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Unidentified Artist

Our Lady of Mercy of Callao

Peru

18th century

Oil on canvas

23 ³/₄ x 18 ¹³/₁₆ inches

The city of Callao, which lies about 9 miles to the west of Lima, was the main trading port for the Spanish empire in South America. Our Lady of Mercy – Nuestra Señora de la Misericordia – was popular with the sailors who came into port, along with other advocations like Nuestra Señora del Buen Viaje, worshipped at the nearby Augustinian church.¹

On September 29, 1675, the feast day of Saint Michael the Archangel, an image of the Virgin at the Jesuit Church in Callao was discovered to be “bathed in a type of dew or sweat.”² It was not the first episode of miraculous sweat and tears that summer, but it spurred the friars into action. The miraculous image quickly attracted attention in Callao and word spread to Lima. Witnesses mopped up the moisture with handkerchiefs, one of which was sent to Countess of Castellar, the wife of the Viceroy of Peru, leading the esteemed couple to visit the image personally; the archbishop of Lima, Juan de Almoguera also came to examine the painting.³ Eventually word of the miraculous image reached Pope Clement XII (r. 1730-40) who authorized an indulgence to those who prayed before it.⁴

The original image was reported by the seventeenth-century chronicler José de Buendía to be almost divinely beautiful.⁵ It had arrived in Peru in a galleon from Spain, and not bearing any information as to its origins or destination, was put on display at the Jesuit Church in 1662. The friars displayed it in an ebony frame adorned with silver brackets and housed it a glass vitrine in the Chapel of Loreto.

¹ Rubén Vargas Ugarte, *Historia del culto de María en Iberoamérica y de sus imágenes y santuarios más celebrados* (Buenos Aires: Editores Huarpes, 1947), 641n1.

² José de Buendía, *Sudor, y lagrimas de Maria Santissima en su santa imagen de la Misericordia: Reconocidas a 29. de setiembre dia del Arcangel S. Miguel año de 1675...* (Lima: En casa de Juan de Quevedo, 1676), n.p. The episode is also related in the unpublished Jesuit history by Jacinto Barrasa (or Barraza).

³ Vargas Ugarte, *Historia del culto*, 640.

⁴ José Eusebio Llano y Zapata, *Observación diaria critico-historico-meteorologica* (Lima, 1748) reprinted in *Terremotos: Colección de la relaciones de los mas notables que ha sufrido esta capital y que la han arruinado...*, ed. D. Manuel de Odrizola (Lima: Aurelio Alfaro, 1863), 126.

⁵ Buendía, *Sudor y lagrimas*, n.p.

The miraculous image, along with the church that housed it, was destroyed in the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami that struck Callao in October 1746.⁶ Numerous copies of the lost image survive today in collections across South America.⁷ All of these images show the Virgin as Buendía described her: in three-quarter view, with her head inclined to the left, framed by the cascade of her golden hair and blue mantle. In some versions, tears can be seen running down her cheeks.

Reclinada un poco sobre el hombro izquierdo la cabeza, partido por el medio de su frente el cabello, que en crespos de oro desciende por los hombros esparcido entre la espalda y el pecho, un volante, o manto azul abriga y corona su cabeza. Su rostro tan apacible, que no es mas sereno el cielo, espaciosa la frente, los ojos rasgados y amorosos, el color de sus mejillas en bandos de nieve y rosa, sacada con perfección la nariz, la boca pequeña y encendidos en roja modestia sus labios, y vertiendo risa.⁸

Nearly all surviving copies of the work bear the same inscription found on the Thoma painting: “Copia de una imagen de Nuestra Señora de la Misericordia que sudó y lloró en la iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús en el puerto de El Callao, el día del Arcángel San Miguel en 29 de septiembre de 1675 años” (see Fig. 1). The Thoma painting, like other surviving copies of the Virgin of Misericordia, dates to the eighteenth century and was likely created in Cuzco.

⁶ See Charles F. Walker, *Shaky Colonialism: The 1746 Earthquake-Tsunami in Lima, Peru, and Its Long Aftermath* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2008). Llano y Zapata, op. cit., also wrote several accounts of the destruction.

⁷ Examples include versions at the Museo Santa Clara in Bogotá, the Museo de Arte Colonial in Mérida, Venezuela, and the convent of Santa Catalina in Cordoba, Argentina.

⁸ Buendía, *Sudor y lagrimas*, n.p.



Fig. 1 Unidentified artist, *Nuestra Señora de la Misericordia de Callao*, 18th century, oil on canvas. Auctioned at Christie's New York, May 23, 2018.