



Unidentified artist

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Peru, probably Cuzco

18th century

Oil on canvas, 35 x 16 inches

This painting is modelled on a European engraving, as so many Spanish colonial paintings were. However, it does not represent a popular saint, but rather a theologian, Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296-298 – 2 May 373), notable for his battle against the heresies of Arianism, for the Catholic dogma of *Consubstantiation* and for his articulation of the Trinity.

In the center of the composition, Athanasius wears a bishop's miter and bears the episcopal staff. Beneath his figure is a scene recalling his earliest beginnings in the Catholic church. It was recounted that Bishop Alexander stood by a window watching boys on the beach below imitating the rite of Christian baptism. He discovered that one of them, Athanasius, had acted as bishop. Alexander encouraged the boys to follow careers in the clergy.

At upper left, Athanasius serves as secretary of Bishop/Patriarch Alexander at the First Council of Nicaea where the Nicene Creed, a formulary of faith, was drawn up. At around this time, Athanasius may have become acquainted with the hermits who lived in the Egyptian desert, especially the solitary who became Saint Anthony Abbot, namesake of the seminary established in Cuzco in 1692, now the *Universidad Nacional de San Antonio Abad del Cuzco*.

Athanasius is said to be the author of the life of Anthony Abbot. In the cartouche below the Council of Nicaea, Athanasius is pictured visiting the hermit in his desert cave.

The life and times of Athanasius were fraught by his implacable opposition to Arianism. He was sent into exile five times under the aegis of four Roman emperors. The charges varied. At a council called in Milan in 355, he was condemned to exile a third time. The cartouche at upper right frames the scene of his arrest during Mass by a band of armed men, and the scene below seems to picture his departure, accompanied by some of his faithful companions.

The sobriety of this composition seems to reflect a devotion to the college of Saint Anthony Abbot in Cuzco. Perhaps it was commissioned by a member of the faculty or by a grateful graduate.