

Paintings of the Visitation in the Collection of
Carl & Marilynn Thoma

After Saint Gabriel the Archangel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would bear a child, she went to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, then pregnant with the child who would become John the Baptist. The story is told in Luke 1:39-46:

And Mary arose in these days and went into the hill country with haste into a city of Judah; and entered into the house of Zacharias and saluted Elisabeth. And it came to pass, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit; and she lifted up her voice with a loud cry, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come unto me? For behold, when the voice of thy salutation came into mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a fulfilment of the things which have been spoken to her from the Lord. And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord.

This scene is found in art from as early as the fifth century and is usually included in series of paintings on the life of the Virgin. However, the Thoma paintings might have been commissioned by an individual or confraternity with a special dedication to the Visitation. In 1605, for example, the “Mayordomo de la Cofradía de Nra Sra de la Visitación” of the Cathedral of Lima ordered carved, gilded, and polychromed images of the Virgin Mary and Saint Elizabeth for the altar of the brotherhood.ⁱ



2020.015

Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

The Visitation

Seventeenth century, with gold stencil pattern added in the 18th century

Oil and gold on canvas, 48 x 1/16 x 42 1/2 inches

In 1688, after on-going conflicts, the Quechua Indians and *mestizo* painters of Cuzco left the local painters' guild because of their claims that their Spanish colleagues had been exploiting them. There are still a substantial number of paintings in Cuzco that attest to the activity of Spanish and Creole artists there during the seventeenth century. Their presence has been hardly studied, however, as art historians have focused on the agency of the indigenous and *mestizo* development of the "Cuzco school" from the late eighteenth century on. This painting of the Visitation clearly exemplifies qualities derived from European painting, while still being identifiable as colonial Spanish, not peninsular Spanish. The figures, from the maidservant at

the far left to the aging Zacharias, gently assisted down the steps by Saint Joseph, are naturalistically painted and wear varied expressions. The perspective, from the near foreground into the distance, is correctly constructed. It is likely that the gold stenciled patterns on the draperies were added in the eighteenth century, when such embellishments added to the value of paintings in Cuzco.



Fig. 1. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Visitation*, 1632-1634, oil sketch. National Gallery, Prague.



Fig. 2. François Ragot, *The Visitation*, engraving after Rubens, ca. 1648-70. Rijksmuseum, Netherlands.



2020.014

Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

The Visitation

Second half of the 18th century

Oil and gold on canvas, frame 26 3/8 x 38 3/16 in.

Compositions by Peter Paul Rubens were widely used as models by artists throughout Spanish America. One that was especially popular in the Andes was Rubens' *Visitation* (fig. 1), which was widely known through the engraving by François Ragot (fig. 2) and others after that one.

The Cuzco artist who created this painting in the Thoma collection closely based his composition on a print after Rubens, with only a few changes which might have appeared in the particular print he saw. He added a flurry of angels in the sky and removed the donkey and muleteer that Rubens imagined carrying the Virgin Mary to her cousin's house. He added a formal garden and a view into the distance. The Cuzco painter added the lacy gold brocade, so popular in the eighteenth century, but he kept the sense of movement, of excitement that marked Saint John the Baptist's recognition of Christ *in utero*.



1999.016

The Visitation

Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

Second half of the 18th century

Oil on canvas, 57 ½ x 45 ¾ inches

A closer view of the same scene is depicted in this more naïvely painted version, also created in the eighteenth century. The curiously shaped haloes are also found in other Cuzco paintings, which might have been created in the same workshop. There has been as yet no effort by art historians to bring together clusters of painting that seem to reflect distinguishing workshop practices, though this might be a fruitful study. Although there were clearly many artists at

work in Cuzco, they probably mostly worked in shops that could provide both private patrons and the art market with a steady stream of production.

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ⁱ Guillermo Lohmann Villena, “Noticias inéditas para ilustrar la Historia de las Bellas Artes en Lima durante los Siglos XVI y XVII,” *Revista Histórica. Organó del Instituto Histórica del Perú* 13 (1940): 5.