



1997.015

*The Dormition of the Virgin*

Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

Eighteenth century

Oil on canvas, 37 1/8 x 62 inches

Apocryphal texts describe the dormition of the Virgin Mary. She was said to have outlived her son Jesus Christ by many years, and finally prayed to be released from life so that she could join him in Heaven. In response, the Archangel Michael appeared to her with a palm branch, saying that she would die several days later. Miraculously, the apostles, who had been preaching the faith in faraway places, came together to be at her bedside. In the final moments, according to the Jesuit hagiographer Pedro de Ribadeneira:

She laid herself down upon a poor bed, and looking on them all who had their lighted tapers in their hands, with a majesty more divine than human, gave them all her benediction, begging of her Son to ratify it in heaven, and give them eternal goods which never decay, and have nothing wanting. They melted all into tears, for the absence of such a mother; and she did comfort them, saying: My dear children, abide in

God, weep not for that I leave you, but, rather rejoice, because I go to my dear Son.<sup>i</sup>

The substantial scale of this painting suggests that it was one of a series on the life of the Virgin painted for a convent or monastery. The series of paintings probably culminated in her corporeal Assumption into Heaven, a doctrine of the Catholic Church that had been reiterated by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.

In this painting, the dying Virgin Mary is surrounded by the twelve apostles and the Three Marys who were also present at the Crucifixion. As is often the case with Cuzco paintings, the arrangement of the figures is frieze-like, all of them near the surface of the composition, and the figure of the Virgin Mary is abruptly foreshortened so that she appears to

be seated in a chair rather than lying in bed. The faces of the apostles have been carefully varied as to age and expression, and their gestures animate the composition. After the gold *brocateado* was applied evenly over the surface of the draperies, the painter returned to add a brownish glaze over the surfaces to re-emphasize the folds of the garments that he had already painted.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

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<sup>i</sup> Pedro de Rivadeneira, *The Life and Death of the Most Glorious Virgin Mary, mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ . . .* (Montreal: T. Maguire, 1835), 24.