentified Artist. Cuzco, Peru. *Christ Child with Passion Symbols*. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 31 3/4 inches (99.4 x 80.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Elizabeth Clare, 64.207.



Fig. 3. Unidentified Artist. *Virgin Crowned by two Angels in the Presence of the Christ Child and Saint Francis of Assisi*. Peru. Ca. 1600? Oil on panel, 66 x 55 cm. Priet-Gaudibert Collection, Versailles, France



Fig. 4. Unidentified artist. *Saint Joseph and the Christ Child with Saint Catherine*. Seventeenth century. Oil on canvas, 183 x 124 cm. Cuzco, Convento de San Antonio de Padua de la Recoleta.

Other elements of one of the Thoma paintings (2016.010) permit a clearer understanding of the meaning of the painting: the Child Christ contemplating his own death. To the symbols of the Passion on his apron are added the skull on which he rests his proper right elbow, and a stone tomb lies on the ground at the lower right of the canvas. Christ's role as *Salvator mundi* (Savior of the world) is indicated by the serpent on which he treads and by the *laburnum*, the imperial standard adopted by the emperor Constantine after his conversion to Christianity, a symbol normally only included in art in illustrations of the Descent into Hell. The vanquished serpent and the flag are emblems of Christ's triumph over evil and the pagan world. This painting is

close to other versions probably created in Europe, suggesting that those and the Peruvian one in the Thoma collection were based on an engraved model.

The second version in the Thoma collection (**new acc. no.**) is a far simpler composition. The Child Christ is shown with his left hand raised in blessing and bearing in his right hand an orb of the earth containing a landscape. The composition is thus close to the Mathonière print (fig. 1). The *arma christi* (“weapons of Christ”) painted on his apron represent the so-called “Instruments of the Passion” that became the weapons of his victory. They include the cross and crown of thorns, the hammer and nails that fixed his hands and feet to the cross, the pincers that removed the nails, the dice that the Roman soldiers tossed for his robe, and the ladder by which his body was brought down from the cross. The selection of these object in paintings from the Middle Ages on can be quite varied. This selection seems to include a pendant fitted with coral, an amulet against harm during the Renaissance. The Christ Child is sometimes shown in paintings wearing a necklace of coral beads as in this example.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

ⁱ I am grateful to my colleague Almerindo Ojeda for identifying this print for me. It can be found at PESSCA (www.colonialart.com), 3177a along with the Brooklyn painting after it.

ⁱⁱ In a recent publication (to be added here) the authorship of this painting is given to an Italian artist who appears in a couple of documents as assisting Bernardo Bitti. There is insufficient reason to attribute this painting to him.