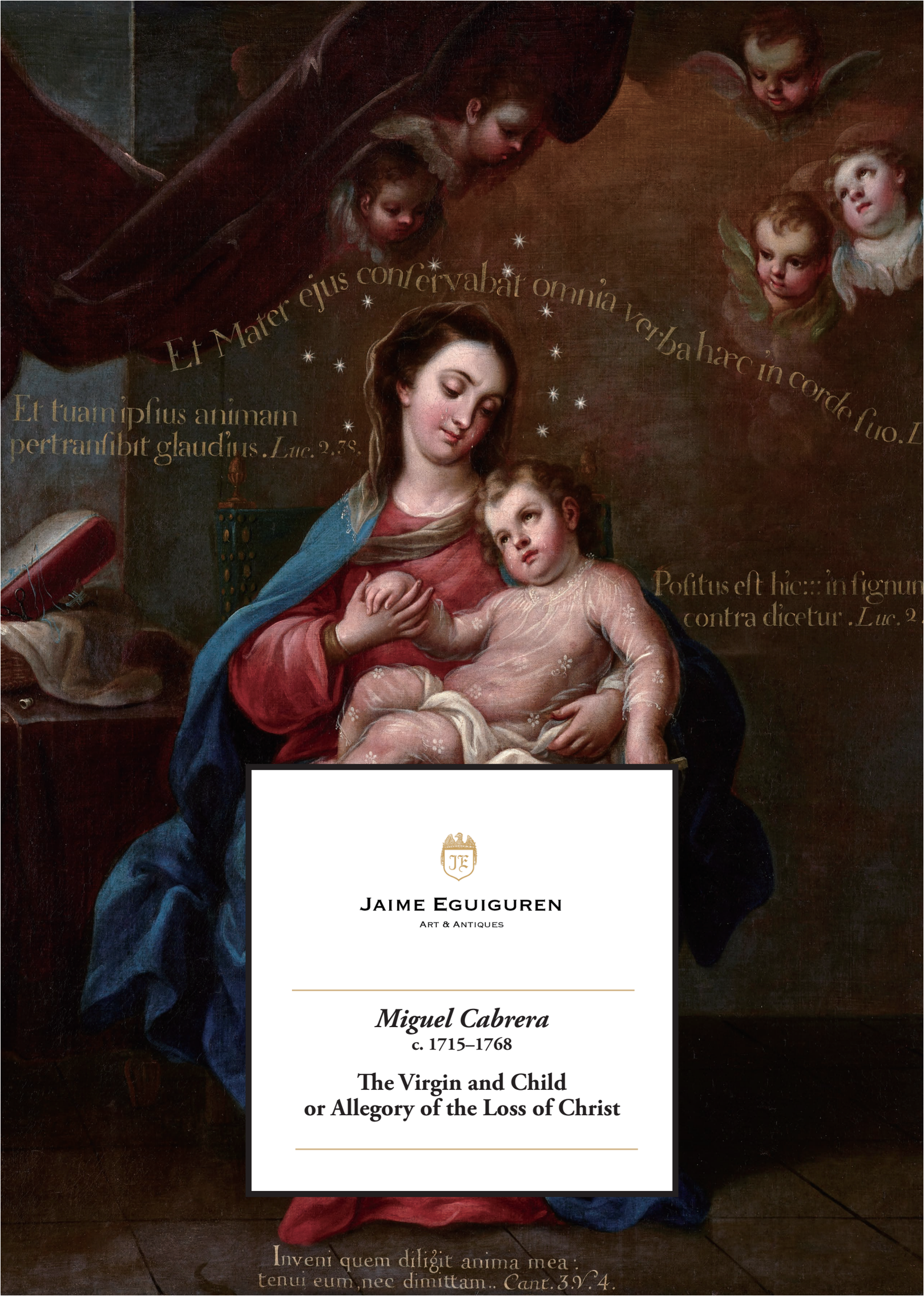

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

Miguel Cabrera

c. 1715–1768

The Virgin and Child or Allegory of the Loss of Christ

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The Virgin and Child or Allegory of the Loss of Christ

Circa 1751–1768
Oil on canvas
123.5 x 99.2 cm
Provenance: Private collection

Adrián Contreras-Guerrero

This painting, though unsigned, is a clear example of the work of Miguel Cabrera, the foremost exponent of 18th-century New Spanish painting, often referred to as "the American Michelangelo."[1]

Cabrera is estimated to have been born in Antequera, now Oaxaca, around 1715–1720[2]. The earliest documented evidence of his life dates to 1739, when he married Ana María Solano y Herrera, who later became a significant supporter of his professional endeavors. Cabrera himself confirmed this in his will, entrusting her with all his affairs due to her "exceptional conduct in managing not only the finances of my household but even my personal affairs, of which she is fully informed."[3]

On a personal level, this marriage produced a large family, including two daughters who entered the Capuchin convent in Mexico City. This has been interpreted as evidence of his Creole ethnicity, as only daughters of Spaniards were admitted to that convent.

Regarding his artistic activity, his earliest works date to 1740 and display a significant affinity with the style of José de Ibarra, leading scholars to believe that Ibarra may have been his teacher. From that time onward, and for nearly three decades, Cabrera maintained a frenetic pace of work, as evidenced by the more than 600 works that are either documented or reliably attributed to him. This prolific output was made possible thanks to his remarkable talent for managing commissions, his efficient organization of labor, and the collaboration of numerous assistants.

Among his religious works, the most prevalent genre of the time, his thematic series stand out, such as those for Santa Prisca in Taxco and the Jesuits in Tepotzotlán. Particularly noteworthy is his specialization in reproductions of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the secular realm, his caste paintings and portraits of prominent figures in New Spanish society also gained recognition, such as the portrait of Archbishop Manuel José Rubio y Salinas (1761, Museo Nacional del Virreinato), his protector, or that of Viceroy Juan Francisco de Güemes (Castillo de Chapultepec).

As evidenced by the inventory of his library, Cabrera was a man of considerable culture, reading works by Dürer, Palomino, and Andrea Pozzo, among others[4]. His social achievements are further reflected in his membership in the elite Congregation of the Immaculate Conception and his selection in 1751 as one of the painters chosen to examine the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.[5] This examination culminated five years later in the publication of his text La maravilla americana, in which he substantiated the miraculous nature of the image through technical considerations, offering an intriguing theorization on the art of painting.

Cabrera passed away on May 26, 1768, in Mexico City and was buried in the Church of Santa Inés, then the headquarters of the painters' guild.

At first glance, this painting seems to depict a conventional subject—a simple Virgin and Child. However, closer inspection reveals an uncommon element in this iconography: tears streaming down the cheeks of both figures. This weeping, along with the small cross Jesus holds almost as a child's toy,

1 Jaime Cuadriello, "Triunfo y fama del Miguel Ángel americano: el nombre de Miguel Cabrera", at Gustavo Curiel Méndez, Renato González Mello y Juana Gutiérrez Haces (coord.), Arte, historia e identidad en América. Visiones compartidas (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1994), t. II, 405-418.

2 Although a baptismal record for a Miguel Cabrera dated 1695 exists in Oaxaca, identifying him as the son of unknown parents and adopted by a mulatto couple, various authors, such as Abelardo Carrillo y Gariel and Guillermo Tovar de Teresa, have cast doubt on whether this was the same person. They argued that this date would be too early to align with his flourishing as a painter. Currently, there is a consensus placing his birth between 1710 and 1720.

3 Abelardo Carrillo y Gariel, El pintor Miguel Cabrera (Ciudad de México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1966), 39.

4 Cristina Ratto, "Entre pinceles y cuadros. Los libros del pintor Miguel Cabrera", Revista Complutense de Historia de América, 45 (2019): 89-112.

5 Luisa Elena Alcalá, "Miguel Cabrera y la Congregación de la Purísima", Anales del Instituto de investigaciones Estéticas (Ciudad de México), 99 (2011): 111-136.

imbues the image with a sense of sorrow, rendering it an allegory of Christ's future loss. This interpretation is further supported by the Latin inscriptions scattered across the surface of the painting, which function as a kind of metapainting by giving the artwork a narrative voice. These same inscriptions appear in other works by Cabrera, such as Santa Rita in the Dallas Museum of Art (1763) and the Life of the Virgin series in the Museum of the Americas [6] (fig. 1).

These inscriptions are linked to the theme of Mary's sorrows or the Virgin of Sorrows. The first inscription, read from top to bottom, states: "Et Mater ejus conservabat omnia verba haec in corde suo. Luc. 2.51"[7], meaning "And his mother kept all these things in her heart," a verse from the Gospel of Luke referring to how Mary and Joseph lost Jesus and, after several days, found him among the doctors in the temple in Jerusalem.

FIG. 1. The Dream of Saint Joseph and the Meditation of Mary, Miguel Cabrera, 1751. Oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm, Museo de América, Madrid. MAM 2021/08/01.

Two additional texts are located to the left and right of the figures. Both are drawn from the prophecy of Simeon when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple. Following the biblical order, the first appears at the bottom right and reads: "Positus est hic::: in signum, cui contra dicetur. Luc. 2.34", an abbreviated version of the prophecy, translated as "[your son] is set here and will be a sign that many will reject." The next verse, appearing on the left, reads: "Et tuam ipsius animam pertransibit gladius. Luc. 2.35", meaning "And a sword will pierce your own soul [heart]."

Finally, on the floor is written: "Inveni quem diligit anima mea: tenui eum, nec dimittam.. Cant. 3.V.4", or "When I found him whom my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go." This passage from the Song of Songs speaks of a woman desperately searching for her beloved at night, ultimately reuniting with him. Although this text might seem profane, in Christian tradition it symbolizes the persistence of love and the celebration of union with God. The interplay between text and image is noteworthy, as the biblical notion of "holding the beloved" is faithfully reflected in how Mary clutches her son's hand tightly.

Thus, the texts, when carefully analyzed, reveal that both the first and last inscriptions speak of the loss and eventual reunion with Christ, creating a thematic framework that ultimately narrates the story of Christian redemption. All of this aligns seamlessly with Cabrera's image as a learned painter.

This profound theological message is conveyed through a simple domestic scene in which the Virgin is seated on a frailera chair, a common piece of Hispanic furniture at the time. To the left, on a table, are a basket, a half-embroidered white cloth, scissors, a spool of blue thread, and a thimble, objects that reflect one of the feminine occupations traditionally attributed to the Virgin. The fact that the embroidery work is unfinished, as if interrupted, might also carry an allegorical meaning, possibly alluding to the premature death of Christ.

6 With all probability, the Life of the Virgin cycle was conceived for a religious setting, but from the 19th century onwards, it passed into private hands and eventually made its way to Spain. There were most likely fifteen paintings in total, of which twelve are housed in the Museo de América, one in the Denver Art Museum, and two in private collections. For more information on this significant series, see the catalog of the exhibition recently held at the Museo de América: Miguel Cabrera. Las reglas del arte de un pintor novohispano (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 2024).

7 This phylactery is cut on the right side, as the canvas was trimmed and relined.

FIG. 2. Coronation of the Virgin (detail), Miguel Cabrera, 1762. Oil on canvas, 46 x 35.2 cm, Museo de América, Madrid. MAM 2000/02/01.

FIG. 3. Comparison with the Holy Family (detail), Miguel Cabrera, 18th century. Oil on copper, 26 x 20 cm, Museo de América, Madrid. MAM 00018.

From a technical perspective, this painting displays characteristics consistent with Cabrera's well-documented methods and those of his workshop. First, there is a clear utilization of the red ground layer, visible in areas where it serves as a middle tone, barely veiled with a thin layer of pigment. This is particularly evident in the dramatic curtain in the upper left corner, where the red background is used as a base to which only highlights and shadows are added for modeling. The highlights are executed with denser, impastoed brushstrokes applied directly.[8] Additionally, traces of a darker red, used as contouring ink—what Palomino referred to as "tinta de perfilar"—are visible in some areas, such as the angelic faces or the child's feet, among others.[9]

Further analysis reveals other formal traits frequently employed by Cabrera. These include the Murillesque appearance of the child's face or the transparent tunic adorned with small flowers that he wears—a device also used by other New Spanish artists, such as José de Páez. The fine perspective delineation of the floor tiles is also striking, a feature already present in Cabrera's earliest known work, the portrait of Fray Toribio de Nuestra Señora (1741) in the Templo de San Fernando.[10] Another specific detail is the arrangement of the halo of stars encircling Mary's head, consisting of a single, continuous row of nine stars, with an additional level at the lateral and upper axes. Altogether, the halo contains the canonical twelve stars described in the Book of Revelation. This distinctive arrangement also appears in other works by the artist, such as the Immaculate Conception Crowned by the Isomorphic Trinity, preserved in the Museum of the Americas in Madrid, signed and dated 1762. (fig. 2).

Similarly, this painting includes motifs reused by Cabrera in other compositions, a practice noted by several scholars. For instance, the Virgin's head, her hand, and the child's entire body appear in identical positions in the small copper painting housed in the Museo de América (fig. 3). Additionally, the two angel heads in this painting, grouped at the top right, are separated and placed at the center of the copper piece (fig. 4). It could even be said that the more dramatically foreshortened angel head, gazing upwards, became a stylistic hallmark, an omnipresent

8 Rocío Bruquetas Galán, "Llevados de la materialidad. Diálogos en tornos a Miguel Cabrera", en Miguel Cabrera. Las reglas del arte de un pintor novohispano (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 2024), 122-123.

9 Rocío Bruquetas Galán, "Llevados de la materialidad. Diálogos en tornos a Miguel Cabrera", en Miguel Cabrera. Las reglas del arte de un pintor novohispano (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 2024), 120.

10 This is also present in other later paintings, such as Saint Dominic of Guzmán (1741) from the Museo Amparo in Puebla, the Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1750) from the National Museum of History in Mexico City, Ferdinand VI and Barbara of Braganza Praying before the Virgin of Guadalupe (1756) from the Museo de América in Madrid, and several copper paintings held in private collections.

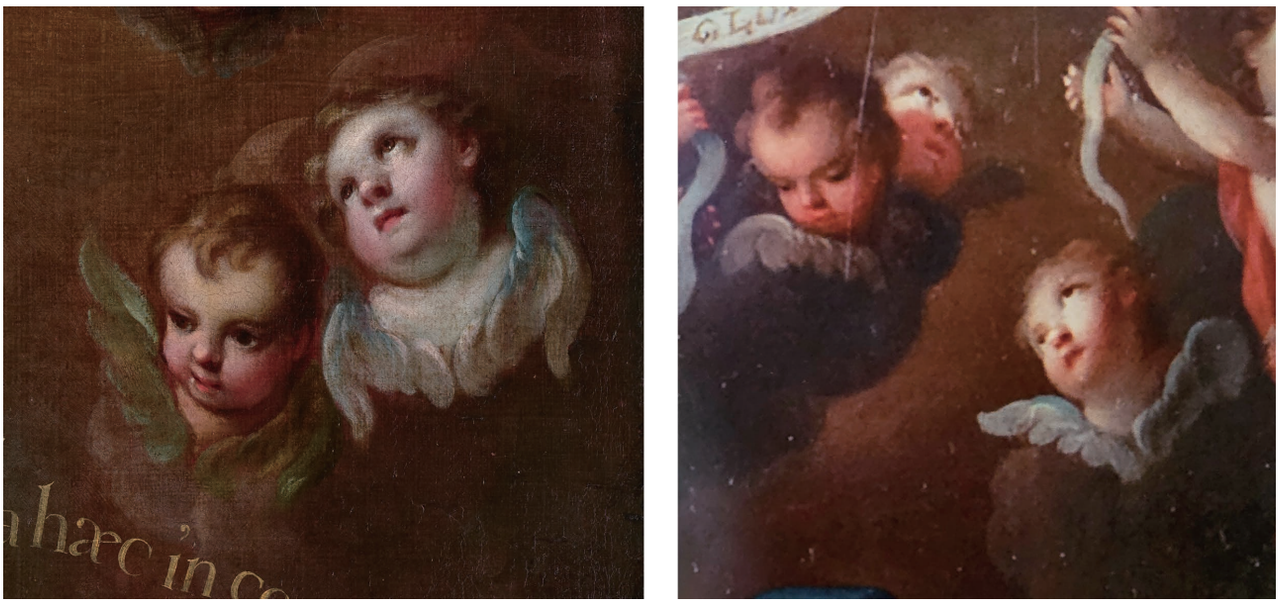

FIG. 4. Comparison with the Holy Family (detail), Miguel Cabrera, 18th century. Oil on copper, 26 x 20 cm, Museo de América, Madrid. MAM 00018.

FIG. 5. Comparison with The Divine Shepherdess (detail), Miguel Cabrera, c. 1760. Oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.

resource in many of Cabrera's paintings. The accelerated creative process in Cabrera's workshop necessitated the use of templates and tracings, sometimes recombining elements and other times introducing variations through changes in scale or orientation (fig. 5).

The painter's body of work is divided into three stages. The first spans 1739 to 1750 and corresponds to the early years of his workshop, during which he had not yet fully developed his creative potential. Fewer than a dozen works from this period have survived. Excluding this phase, as the stylistic maturity evident in this painting places it beyond his early period, the work should be dated to either the second or third stage of Cabrera's career, between 1751 and 1768, encompassing the years of his greatest productivity and artistic refinement.


Et Mater ejus conſervabat omnia verba hæc in corde ſuo. Luc. 2.
Et tuam ipſius animam
pertranſibit glaudius. Luc. 2.35.
Poſitus eſt hic::: in ſignum, cui
contra dicetur. Luc. 2.34.
Inveni quem diligit anima mea:
tenui eum, nec dimittam.. Cant. 3.V.4.