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## Nativity

Viceroyalty of New Granada, Quito (present-day Ecuador)

Second half of the 18th century

Carved and polychromed wood and alabaster with applied glass and mother-of-pearl elements

33.5 × 21.5 × 22 cm (Saint Joseph)

33.5 × 21.5 × 22 cm (Virgin)

19 × 6.5 × 4 cm (Child)

Provenance: Private collection

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The tradition of setting up the Nativity scene at Christmas has traditionally been attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, who initiated the practice in the thirteenth century. Its greatest flourishing, however, occurred during the eighteenth century, reflecting the period's taste for scenographic display and a growing sensitivity toward gentle and child-centered iconographic themes. Artistic production associated with this custom took strong root in places such as Naples and, in the Americas, in the Royal Audiencia of Quito.<sup>1</sup>

In Quito, Nativity figures were initially produced for local consumption and later also for export. They were made in a variety of sizes and formats, either as individual sculptures or as assembled groups housed within boxes or urn-like structures resembling small opening altarpieces. The essential core consisted, as in the present example, of Saint Joseph, the Virgin, and the Christ Child, although an extensive range of secondary figures could be added, representing a wide diversity of attitudes, professions, ethnicities, and social classes.<sup>2</sup>

The three principal figures are typically represented according to highly defined compositional schemes that are repeated with very few variations, reflecting a process of codification characteristic of Quito sculpture. Mary and Joseph appear kneeling before the Christ Child—she fully kneeling, while he bends only one leg, as if captured at the very moment of lowering himself. Both figures are shown with open arms, their hands displaying pronounced expressiveness; Saint Joseph holds the lily staff that forms part of his traditional iconography. Each wears a long tunic—his invariably green—and a mantle—blue for the Virgin and consistently yellow for Saint Joseph. The Virgin further reinforces the idea of her purity through a collar-like headdress, which at times, as in the present example, may also cover her hair.

The Christ Child, for his part, is usually depicted as if asleep, resting upon a bed of straw or a small mattress. The same compositional arrangement appears in the Nativity group in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, attributed to Manuel Chili Caspicara (Fig. 1), whose Christ Child raises his right hand to his cheek in exactly the same manner as the Child in our Nativity (Figs. 2 and 3).

One of the most striking features of Quito sculpture in general—and of the present group in particular—is its refined polychromy, an element inseparable from the very essence of Hispanic sculpture.<sup>3</sup> In this ensemble, thin sheets of silver leaf are applied both visibly—on the Child's bed—and beneath translucent layers, as seen in the corladuras. Ecuadorian and Colombian



Fig. 1. Nativity, Quito, 18th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 64.164.207a, b.

1 For a general overview of these works, see Ángel Peña Martín, "'To Celebrate Christmas': The Baroque Quito Nativity Scene," in *The Art of Sculpture in South America, Sixteenth–Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Adrián Contreras-Guerrero (Madrid: Sílex, 2024), 295–327.

2 Adrián Contreras-Guerrero, *Sculpture in Colombia: Production Centers and the Circulation of Works (Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2019), 199–210.

3 Adrián Contreras-Guerrero, *Sculpture in Colombia: Production Centers and the Circulation of Works (Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2019), 199–210.

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Fig. 2 Christ child (from a Nativity) Metropolitan Museum of Art 64.164.209



Fig. 3 Christ child (from the Nativity) Jaime Eguiguren Collection

scholars have demonstrated that silver leaf is often thicker than gold leaf and may at times lack a preparatory bole layer, since it does not require a perfectly smooth surface for burnishing.<sup>4</sup>

Corladura consists of applying a very thin and diluted layer of color over silver leaf, allowing the underlying brilliance to remain visible and thereby producing a metallic effect. The importance of this technique in Quito sculpture has been explained through the influence of Chinese silks and artistic techniques of Asian origin.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, several eighteenth-century Quito inventories refer to such works as painting a la chinesca, and the presence of Chinese objects in Quito has been documented, including four Oriental images owned by Bernardo de Legarda at the time of his death in 1773.<sup>6</sup>

It is common for textiles in Quito Nativity scenes not to employ the technique most frequently used for such works within the Hispanic artistic tradition, namely sgraffito. This technique consists of applying gold leaf that is subsequently entirely covered with paint and then incised so as to reveal the underlying layer in decorative motifs. By contrast, in the present example—and in many other Quito Nativity groups of the period—the gilded motifs are applied over the base layer in relief, producing a clearly raised surface (Fig. 4).

What makes this ensemble particularly distinctive among the many surviving Quito Nativity scenes, beyond the excellence of its polychromy, is the application of small inset glass elements embedded in the textile garments, specifically on the collar of Saint Joseph's tunic and on his sash (Fig. 5), as well as in the Virgin's



Fig. 4 Detail from the Nativity, Jaime Eguiguren Collection

4 Lourdes Cevallos y Rosa Morales, *Estudio de los materiales constitutivos de la "Técnica Chinesco" en escultura policromada*, Doctoral dissertation, Universidad Central del Ecuador, 2000; Manuel Amaya y Vanesa Garnica, *Corladura en escultura policromada colonial*, dissertation, Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2006, 75.

5 Lourdes Cevallos y Rosa Morales, *Estudio de los materiales constitutivos de la "Técnica Chinesco" in escultura policromada*, doctoral Thesis, Universidad Central del Ecuador, 2000; Manuel Amaya y Vanesa Garnica, *Corladura en escultura policromada colonial*, Trabajo de grado, Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2006, 75

6 Jean Powell, "Coloured Glazes on Silver-Gilded Surfaces", in Henry Hodges, John Mills y Perry Smith, *Conservation of the Iberian and Latin American Cultural Heritage: Preprints of the contribution to the IIC Madrid Congress*, 9-12 September 1992 (Londres: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 1992), 116-118.

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Fig. 5 Detail of the Nativity, Jaime Eguiguren Collection

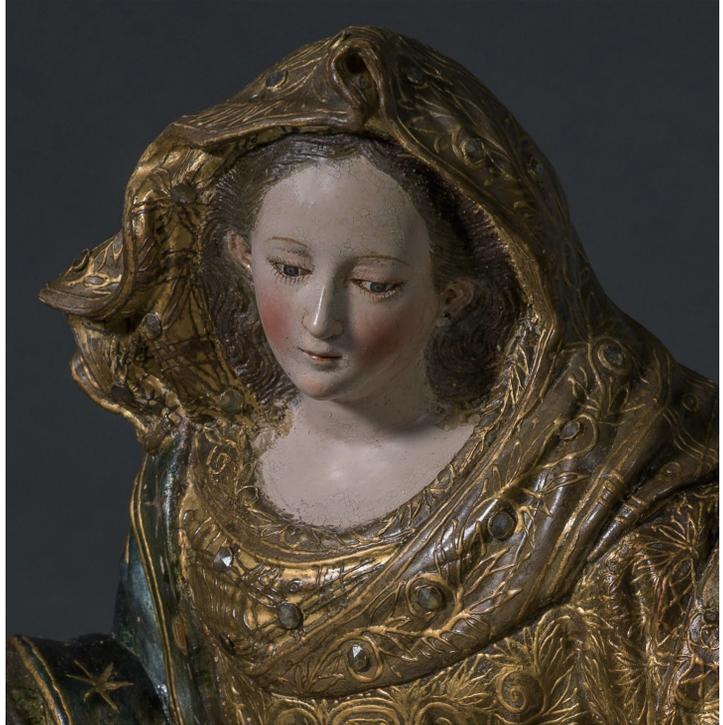


Fig. 6 Detail of the Nativity, Jaime Eguiguren Collection

headdress (Fig. 6). Even more unusual is the inclusion of mother-of-pearl in the fingernails of both figures, a feature for which no known precedents currently exist (Fig. 7).

Another distinctive feature of the sculptural ensemble presented here is that the figure of the Christ Child appears to be carved in alabaster, reinforcing its polymaterial character. Comparable examples may be found within Spanish American sculpture; for instance, the inclusion of alabaster heads and hands is well documented in certain Guatemalan Immaculate Conceptions, while in Peru entire sculptures were produced in Huamanga stone.

Within the Quito context in which this piece was created, the use of tagua was likewise common. This material—also known as corozo or “vegetable ivory”



Fig. 8 Detail from the Nativity, Jaime Eguiguren Collection

due to its physical properties—became a genuine fashion in the region during the eighteenth century. Harvested in the humid forests of Ecuador, its scientific name is *Phytelephas aequatorialis*. Nativity scenes were also produced in tagua, such as the example in the Hernández Roa Collection (Fig. 8), which follows exactly the same formal models as those carved in wood. The material was described

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by Fray Juan de Santa Gertrudis as follows: “it is like marble and is the fruit of the palm called cabeza de negro; figures are made from it to compose Nativity scenes, or small rocky settings with great refinement, as well as heads and hands for dolls.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that Nativity scenes functioned as true microcosms, capable of incorporating all manner of objects, thereby transforming them into a kind of Wunderkammer or cabinet of curiosities. In those produced in the city of Quito, scholars have documented the presence of “European and Asian porcelains, wax figures, small tagua sculptures, toys made from various materials, jewels, coins, and even carpets.”<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 8, Nativity, Quito, 18th c. Carved and polychromed tagua, Hernández Roa Collection, Bogotá

<sup>7</sup> Jean Powell, “Coloured Glazes on Silver-Gilded Surfaces”, in Henry Hodges, John Mills y Perry Smith, *Conservation of the Iberian and Latin American Cultural Heritage: Preprints of the contribution to the IIC Madrid Congress, 9-12 September 1992* (Londres: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 1992), 116-118.

<sup>8</sup> Ángel Peña Martín, “La sala del Belén, cámara de maravillas de las clausuras de la Real Audiencia de Quito”. In *Iberoamérica en perspectiva. Transferencias culturales y devocionales, editado por Inmaculada Rodríguez Moya, María de los Ángeles Fernández Valle y Carme López Calderón* (Castellón: Universitat Jaume I, 2016), 400.

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