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Unidentified Artist
Guatemala
Saint Joseph and the Christ Child
Eighteenth century
Polychromed and gilded wood, 18 7/8 x 9 7/8 inches.

Throughout Spanish America, the Spanish sculptural tradition of wood carvings given realistically painted finishes enhanced with gilding was continued. Life-size polychromed sculptures were placed in niches on elaborately constructed altarpieces, while smaller versions were acquired for the cells of convents and monasteries and for homes. Some of the most beautiful sculptures created in the Spanish colonies are from Guatemala.

The earliest representations of Saint Joseph in western art depict him as a white-bearded man, so senescent that he is sometimes pictured fallen asleep in scenes of the Nativity. It was Jean Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, who:

systematically reworked St. Joseph's images from that of an aged, ineffective attendant to a vigorous, youthful man who was the divinely-appointed head of God's household, a paragon of perfection who had been sanctified in the womb and was thus incapable of sin, the protector of God's plan for salvation, an industrious provider for the Holy Family, and, along with his spouse Mary, an exemplar of holy matrimony.ⁱ

Gerson's "rehabilitation" of Saint Joseph was followed by Saint Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444), who promoted the Holy Family as the paragon of family life, the most excellent example of Catholic matrimony. In the sixteenth century, the foremost promoter of the virtues of Saint Joseph was Saint Teresa, who founded several Carmelite monasteries dedicated to him. In the *Book of Her Life* (1562-65), Saint Teresa described an ideal monastery, one truly devoted to the early Carmelite rule of poverty, prayer, and solitude, as a recreation of the stable in which Christ was born, and the House of Nazareth, where he was raised by Mary and Joseph, as "a heaven, if one can be had on earth."ⁱⁱ

A large sculpture representing Saint Joseph and the Christ Child that belongs to the church of Santo Domingo in Guatemala City is attributed there to an artist named Alonso de la Paz, who supposedly worked in the late seventeenth century (fig. 1). The Guatemalan scholar Haroldo Rodas, writing about that work in the catalogue of an exhibition organized in 2006 by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, noted, however, that "no documentation exists to confirm this attribution...and other works possibly executed by this artist are hardly comparable to this piece."ⁱⁱⁱ In a recent communication with me, Rafael Ramos Sosa, an expert on Spanish colonial sculpture, confirmed that nothing is surely known about Alonso de la Paz, and that the name has been used "as a consequence of the anxiety to put names to sculptures." Ramos Sosa confirms, however, that this acquisition for the Thoma Collection is a genuine Guatemalan work of the eighteenth century.^{iv}



Fig. 1. *Saint Joseph and the Christ Child*, polychromed wood with gilding, 158 x 75 x 54 cm. Church of Santo Domingo de Guzmán, Archdiocese of Guatemala, Guatemala City.

The sculpture workshops of Guatemala started under the direction of artists from Spain and continued to produce small sculptures for both the domestic market and for export until right up to the twentieth century. These workshops remained faithful to certain models (as exemplified by the comparison illustrated above), although during the nineteenth century, in a nod to the influence of Neoclassicism, the elaborate gilding and polychromy found in prior centuries ceded to painting draperies in solid colors. Figures of saints, and especially figural groups representing Calvary, with Mary and Saint John at the base of an image of Christ Crucified, and often the inclusion of other actors in the Passion narrative, were sent to Spain.

The inventory of the workshop of Juan de San Buenaventura Medina, an artist and lay brother of the Third Order of the Franciscans, taken when he died in Antigua, Guatemala around 1716, records that he had on hand a number of small paintings and sculptures (in a space that was evidently a sales showroom), books on architecture, books on religious subjects, prints, carpenter's benches and tools appropriate for the "oficio de escultor."^v It is likely that he used cedar for his sculptures, as it was used for that purpose so often it was called "madera para santos" (wood for saints), being relatively free of knots, fine-grained to permit detailed carving, and somewhat resistant to xylophagous insects.^{vi}

The sculptor of the Thoma piece created a work filled with a sense of life and movement through the generously conceived volumes and swaying drapery. However, his work would have earned less than would be paid to the painter who gave the wooden figures a coat of gesso, and then added colors and gilding in a process called *estofado*, which roughly translates as “imitation of textiles (stuffs).” For example, a 1790 document related to a commission for a “Belén,” a Nativity scene with figures of the Infant Christ, Mary and Joseph, records that the sculptor was to be paid 80 *pesos* for the three pieces, but the painter would receive 100 *pesos* for the polychromy.^{vii}

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ⁱ Joseph F. Chorpenning, OSFS, “Icon of Family and Religious Life: The Historical Development of the Holy Family Devotion,” in *The Holy Family as Prototype of the Civilization of Love: Images from the Viceregal Americas*, exh. cat., ed. Joseph F. Chorpenning (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 1996), 4.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ See *The Arts in Latin America 1492-1820*, eds. Joseph J. Rishel and Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006), 272.

^{iv} I am grateful to Rafael Ramos Sosa at the University of Seville for sharing his thoughts about this and other works of colonial art with me.

^v Rafael Ramos Sosa, “Entre la imaginería y la estatuaria: Un ejemplo de la coyuntura artística en Guatemala, a propósito de una Dolorosa de Martín Abarca (1802),” *Laboratorio de Arte* 24 (2012): 493.

^{vi} Pablo Amador Marrero, “Una escultura guatemalteca en Cádiz, España. El análisis policromo como clave para su catalogación,” *Encrucijada* 1 (2009): 121-128.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 124.