



**JAIME EGUIGUREN**

ART & ANTIQUES

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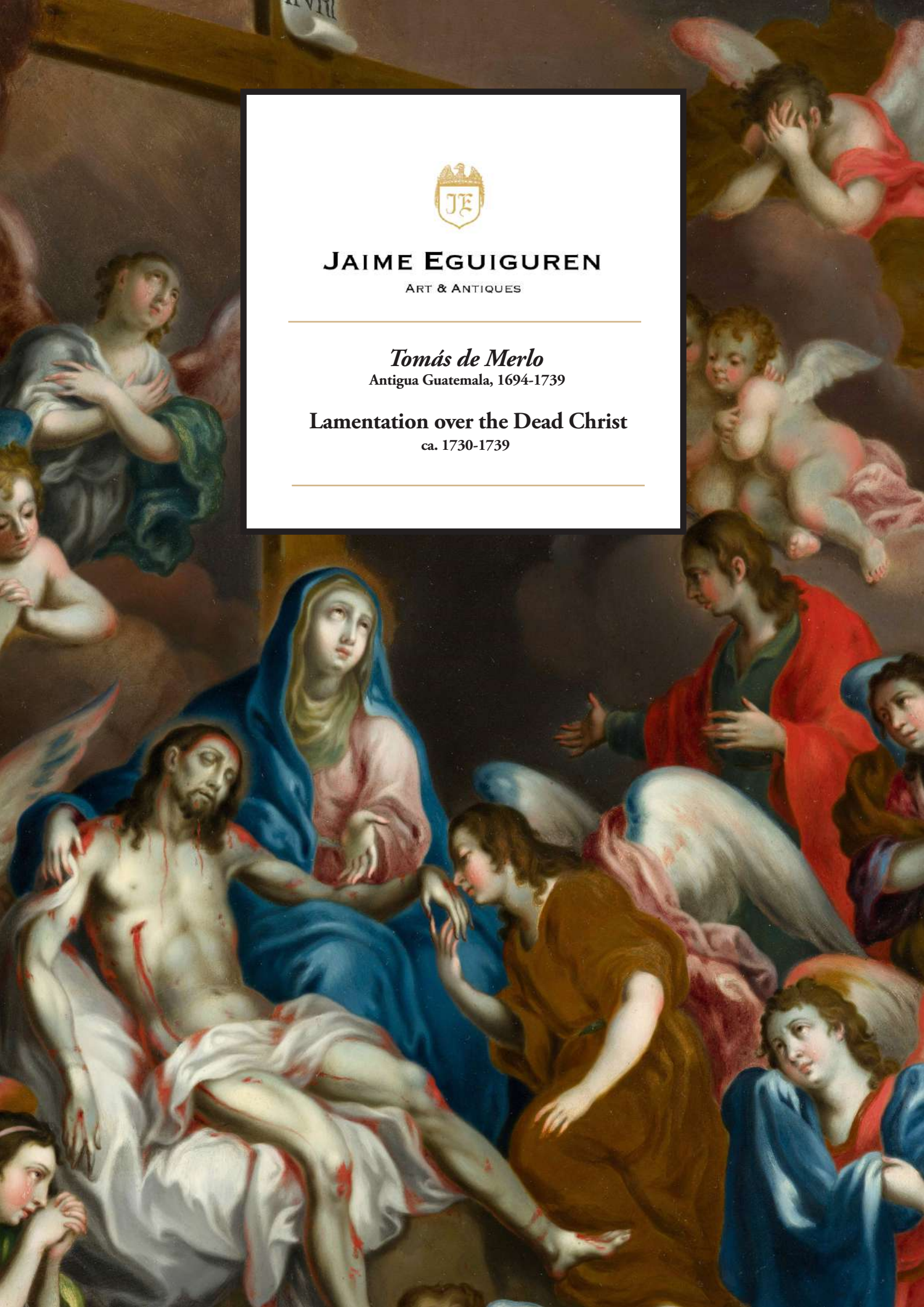
*Tomás de Merlo*

Antigua Guatemala, 1694-1739

**Lamentation over the Dead Christ**

ca. 1730-1739

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*Tomás de Merlo*

Antigua Guatemala, 1694-1739

**Lamentation over the Dead Christ**

ca. 1730-1739

Oil on copper

59.5 x 46.5 cm

Signed: *Merlo facit en Guathemala*

Provenance: Private collection, Spain

*Jorge Gonzalez Matarranz*

Art Historian

The study of an image of the Pietà or the Lamentation over the Dead Christ means entering a scene with a profound emotional and theological charge, since, for Christianity, the moment when Christ rests in his mother's arms symbolizes redemptive suffering, maternal compassion and meditation on his Passion.

The origin of this representation does not go back to the Gospels, but to the approaches of the *Devotio moderna* (Latin for "Modern Devotion") during the Late Middle Ages, at the beginning of the 14th century, taking as reference a text about the sufferings of Mary written by the Franciscan Jacopone de Todi (1236-1306) entitled *Stabat Mater*. Other texts such as the Meditations of Pseudo Bonaventure, the *Effusions* of Henry of Berg, the *Revelations* of Saint Bridget of Sweden, or the *Planctus Mariae* of the Cistercian Ogiero de Locedio, delved into the description of the body of the dead Christ on the knees of his Mother and the emotions she suffers, as well as her indescribable pain, as a way of reaching the hearts of the faithful.<sup>1</sup>

Representations in art also emerged around the Rhine Valley in this context, spreading throughout Europe in the 15th century, influenced by International Style, both in pictorial versions and through sculptural groups. During the Renaissance, the most prominent artists delved deeper into this theme, with Michelangelo's (1475-1564) *Pietà in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican being the culmination of its representation*. In the 17th century, the Baroque gave a new dynamism and drama to the representation of the Pietà or the Lamentation. The influence of Caravaggio (1571-1610) was decisive in shaping this aesthetic, with plays of light and shadow that emphasized the three-dimensionality of the figures. In this period, the scene not only functioned as a devotional image but also as a vehicle of the Counter-Reformation to reinforce the Christological pathos. Its presence in altarpieces, oratories and convents demonstrated its importance within sacred art and Baroque spirituality. In the Flemish sphere, Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) – influenced by the Italian naturalism of Caravaggio and the monumentality of Michelangelo – approached the Pietà with a theatrical sense, where the bodies twist in pronounced angles and the emotions is intensified through expressive gestures and light contrasts. For his part, his disciple Anton Van Dyck (1599-1641) developed a *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (Fig. 1) more refined and melancholic,



Fig. 1. Anton Van Dyck (1599-1641), *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, oil on canvas. Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, no. 403.

<sup>1</sup> "I received him on my knees like a leper, livid and bruised, for his eyes were dead and full of blood, his mouth cold as snow, his beard stiff as a rope," Saint Bridget of Sweden, *Prophecies and Revelations*, Book 1, Chapter 27.

characterized by elongated canon figures, idealized faces and a more subtle chromaticism. His approach privileges devotional sensitivity, with an emphasis on serenity and spiritual recollection. He captured it in this composition of such beauty and plastic drama that it gave rise to engraved copies being made based on his image, which were distributed throughout Counter-Reformation Europe, and consequently, sometime later in America, as a tool for evangelization and dissemination of the Passion of Christ, as is the case of the print reproduced by the Flemish engraver Hendrick Snyers (1621-1667) (Fig. 2), which certainly functioned as an inspiring composition for this delicate creation by Tomás de Merlo.

Compositionally, the work now studied presents us – through a pyramidal axis under the cross – with Christ lying in the center, with a slender and pale body, arranged diagonally, generating a visual tension that connects with the gaze of the mourners. The Virgin Mary, with a disfigured face and a look dejected by grief, holds her son in her lap, with her hands in a gesture of despair, while Mary Magdalene cries at her feet, clinging to Christ with a gesture of despair, and Saint John the Evangelist expresses his affliction with resignation from the background. To emphasize the feeling of compassion, the master Merlo decides to include numerous figures. Various angels have come down from heaven to show their respect, saddened by what has happened, with sad faces and gestures of resignation or in an attitude of prayer. He also delves into iconographic details of the scene, which highlight the idea of Passion through symbolic language. Beneath Christ's feet are various elements such as the crown of thorns, already removed from his head and placed on a golden tray, the nails from the cross, and what appears to be an ointment jar, due to the Jewish tradition of anointing bodies with oils and perfumes before burial, and a symbol of Mary Magdalene's absolute devotion and love for Christ.

The lighting accentuates the corporeality of the figures and highlights the tactile quality of the draperies, elements that Merlo handles with mastery, with emphasis on the faces of the characters and the body of Christ, creating a theatrical effect that intensifies the feeling of tragedy. Added to this is the masterful use of colors, with red and blue predominating, which provide depth and symbolism. The tendency toward chiaroscuro, influenced by Caravaggio and Rubens, also helps to emphasize the volumes and provides a sense of realism, accompanied by a precise pictorial technique only within the reach of masters like Merlo, where the folds of the tunics, the gradations of color, or the various postures of the characters, denote a great study of the volumes and the human figure, all corroborated by the presence of his signature “Merlo fact. in Guatemala”.

Tomás de Merlo (1694-1739), a resident of Santiago de Guatemala (today Antigua Guatemala) and son



Fig. 2. Hendrick Snyers (1621-1667), *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, lithograph on paper, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, no. RP-P-OB-59.616.

of the painter Tomás de la Vega Merlo (c. 1659-1749), developed his career in his hometown, where he was especially known for a large commission made for the El Calvario hermitage in Antigua Guatemala, consisting of eleven large-format canvases on the Passion of Christ made from 1737 until the date of his death. The hermitage was almost entirely destroyed during the San Miguel earthquakes of 1717, and among the main losses recorded was the total destruction of the paintings by Antonio de Montúfar (1627-1665) that decorated its walls. The dean of the Cathedral then commissioned this new pictorial cycle to the painter Tomas de Merlo, with such specific specifications as that the colours were to be “fine and full-bodied”, and that upon observing them “the faithful would enjoy a vivid representation”, in order to awaken in them the flame of faith and value the sacrifice of Christ. Merlo’s work, in addition to coming to life in intricate Holy Week ceremonies, must also have served daily for the teaching of Catholic doctrine to the indigenous peoples who surrounded the ancient capital of the kingdom <sup>2</sup>. Regrettably, he was only able to complete nine of the eleven, due to his premature death, leaving the last two sketches, which were completed by his disciples. Currently, six of them have been kept in their original location in the hermitage – although unfortunately they were stolen in 2014, and their whereabouts are still unknown – and the remaining five are part of the National Museum of Art of Guatemala.

Works such as *The Elevation of the Cross* (Fig. 3) are closely related to the painting now being studied. The theme of the Passion causes several of its characters to be repeated. Christ on the cross, with an elongated canon, with his characteristic paleness in contrast with the intense red of the blood (Fig. 4); the Virgin Mary, afflicted, sharing her pain with Mary Magdalene and Saint John. All of them with clothing very similar in color and typology with respect to this wonderful work of art (Fig. 5). Another notable example of this series is the canvas *Ecce Homo* (Fig. 6), where Christ is shown stripped of his garments, presented by Pontius Pilate before the Jewish people, with an anatomy again very close to our work, where the muscles are defined by shading, and the bleeding legs have a peculiar curvature in the knee area. Likewise, in reference to the work entitled *The Prayer in the Garden* (Fig. 7), as it is a previous



Fig. 3. Tomás de Merlo (Antigua Guatemala, 1694-1739), *The Elevation of the Cross*, 1737-1739, oil on canvas. National Museum of Art of Guatemala.

<sup>2</sup> Urquizú, Fernando, “Some iconological and iconographic considerations on the paintings of Tomas de Merlo from the Calvary Church in Antigua Guatemala” in *Estudios Digital*, No. 5, 2015, pp. 9-10.

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Fig. 4. Comparasion with Tomás de Merlo, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, oil on copper. Jaime Eguiguren At & Antiques



Fig. 5. Comparasion with Tomás de Merlo, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, oil on copper. Jaime Eguiguren At & Antiques

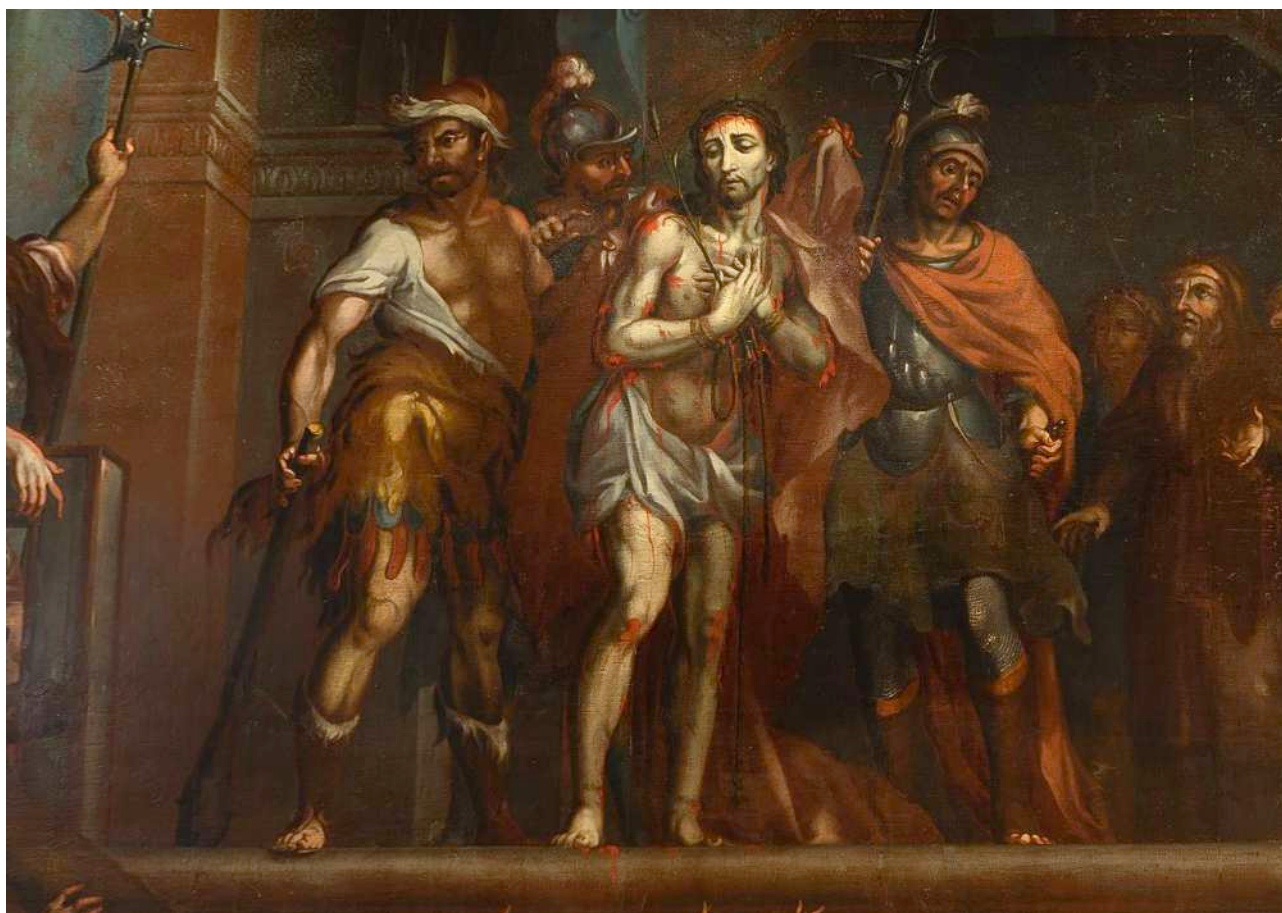


Fig. 6 Tomás de Merlo (Antigua Guatemala, 1694-1739), *Ecce Homo*, 1737-1739, oil on canvas, National Museum of Art of Guatemala (detail).

event, Christ does not yet show signs of the Passion, but other elements can be put in direct relation with our Lamentation. In both compositions the cross appears, with a cartouche with the inscription INRI at the top, with identical handwriting and the same treatment of the rolled paper (Fig. 8). In addition, the presence of angels facilitates the appreciation of parallels, sharing formal and stylistic characteristics such as their bare feet, their long hair, the tunics in the wind or the treatment of the wings (Fig. 9).

This series of the Hermitage of the Passion, considered the masterpiece of Tomás de Merlo and his most important legacy for Guatemalan painting, could be the culmination of other commissions received throughout his career by ecclesiastical or private clients, where he was perfecting his technique, composition and style. The essayist and philosopher José Martí praised the artist Tomas de Merlo with this quote: “Original to invent, bold to compose, skillful



Fig. 7. Tomás de Merlo (Antigua Guatemala, 1694-1739), *The Prayer in the Garden*, 1737-1739, oil on canvas, whereabouts unknown.

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Fig. 8 Comparasion with Tomás de Merlo, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, oil on copper. Jaime Eguiguren At & Antiques



Fig. 9 Comparasion with Tomás de Merlo, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, oil on copper. Jaime Eguiguren At & Antiques

to place, move away and bring closer, give perspectives; dark in color, sure in drawing...” a magnificent summary of what the work of the Guatemalan represents, without a doubt, one of the great masters of the viceregal painting of the 18th century, whose skill is exemplified in this copper of *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. Through his exquisite and delicate style, he offers us as a result a true masterpiece.

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