



2014.051
Unidentified Artist
Peru, Cuzco
The Descent of Christ into Limbo
Seventeenth century
Oil on canvas, 54 x 40 inches

In the foreground, Christ descends into the Limbo of the Patriarchs, at the edge (*limbus*) of Hell to reassure the souls waiting there that through his resurrection they will be redeemed. The Catechism of the Catholic Church interprets the descent of Christ into Hell before his Resurrection as meaning that he descended there as Savior, proclaiming salvation to the souls imprisoned there. The Limbo of the Patriarchs is not spelled out in the Bible, but appears in the medieval *Speculum Humane Salvationis* by Vincent de Beauvais and the *Golden Legend* of Jacopo da Voragine. During the colonial period in Spanish America, there were many confraternities dedicated to the Souls (*Ánimas*) in Purgatory whose suffering through those purifying fires could be abbreviated through prayer and alms.

In this painting, Limbo is a cave from which emerge the souls of those who lived and died before Christ's self-sacrifice. We can identify only Eve with the fig leaf and apple and John the Baptist with his cross. The rest generically recall the kings and prophets of the Old

Testament. It is possible that this section of the painting was influenced by the composition by Maarten de Vos that was engraved by Johannes Sadeler (fig. 1), but the pose of the figure of Christ may ultimately depend on an invention by Albrecht Dürer which was adapted by generations of artists.¹



Fig. 1. Engraving by Johann Sadeler after Marten de Vos.

Certainly, the concept of Hell as a rocky cave opening toward Earth, the presence of Christ pulling an aged patriarch from the edge of Hell, and the accompanying figures of Eve and Saint John the Baptist suggest a common source, perhaps other versions of Sadeler's print. The figure of the Resurrected Christ in the distance is also similar in both compositions.

However, this Cuzco painting is distinguished by the inclusion of Mary Magdalene's vision of the Resurrected Christ in the garden, the traditional iconography called "*Nolo me tangere*," and the placement of the scenes in a vast landscape setting. Whoever conceived of the composition of this Spanish colonial painting may have had in mind similar compositions found in Jerome Nadal's *Annotations & Meditations on the Gospels*, that included a set of 153 prints illustrating episodes from the Gospels. The engravings and text were first published in Antwerp in two editions in 1595 and in another edition in 1607. The painter of this narrative scene in the Thoma collection, however, did not have a Nadal engraving to refer to as "The Descent of Christ into Limbo" was not illustrated there. Other related scenes from the period following the Crucifixion were, however, included in the series. The appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene and the awe-struck Roman soldiers are found in one of the prints (fig. 2), and the precisely rendered fenced garden depicted in another print (fig. 3) is faithfully replicated in the painting. We can therefore assume that the painter had access to engravings from which

EODEM DIE APPARET MAGDALENÆ. 139

Marc. xvi. Ioan. xx.

cxij



A. Magdalena stabat ad monumentum foris plorans.

B. Dum ergo fleret, vidit duos Angelos in albis sedentes in monumento, ab his audit. Mulier, quid ploras?

A. Animadvertit Angelos post suam ipsius tergum cupide prospicere. itaque conuersa videt IESVM habitu hortulani.

C. A quo audit, Mulier, quid ploras? &c.

A. Cum responderet illa rursus, Domine, si tu sus tulisti eum.

D. A Christo nomine de more appellatur Maria.

E. Respondet Rabbini. Accidit ad pedes eius vulnerata cor vno ipsius verbo, cupiens suo more complecti.

D. IESVS se tangi vetat; ac docet quem admodum, antequam ascendat, cum eo sit agendum.

F. Apostoli redeuntes sunt obviam venientibus mulieribus.

G. Nondum milites surgunt.

Fig. 2. Eodam die apparet Magdalena. Engraving from Jerome Nadal's *Annotations & Meditations on the Gospels*



Fig. 3. *Eodem die apparet mulieribus.* From Jerome Nadal's *Annotations & Meditations on the Gospels*

he judiciously selected elements, perhaps with the aid of a priest, from the graphic sources.

The landscape setting probably reflects study of both the Nadal prints and Flemish paintings. From the late fifteenth century, Flemish artists had used a color scheme that convincingly suggests spatial recession: browns in the foreground, green in the middle ground, and blue in the far distance. The Cuzco artist used this basic palette to great effect in this painting and further enhanced the impression of depth by drawing the viewer's eye from the foreground into the distance through the visual allure of anecdotal details. The distorted trunk of a dead tree on top of the mouth of the cave, the shocked response of Roman soldiers to the appearance of Christ, the three crosses surmounting Golgotha, the appearance of Christ to his

mother in the building at upper right, a detailed cityscape—all are intended to engage the viewer in close study of the painting.

The original gilded frame bears emblems and scenes from the Passion of Christ that are now somewhat abraded, but still identifiable.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

ⁱ This observation was shared by art historian Rebecca Long.