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*Our Lady of the Forsaken*

Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

Eighteenth century

Oil and gold on canvas, 48 ½ x 41 inches

The construction of the old hospital in the city of Valencia, Spain was begun in 1410, following the incendiary exhortations of the Mercedarian friar Joan Gilabert Jofré, whose passion convinced the city magistrates to build a haven for the unfortunate. These included the abandoned mentally ill and “simpletons who were not possessed by the Devil,” but rather were, according to Jofré, “blessed by God.” During the fifteenth century, a carved and polychromed sculpture representing the Virgin Mary after her death or “dormition” was laid upon the cadavers of the unfortunates who died in the hospital, tied to the biers with yellow silk cords. The sculptured image reclined with her head upon a pillow. Since the seventeenth century the sculpture has been shown standing, so that her neck, bent forward by the original pillow, instead bends toward the viewer (fig. 1). The people of Valencia fondly call the sculpture “the little hump-back.”<sup>i</sup>



Fig. 1. Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados

By 1414, there was a confraternity devoted to the care of all kinds of indigent people, orphans and the homeless, as well as the mentally ill. In 1416 King Alfonso the Magnanimous granted the confraternity permission to expand the meaning of the title of the institution to include the “innocents” of the Massacre of the Innocents under King Herod to the original meaning of *inocentes* (simpletons). This explains the inclusion of the two children, often bearing grievous wounds, under the mantle of the Virgin Mary (fig. 2). The responsibilities of the confraternity expanded to include proper burials for the bodies of drowned sailors washed ashore, the poor, and prostitutes.



Fig. 2. Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados

The branch of lilies in the right hand of the Virgin Mary in the Thoma painting is a symbol of her purity that was mentioned even in the fifteenth century. The painting also includes the pillow that was placed under the head of the reclining figure. The image of Our Lady of the Forsaken (Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados) was given jewels by the faithful whose prayers she answered, a common tradition among devotees of cult images of Mary. Unique to Our Lady of the Forsaken, however, were gifts of pillows to place beneath her head. In an inventory of 1459, for example, a member of the confraternity, Tomás Caramany, donated “a pillow for the head of the image when it is carried on top of a body.”<sup>ii</sup> The pillow is in the painting is decorated with tassels on each corner, and another cushion appears beneath her feet. A voluminous cape shelters the two Innocents, whose small limbs are marked by wounds.

A devotion to Our Lady of the Forsaken was brought to Peru as early as 1629 when a native of Valencia resident in Lima built a chapel there devoted to the cult. Later, the 10<sup>th</sup> Count of Lemos, appointed Viceroy of Peru by King Charles II, and his wife Ana de Borja, brought their devotion to Our Lady of the Forsaken with them. With their support a church in Lima

devoted to Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados y San Francisco de Borja was completed and dedicated in 1672.<sup>iii</sup>

Meanwhile, in Cuzco, a painting modeled quite clearly on the traditional composition of painting of Our Lady of the Forsaken, was dedicated in the cathedral in 1646 as “Our Lady of Remedies,” and it is possible that a number of paintings created later in Cuzco were considered to be representations of the “Remedies” painting in the cathedral rather than the “Forsaken” of Valencia.<sup>iv</sup> The composition lent its self to other applications as well. In Quito there is a painting representing Our Lady of the Rosary clearly based on the Valencia prototype, complete with the inclusion of the two Innocents. And there are Cuzco paintings that include Saint Augustine and Saint Monica, holy figures with no connections to either the Valencian cult nor the devotion to Our Lady of Remedies.

In 1761, much later during the colonial period, when José Solís Folch de Cardona, scion of a Valencian family, was named viceroy of the Kingdom of New Granada, a bequest from him built a church for the Franciscan Third Order. A chapel located perpendicular to the presbytery of the church was dedicated to Our Lady of the Forsaken, here with no confusion about identity.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

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<sup>i</sup> The sculpture was believed to have been created by angels. See Javier Portús, “The Holy Depicting the Holy: Social and Aesthetic Issues,” in *Sacred Spain: Art and Belief in the Hispanic World*, ed. Ronda Kasl (Indianapolis, IN: Indianapolis Museum of Art, distributed by Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2009), 37-53.

<sup>ii</sup> I am grateful to my colleague in Valencia, Amador Grinyó, for this reference and other information about Our Lady of the Forsaken.

<sup>iii</sup> For more about the appearance of this type of the Virgin Mary in the art of Colonial South America, see Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, “La Mare de Déu dels Desamparats en l’art colonial dels Andes,” in *Mare del Desemparats*, 2 vols. (Valencia: Museu Valencià de la Il·lustració i de la Modernitat [MuVIM], 2020), 2:49-53 (in Catalan) and 197-201 (in Spanish).

<sup>iv</sup> For the fascinating story behind the painting in the Cathedral of Cuzco, see Patrick Thomas Hajovsky, “Shifting Panoramas: Contested Visions of Cuzco’s 1650 Earthquake,” *The Art Bulletin* 100, no. 4 (December 2018): 34-61.