



2013.043

Our Lady of Bethlehem with Indigenous Donor

Unidentified Artist

Cuzco

Eighteenth century

Oil on canvas, 95 2/3 x 63 inches

On the swirling banderoles at either side of Mary the words “Dios te salve” refer to the Spanish language version of the prayer in English that begins, “Hail, Mary, full of grace.” The inscriptions at the left beg her to pray “for me” and for sinners. The inscriptions at the right of

the canvas call upon her as the spouse of the Holy Spirit and as the temple/*sagrario* of the most holy Trinity. (A *sagrario* is the space in a cathedral where holy objects are kept.)

Our Lady of Bethlehem is a patron saint of Cuzco, where a sculpture representing this devotion to Mary is carried in procession during the feast of Corpus Christi and then returned to its home in the convent of Santa Clara. The painted image seems to make its first appearance in Cuzco in a large canvas of 1698 often erroneously attributed to the indigenous painter Basilio Santa Cruz Pumacallao (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Unidentified artist, *Bishop Mollinedo before an Image of Our Lady of Bethlehem*, 1698, Cathedral of Cuzco.¹

The markedly flattened forms of the cult figure holding before her an equally two-dimensional, doll-like image of the Christ Child became characteristic of the iconic type. Before the altar with its embossed silver frontal, Bishop Manuel de Mollinedo kneels in adoration of the dressed sculpture. In the background are scenes telling of the miraculous history of the sculpture, which appeared in a box floating in the waves off the coast of Lima. When fishermen brought the container ashore, they found not only the carved and polychromed sculpture, but as well a note indicating that it was intended for Cuzco (*Imagen de Nuestra Señora de Belén para la Ciudad*

de Cuzco”). Other legends associated with the miraculous image in Cuzco are also illustrated in this large painting.²

Another another in the Cuzco cathedral commissioned by Mollinedo represents Carlos II and his queen Mariana de Neoburgo worshipping before the altar of Our Lady of Almudena, a patroness of Madrid. The composition of that painting may have been based on a print by or after one created by the court artist Francisco Ignacio Ruiz de la Iglesia (1649-1704) in 1689 (fig. 2). A similar Spanish print may be the model for the painting representing Our Lady of Bethlehem.



Fig. 2. Francisco Ignacio Ruiz de la Iglesia, *King Carlos II and Mariana of Neuburg before an Image of Our Lady of Almudena*, engraving.

The priest of the church of Our Lady of Bethlehem was Mollinedo's secretary, Don Martín de Irure, who paid for the construction of the church in 1696, and to which the bishop contributed the altarpieces and paintings. Mollinedo also commissioned for the church a

monstrance that cost 7,000 pesos and a crown of gold and precious stones for the cult image at a cost of 17,000 pesos. The silver altar frontal he also commissioned may be the very one pictured in the painting in the Cathedral of Cuzco discussed above.³

The Thoma version of this popular subject is of very high quality, painted by an artist with careful attention to details such as the freshness of the flowers in the silver vases and baskets on the altar upon which Our Lady of Bethlehem rests. Mary's triangular-shaped gown is liberally illuminated with gold, and swags of gold chains cross her mantle. A painting of Our Lady of Bethlehem in the Casa de Aliaga in Lima (fig. 3), so similar though less detailed, suggests that it is not rare to have donor figures in Spanish colonial paintings of the Virgin Mary, but nor is it usual. The presence of the indigenous donor figure at the lower left thus adds considerably to the interest of this painting. The man who commissioned this image of Our Lady of Bethlehem is clearly a person of distinction dressed in European style. His long nose and chin are unusual features that suggest that this might be a real portrait, not just a generic representation of an Indian *cacique*.



Fig. 3. Unidentified artist, Cuzco, circa 1675-1700, Colección Aliaga Ascenzo, Casa de Aliaga, Lima. Photo courtesy of Casa de Aliaga, Lima.⁴



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Unidentified artist

Our Lady of Bethlehem

Cuzco, Peru

18th century

Oil on canvas

62 ½ x 46 ½ inches

Another version of the “*Virgen de Belén*” in the Thoma collection might also be based on the same print because the silver volutes on the painted processional cart are very like and the overall patterns on Mary’s gown are similar. However, the unidentified artists have imaginatively varied the details. In this painting, the Virgin and Child appear as a miraculous vision revealed by the curtains held open by putti, a motif borrowed from other hieratic images.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

¹ The painting has long been attributed to “Basilio de Santa Cruz Pumacallao” without any documentary evidence.

²See Héctor Schenone, *Santa Iconografía del arte colonial: Santa María*. (Buenos Aires: Editorial de la Universidad Católica Argentina “Santa María de los Buenos Aires,” 2008), pp. 311-312, and Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, in *Painting the Divine: Images of Mary in the New World*, exh cat., Josef Diaz and Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, eds. (Santa Fe: New Mexico History Museum in Cooperation with Fresco Books, 2014), cat. no. 4, pp. 28-30.

³See Suzanne L. Stratton-Pruitt, “The King in Cuzco: Bishop Mollinedo’s Portraits of Charles II,” in *Art in Spain and the Hispanic World: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Brown* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing in association with Center for Spain in America, 2010), pp. 318-320 of 304-321.

⁴ The work is published by Patricia Díaz Cayeros, “Clothing and Transfiguration: Vestments and Viceregal Representation in the Religious Images of Viceregal Latin America,” in: *Painted Cloth: Fashion and Ritual in Colonial Latin America*, Rosario I. Granados, ed. (Blanton Museum of Art, 2022), pp. 103-125, at p. 117.