



Mariano Balcera

Our Lady of Mercy with Donors

1797

Bolivia, Potosí

Oil on canvas, 51 ½ x 36 ½ inches

Inscription: *A devoc.ⁿ de D.ⁿ Esteban Villanueva, y de su Esposa D.^a Dionisia Lopez Camelo en Potosi y Febrero 7 de 1797. Mariano B[...]¹ fecit.*

Collection of the Carl and Marilyn Thoma Foundation, acc. no. 2025.7

¹ The inscription was repainted, probably long ago. The last name of the artist no longer reads "Balcera," though his authorship is not disputed here.

The Thoma collection includes a number of paintings in which Our Lady of Mercy appears. For more information about the iconography, see *Our Lady of Mercy* (1997.014).

Here Our Lady of Mercy appears in her white habit with the emblem of the Mercedarian order on her breast. Attended by angels, she bears the scapular of the order at her right, and the shackles, a reference to the captives released by the members of the order, at her left.

On the earthly terrain below are the donor Esteban Villanueva and his wife Dionisia López Camelo. He wears male clothing typical of the period. She seems to be dressed in mourning, complete with a black head covering. It may be that she is shown in mourning for a deceased daughter, pictured as a smaller version of herself nearby.

Mario Chacón Torres found a document in the archives of the cathedral of Potosí, Bolivia that records, on 31 December 1799 “140 pesos pagados al maestro pintor Balcera por la pintura de cuadros, retablo y coro de la Capilla de Aranzazu de la Iglesia de San Agustín.” Chacón Torres also assigned two paintings on a single wood panel, then in a private collection in Potosí, to Mariano Balcera. The paintings, representing the *Road to Calvary* and the *Workshop of Saint Joseph*, were signed *Balcera me fecit*.²

The contract for the decoration of the chapel in the church of San Agustín suggests that by 1799 Mariano Balcera was a well-regarded artist in Potosí, with a workshop that enabled him to take on that substantial commissions.³ His known oeuvre, however, is astonishingly meagre. The first painting connected to him was the signed and dated *Santa Fortunata* (Fig. 1), which is clearly signed “Balcera” twice on the canvas (Figs. 2-3).

When José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert published their first version of *Holguín y la pintura altoperuana del virreinato* in 1956, they noted that the painting is by Mariano Balcera.⁴ We do not know exactly how he signed other paintings, but it is likely that the change to “Balcera” is found in the contract for the above-mentioned paintings for San Agustín: the notary

² Mario Chacón Torres, *Arte virreinal en Potosí: fuentes para su historia* (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1973), p. 131. The *Workshop of Saint Joseph* was illustrated in José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert, *Holguín y la pintura virreinal en Bolivia* (La Paz: Librería Editorial “Juventud”: 1997, but it is too poorly reproduced (fig. 280) to discern the artist’s style.

³ The paintings are not known.

⁴ José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert, *Holguín y la pintura altoperuana del virreinato* (La Paz: Serie Arte y Artistas, Biblioteca Paceña-Alcaldía Municipal, 1956) p. 179 and fig. 120. The Mesas’ 1977 book is not actually a second edition, as stated on the title page: it is a much longer, more detailed book.

who wrote the document probably used the more “Spanish” name Balcera. Chacón Torres adopted that spelling and, later, so did Mesa and Gisbert.

The signature on the Thoma painting has been further altered through careless repainting to a name best read as “Mariano Becerra,” but we can be confident that this work is by Mariano Balcera as no other artist working in Potosí named Mariano has been identified (Fig. 4).

A painting attributed to Balcera’s workshop (Fig. 5), which is stylistically close to the Thoma painting, is currently our best guide to the master’s suave figure style.⁵ It has been attributed to Balcera’s workshop by comparison with the painting now in the Thoma collection and because it is not signed, as the master clearly preferred for works by his own hand.⁶

The dedications inscribed on Balcera’s extant paintings tell us that he worked for a distinguished clientele. The Thoma painting was commissioned by Esteban Villanueva about whom more could probably be discovered: the distinguished genealogy of his wife, Dionisia López Camelo y Tapia, can be found on-line. The small workshop painting illustrated above was dedicated by Don Ramón Odriozola, undoubtedly a member of a wealthy mining family of Basque descent.

A painting called *The Two Trinities* by the family to which it still belongs in Tucumán, Argentina was discovered in 1980 to bear Mariano Balcera’s name and the inscription: “*A Devocion de D^a Maria Josefa Villafañe, Potosi, julio de 1792.*”⁷ María Josefa was married to José de Molina, a wealthy and powerful resident of Tucumán.⁸ It has been suggested that this devotional painting was commissioned by José de Molina as a pendant to another work by Balcera inscribed “*A devoción de Da. Isavel Rubert Potosi y julio 16 y 1792.*”⁹ The devotee, María Isabel Rubert y López Aráoz had married Diego Ramón Molina Villafañe, eldest son of José de Molina and María Josefa Villafañe. Isabel

⁵ The current location of the two-side panel identified by Chacón Torres is unknown

⁶ This painting was identified by Gustavo Tudisco, curator of the collection of the Museo I. Fernández Blanco, who kindly shared his information with me in a message dated February 3, 2025.

⁷ Sara Peña de Bascary, “Del arte cúllico al retrato,” *Revista de la Junta de Estudios Históricos de Tucumán*, no. 16 (Dec. 2018), pp. 81-116, at. pp. 103-04.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

⁹ Celia Terán, *El retrato en Tucumán antes del siglo XX* (Tucumán, Argentina: EDUNT, Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 2008), pp. 118-119. Peña de Bascary and Terán illustrate the paintings they discuss. Unfortunately, the paintings are of documentary interest only as their poor condition prevents stylistic analysis.

is pictured kneeling before a large image of the body of Christ on Mary's lap. It is clear that Balcera did not require the presence of a sitter to paint a "donor portrait." These commissions reflect Balcera's reputation beyond Potosí.¹⁰

The Thoma painting was until recently in a private collection in Buenos Aires. Thus, several of the rare paintings by Mariano Balcera or his workshop, painted in Potosí, found their way into collections in Argentina, where they remain today.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt with Veronica Muñoz-Najar Luque, with thanks to our colleagues Sara Peña de Bascary, Carlos Ponce Ponte, Lucía Querejazu Escobari and Gustavo Tudisco.

¹⁰ Mario Chacón Torres's suggestion that the Balcera who worked in Potosí in the late eighteenth century is the same artist as Mariano Osorio y Balcera, documented in Sucre in 1841, has correctly been ignored. See Mario Chacón Torres, "Más datos sobre la pintura boliviana del siglo XIX," *Anales del Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas* 11 (1958), 99-111, at p. 100.



Fig. 1. Mariano Balcera, *Santa Fortunata*, 1798, Museo de la Casa Nacional de la Moneda, Potosí, Bolivia.



Fig. 2. Balcera's signature on the *Santa Fortunata*: "Mariano Balzera ma fecit. año de 1798."



Fig. 3. Balcera's second signature on the *Santa Fortunata*: "Mariano Balzera fecit."

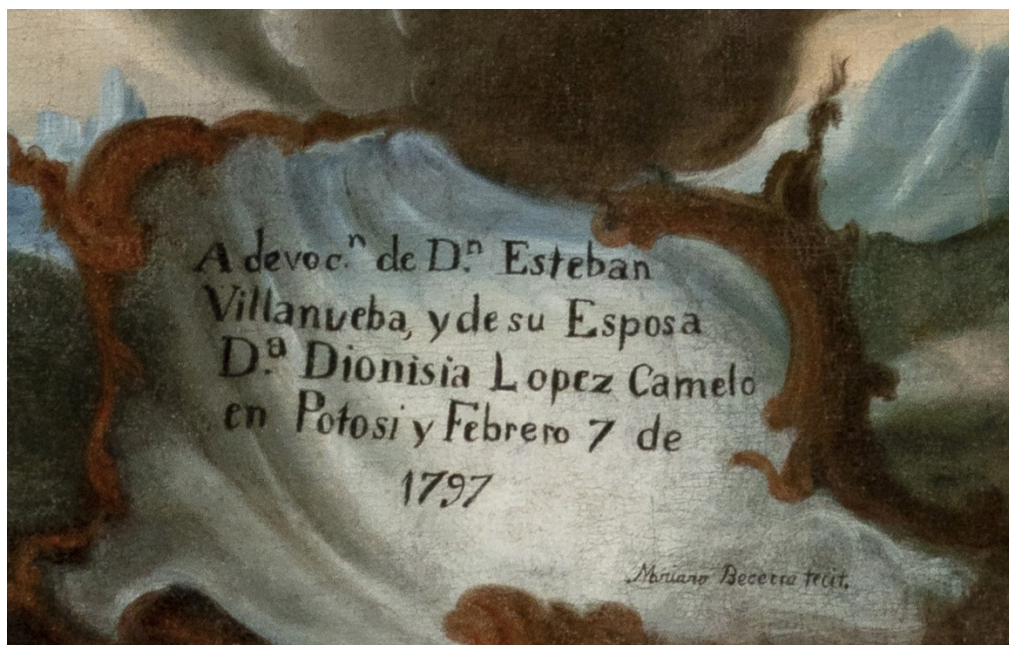


Fig. 4. Detail of the Thoma painting



Fig. 5. Workshop of Mariano Balcera, *Our Lady of Mount Carmel with a Donor*, ca. 1797, oil on panel, 9 x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Museo Hispanoamericano Isaac Fernández Blanco, Buenos Aires, Argentina.