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The Holy Family with Mercedarian Symbols

Workshop of Bernardo Rodríguez

Ecuador, Quito

Late 18th-early 19th century, 43 ½ x 33 inches

Following a vigorous and productive seventeenth century, the art of painting in Ecuador languished during the first half of the eighteenth century when the religious confraternities continued to commission works of art, but with a preference for sculpture. After 1750, however, the status of painting rose, so much so that in a discourse of 1805 the artists José Cortés de Alcocer, Manuel Samaniego y Jaramillo, and his brother Bernardo Rodríguez de la Parra y Jaramillo were praised as representatives in America of Raphael Mengs, Charles LeBrun, and Titian.ⁱ

The first documented work by Bernardo Rodríguez (active ca. 1768-1803), representing Saint Eloi, the patron saint of silversmiths (Museo del Banco Central, Quito), is dated 1775. However, he must have been well established long before that date, for in 1768 he was renting a storefront in the large home of the sculptor Bernardo Legarda near the Franciscan convent.ⁱⁱ From 1780 Rodríguez worked for the Mercedarian order, creating paintings for the cloister of their convent in Quito. He also worked for the Franciscans, for whom he created a series of the miracles of Saint Anthony of Padua and a *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception* (today in the Museo Fray Pedro Bedón of the Franciscan convent). In 1797 the Augustinians commissioned portraits of the Four Doctors of the Church (today in the museum of the Augustinian convent). Bernardo and Manuel Samaniego also collaborated on the wall paintings that decorate the “cell” of the provincial father of the convent of La Merced in Quito in 1797,ⁱⁱⁱ and together they decorated the vault of the cathedral and the walls of the side aisles in egg tempera.

Rodríguez had a large workshop, evinced by the many paintings such as this one that incorporate characteristic figural motifs and a clear palette of primary colors tending toward the pastel hues of the Rococo. Rodríguez's figures are rendered with porcelain-like delicacy, and his compositions are infused with a mood of gentle piety. In the Thoma painting the "two Trinities," both heavenly (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and earthly (Virgin Mary, Christ Child, Saint Joseph) are accompanied by little angels looking on approvingly. The Virgin wears the scapular of the Mercedarian order and the Child holds the yoke that symbolizes the original dedication of the order to the ransoming of Christian captives of the Moors in medieval Spain. Rodríguez's productivity was made possible by a workshop skilled at replicating the master's popular compositions, adapting them in each instance to the commission.

This painting is enhanced by the ornate frame, a fine example of Ecuadorian Rococo carving and gilding. The sculptor Legarda's workshop created not only sculpture, but mirrors, musical instruments, marquetry, prints and other things.^{iv} It is not impossible that his workshop also provided the beautiful frames that enhance Rodríguez's paintings. A wide variety of luxury goods were produced in late-eighteenth century Quito, including the elaborate frames favored by patrons and collectors.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

Notes:

i " . . . estoy seguro que Cortés, los Samaniego, Rodríguez, habían representado en el Nuevo Continente a Mengs, Lebrount [sic] y el Ticiano." Quoted from José María Vargas, ed., *Arte de Ecuador: siglos XVIII-XIX* (Quito, 1977), 53. For a thoughtful (and more measured) introduction to colonial painting in Quito, see Carmen Fernández-Salvador, "Introduction. Reflections on Painting in Colonial Quito: The Artists, Subjects, and Styles," in *The Art of Painting in Colonial Quito/El arte de la pintura en Quito Colonial*, ed. Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2012), 2-17.

ii Alexandra Kennedy Troya, "Transformación del papel de talleres artesanales quiteños en el siglo XVIII: El caso de Bernardo Legarda," *Anales del Museo de América*, 2 (1994), p. 63.

iii Alexandra Kennedy, "Algunas consideraciones sobre el arte barroco en Quito y la 'interrupción' ilustrada (siglos XVII y XVIII), in: Alexandra Kennedy, ed., *Arte de la Real Audiencia de Quito, siglos XVII-XIX* (Madrid, 2002), p. 61.

iv Ibid., 64.