



JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

Miguel González

New Spain

late 17th century – early 18th century

The Apostle James the Greater



Miguel González

Active in the 2nd half of the 17th century

The Apostle James the Greater

Mexico, 17th century

Oil and mother-of-pearl on wooden panel

84×70 cm (framed)

56×40.6 cm (unframed)

Provenance: Private collection

Sofía Fernández Lázaro

Miguel González, a “*skilled craftsman in the art of painting*”,³¹⁶ is currently considered an indisputable benchmark figure and pioneer of the mother-of-pearl inlay technique, known as *enconchado*. He was born in 1662 to a family of artists. His father, Tomás González de Villaverde, a “*master maque painter*”,³¹⁷ ran his own workshop in Mexico City, which is probably where Miguel undertook his first commissions, becoming a leading light in one of the most unusual chapters of New Spanish art in the modern era, at just the same time as the work of renowned artists such as Cristóbal de Villalpando, Juan Correa or the Arellano family.

However, little else is known about the life of this *enconchado* master, with scholars of art history not paying him much heed until well into the 20th century, despite the fact that a considerable number of his works have survived to vouch for him as an original artist and a leading eminence, along with his close relative Juan, of this unique artistic style which, while drawing on oriental influences, developed in an entirely New Spanish fashion.

To judge by its exceptional iconography (St. James the Greater, patron saint of Spain), the work we are presenting here was probably commissioned by a private individual of Spanish origin, and it is also likely that it was intended for domestic use, as the light qualities of this sort of mother-of-pearl inlay work are an invitation to close inspection, where the iridescence and meticulous detail can be appreciated to the full.

This previously unpublished *enconchado* depicts James the Greater as its sole protagonist, in line with Counter Reformation norms regarding his portrayal. The Saint appears as a medieval pilgrim, full-length, standing up and facing the viewer, his left foot pushed slightly forward, barefoot, lending the scene a subtle dose of movement that alludes to pilgrimage. He is portrayed as solid and forthright, his back straight and gaze fixed on the horizon, creating a sort of visual metaphor for personal self-improvement and the spiritual fortitude necessary to tackle the challenges that crop up along life’s highway.

Depicted as an elderly man with pale skin, St. James boasts a softly-flowing mane of almost golden brown hair, with tufts of white around the corners of his mouth leading to his thick, three-toned beard, which almost conceals his fine, red, tightly-sealed lips. His saintly face is crowned by two large black eyes which, under fine and slightly raised eyebrows, seem lost in a gaze beyond the spectator, capturing the profound faith and devotion implicit to his mission. We find an analogous portrayal, with refined features, in the *Guadalupe* signed by Miguel González in 1692, and preserved today in Madrid’s Museo de América (Fig. 1). This similarity in *fattura* is particularly visible in the figure of St. Joaquin, who appears in the medallion in the top left corner, with physiognomic features that are incredibly close to those of our St. James, strongly suggesting that Miguel González was the artist responsible for the beautiful and unpublished

enconchado work we are presenting here.

Moving on with our description of the Saint, we come to his body, which is almost entirely covered in a long robe with a mantle on top. The pilgrim’s clothes take up almost all our attention thanks to the sort of mosaic they form, constructed out of multiple layers of mother-of-pearl inlay, which are imbued with movement by a succession of fine black lines applied by brush. Equally striking is the painstaking decoration of the clothing, which appears to be populated by a sea of dots, combined with volute-shaped motifs, all golden, lending it an even greater level of iridescence and brilliance.

Following the iconographic norms for depicting James the Greater as a pilgrim, he is pictured with all his canonical attributes. If



Fig. 1 Miguel González, *Guadalupe*, signed and dated 1692; oil and mother-of-pearl inlay on panel. Museo de América, Madrid

we start at the top, we find his pilgrim's hat, hanging round his neck and falling down his back, and which would appear to follow the most orthodox model, being cone-shaped and pointed. We then come to his left arm, from which his pilgrim's bag is hanging, while his left hand holds a book, in allusion to his gospel and his role as messenger of the Christian faith, a particularly symbolic dimension in this New Spanish *enconchado* given the evangelising function of the visual arts in the New World. One final distinctive element of Spain's patron saint is the pilgrim staff in his right hand, with a gourd hanging from the top. This attribute, which is practically the *sine qua non* of the Apostle James' pilgrim iconography, has a dual dimension, both spiritual and practical. Spiritually, the long staff carried by the pilgrim alludes to God's support as a spiritual guide on the road of life, as well as the practical need for, and benefits of, helping each other along the way. The gourd, meanwhile, used as a container for water or some other liquid, alludes to our connection with nature and our basic needs as we move through life.

The painting's background is stripped of compositional elements, eschewing any scenes or landscapes that might evoke the way of the pilgrim and his spiritual journey. Instead, in a display of originality and technical skill, González has enveloped the Saint in a sort of frame within a frame, surrounding the figure of James the Greater with a perimeter border festooned with flowers made out of little pieces of mother-of-pearl inlay combined with stems and foliage painted by brush, skipping between red, green and gold, the traditional colours of *enconchado*. We can find a similarly original background featured in a mother-of-pearl inlay work depicting *Guadalupe* housed at the Museo de América in Madrid (Fig. 2), whose authorship is currently unknown.

The work's final compositional element is the frame itself; comprising a perimeter border featuring a black background decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay, populated by an elegant and meticulously-



Fig. 2 Anonymous, *Guadalupe*, end of the 17th century – start of the 18th century; oil and mother-of-pearl inlay on panel. Museo de América, Madrid

executed repertory of plants, flowers and birds, all of which are covered by a subtle layer of red, green and golden pigments, instantly reminiscent of the subtlety of *Namban* lacquer. Of particular interest in our painting is the octagonal geometry employed by González in his design of the frame, a departure from the rectangular model generally found (with greater or fewer variations) in the majority of surviving *enconchado* works. It is worth noting, as Soria Ocaña does well to observe in her detailed study of *enconchado* frames, that “the fact that the frame technique is the same as the “*enconchado*” paintings indicates that the two parts of the work are closely linked”³¹⁸ and both, as such, the work of the same artist.

In addition to the conquistadors themselves, many of whom belonged to the Order of St. James, or Santiago,³¹⁹ the main institutions in charge of the dissemination of this iconography were the various religious orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Jesuits) which, each with its own precise evangelical role, did not stick merely to the act of converting, but participated in the development of a new society, using the visual arts as a tool for direct and immediate action in a process of acculturation that still endures to this day.³²⁰

As mentioned above, when they arrived in New Spain, the religious orders brought with them the cultural marks and traditional features that identified the Old World, with the figure of St. James the Greater, Apostle of Christianity and patron saint of Spain prominent among the icons of popular worship and devotion, and the “first Catholic saint to arrive with the Conquistadors”.³²¹ We can thus argue that, if St. James is linked to the history of Spain, he is also linked to that of the Americas, and to that of Mexico.

In short, we can conclude that this *enconchado* depiction of St. James the Greater stands before us as testimony to the globalisation of trade which, under the flag of the Manila Galleon, linked Asia, the Americas and Europe in a three-way voyage of influences and allegories that lives on to this day.



The Apostle James the Greater (detail), Jaime Eguiguren Collection

