



Bernardo Bitti (1548-1610)

Jesus, Mary and Joseph¹

Peru

Ca. 1600

Oil on panel, 35 x 24 inches

¹ In the early modern period, paintings depicting what we have some to call “The Holy Family” were always listed in inventories and similar documents as representing “Jesus, Mary and Joseph.” As there are many works of art that represent the more extended family unit, the paintings that are limited to these three figures are identified in the Thoma collection as “Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” as they were in the time of the colonial artists who painted them.

Bernardo Bitti, a Jesuit friar from Camerino in Italy, came to Peru in 1572 with the second Jesuit mission there led by Diego de Bracamonte. A painter trained in the Mannerist style, Bitti was specifically brought to Peru to create works of art for the churches established by the Jesuits in South America. He followed a peripatetic career, creating paintings for his order in Lima, Cuzco, Juli, Sucre, and Arequipa, rushed from place to place, so anxious were the Jesuits for works of art. Besides the large paintings destined for altarpieces, Bitti left a number of individual canvases and panel paintings that accord with contemporary theories about devotional art.

Antonio de la Vega, S.J., in his *Historia...de las Cosas sucedidas en este Colegio del Cuzco en estos Reynos del Perú...hasta hoy, primero de noviembre año 1600*, reported that Bitti painted many smaller pieces that decorated the cells of the monastery and the Chapel of the Conception of Our Lady of the students.² One of these may have been the “*Virgen del Pajarito*” (The Virgin and Child with a Little Bird) in the Cathedral of Cuzco (fig. 1), which is painted in oil on wood panel like the *Jesus, Mary and Joseph* in the Thoma collection.



Fig. 1. Bernardo Bitti, *Virgen del Pajarito*. Cathedral of Cuzco, Peru.

Like the painting of *Jesus, Mary and Joseph*, the *Virgen del Pajarito* was “enhanced” in the eighteenth century by the addition of gold to the surface of the painting, enriching the drapery of the figures with the impression of gold brocade called *brocateado*. This was by no means unusual; a number of seventeenth-century paintings were similarly “enhanced” in the eighteenth century. In the Thoma painting, Mary and the Christ Child also received golden haloes, though Joseph, probably for lack of space at the upper left, did not.

However, small paintings like this one are too rare for us to distinguish Bitti’s hand, so we need to rely on a number of larger paintings to study how he paints these figures. We might, for example,

² José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert, *Historia de la pintura cuzqueña*, vol. 1 (Lima: Fundación Augusto N, Wiese/Banco Wiese, 1982): 61, referring to the edition by Rubén Vargas Ugarte.

consider a detail from Bitti's painting of Our Lady of Candlemas (*Candelaria*), painted for the Jesuits in Lima (fig. 2) or a Virgin and Child for the Jesuits in Arequipa (fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Bernardo Bitti, *Our Lady of Candlemas* (detail). Church of San Pedro, Lima – Peru.



Fig. 3. Bernardo Bitti, *Virgin and Child* (detail). Sacristy of the Jesuit church, Arequipa – Peru.

Or, we could examine several of the large paintings originally intended to decorate the altar of the Jesuit church in Sucre, Bolivia (figs. 4 and 5). Bitti never signed a painting, so we depend on documentation of his work, which the Jesuit order provided and art historians have confirmed, as well as stylistic study, to identify his hand.

It is through such visual analysis that the “*Virgen del Cetro*” (fig. 6) has been accepted by scholars as by Bitti's hand. An additional visual connection to another painting by Bitti is this image of the Christ Child, with the unusual pose of his crossed leg (fig. 7).

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt



Fig. 4. Bernardo Bitti, *Annunciation* (detail). Cathedral Museum, Sucre – Bolivia.



Fig. 5. Bernardo Bitti, *Nativity* (detail). Cathedral Museum, Sucre – Bolivia.



Fig. 6. Bernardo Bitti, *Virgen del Cetro*. Museo de Osma, Lima – Peru.



Fig. 7. Bernardo Bitti, *Virgen de la Pera*, 1585-1602. Church of San Pedro, Juli – Peru. Photograph by Raúl Montero.



Unidentified Artist

Virgin and Child

Peru

Early 17th century

Oil on panel, 17 x 11 inches.

There is another painting in the Thoma collection that was acquired in 2010, when it was attributed to Bernardo Bitti. Although this work is clearly by an artist working in the Mannerist style that was predominant in early colonial Peru, close study reveals that it is not by Bitti. The faces are just enough different to reveal another hand at work. Also, while Bitti did focus on the central figures in his small paintings (as in figs. 1 and 5 pictured above), the image of the Virgin and Child in this painting is much more closely cropped.

There are other lovely paintings of Mary and the Christ Child that have been attributed to Bitti in error; however, most of them similarly reflect both iconographical types popular at the time and the Mannerist style that was predominant in colonial Peru around 1600.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt