



Unidentified artist

Saint Gertrude with the Vicar of Abancay

c. 1784

Peru

Oil on canvas

35 x 29 1/8

Inscription: *Oración que decía la Santa todos los días. Glor[i]osa sea dada a la Trinid[ad], suavísima, dulcísima, benignísima, nobilísima, excelentísima, resplandeciente, serena y ajena de toda turbación Imperial Majestad por las [...] llagas de mi muy amado sanador y escogido entre mil [...] es Jesucristo, mi señor, Amén. A devoción del Doctor Don Josef Travitazo, Cura y Vicario de la Doctrina de Abancay. Enero 22 de 1784.*

[Prayer that the saint said every day. Glorious be given to the Trinity, most gentle, most sweet, most benign, most noble, most excellent, resplendent, serene and free from all disturbance Imperial Majesty by the [...] wounds of my beloved healer and chosen among a thousand [...] is Jesus Christ, my Lord, Amen. To the devotion of Doctor Don Josef Travitazo, Priest and Vicar of the *Reducción*¹ of Abancay. January 22, 1784.]

¹ A *reducción* in the Viceroyalty of Peru was a settlement created by Spanish colonial authorities to relocate and concentrate Indigenous populations into organized communities. This system aimed to facilitate conversion to Christianity, Indigenous labor, and administrative control.

Saint Gertrude of Helfta, known as Saint Gertrude the Great (1256-1302), was a German Benedictine nun and mystic of the 13th century, who was renowned for her profound spiritual experiences detailed in her work *Legatus Divinae Pietatis*, or “The Herald of Divine Love.” She is frequently portrayed as a nun dressed in a black habit with wide sleeves which, as displayed in the Thoma painting, is richly adorned with intricate designs of leaves and golden flowers. Although Gertrude held the position of chantress at the Convent of Helfta, she is often depicted as an abbess, holding a baculum in one hand. A distinctive attribute of her iconography is the depiction of a heart on her chest, within which the Christ Child is shown.

The rise in popularity of St. Gertrude during the early 17th century must be understood within the broader context of the Counter-Reformation and anti-Lutheran movements, which were crucial in shaping new visual and devotional practices within Catholicism. These movements emphasized the importance of mysticism, the veneration of saints, and the doctrine of Purgatory as central tenets of Catholic piety. The emerging visual culture of this period played a significant role in reinforcing these religious concepts, as well as positioning Saint Gertrude as a key figure whose intercession was sought to aid souls in Purgatory.

A resurgence in the devotion to Saint Gertrude can be attributed to several key developments such as the publication of Alonso de Andrade's *Vida de la gloriosa virgen y abadesa Santa Gertrudis* in 1663 and her inclusion in the Roman Martyrology in 1677.² A proliferation of printed materials appeared throughout the 18th century, particularly in Madrid, Murcia, Puebla, and Lima, playing crucial roles in reviving and spreading devotion to the saint. Notably, while Gertrude had long been invoked as a protector against a perilous death, it was in the 18th century that her intercession for the salvation of souls became a prominent theme in devotional literature. New biographical works, such as Juan Bautista Lardito's *Idea de una perfecta religiosa en la vida de Santa Gertrudis la Grande, hija del gran padre y patriarca San Benito* (1717) further solidified her iconographic presence, which was reinforced by the inclusion of Juan Francisco de Palomo's influential engraving showing baby Jesus nestled in the heart of the saint (Fig. 1).³

Indeed, the Thoma painting is partly based in Palomo's engraving. In Christian iconography, the heart was also considered as the receptor, along with the brain, of divine inspiration due to the fact that it was one of the areas where the soul was thought to reside.⁴ In Gertrude's writings, the infant Jesus reveals the dogma of the incarnation of the Word of God, and she narrates that Jesus was born in her heart.

Surrounding the baldachin under which the Saint appears are seven medallions that picture the mystical experiences of Saint Gertrude. In the upper left corner is her vision of Christ

² Ibid., 10.

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Nancy Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe," *Studies in Society and History*, no. 42 (2000): 280.

on the cross embracing Gertrude. This vision reflected her closeness to Jesus, whom she constantly calls in her writings as the “Divine Bridegroom.” Below this medallion there is a depiction of Gertrude’s vision of Christ touching her tongue, which symbolizes the purification of her speech and her ability to communicate divine truths. In the lower left corner is portrayed one of Gertrude’s most famous mystical experiences: the exchange of hearts with Christ, where she saw Jesus take her heart and replace it with His own, indicating a profound spiritual transformation and union with Him. This exchange with the *cor Jesu* symbolized the complete surrender of her will to God's will and the indwelling of Christ within her.

To the right of the baldachin, the upper medallion depicts the Community of Helfta receiving Communion directly from Christ. In fact, for Gertrude, the Eucharist was the equivalent of and the occasion for ecstasy as narrated in Book 2 of the *Legatus Divinae Pietatis*. The German nun explains there that in January 1281, after receiving communion, she experienced a vision of Christ as a beautiful youth who pledged his troth to her.⁵ The unifying visions that she subsequently enjoyed, always given on days when she received the Eucharist, were connected with her devotion to the wounds of Christ. Below the medallion, is depicted the vision of Gertrude drinking the blood from Christ’s side. At the bottom is Gertrude’s vision of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus. Lastly, at the feet of the Saint appears Gertrude’s vision of a Moorish attack on her convent. This vision was likely a later addition to her hagiography by an Spanish author.

In the Viceroyalty of Peru, we know through inventories and archival documents that the Saint Gertrude enjoyed great popularity. In the church of La Merced in Lima, there was an altar dedicated to Saint Gertrude, to which the *morena libre*, Martina Vargas, donated all her jewels and noted in her testament that she wanted to be buried a “los pies del altar.”⁶ Moreover, in the Andes, the Jesuits had a sculpture of Saint Gertrude in the church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción of Juli and a painting of her in the church of Acora (Fig.2). Moreover, in the Jesuit temple of Cusco, there was an altar dedicated to her.⁷

The cult to Saint Gertrude the Great even reached Abancay, a city located in the Central Highlands that belong to the region of Cuzco during the 18th century. The priest and Vicar of Abancay, Josef de Travitazo, is depicted kneeling in prayer, wearing a black habit. The cartellino at the right of the painting recounts a prayer attributed to Saint Gertrude that mentions her devotion to the Trinity and to the wounds of Jesus, as well as the date in which it was probably finished: January 22, 1784. A document referring to the payment of funds in the region of Cuzco

⁵ Gertrude the Great “Book II. The Memorial of the Abundance of Divine Sweetness,” in *Gertrude of Helfta. The Herald of Divine Love*, ed. Margaret Winkworth (New York: Paulist Press, 1992): 95

⁶ Martina Vargas, Will, February 2, 1795, Lima, Peru. AGNP, Tribunal Eclesiastico, leg. 63, doc. 21, fol. 6-9.

⁷ For more information about the Jesuit promotion of Gertrude the Great in the Peruvian Andes, see: Ewa Kubiak, *Mirando al arte colonial: Arquitectura y Arte Jesuita en el Virreinato del Peru. Un estudio de problemas especificos* (Varsovia: Centro de Estudios Andinos de la Universidad de Varsovia, 2023): 386-387.

demonstrates that by 1784, Josef de Travitazo was indeed in Abancay as he signed the disbursement of the money to be distributed among the parishioners of the *reducción*.⁸

The inclusion of a fine *brocateado*, or applied gold motifs that decorate the habit of the saint reveal that at a certain point, the painting was probably created in a Cuzqueño workshop. Furthermore, its conservation treatment, and the fineness of its canvas indicates that it is possible that it was a scroll painting intended to travel.⁹ In this context it is possible that Travitazo carried his portrait with the devotional image of Saint Gertrude as he moved about, tending to his pastoral duties.

Verónica Muñoz-Nájar

⁸ Martín Mariano Toledo, Financial accounts for the churches of the region of Cuzco, August 1, 1785, Cusco, Peru. AGNP, Varios-Asuntos Eclesiásticos, leg. 71, doc. 20, fol. 7.

⁹ Rocío Bruquetas, personal communication, July 1st 2024.



Fig. 1 Image included in Juan Bautista Lardito's, *Idea de una perfecta religiosa en la vida de Santa Gertrudis la Grande, hija del gran padre y patriarca San Benito*. Madrid: Francisco del Hierro, 1720.



Fig. 2 Unidentified artist, *Saint Gertrude the Great*, 18th century. Oil on canvas. Iglesia de San Pedro de Acora, Peru (Photograph by Elena Amerio)

TRANSCRIPTION:

Christo desenclavo los brazos de la Cruz y de los echo a Gertrudis=

Christo comulgo a Getrudis y a todas las Religiosas

Le toco con su dedo la lengua diciendole ponga mis palabras en tu boca

se llevo Christo a Getrudis y aplicandola a la llaga d[e] costado le dio a **bever** su preciosa Sangre

Cambiando Corazones le dexo el suyo y le llevo el de Getrudis.

Se le apareció la Reyna de los Angeles con su Santísimo hijo en los brazos se paso a los de Getrudis y se puso [a] mamar (ilegible) [de] sus pechos

**Oración que decía
la Santa todos los
Glor[io]sa sea dada a la Trinid[ad]
suavísima dulcísima benign[isima]
nobilísima exelen[t]ísima resplandeciente serena y agena de toda turbacion Imperial Magestad por las rrubicundas llagas de mi mui amado samador(sic) y escogido entre mil(ilegible) es Jesuchristo mi señor Amen_
A devoción del Doctor Don Josef Traviitazo
Cura y Vicario de la Doctrina
de Abancay Henero 22
de 1784**