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ART & ANTIQUES

Santiago Matamoros

Bolivia, 1711

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**Santiago Matamoros
Saint James the Moor Slayer**

Anonymous artist
Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia), 1711
Oil on canvas
229 x 148 cm
Provanence: Private collection, Italy

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The painting before us is, above all, stimulating. Few paintings of Santiago Matamoros are richer than the typical horseman defeating the Muslim hordes with his mere presence; of the many works that exist, few are those that are directly and iconographically related (that is, allegorically) to the conquest and the processes of evangelization in the high Andean areas; an iconography that turned the apostle into an Indian-killer. Let us proceed in order with the reading of the painting.

In this piece, beneath the grandiose central scene of a towering Santiago Matamoros—who, “from a modest disciple of the Nazarene, was turned into a symbol of a militant church”;¹ below this image of the defense and expansion of the Catholic faith, there extends a horizontal predella-like section that further elevates, like a statuary pedestal, the triumphant equestrian figure. At each end of this tight space, two *putti* The corner figures, each holding a bouquet of flowers and wearing a cap with a beret, thus celebrate the reason for the existence of the painting itself, explained in the baroque cartouche that these same cherubs flank. Decorated with masks and scrolls of a very distant Mannerist origin, the text states:

ALUMNOS PIE FORE TUOS SAN[;E/C?]TE YACOB (Your disciples shall be pious, Saint James)
Año de 1711 dedico este lienzo e yglesia el DD Dionysio Brizeño Ribero Cura y Uic.^o de ella Gov.^{or} Ecles.^o desta cruz de la sierra Exam^{or} cin.^l y Uissit.^r G.^r de Ydolatria^s en este arzobispa.^{do} de la Plata.
(Year 1711: This canvas and church were dedicated by Don Dionysio Briceño Rivero, priest and vicar of it, ecclesiastical governor of this Cruz de la Sierra, examiner of the council, and great visitor of idolatries in this archbishopric of La Plata.)

The Latin header is more difficult to read because it seems to have the same spelling problems as the Spanish sentence; problems to which we should surely add other grammatical problems. The text could be read like this:

[Possibly: tus discípulos serán piadosos, Santo Jacobo] (Yours disciples will be pious, Saint James)
Año de 1711 dedicó este lienzo e iglesia el Doctor Don Dionisio Briceño Ribero, Cura y Vicario de ella, Gobernador Eclesiástico de esta [Santa] Cruz de la Sierra, Examinador Sinodal y Visitador General de Idolatrias en este Arzobispado de la Plata. (In the year 1711, Doctor Don Dionisio Briceño Ribero, Priest and Vicar of this church, Ecclesiastical Governor of this [Holy] Cruz de la Sierra, Synodal Examiner, and General Visitor of Idolatries in this Archbishopric of La Plata, dedicated this canvas and church.)

As a method of exposition, one can proceed, first, from the various data provided in the Spanish text to, finally, the Latin heading, in its broad sense. The bishopric of La Plata, or also known as Charcas, was created in 1552 by a papal bull of Julius III, and occupied a large area of territory that was made up of present-day Bolivia and part of its neighboring countries, ie Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Paraguay. “It seems that throughout the colonial era there were frequent cases of a return of the Aymaras to the practice of their rites there where they had apparently adopted Christianity”,² which, as Hans van den

1 Emilio Choy, “From Santiago Matamoros to Santiago mata-indios,” *Journal of the National Museum*, vol. XXVII (1958), 209.

2 Hans van den Berg, “Human Efforts II. Divinatory Observations and Symbolic Techniques,” *Revista Ciencia y Cultura*, nr. 15-16 (August 2005), 75.

Berg correctly observed, caused Archbishop Juan Queipo de Llano to appoint Dr. Dionisio de Torres Briceño Ribero as general visitor for the extirpation of idolatries in 1704.

According to a brief biographical note by Alicia Fraschina, Dionisio de Torres was born in Buenos Aires in 1664, studied at the University of Charcas, where he earned a doctorate in Theology, and pursued an ecclesiastical career as a presbyter of the Third Order of Saint Dominic. In addition to these roles, in 1711—the year in which this painting must be dated—he was the ecclesiastical governor of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, a region marked by a large indigenous population mainly gathered in Jesuit missions. Finally, he was the priest and vicar of the church to which he donated the painting of Santiago Matamoros. It remains unclear which church received this epic scene, and future archival research may reveal the answer.

In any case, the selected iconography, a triumphant equestrian figure of Saint James, that is, of Santiago Matamoros, is appropriately consistent with the title that was given to Dionisio Briceño Ribero in 1704 as the extirpator of idolatries. According to Catholic mythology, during the period of the Spanish reconquest, among the many battles that took place to achieve the expulsion of the Arabs from the Iberian territory, it happened that, on May 23, 844, in the middle of the battle of Clavijo, the apostle Santiago appeared mounted on his horse and with a sword in his hand, to help the Christian army against Abderramán II. Thus, a political-symbolic war began; “and it is that,” quoting the already classic study of Emilio Choy, “it was not enough to fight; The overwhelming advance of Islam had produced a symbol, Muhammad [...], and the victories achieved by the Islamists were due, according to them, to divine favour. The competition determined the need to affirm that divinity also protected Christians [...]”.³ The epithet “Matamoros” (Moor-Slayer) was sufficiently eloquent in itself. But the allegorical essence of the warrior apostle was, in reality, protean, since, during the conquest of America, the presence of his image on the battle standards soon took on a new meaning, making the word “moor” become a direct synonym for infidel, that is, for any indigenous host.

A very significant Peruvian representation of the decisive appearance of Santiago Matamoros on a battlefield was, in fact, that of a Santiago “Mata-indios” in the work written in 1615 by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, entitled *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno* (Fig. 1). The corresponding passage says: “Like lightning he fell from the sky to the fortress of the Inca called Sacsu Guaman, which is the pucara of the Inca above San Cristóbal. And when he fell to the ground the Indians were frightened and said that Illapa had fallen, thunder and lightning



Fig. 1 Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, *Santiago Mata-indios*, wood engraving, 17th century

³ Emilio Choy, “From Santiago Matamoros to Santiago mata-indios,” *Journal of the National Museum*, vol. XXVII (1958), 209-210.

from heaven [...], favor of Christians.”⁴ In the illustration that accompanies the text, the apostle Santiago can be seen defeating an Inca warrior, constituting an allegory of the Conquest. Everything in this image, his posture as a rider, the movement of the horse, more suggested than natural, and the clear distinction of the elements, such as the standard, the sword, the Inca on the ground and his mace, are all duly outlined and separated from each other, like a heraldic representation. In essence, this representation did not vary much over the centuries.

The painting in question, as noted at the outset, presents a Santiago who vacillates between his two epithets of Matamoros and Mata-Indios. Triumphant on his richly adorned white horse, brandishing his sword above his hat, he appears calm and majestic. In his characteristic rearing stance, his horse towers over four fallen Moors in battle—one of them pleading for his life—while the apostle remains impassive, advancing unshaken. The drama of the scene is heightened by the central victim: his limbs arranged in a semi-swastika-like composition of great expressiveness, his contorted body reflecting an even greater violence than that suffered by his companions bleeding beside him, as if trampled by the steed.

The maelstrom of the war's advance is expressed through the two groups of cavalry that flank the figure of the apostle Santiago: those on the left, grouped in a succession of profiles, enter the scene ready for battle; and those on the right, drawn in foreshortening, show the haunches of the horses and the shields of the warriors seeking to give movement to the entire composition. They seem to be heading hastily towards another host: in the background, emerging from a hill, appear several spears and some Inca warriors ready for battle. Victory, of course, is announced in the figure of the apostle. It is clear that what the priest Dionisio de Torres Briceño Ribero wanted to signify through this painting was a symbol of his own institutional function against indigenous practices of pagan origin.

It remains to be seen what historical scene, if there was one, the battle depicted in this painting referred to. A slightly later work, from between 1730 and 1750, belonging to the Llosa Larrabure collection (Fig. 2), was unveiled in the exhibition and catalogue *Pintura cusqueña* in 2016 held at the Museo de Arte de Lima. The painting was brought back to light in the recent exhibition *Los incas, más allá de un imperio* (The Incas, Beyond an Empire) in 2024, held at the same institution.⁵ In the catalogue of the latter it received an explanatory note. In the words of Ricardo Kusunoki, “while the saint appears in the foreground, defeating the Moors, in the background of the composition the meeting between Pizarro and Atahualpa takes place as a parallel story [...]”.⁶ This painting sought to represent the taking of Cajamarca, a battle that



Fig. 2 *Santiago Matamoros and the Capture of Cajamarca*, 18th century, oil on canvas. Llosa Larrabure Collection

4 Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, *The first new chronicle and good government*, [1615] f. 405v.

5 Luis Eduardo Wuffarden and Ricardo Kusunoki (eds.), *Cusco Painting* (Lima: Lima Museum of Art, 2016), p. 247.

6 Ricardo Kusunoki, “Christian Incas,” in *The Incas: Beyond an Empire*, edited by Ricardo Kusunoki, Cecilia Pardo, and

began the process of conquest.

Whether the painting donated by the priest Briceño Ribero was alluding to the capture of Cajamarca or to the battle of Sacsayhuamán is difficult to know. The use of Inca warriors in the background seems to be more symbolic than historicist, a simile of the infidel Moors in the foreground. A specific question arises: to whom was the work addressed? Or, were the disciples mentioned in the title page referring to a specific group of people? The possibility that the main character of the painting was political and that it hides a complex context behind it, ready to be revealed, should not be ruled out.

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ALVMINOSPIEFORETVOSSANE EYACOB
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