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Andrés de la Concha
(Seville, ca. 1559 – Oaxaca, Mexico, 1612)

**SAINT MICHAEL THE
ARCHANGEL**

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Seville, ca. 1559 – Oaxaca, Mexico, 1612

Saint Michael the Archangel

Ca. 1600

Oil on canvas

130 x 90 cm

Provenance: Private collection, Spain

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*[...] Michael suggested to the Angels the greatness of the divine being,
his infinite perfections, by which he should be adored,
served and loved by all his creatures,
saying: Who like God? [...]*

Andrés de la Concha, the son of Francisco de la Concha and Isabel de Gamica, was born in Seville at a date still to be determined, although presumably before 1559, given he “stated in 1609 that he was over 50 years old”². Following a brief period in the city of his birth, in 1568 he set sail for the New World, being one of the first painters to arrive from Spain³. His 30 years of pictorial, sculptural and architectural work won great praise from his contemporaries, and earned him the most important commissions, to the extent of being named *Maestro Mayor* (Master-in-Chief) of the Cathedral of Mexico in 1601 by the Viceroy, Gaspar Zúñiga Acebedo, a post he would keep until his death in Oaxaca in 1612, and which he could combine with other works, such as the main altarpiece undertaken for the monastery of Santo Domingo in Oaxaca (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Andrés de la Concha,
Santo Domingo altarpiece,
1611-1612, Oaxaca.

¹ García, Francisco, 1684, p.16

² Sotos Serrano, Carmen, 2007-08, p.49

³ Díez Barroso, Francisco, 1921, p. 247

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Although his work is not signed, the seal of his marked and elegant style, as well as the surviving documentation referring to the range of commissions he undertook across the regions of the *Mixteca Alta* and the area surrounding the capital, have allowed historians of art in the Viceroyalty to refer to the Seville artist as “one of the best 16th-century New Spanish painters” and, more specifically, one of the major exponents of Latin American Mannerism along with Simon Pereyngs, with whom he worked on the altarpiece from the Franciscan monastery in Huejotzingo, Puebla.

His style, both respectful of the Classicist models, yet also daring in the way he worked line and shadow, should be conceived of within an urbane, cultured and secular form of Mannerism⁴ that defines the Viceroyalty’s adaptation of this artistic style, and which won the praise of poets, chroniclers and historians, who did not hesitate to consider the panel depicting *St. Cecilia*, housed today at the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City, as “one of the best examples of Latin-American Mannerism”⁵. (Fig. 2)

Along with a number of his contemporary émigré artists working in the 16th century, he shared that particular tendency to appropriate and adapt the modes and trends of the Old Continent, to the extent that some, such as Toussaint⁶, think they can discern hints of Tintoretto in the Seville painter’s brushwork, while others, meanwhile, would concur with Angulo⁷ in identifying the mark of Raphael, Correggio, Andrea del Sarto or Michelangelo in De la Concha’s *maniera*.



Fig. 2: Andrés de la Concha, *St. Cecilia*, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico.

⁴ Manrique, Jorge Alberto, 2006, p.42

⁵ Prieto Ustio, Ester, 2018, p. 53

⁶ Toussaint, Manuel, 1983, p.18

⁷ Angulo Íñiguez, Diego, 1950, p.382

Continuing in this line of considered influences, we should also highlight those who identify stylistic connotations in his oeuvre harking back to Seville. An appreciable legacy in the highly individualized treatment of the figures, or the fabrics, depicted with such authenticity. Added to this interpretation, there is also the inclusion of movement in his compositions, as well as foreshortening. This hypothesis makes even greater sense if one takes into account the probable link between the artist we are studying here and Diego de Concha, another painter from Seville and a disciple of Luis de Vargas, the latter being granted a prominent role in numerous comparative stylistic studies of the work of Andrés de la Concha, and a leading exponent of the Andalusian Late Renaissance, who Pacheco called the Father of painting in Seville⁸.

The stylistic characteristics described *ut supra* become undeniable in the work we are addressing here, depicting St. Michael the Archangel, one of the most widespread figures of devotion in the Christian world since the medieval period, and whose conceptual reference as the commander of the heavenly armies can be found in John's Book of Revelation:

"Then war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down; that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: Now have come the salvation and the power, and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens, and you who dwell in them! But woe to

⁸ Pacheco, Francisco, 2009, p.427

the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.”⁹.

In accordance with the Biblical story, the Archangel is depicted as a Roman soldier, full-length, standing up and slightly turned to the side. Slim and elegant, the celestial warrior makes a display of the representational magnificent of Italian Mannerism, which undoubtedly influenced the original Maerten de Vos painting on which the work we are studying here was based, and which De la Concha may have been able to appreciate *in situ* on the main altarpiece of the cathedral of the capital (Fig. 3) as:



Fig. 3: *Maerten de Vos, St. Michael the Archangel*, oil on canvas, Cuautitlán Cathedral, Mexico.

“Elsa Arroyo Lemus suggests that the paintings of Maerten de Vos (1532-1603) – Sts. Peter, Paul and St. Juan writing Revelations, Tobias and the angel and St. Michael the Archangel vanquishing sin – arrived in Mexico as a commission from Archbishop Pedro Moya de Contreras for the main altarpiece of the cathedral, and the canvases were stuck to wooden panels by Simon Pereyrs, at the behest of Andrés de la Concha”¹⁰

Another quite likely version is that De la Concha executed his composition based on one of the engravings Hieronymus Wierix dedicated to the original composition by the

⁹ Revelations, 12, 7-12

¹⁰ Sigaut, Nelly, 2017, p. 48

Flemish painter, and which we know travelled to the New World, always respecting, of course, the formal and figurative criteria demanded for the depiction of archangels, as set out (among others) by the painter and art theorist Francisco Pacheco in his *Arte de la pintura (Art of Painting)*:

“[...] The aspect and face taken from the divine letters, and which is approved of by the holy councils, is that of men, and not of women, and that is why they are given the name Viri [...] They should, therefore, be painted: at a young age, from 10 to 20 years old which, as St. Dionysius says, represents the vital force and value which is always vigorous in angels; beardless boys [...] with graceful and beautiful faces, lively and shining eyes, and yet virile, with generous, lustrous hair, blond and brown, with slender waists and their members pleasingly composed, an argument for the beauty of their being, [...] The cherubim of the Ark were also children (the name they are given in the Scriptures) and the seraphim should also be painted with children’s faces [...]”¹¹

In accordance, once more, with the literature and pictorial references, the Archangel is depicted as a beardless young man, with a snow-white pubescent face. His pink-blushed cheeks share center-stage with two little almond-shaped black eyes that imbue his face with great expressivity, and where our gaze is also drawn to the fine, stylized nose and thin mouth with tightly-closed red lips. His head is crowned by short, golden, curly hair over which a round splendor opens out, white at the bottom and blue at the top edge, with thin whitish rays of light.

Casting our eyes over the body of the warrior, we observe his triumphant posture, pointing his right hand towards the heavens while, in a diametrically opposing position, his other hand points towards the ground, while holding the palm of victory.

¹¹ Pacheco, Francisco, 2009, p. 532

Fundamentally respecting the chromatic code reserved and required for the graphic representation of this member of the Catholic body of saints, the Archangel Michael is depicted dressed in a blue cuirass, adorned all over its surface with gold stars, accompanied by a sun and moon on his pectorals, the former on the right one the latter on the left. His armor is further embellished with ruffled orange-yellow sleeves that stick out from his undershirt, and an underskirt of the same color.

A series of gold cherub heads, arranged like a belt across the pelvic region, give way to the overskirt, made up of thin hanging parallel strips, the same color as the cuirass, in between which we can make out the underskirt beneath.

Contrasting with the cuirass, which is tight against the body, and yet respecting the rules of decorum set out at Trent, we observe the skirt and cape, both of a light material, caught up in a sort of dance led by the wind, thereby providing the element of movement required by the composition.

Under the Archangel's feet lies the devil, depicted as a young, winged man with a snakelike tail hiding a muscly torso under his arms, crossed over his breast. This anthropomorphic representation of evil, a substitute for the devil in his varying bestiary versions, is a device that coincides with the consolidation of the Christian religion as a hegemonic form, and with the subsequent need for new identificatory symbols. To quote once more from Pacheco:

"[...] I add, that he is also painted in other forms, and with human figures and human nudes, both ugly and dark, with long ears, horns, eagle's claws and snake's tails, as Michelangelo portrayed him in his celebrated Judgment, along with other great painters."¹²

¹² Ibidem, p.532

Finally, and to conclude the descriptive aspect of the composition, it is worth highlighting that the Archangel is presented with his wings open, in battle stance, framed within a host of fluffy, blue-white clouds against which nine little cherub heads are seen floating, arranged like an arch over the guardian of the heavens, the same arrangement we find in the De Vos canvas and which, however, does not strictly adhere to the model from the Wierix engraving.

We know that De la Concha had recourse to the St. Michael the Archangel iconography on another occasion, although with a simpler compositional model, in the case of the work preserved at Oaxaca Cathedral (**Fig. 4**). Knowing that his painting would be compared with the works of Maerten de Vos, our artist used all his skills to create a display of technical mastery, showing his knowledge of a *maniera* that he must have seen in person, either in Seville or in the Viceroyalty, given the devices of Mannerist visual rhetoric present in his painting could not have been learnt from prints, but constitute a language acquired witnessing works in person.

As such, and as the major characteristic of the Latin American Mannerism pioneered by De la Concha, it is worth highlighting his choice of color because, beyond the palette required for certain iconographic attributes, such as the cuirass, skirt and cloak, the choice of the orange tone for the undershirt reflects a deliberate and intended interplay of contrasts, or *cambiamento*, something highly characteristic of the Venetian Mannerist rhetoric that exerted such an influence on our artist. This pictorial device consists of a sort of contrast in lighting achieved by the application of complementary tones in high saturation, imbuing the work with



Fig. 4: *Andrés de la Concha, St Michael the Archangel*, oil on panel, 16th-17th century, Oaxaca Cathedral, Mexico.

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an elevated level of scenography and expression. In addition to the previously unpublished work we have before us here, this device may be found in the canvases *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* and *The Final Judgment*, among others (Figs. 5 and 6). Furthermore, the work we are addressing here also points to certain parallels between the artistic *modus* of the Seville artist and other paintings from his oeuvre, such as the *Annunciation* or the *Holy Family and St. John* where, beyond the chromatic approach, we can observe the gestural grandiloquence inherent to Italian Mannerism and, now, also to that of New Spain. Parallels here may also be identified in the execution of the clouds, wings and hair (Figs. 7 and 8).



Fig. 5: *Andrés de la Concha*, *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, oil on panel, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico.



Fig. 6: *Andrés de la Concha*, *Final Judgment*, oil on panel, ca. 1575, main altarpiece of the church of Santo Domingo, Yanhuitlán, Oaxaca.



Fig. 7: Andrés de la Concha, Annunciation, oil on canvas, parish church, Mexico.

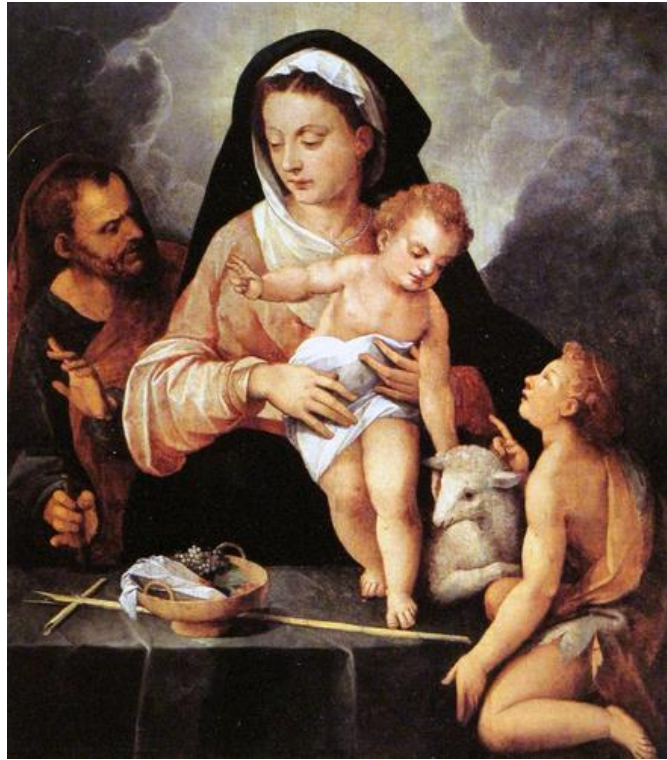


Fig. 8: Andrés de la Concha, The Holy Family and St. John, oil on panel, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico.

Finally, having concluded our artistic and stylistic analysis of the work being addressed, and in order to complete our study of it, I think we ought to devote our final few paragraphs to the iconographic evolution of this subject in Western art and, in particular, the role that Maerten de Vos and Hieronymus Wierix played in the popularization of the visual material of this and other Counter Reformation repertoires.

St. Michael the Archangel, head of the Heavenly Army, Prince of the Heavenly Hosts, and first among the seven archangels has, since the earliest Christians, been venerated as the archangel who defeated Satan in the great battle that took place in Heaven. Such is his standing, respect and place among the faithful that the Church named him the protector of souls from diabolical powers, and the figure who led them into the presence of God. Both responsibilities being enough to guarantee him a privileged position within the iconographic repertory of Art History, which currently ensures his presence on the walls of churches, museums and palaces throughout the Western world. These

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depictions therefore range from Medieval chivalric versions to examples charged with realism which, starting with the Renaissance, gradually forged a model that would soon be understood as hegemonic, born of the one conceived by Raphael in 1518 for Frances I, housed today in the Louvre (**Figs. 9a and 9b**).



Fig. 9a: Master Sant Paul de Casserres, Front panel of altar of the archangels, stucco reliefs and remains of silver gilding on panel, second quarter of the 13th century, MNAC, Barcelona.

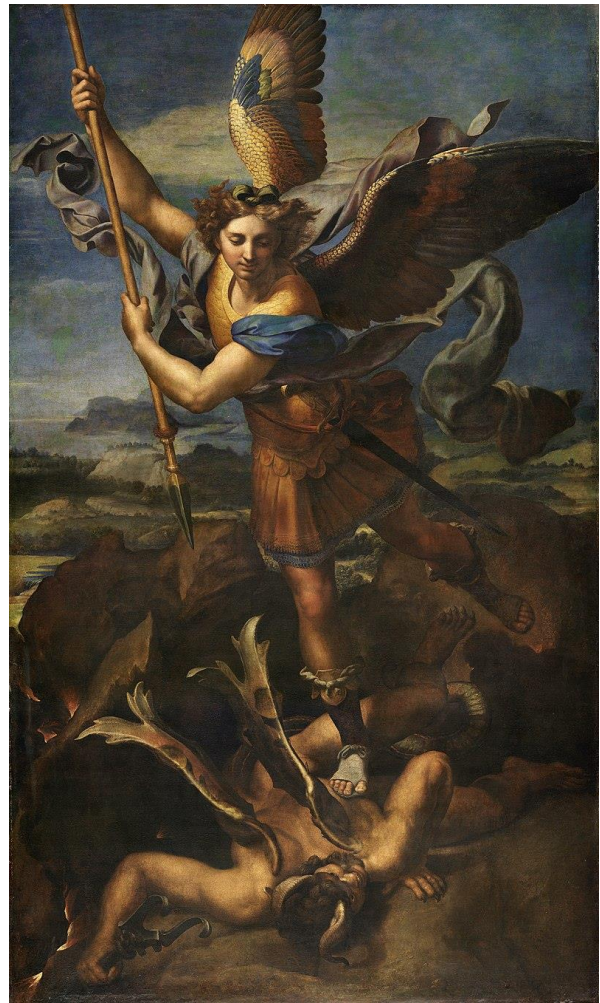


Fig. 9b: Raphael, St. Michael Vanquishing Satan, oil on canvas, 1518, Musée du Louvre.

This work of genius gave rise to the emergence of new depictions, less exuberant, and yet boasting increased Mannerist refinement, and which undoubtedly served as inspiration for the Flemish De Vos, to whom we owe the thematic reinterpretation we have before us here, and which was so successful on both sides of the Atlantic thanks to the engravings produced in Flanders and shipped over to the Americas in the second half of the 16th century.

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The Maerten de Vos model of St. Michael vanquishing the devil was engraved by Hieronymus Wierix in 1584, published by his countryman Adriaen Huybrechts and dedicated to the Spanish Humanist Benito Arias, the librarian at the El Escorial monastery (**Fig. 10**). The great merit of this and other prints was, beyond serving as a bridge between the art of the Netherlands and that of the Viceroyalty, to satisfy the aesthetic and spiritual requirements of society in the New World, and provide a figurative mechanism for the dissemination of the Catholic faith and the subsequent acculturation of the indigenous population.



Fig. 10: Hieronymus Wierix, St. Michael the Archangel, engraving of a design by Maerten de Vos, 1584.

In conclusion, the painting we are introducing today forms part of that broadest of Christian artistic corps which, beyond the aesthetic and educational motives assigned to versions created by and for the Old Continent, constitutes a clear example of the instrument of instruction and persuasion into which the Catholic Counter Reformation transformed art, identifiable in this exceptional example of Latin American Mannerism.

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