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Unidentified Artist

Bolivia or Peru

Triumph of the Immaculate Conception

Late 17th or 18th century

Oil on canvas, frame 78 x 105 x 2 inches.

In 1904 an Italian artist named Giovanni Ricciotti was working in the church of San Francisco in Potosí, where he had been commissioned to paint a “Triumph of the Immaculate Conception” for the sacristy.ⁱ This painting would have been a very late, post-colonial reflection of a subject that seems to have been far more popular in the region of present-day Bolivia than anywhere else in Spanish America.

There were two interrelated themes – the “Triumph of the Eucharist” and the “Triumph of the Immaculate Conception” – painted by Leonardo Flores for the parish church in Achocalla near La Paz in the late seventeenth century.ⁱⁱ These were badly damaged by thieves some years ago, but there is another painting of the subject by Flores in the La Paz in the Church of San Francisco, and still others extant in churches in the Departamento de La Paz at the villages of Guaqui and Jesús de Machaca. Although the device of a Roman chariot to symbolize “triumph” was known long before Peter Paul Rubens painted his tapestry cartoons for the Spanish court in 1626, it is probable that Rubens’s design, disseminated through engravings by Schelte Adams Bolswert, are the ultimate source of the composition used in Bolivia. In the hands of various

printmakers changes were made, but the essentials established in Rubens's oil sketch (fig. 2) remain.



Fig. 1. Leonardo Flores, *Franciscan Triumph of the Immaculate Conception*, c. 1685-1700. Church of San Francisco, La Paz, Bolivia. Photo: Antonio Suárez Wiese.



Fig. 2. Peter Paul Rubens, Oil sketch on panel for the *Triumph of the Eucharist*, 1626. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Although the idea of the Roman triumphal chariot had not been forgotten in the decades between antiquity and the Renaissance (witness Petrarch's fourteenth-century literary Triumphs), and certainly was the model for the *joyeuse entrées* celebrating royalty before and during the seventeenth century, it is likely that Rubens's exuberant compositions were the foundations upon which many engravings were based and made their way to Spanish America. This New Spanish painting (fig. 3) may be based on the same print source as the Thoma painting of the *Triumph of the Immaculate Conception*.ⁱⁱⁱ Comparison of a number examples of these "Triumphs" in Spanish colonial art indicate that there was more than one graphic model used to depict either the Triumph of the Immaculate Conception, or the Triumph of the Faith, or both. Both concepts were inextricably tied to the political vision of the Spanish Monarchy as defender of both the Catholic Church worldwide, and of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which was promoted by the kings of Spain.^{iv} Ramón Mujica Pinilla has suggested that the distance of the towns and cities of Bolivia from the center of viceregal power in Lima, and the fractious competitions for power in this region of the viceroyalty during the entire colonial era, fostered a proliferation of these triumphal paintings—impressive visual reminders of where power really lay. Mujica Pinilla points as well to the important role of the religious orders in carrying this quasi-religious, quasi-monarchist message to the far flung corners of the empire.^v



Fig. 3. Antonio de Santander (fl. 1680-1720), *Triumph of the Faith*, 1709, oil on canvas. Tlaxcala, Mexico, Sanctuary of San Miguel del Milagro.

It is necessary to establish the regional importance of the iconographies of the Triumph of the Immaculate Conception and the Triumph of the Faith in order to postulate where this painting might have been created. As the subject of the Triumph of the Immaculate Conception appears frequently in paintings created in colonial Bolivia, and, as far as has been published to date, not at all in Cuzco, it is likely that the painting is Bolivian. The style is of no help in ascertaining the geographical origins of the painting, for the overall composition and the

individual figures are painted in a generically colonial manner, competent though somewhat naïve. The remarkable exception is the figure of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception itself, which strongly recalls the Sevillian paintings of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo and other seventeenth-century Spanish artists. It is likely that the artist had access to a Spanish model for this remarkably fluid painting of the Virgin, perhaps a small painting on copper.

A chariot pulled by white horses guided by winged angels rumbles over the bodies of fallen heretics. To the left are Adam and Eve, expelled from Eden. The chariot holds members of the church hierarchy and founders of the religious orders. Above the fray are images of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, with the *speculum sine macula* (spotless mirror) to her left and, to her right, God the Father, her creator “before all things.” A blindfolded figure of Faith carrying a cross is included as well, much as she appears in the Mexican painting illustrated above. The figures, holy and not, bear placards with inscriptions that are not quite legible and perhaps never were, simply emblematis of the arguments for and against the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

ⁱMario Chacón Torres, *Notas sobre arte republican en Potosí* (Potosí: Imprenta de la Universidad Tomás Frías, 1960), 24, n. 41.

ⁱⁱ Reconstructions of these paintings are illustrated in Ramón Mujica Pinilla, “The Columns of Hercules: Imperial Visual Politics in Bolivian Viceregal Art,” in *The Art of Painting in Colonial Bolivia/El arte de la pintura en la Bolivia colonial*, ed. Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2017), 83-135.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am grateful to Ronda Kasl for pointing out this painting to me. It is published under the unlikely title of “Triumphal Carriage of Saint Michael the Archangel” by Fernando E. Rodríguez-Miaja, “A Wondrous Event in San Miguel del Milagro,” in *Images of the Natives in the Art of New Spain 16th to 18th Centuries*, ed. Elisa Vargaslugo, et al. (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, 2005), 354-385. The painting is illustrated on pages 384-85.

^{iv} See Suzanne L. Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

^v See Mujica Pinilla, “The Columns of Hercules,” 83-135.