



Unidentified artist

*Franciscan Allegory in Honor of the Immaculate Conception*

Peru, probably Cuzco

c.1640 to 1700

Oil with gold on canvas, 48 x 36 inches

This composition, in an engraving by Paulus Pontius after an oil sketch by Peter Paul Rubens, was widely disseminated and copied in the Spanish Americas (fig. 1). The image of Saint Francis supporting three orbs may have been the most widely copied motif.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For an array of other Spanish colonial paintings and sculptures referencing the print, see <https://colonialart.org/artworks/377A>.

The origin of the sketch by Rubens is not documented, though it is thought to have been commissioned by a member of the Spanish Habsburg family as the *modello* for the frontispiece of one of the many publications about the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. The oil sketch is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where it is titled *Franciscan Allegory in Honor of the Immaculate Conception*, both apt and more easily understood than the title *Austro Seraphicus Coelum* inscribed on Paulus's engraving.

Rubens's composition, buttressed by the Latin inscriptions on the phylacteries, pays homage to the dedication to the doctrine by the Franciscan order and to the unshakable belief and unstinting support of the Spanish Habsburgs. In the center of the composition, Saint Francis as the *Seraphicus Atlas* bears three spheres upon his shoulders. The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception rests lightly on them. To the right of Saint Francis are four Franciscan monks, including Duns Scotus, who thrusts Heresy into the jaws of Hell. To the left, are four contemporary Habsburgs: Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand, Philip IV king of Spain wearing a crown, his son Prince Balthasar Charles of Austria, and the Infante Carlos of Austria. In a chariot above this group are King Philip's ancestors: Charles V, Philip II, and Philip III. The Peruvian painter closely follows the model.

The painting in the Thoma collection was probably created in the seventeenth century, with the few touches of gold added in the eighteenth.<sup>2</sup> It was undoubtedly commissioned by the Franciscans or for a Franciscan institution. The composition, invented by Rubens and engraved by Paulus Pontius, was widely known. However, it is unlikely that the many versions of it created by artists in the Spanish Americas during the colonial period refer to the actual engraving

---

<sup>2</sup> The Spanish Habsburg dynasty ended in 1700, replaced by members of the French Bourbon family.

by Pontius. Like other European prints that were widely used in the Americas, the engraving was undoubtedly itself copied into less expensive versions that were then sent to the colonies.

The painter of the Thoma version did not follow the original slavishly. For one thing, the horizontal composition has been adapted to a vertical format. Other details vary, notably, the three orbs borne by Saint Francis have been transformed into images within circular frames. One depicts Adam and Eve, representing the original sin that Mary Immaculate was born without. The bottom two borne by Saint Francis represent Europe and Africa and a third adds America and the southern sea to the world, thus bringing the vast realms of the Habsburgs together.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt