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Guatemala, circa 1750-1780

**Altarpiece of the  
Virgin of Guadalupe**

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**Altarpiece of the Virgin of Guadalupe**

Guatemala, circa 1750-1780  
Mirror plate, carved and gilded  
wood and oil on metal sheet  
60 x 46.5 x 8.5 cm  
Provenance: Private collection

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In recent years, an increasing number of New Spanish paintings depicting miniature painted retablos have appeared on the art market. These works function as a kind of perspectival trompe-l'oeil, presenting a wide range of Marian and saintly advocations. The piece examined here belongs to this group, although it presents two distinguishing features: it is a carved wooden relief rather than a painting, and its place of origin is Guatemala.

Judging by their scale, such works were intended for the domestic sphere. They held a dual appeal for patrons: on the one hand, they transferred into the private realm the prestigious format of the Hispano-American retablo; on the other, they made it possible to include multiple favored advocations within a single, compositionally coherent object

Formally, the retablo follows the complex structural schemes developed in Guatemala during the second half of the eighteenth century. A comparison with other retablos of similar origin and date reveals closely related features. One example is the Retablo of Saint Joseph from the beaterio of Santa Rosa in Guatemala (Fig. 1). This piece is believed to have originated in the former cathedral, whose furnishings were relocated following the well-known transfer of the capital in 1779. Whether or not this provenance is accurate, the retablo in question must have served as a model for subsequent works, including the present example.

As in the case of Santa Rosa, our retablo is organized around a principal body occupied by three images placed at varying heights, with the central figure extending into and overlapping the entablature. The vertical supports, complex in design, correspond to the typology that Brenda Porrás has termed “poly-sectional pilasters” and “flexible pilasters.”<sup>1</sup> Above rises a large attic with a rounded profile—slightly trilobed in the Saint Joseph retablo—housing three additional images, which in both cases are paintings. Furthermore, the perimeter of the retablo is encircled by gilded and openwork foliage, imparting a pronounced sense of movement to the structure.

A further point of convergence between the two retablos is the use of mirrors as a sumptuous material intended to enhance their visual appeal. In the case of the Retablo of Saint Joseph, mirrors are incorporated into the central niche (Fig. 2), whereas in the present example they function as a general background upon which the painted panels and gilded relief elements are applied. Documentary evidence attests to the use of this material in other contemporary works, such as the gilded retablo with mirror panels recorded in 1768 in the private oratory of the Marquis Juan Fermín de Aycinena in Guatemala, or the church of the Convent of Belén, which in 1805 possessed “an altar composed of a niche of fine glass.”<sup>2</sup> Among the surviving examples employing this resource are also the two lateral retablos of the Church of Salamá.

Another noteworthy aspect is the selection of devotions represented in this retablo, whose



Fig. 1 Altarpiece of Saint Joseph, 18th century. Carved and gilded wood with mirror insets, Church of Santa Rosa, Guatemala City.

<sup>1</sup> Brenda Janeth Porrás Godoy, “El retablo y la escultura en Guatemala, siglos XVI al XIX”, doctoral thesis, Universidad de Sevilla, 2015, 207, 210 y 218.

<sup>2</sup> Brenda Janeth Porrás Godoy, “El retablo y la escultura en Guatemala, siglos XVI al XIX”, doctoral thesis, Universidad de Sevilla, 2015, 224-255.

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Fig. 2 Altarpiece of Saint Joseph (detail of mirrors), 18th century. Carved and gilded wood with mirror insets, Church of Santa Rosa, Guatemala City.

principal advocacy is the Virgin of Guadalupe—undoubtedly one of the most prominent cults of the eighteenth century. Numerous paintings and sculptures from this period attest to the extraordinary devotional success of this Marian image across virtually all regions of the American viceroyalties. For the Guatemalan context, one particularly illustrative example is the retablo located in the Church of San Miguel de Capuchinas in Nueva Guatemala (Fig. 3), which depicts the Guadalupan apparitions. This work also originated in the former capital, which had been devastated by the catastrophic earthquake of 1773.

Flanking the Virgin of Guadalupe are Saint Michael and Saint Joseph, both represented according to the formal archetypes of the period. The former may be compared, for example, with the figure depicted in *Los cinco señores* preserved at the National Museum of Art of Guatemala (Fig. 4). In his capacity as commander of the heavenly armies, he bears a standard displaying the image of the Immaculate Conception, another of the principal emblems of Hispanic religiosity.

Saint Joseph, for his part, is shown standing upon a pedestal formed by cherubim.<sup>3</sup> In Guatemala, and more broadly throughout Spanish America, devotion to Saint Joseph expanded rapidly and found expression in numerous retablos—whether in painted or sculpted form—where the saint commonly appears in scenes such as the Betrothal of the Virgin, the Nativity of Christ, or the Holy Family. It was, however, during the eighteenth century that his autonomous iconography became fully codified, consistently portraying him holding the Christ Child in his arms. Comparable images can be found in both painting and sculpture—for instance, in the Church of San Francisco in Guatemala, as well as in San Andrés Itzapa, Jocotenango, and Salamá, among others. Particularly noteworthy is the example preserved in the Church of Santo Domingo, traditionally attributed to Alonso de la Paz, though more accurately ascribed to Blas Rodríguez.

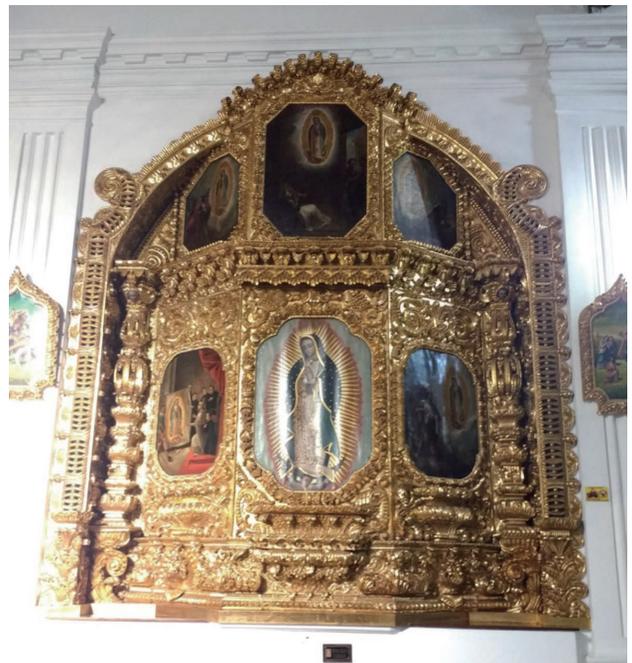


Fig. 3. Retablo de la Virgen de Guadalupe, anónimo guatemalteco, s. XVIII. Madera tallada y dorada. Iglesia de San Miguel, Ciudad de Guatemala.

In the upper section, two thematic axes are clearly articulated. In the central register, enclosed within a mixtilinear frame, appears the celestial

<sup>3</sup> Brenda Janeth Porras Godoy, *San José en el arte guatemalteco* (Ciudad de Guatemala: s/e, 2021).

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Fig. 4 Comparación con Los cinco señores (detalle), anónimo guatemalteco, s. XVIII. Óleo sobre lienzo, Museo Nacional de Arte de Guatemala, Antigua Guatemala



Fig. 4a Altarpiece (detalle), Guatemala, circa 1750-1780. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Along the horizontal axis, the cardiomorphic representation of the earthly trinity is displayed through the three hearts: at the center is the Heart of Jesus, encircled by the crown of thorns and surmounted by the cross; to its right, the Heart of the Virgin, bearing the Marian monogram and pierced by a sword alluding to the Seven Sorrows of Mary; and finally, to its left, the Heart of Saint Joseph, marked with his own monogram and a flowering lily staff emerging from the aorta.

Devotion to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary originated in France, largely through the efforts of John Eudes, and was subsequently reinforced by the mystical visions of Margaret Mary Alacoque. In these revelations, the Risen Christ opened his chest to reveal a heart wounded by the lance, encircled with thorns, crowned by a cross, and inflamed with love for humanity.<sup>4</sup>

In Mexico, this “cardiolatry,” or devotion to the Sacred Hearts, received the support of the Jesuits, though not of the archbishopric, which officially opposed it at the Fourth Mexican Provincial Council; nevertheless, such opposition did not succeed in eradicating the practice. Indeed, its popularity led to the creation of images of the “Five Hearts,” representing those of Jesus, the Virgin, Saint Joseph, Saint

<sup>4</sup> Al respecto véase José Antonio Díaz Gómez, “Un debate ilustrado sobre el corazón en el IV Concilio Provincial Mexicano, 1771”. Quiroga. *Revista de patrimonio iberoamericano*, 9 (2016): 50-63.

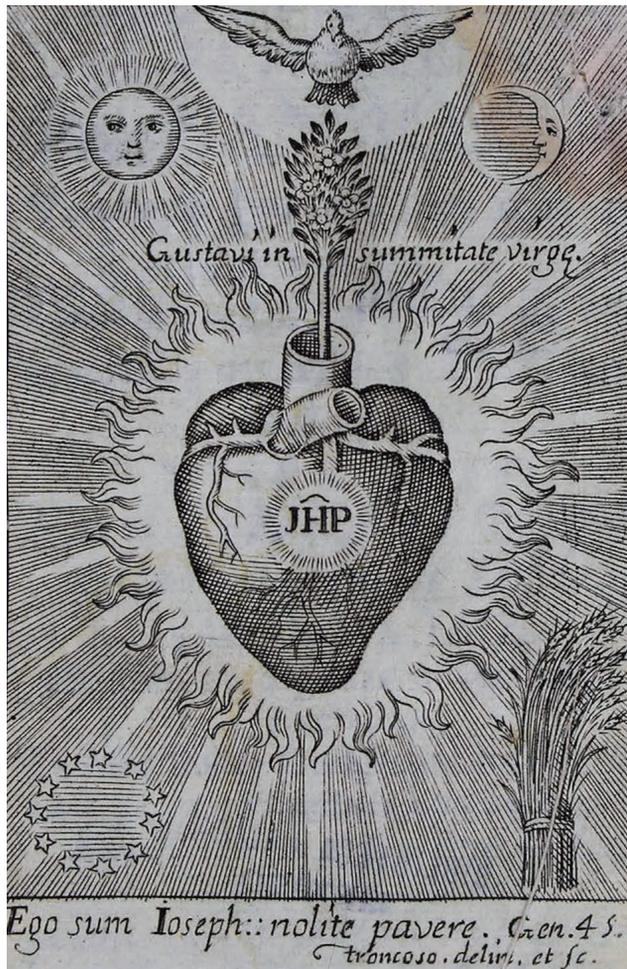


Fig 5. Comparación con el Corazón de San José, atribuido a Baltasar Troncoso, s. XVIII. Grabado sobre papel. Frontispicio de El Sagrado corazón del Santísimo Patriarca San Joseph de Ignacio Tomay.



Fig. 5a Altarpiece (detail), Guatemala, circa 1750-1780. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

Joachim, and Saint Anne.<sup>5</sup>

It has been documented that artists such as Miguel Cabrera owned theological texts related to this devotion, including several dedicated to the hearts of the Holy Family written by Father José María Genovese—who published under the pseudonym Ignacio Tomay.<sup>6</sup> It was from such publications that the formal guidelines for the iconographic representation (Fig. 5) were derived.

<sup>5</sup> Miguel Rodríguez, “El Sagrado Corazón de Jesús. Mensajes, imágenes, transferencias culturales”. *Secuencia*, 74 (2009): 145-168.

<sup>6</sup> Jorge Luis Merlo Solorio, “Miguel Cabrera y las alegorías de los sacros corazones”. Quiroga. *Revista de patrimonio iberoamericano*, 18 (2020): 109.

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