



2000.004
Unidentified Artist
Ecuador, Quito
Noah's Ark
Late 18th century
Oil on canvas, 35 x 47 inches

Of all the subjects based on stories following the fall of man in the Old Testament book of Genesis, one of the more frequently illustrated in prints, though not in paintings, was the entrance of pairs of “every living thing of all flesh” into the ark Noah built according to God’s instructions.



Fig. 1. Jan Theodor de Bry, *Noah's Ark*, engraving for the *Biblia Sacra*, published in Mainz in 1609. This is one of 140 illustrations created by de Bry for the book.

The iconography of the painting is thus not at all original: its immense charm is in the details. The artist has included European, American, exotic and fantastic animals: camels and dromedaries from Asia; horses and a peacock from Europe; a turkey and an armadillo, representing Central and South America; an elephant from Africa; water buffalo, all manner of birds, and so on. Most strikingly, Noah's immediate family will be traveling with an indigenous family who carry their belongings aboard in bags and baskets. And the mountains in the distance

rise as majestically as the highest Andes. The print is based, with little variation, on a 1609 engraving by Jan Theodor de Bry (Fig. 1).

Despite the carefully arranged and painted figures of the individual animals, as though they were illustrations in a biology textbook, the composition is animated by the gestures and windblown garments of the elderly Noah and his wife, by the brilliant rays of light coming from God, and by the whirling, diving flocks of birds.

Noah's Ark was interpreted as a prefiguration of the Church itself, where the elect would find salvation, as God had saved the Ark and its passengers from the flood. In Alonso de Villega's *Flos Sanctorum*, the life of Noah was told in four chapters, one of which is titled "How the Ark of Noah was a figure of the Church, the one combatted by the waters of the Flood, the other by heretics."¹ The Peruvian creole Antonio de León Pinelo, in his 1650 *Paraíso en el Nuevo Mundo*, wrote that God arranged for Christ to be prefigured by Noah, and that the Church, symbolized by the Ark, illustrated the "New World, under Spanish flags. . .".²

It is also possible, however, that the religious iconography of this painting was not of foremost importance to either the painter or the patron who commissioned it. It is unlikely that this *Noah's Ark* was ever part of a series of paintings on Old Testament prefigurations of Christian doctrine. Its small scale and the loving attention to anecdotal details suggest instead that it was painted for its secular qualities, for a collector who enjoyed a painting featuring what might be imagined as the Andean landscape, its people, and its fauna.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

¹ "Cómo el arca de Noé fué figura de la Iglesia, la una combatida de la aguas del Diluvio, la otra de herejes." Ana María Roteta de la Maza, *La ilustración del libro en la España de la Contrarreforma: Grabados de Pedro Angel y Diego de Astor, 1588-1637* (Toledo: Instituto Provincial de Investigaciones y Estudios Toledanos: 1985), p. 131.

² See Ramón Mujica Pinilla, "Identidades alegóricas: lecturas iconográficas del barroco al neoclásico," in: *El barroco peruano* (Lima: Banco del Crédito del Perú: 2003), p. 262.