



JAIME EGUIGUREN

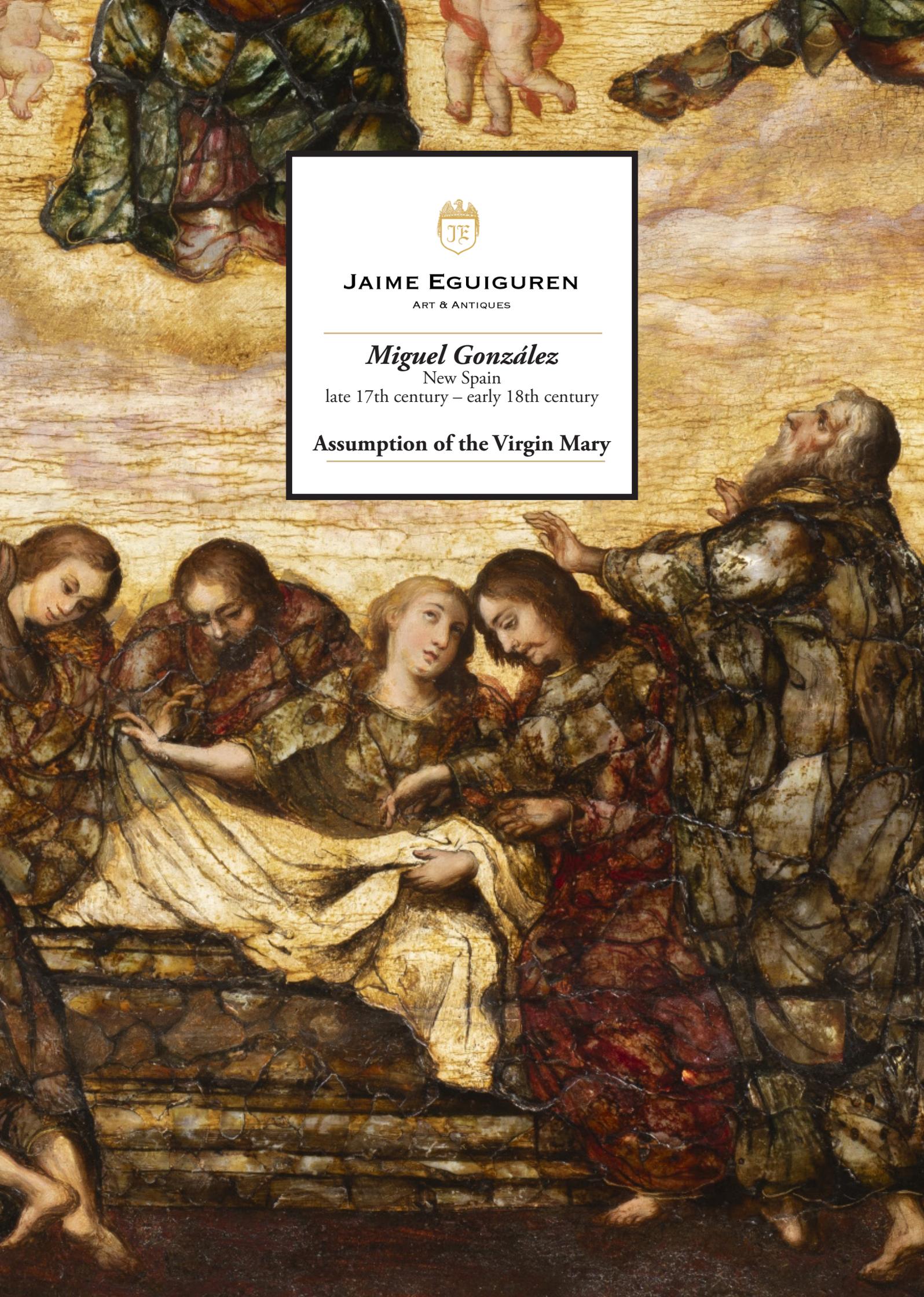
ART & ANTIQUES

Miguel González

New Spain

late 17th century – early 18th century

Assumption of the Virgin Mary





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Oil and mother-of-pearl on wooden panel

65×98.8 cm

Provenance: Private collection, Madrid

Sofía Fernández Lázaro

In the late 17th century, the Viceroyalty of New Spain went through an artistic and cultural period that was highly complex and enriching, the fruit of the constant influx of people, objects and ideas arriving on the American continent via the Manila Galleon maritime trade routes, in a two-way exchange phenomenon known as the *tornaviaje*. Out of this convergence of cultural and stylistic influences, which fused indigenous, European and Oriental knowledge, a unique artistic expression was born, which we now know as “enconchado” or mother-of-pearl inlay painting, reflecting the local artists’ remarkable taste for originality.

Works featuring mother-of-pearl inlay were characterised by the use of pictorial techniques taken from the European tradition, combined with the materiality and technical approach of Oriental nacreous and lacquer decoration (*maque*), thereby obtaining a surface populated with a particular glittering shimmer.

From a technical point of view, the increased efforts of the scientific and research community mean we now know that *maque* painters mostly executed sketches prior to the final execution and that, in general, these did not differ much from the final composition. On top of this preparatory drawing they would use animal glue to apply the pieces of mother-of-pearl, doing so in a studied and premeditated fashion, as “we always find them in the figures’ clothing, in architectural elements and certain decorative pieces”.³²² Once the mother-of-pearl sections had been inlaid, the master moved on to the detailed task of drawing the figures and objects, subtly outlining their forms with the tip of a brush laden with India ink, thereby attaining an

interplay of saturations and volumes reminiscent of Oriental art. Next the painter applied the pictorial layer, generally comprising a reduced chromatic palette moving between yellow tones for the background and architecture, and greens, blues and reds for the clothing. Its application, which was equally subtle, using transparencies and glazes, meant that, like a magical trick, the underlying iridescence of the mother-of-pearl shone through, mesmerising and astonishing the spectator. Finally, to protect the work, but also fulfilling an aesthetic purpose, the composition was covered with a layer of yellowish varnish, obtaining a greater colour saturation and thereby producing a noticeable increase in the chromatic contrast of the surface.³²³

Of the increasing numbers of known examples of *enconchado* works, we find both profane and religious subjects, some forming part of large series, like the previously-unpublished depiction of the *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* that we are presenting here, and which almost certainly belonged to a large series portraying episodes from the Virgin’s life. This was probably also the case for the small mother-of-pearl inlay panel depicting the same iconography, but of inferior pictorial quality to ours, preserved in Mexico’s Museo Franz Mayer (Fig. 1).

This majestic and excellently-preserved panel depicting the Assumption is medium-sized and of a horizontal, or landscape format, ideal for being displayed in a chapel or private oratory³²⁴ given, as Sonia Ocaña rightly points out, *enconchado* paintings are made to be viewed up close, at a distance from which the shining mother-of-pearl may be best appreciated.

The composition of the scene divides the painting into two narrative sections along the horizontal axis. In this, it joins the *Assumption* from Madrid’s Museo de América in using one or more engravings linked to Rubens as a model.³²⁵ Awash with iridescence thanks to the nacreous ocean bathing its pictorial surface, the *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* captures the very essence of devotion and transcendence, transporting us to a universe of symbolism and spirituality brimming with meticulously conceived and executed details.

In the upper area of the panel we find the Virgin Mary, resting on a swathe of ethereal and vaporous clouds, just as she is being taken, body and soul, to heaven by a cohort of adolescent angels arranged symmetrically, smiling, two on each side of the Mother of God. They boast colourful wings and wear light, long red and green tunics, which flutter in the breeze. Similar to them, but smaller and bare-chested, are the cherubim accompanying them on this celestial journey, surrounding the Virginal image and appearing from between the clouds, some full-length, others with just their little heads showing.

The Virgin, a matronly and noble-looking young woman, is dressed in a bluish mantle and pink robe, both garments “woven” with a succession of carefully-applied layers of mother-of-pearl. Surrounded



Fig. 1 Anonymous, *Assumption of the Virgin Mary*; oil and mother-of-pearl on panel, 17th-18th century. Museo Franz Mayer, Mexico



by a modest aureole, she emanates a splendour made up of subtle radiating glimmers, particularly accentuated at the level of her face, as if attempting to underline her celestial status. She is crowned by a tiara of roses underneath which her beautiful long brown mane flows down in fine, wavy locks that open up as they fall onto her shoulders like a theatre curtain, offering up to us the most serene and radiant of faces. Her head is slightly tilted towards the heavens, guiding her course with the gaze of her dark and almond-shaped eyes,³²⁶ which seem to go beyond the limits of the earthly realm. Her perfectly-traced nose and mouth are testament to the skilled draftsmanship of the artist, who was worthy of being called painter. The Virgin's body is outlined with soft curves, a device used by the artist as a counterpoint to the rigid incisions of the mother-of-pearl. The Marian depiction concludes with her white hands which, delicately clasped together over her breast, are an invitation to prayer, connecting the divine and human worlds.

In the lower section of the composition, clearly separated by a virtual horizontal line in the gold-tinted section, we find the figures of Mary Magdalene and the twelve Apostles, arranged on varying planes of depth around the empty tomb. Mary, the only woman in the group, is seen face-on in the centre of the composition, raising her face up to the heavens while holding the shroud in which the body of the Mother of God was wrapped. She is joined, in a sort of group hug, by three apostles, two of which are beardless. Of these, the youngest is probably St. John, who is holding up the heavy stone lid of the vacant tomb, provoking looks of astonishment in his companions who, stunned and overjoyed, are witnesses to the miracle. On their right we observe three more apostles, standing and full-length. The first, who is closest to the tomb, looks like an old man, with long hair and grey beard, looking up

towards the heavens, accompanying the Virgin in her passing into the divine sphere. Behind him, two apostles appear to be talking; one of them standing out with long light brown hair and moustache, pictured face-on, and somewhat removed from the emotional mood of the rest of the group. The majority of the apostles appear on the left of the panel. The first ones, those nearest the tomb, are seen kneeling down, with their backs to us, helping to lift off the heavy stone lid. Behind them, standing up, three bearded apostles of a certain age are lost in prayer, two of them looking towards the heavens, in contrast to the third apostle's reverential downwards gesture.

The skilled drawing of the faces and hands is of particular note, presenting a wide range of positions and expressive poses. This vouches for the courage and quality of Miguel González as a draftsman, with this meticulous depiction of details serving as the artist's signature given, according to the guild regulations, he had to accredit his skills in drawing, colouring and, most of all, in the *fattura* of beautiful faces and bodies when decorating his works.³²⁷ It is thus that we can confirm that this presumed relation of Juan González took all these technical matters extremely seriously in his most prominent works, showing that his link to the guild was not just for appearances, but that he made every effort to adapt his work to its requirements.

As a defining characteristic of this sort of piece, the composition is further embellished through the use of mother-of-pearl in the clothes of the Apostles, summoned by the divine power to witness this prodigious occurrence. The chromatic palette, as tends to be the case with *enconchado* paintings, is limited to the glazed use of yellows, greens and reds which, intermingled, create a visual contrast between the earthly hues and the sepia and golden tones reserved for the divine sphere.

As noted earlier, throughout the execution of the entire scene the artist subtly displays his meticulous and detailed pictorial technique, revealing his skill in rendering textures and shades of light. Each fold of the fabrics, worked using the tip of his brush, each strategically-placed dot of light; they all go to envelop the spectator in a mystical dance that helps to make up for the difficulties of perspective inherent to this sort of artform, instead regaling us with what is most certainly a mature work by Miguel González, whose popular workshop enjoyed a more than deserved reputation.

In short, this painting of the *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* stands before us as a majestic example of the virtuosity of a New Spanish painter who drew on the influences reaching him from overseas, and wove his own language to reproduce a complex iconography which, developing over the years through a profuse and heterogeneous ensemble of oral legends and apocryphal texts of varying linguistic/cultural origins, had to wait until 1959 to be defined as dogma by Pope Pius XII; a fact that did not, however, stop it from blossoming through both Spanish and Novohispanic artistic representations from the 18th century on (Fig. 2).

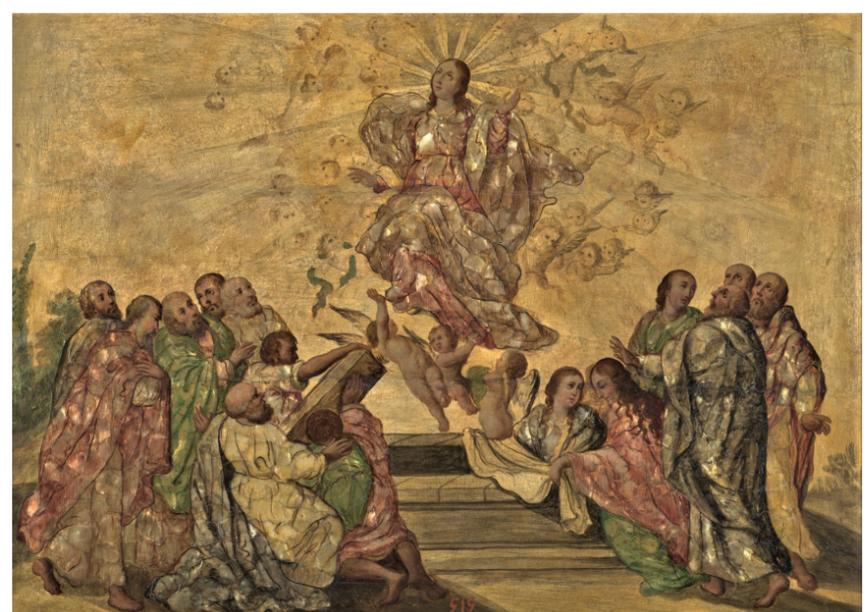


Fig. 2 Anonymism, *Assumption of the Virgin Mary*; mother-of-pearl inlay, Mexico 17th or 18th century. Museo del Prado, Madrid

