



*The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine of Alexandria*

Peru

Late 17<sup>th</sup> century

Oil and gold on burlap

58 5/8 x 60 3/8 inches

St. Catherine of Alexandria (c. 287-c.305 CE) was a princess, the daughter of King Constus (or Costus), the governor of Roman Alexandria during the reign of Emperor Maximian (r. 286-305 CE).<sup>1</sup> As such she was well-educated and grew up among luxury; she was renowned not only for her intelligence and wisdom but her beauty.

After the Emperor Maxentius (r. 306-12 CE) came into power in 306, he demanded that the populace descend on Alexandria to make offerings to the gods in the temple. Christians who refused were persecuted, and hearing of their plight, Catherine confronted the emperor in hope of persuading him to exercise mercy. Unable to counter her arguments, Maxentius arranged a theological debate between the young princess and 50 of the most learned philosophers and orators in the Empire, but Catherine emerged victorious. Enraged, Maxentius ordered Catherine to be tortured on a spiked wheel, but the intervention of God broke the wheel and saved Catherine – albeit only temporarily. Catherine was instead beheaded and angels bore her body to Mount Sinai.

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars generally agree that Catherine was likely not a historical personage.

Prior to her conflict with the emperor and martyrdom, Saint Catherine's experienced a spiritual union to Christ in which she consecrated her virginity to him. Though Catherine was said to have lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, the story of the Mystic Marriage did not appear until the 14<sup>th</sup> century in later versions of Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*. In the text, Christ declares his desire that Catherine "be knit to me by marriage among all the virgins of the earth."<sup>2</sup> Catherine weds the adult Christ before the Virgin Mary and the celestial court, who rejoice with song.<sup>3</sup> In early modern paintings of the Mystic Marriage, however, Christ is consistently depicted as a child seated in his mother's lap. The iconography was popular across early modern Europe and was the most popular way to depict the saint in colonial Spanish America as well.<sup>4</sup>

In the Thoma painting, Catherine is identifiable by the broken wheel and sword at her feet, as well as by the long blonde tresses indicating that she is unmarried. She wears a crown to indicate her position as an earthly princess, as an angel holding a martyr's palm reaches down to place a wreath on her head. The Virgin Mary sits at the center of the composition, holding Catherine's hand in position so that the Christ Child – in the rigid posture of a religious statue – can place a ring on her finger. At the far right, dressed in elaborately embroidered robes and a bejeweled miter is a bishop saint, perhaps St. Augustine, grasping a crosier in one hand and a gospel in the other. Augustine occasionally appears in European depictions of the Mystic Marriage, as in this example by Tintoretto (fig. 1). A chorus of angels and the Holy Spirit preside over the scene.

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<sup>2</sup> William Caxton, trans. *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints, as englished by William Caxton* (London: J. M. Dent, 1900), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Caxton, *The Golden Legend*, 15. N.B. The episode is omitted from Princeton University Press' 2012 reprinting of the *Golden Legend*.

<sup>4</sup> Hector Schenone, *Iconografía del arte colonial: Los santos*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Fundación Tarea, 1992), 209.



Fig. 1 Tintoretto, *Virgin and Child with Saint Catherine, Saint Augustine, Saint Marc and Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1549-50. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, France.

Likely painted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, following the prevailing international style in Europe and South America at the time, the painting features a palette of ochre, mauve, dark green, and blue, standing in sharp contrast to the bolder colors that predominated in the eighteenth century. While the painting gives the impression of considerable sophistication, the clumsy, rather large hands of St. Catherine and the Virgin and the relatively diminutive figure of St. Augustine suggest an artist working far from the artistic academies of Europe. Additionally, the unusually rigid posture of the Christ Child and the size of the St. Augustine suggest that the artist drew from a variety of printed sources for the composition.