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Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

The Return from Egypt

18th century

Oil on canvas, 42 x 67 inches

In the Jesuit writer Pedro de Ribadenera's late-sixteenth-century *Flos sanctorum*, a dependable guide to the orthodox iconography of the lives of the Holy Family, he wrote:

The Lord was in Egypt during all the time that Herod lived. Although one cannot know exactly how long that was, the most probable and common opinion is about seven years. At the end of that time, with Herod already dead, the angel appeared to Saint Joseph and commanded him to return to Judea with the Son and the Mother; and he did so . . . the holy Church remembers that return of the Lord from Egypt to Judeah, and celebrates it on the seventh of January.¹

Paintings of the return of the Holy Family from Egypt are not numerous in European art, but the subject is seen relatively often in Andean painting, and the group of three figures--Mary, Joseph, and the seven-year-old Christ Child-- in those paintings often reflect Lucas Vorsterman's 1620 engraving after a composition by Peter Paul Rubens (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Lucas Vorsterman (1595-1675), *Return from Egypt*, 1620, engraving, 42.2 x 31.1 cm. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The composition of this painting observes certain conventions typical of the Cuzco school in the eighteenth century, some of them based on literary sources. For example, Francisco Pacheco, in the 1649 *Arte de la pintura*, advises specifically that the Virgin Mary should be wearing a straw hat and that Joseph, out of respect, should have his hat in hand (i.e., be bare headed). Such instructions as to the details of orthodox religious iconography were followed in post-Tridentine European paintings, then reflected in prints after those paintings, and through the latter were continued in Spanish viceregal art.

Also continuing a European tradition is the construction of the landscape setting according to the conventions of sixteenth-century Flemish painting, with a foreground executed in largely brown tones, the green trees and shrubs of the middle ground, and a distant landscape in soft blues and grays. The date-laden palm tree, suggestive of the exotic lands through which the family travels, is seen in Vorsterman's print. The composition is simplified, with the figures arranged in a frieze.

Unique to Andean painting, though, are the little angels generously scattering flowers along the path of the Holy Family, and the exotic birds in the trees. Many paintings similar to

this one have been attributed to the “Circle of” Diego Quispe Tito. It may be more accurate to say that the workshops of the Cuzco school, in the decades following Quispe Tito’s death in or after 1681 continued certain elements found in his art. By that time, compositions such as this one were, by European standards, half a century behind the times. In Cuzco, however, they took on new life, enlivened by colorful flowers, busy angels, and animated birds.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

¹ “Estuvo el Señor en Egypto todo el tiempo que vivió Herodes, que aunque no se puede saber de cierto quanto fue, la mas probable, y comun opinion es, que fueron como siete años; al cabo de los quales, siendo yá muerto el Rey Herodes, el Angel apareció à San Joseph, y le mandò que bolviesse á Judèa con el Hijo, y con la Madre, y èl lo hizo. . . . Y la Santa Iglesia haze memoria de esta buelta del Señor de Egypto à Judèa, y la celebra à los siete de Enero.” Pedro de Ribadeneyra, *Flos sanctorum* . . . (Madrid, 1716), vol. 1, 16.