



2015.072

Unidentified Artist

Peru

*The Sleeping Christ Child with the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph and the Infant Saint John the Baptist*

Seventeenth or 18<sup>th</sup> century

Oil on copper, 13 x 11 inches

The Flemish printmaker Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619) created two versions of a composition inscribed with the words of the Song of Songs 1:15: “Ecce tu pulcher es dilecte mi, et decorus: Lectulus noster floridus” (“Behold, you are beautiful, my love, and comely. Our bed is flourishing.” This is the translation provided in the Douay-Rheims version of the Bible. It can also be translated as “Behold, you are beautiful, my love, and comely. Our bed is blooming.”



Fig. 1. Hieronymus Wierix, *The Sleeping Christ Child with the Virgin Mary*, before 1619. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 2. Hieronymus Wierix, *The Sleeping Christ Child with Saint Joseph and an Angel*.

In both versions, Hieronymus Wierix pictures the sleeping Christ Child as the “blossom,” but also the sprinkles the coverlet with flowers to emphasize the relationship between text and image. It is likely that the first version of the composition is the one with only the Virgin Mary adoring the sleeping Christ Child (fig. 1), followed by another (fig. 2) in which the witnesses include Saint Joseph and an angel. In yet another variation by Hieronymus Wierix (fig. 3) the inscription is different: “Paruulus en dulci somno sibi clausit ocellos.” Here two angels accompany the Virgin Mary, one of them bearing the “Instruments of the Passion,” suggesting, with the words of the inscription that Mary contemplates her eventual loss of her son. The inclusion of Saint John the Baptist must have appeared in a print that probably came from the Wierix workshop in Antwerp, if not by Hieronymus himself.



Fig. 3. Hieronymus Wierix, *Paruulus en dulci somno sibi clausit ocellos*.

Barbara von Barghahn and Christopher C. Wilson have written that: “The popularity of such a depiction may have been stimulated by the writings of sixteenth-century Spanish mystics, who used the image of the flowery bed to describe the indwelling of Christ in the soul. St. Teresa of Ávila, in her *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (composed 1566-1575; first published in Brussels, 1611) exclaimed, ‘Oh, His Majesty is making a bed of roses and flowers for Himself in the soul....’ Similarly, Francisco de Osuna, in his *Third Spiritual Alphabet* (published 1527), characterized the heart as ‘the narrow manger where Christ is born, His flowery bed.’”<sup>i</sup>



Fig. 4. Angelino Medoro, *The Sleeping Christ Child with the Virgin Mary, Joseph, Saint Dominic and the Child Saint John the Baptist*, 1622. Museo de Bellas Artes, Seville.

A fine example of many paintings following these engravings was painted in 1622 by Angelino Medoro (fig. 4).<sup>ii</sup> Medoro, an Italian artist who had spent many years in Peru painting and teaching, had returned by this date to Seville, where he spent the rest of his life. Medoro added Saint Dominic and Saint Joseph (shown asleep as in late Medieval representations of him) to the composition, as well as a figure of the Infant Saint John the Baptist with a finger to his lips, admonishing the viewer to be silent. Instead of being tucked under a flowery coverlet, the Christ Child is laid out on what appears to be a grave slab with stones under his head and a headstone in lieu of a bedstead. The Virgin Mary, in this rendering, both adores the sleeping Christ Child, and experiences a premonition of her son's death. The composition is a "prolepsis of the Passion and the Pietà,"<sup>iii</sup> with roots in Italian paintings of the fifteenth century exemplified by the painting by Giovanni Bellini called the "Davis Madonna" in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Giovanni Bellini, *The “Davis Madonna,”* early 1460s. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The “missing print” with the Infant Saint John included is evinced by the existence of the composition in two paintings created by Japanese artists in the “Seminary of Painters” established in Japan by the Jesuit artist Giovanni Niccolò. The so-called seminary, devoted to the creation of devotional art, was founded in 1590 and lasted until 1614, which gives an approximate date for two paintings of this subject by the Japanese (figs. 6 and 7) followers of Niccolò.<sup>iv</sup> Since the Infant John the Baptist appears in both of these paintings, we know that the model was probably created at the same time as the Wierix compositions illustrated here, and that it was probably distributed by the Jesuits worldwide.



Fig. 6. Japanese lacquerware produced and exported at the request of the Society of Jesus. Azuchi–Momoyama period, 16th century. Kyushu National Museum.



Fig. 7. Portable Christian shrine (*seigan*), Momoyama period, 16<sup>th</sup> century. Christie's London. The fact that the composition of these Japanese paintings is reversed from other versions suggests a reversed copy after an original print. The inscription from Song of Songs 5:2 on the paintings was surely adapted from the engraving: "Ego dormio e cor meum vigilat" (I sleep and my heart watcheth.) So, we know that the Infant Saint John was added to the composition at least early in the seventeenth century and we hope to find that source.

It is interesting to note that the composition was being reproduced in Japan only shortly before it became relatively popular in Peru, for the Thoma painting is not the only Spanish colonial representative of the type. A painting in the collection of Francisco Yábar in Lima (fig. 8) is a larger work on canvas, but even the extension of the flowery motif along the borders of the composition recalls the exquisitely small painting on copper.



Fig. 8. Unidentified Artist, Peru, Cuzco, *The Sleeping Christ Child with the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph and Saint John the Baptist*, oil on canvas. Collection of Francisco Yábar, Lima, Peru.

At the top of the Thoma painting are inscribed the three theological virtues, Faith, Hope, and Charity. Added to those are words suggesting meditations while praying: Perseverance, Mortification, Patience, Prayer, Obedience, Chastity, Poverty, and Humility. At the center bottom, two small figures representing the human soul and Divine Love clasp hands over a pair of hearts that are bound with rope. The image comes from emblem 38 of Benedictus van Haeften's *Schola cordis* (1635), "Cordis unio" (fig. 9). The artist has added a seeing eye to the heart closest to Divine Love as well as some delicate gold text across both hearts.

The subject of the Thoma painting was so popular for so long that it is somewhat difficult to date the work, but the style of the faces suggest that it might date from the seventeenth century.

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara von Barghahn and Christopher C. Wilson in *The Holy Family as Prototype of the Civilization of Love: Images from the Viceregal Americas*, ed. Joseph F. Chorpennig, OSFS (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 1996), 190.

<sup>ii</sup> The painting by Medoro was identified and published by Rafael Ramos Sosa, "Noticias del pintor Angelino Medoro en Lima y Sevilla," in *La festa delle arte. Scritti in onore di Marcello Fagiolo per cinquant'anni di studi*, eds. Mario Bevilacqua, Vincenzo Cazzato, and Sebastian Roberto (Rome: Gangemi editore, 2014), 738-41.

<sup>iii</sup> For this elegant phrase, I am grateful to my colleague Carolyn C. Wilson, who brought the Bellini "Davis Madonna" to my attention.

<sup>iv</sup> These images are on loan to me from Noriko Kotani, based on her dissertation, "*Studies in Jesuit Art in Japan*" (Princeton, 2010). I am grateful for her generosity with information and photographs.