



1998.003

The Marriage of the Virgin

Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

Eighteenth century

Oil on canvas, 39 x 65 3/4 inches

According to the apocryphal legends, the Virgin Mary's parents died when she was eleven years old and she was betrothed to Joseph when she was thirteen years old (and three months, Pedro de Ribadeneira specified)ⁱ and Joseph was a little over thirty years old. Francisco Pacheco, in his *Arte de la pintura*, published posthumously in 1649, a treatise that must have been widely available to theologians and artists in the Americas, related that when Mary declared her vow of virginity to the high priest, he ordered her to pray to God for direction. A voice told her that her husband should be selected according to the prophecy of Isaiah 11:1: "And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots shall bear fruit." And so young men in the lineage of David were called together, with their branches, among them Joseph, ". . . whose rod flowered, bursting into beautiful almond blossoms, over which the Holy Spirit appeared as a very white dove."ⁱⁱ

Pacheco recommended a grand setting for this event: "This story should be painted in a sumptuous temple, with a great crowd of ministers and common people of all ages, and youths with rods in their hands."ⁱⁱⁱ Accordingly, the Cuzco painter's scene is richly staged, with grand columns rising behind the betrothed couple, an elaborate canopy over the priest and his two acolytes, and rich carpeting on the floor. However, the artist reduced the crowd of witnesses to an unidentified man and woman, and the number of youths applying for Mary's hand to one disgruntled suitor shown at the left, breaking his barren rod over his knee.^{iv}

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

ⁱ Pedro de Ribadeneyra, *Flos Sanctorum, libro de las vidas de los Santos* [1616], 2 vols. (Madrid, En la Imprenta Real, 1716-1717) 1: 62.

ii Francisco Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura*, ed. with notes by Bonaventura Bassegoda i Hugas, 2nd edition (Madrid: Cátedra, 2001), 591.

iii Ibidem.

iv Santiago Sebastián has noted that, following the Council of Trent, the legend of the suitors and their rods was considered heterodox—no longer acceptable in painting. Johannes Molanus had written that “If we find a Saint Joseph represented with a flowering rod, we must understand that this flower simply represents his virginity, since the story is apochryphal.” Santiago Sebastián, *El barroco iberoamericano* (Madrid: Encuentros Ediciones, 1990), 133.