



2017.072

Unidentified artist

Peru or Bolivia

*Raising of the Cross*

Early seventeenth century.

Oil on copper, 11 5/16 x 8 7/8 inches; frame 25 1/4 x 17 1/4 x 3 7/8 inches

This brightly colored and imaginatively composed painting in oil on copper offers an opportunity to consider the strong possibility that it was created by an artist working “in the circle of Bernardo Bitti,” as has been claimed.

Bitti (Camerino, 1457-Lima, 1610) was a brother in the Society of Jesus, the religious order that brought him to Peru in 1575 to create paintings for their newly constructed churches. That task brought him to Lima, Cuzco, Juli (Peru), La Paz, and Sucre. Bitti’s peregrinations on behalf of his order are fairly well documented by the Jesuit chroniclers in their annual letters. He moved from place to place with a faithful assistant or two, such as the Spaniard Pedro de Vargas, but there is no mention of his establishing a school or taking apprentices. He did not stay in one place long enough to train any “followers” and he did not form a “circle.” Bitti painted canvases for Jesuit churches and then moved on to the next site.

A close reading of this small *Raising of the Cross* can shed light on the fledgling artistic climate in early-seventeenth-century Peru. The composition of the work might have a number of sources, including the engraving found in the late-sixteenth century *Annotations and Meditations on the Gospels* (fig. 1) that was widely used by the Jesuits as a resource for correct iconography.

The viceregal artist might have been familiar with other graphic sources for this composition as well, or even referenced an imported European painting. This multifigured composition with grieving women, soldiers and horses milling around, and even several figures throwing dice to claim Christ's robe was not uncommon in European paintings preceding the possible date of this work.



Fig. 1. *Erigitur crux*. Engraving in Jerónimo Nadal's *Meditations and Annotations on the Gospels*. First published in Antwerp in 1595.

Someone must have instructed the artist in the technique of painting on copper, but that instructor need not have been Bitti, who did not, as far as we know, work in that medium. We also cannot know whether this work might be a naïve adaptation of a larger painting in oil on canvas by Bitti.

However, aspects of this interesting painting certainly suggest that the artist was familiar with Bitti's palette and style (see figs. 2 & 3). The pastel colors are typical of Bitti's work in South America, as they were to a generation of painters in Europe. Draperies are yellow, acid green, salmon, and lavender. Also perhaps borrowed directly from Bitti's example are the unstable poses and nervous gestures that heighten the sense of urgency in the Italian master's narrative paintings.



Fig 2. Bernardo Bitti, *Christ Crucified*, ca. 1583-1585, oil on canvas, 190 x 120 cm. Church of Santo Tomás de Aquino de Rondocan, Acomayo, Cuzco. Photo: Raúl Montero Quispe.

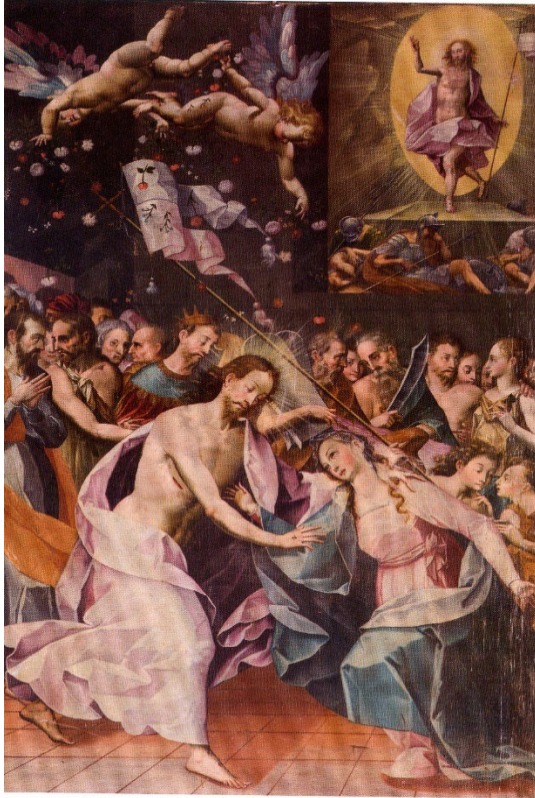


Fig. 3. Bernardo Bitti, *Christ in Limbo*, ca. 1583-1583, oil on canvas, 190 x 120 cm, Church of Santo Tomás de Aquino de Rondocan, Acomayo, Cuzco. Photo: Raúl Montero Quispe.

This small painting on copper, presumably by an Indian or Mestizo artist, renders homage to Bitti's example without his sophistication. The composition is busy, but not cluttered. Each of the narrative and anecdotal motifs are rendered with perfect clarity.

The importance of Bitti's influence in colonial Peru has probably been over emphasized by art historians, for few paintings reflect direct knowledge of the Italian master's work in the way this small painting does.<sup>i</sup>

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

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<sup>i</sup> Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, "El estilo romano en el Perú del siglo XVII" in *Identidades y redes culturales. V Congreso Internacional de Barroco Iberoamericano*, eds. Yolanda Guasch Marí, Rafael López Guzmán, Iván Panduro Sáez, 319-25 (Granada: University of Granada, 2021).