

JAIME EGUIGUREN ART & ANTIQUES



Saint Michael the Archangel

Unidentified artist
Queretaro (Mexico), Late 17th–early 18th century
Polychromed terracotta
37 x 17 x 14 cm
Provenance: Private collection, Spain

When we examine this original sculpture from Queretaro, Mexico, we can but be well aware of the dearth of documentation surrounding the study of the sculptural heritage of New Spain.³⁰ However, the success of formal analysis in studying the origins of pieces with similar characteristics leads me to argue the case for the validity of said method on this occasion, too.

The image of St. Michael (37cm tall, *ronde-bosse* and executed in terracotta) presents a depiction of the archangel that adheres to traditional medieval iconography. The saint and head of the heavenly hosts appears face-on, standing on a pedestal of imitation marble, his left leg forward, resting on the speared and captive body of Satan. In accordance with the Gothic aesthetic being reproduced, the Archangel Michael is depicted as a young knight wearing 15th century armor, including rerebraces, cuirass, a mail skirt and cloak. Protecting the lower half of his body are cuisses, poleyns, greaves and sabatons. In addition, and also following the iconographic model, his left hand bears his shield while his right hand holds his spear. On his head he has a helmet with a plumed crest and his hands are protected by gauntlets.

Michael's face presents a pale complexion where the pink cheekbones are particularly noticeable. He has two enormous dark, almond-shaped eyes which, topped by two fine raised eyebrows, look down on the Devil, accompanied by a slight tilt of the head in the same direction. His nose, both prominent and markedly straight, contrasts with the fine delicacy of his lips, which are reddish and closed tightly.

With regard to the carving work, it is worth noting the fine softness of the folds, with an abundance of undulating movement, especially in the cloak, generating a dynamism which, added to the excellent polychroming, lends the sculpture a captivating effect.

It is key, at this juncture, to address a series of aesthetic details that are an indication of the Latin American origins of this work, and which call on the reader to pay close attention to the specific manner in which the artist has executed the polychroming of this extremely interesting terracotta sculpture, of particular note due to the gilding and *corladura*³¹ varnishing work. This may be observed all over the surface making up St. Michael's body. Without ornamentations added to the garments covering the upper and lower extremities of his armor, we see how the skirt has been polychromed using the tip of the brush, with red and green tones forming successive parallel and undulating lines that skillfully match the folds depicted in the garment. In addition, lower down, the artist has included a border made up of thin, straight vertical lines, also in tones of red and green. Of particular interest is the ornamental repertory the artist has brought to bear on the cloak, so suggestively mobile and rich in color and brilliance. The red inner lining of this garment features the most elegant and painstaking decoration, combining blue and white floral motifs applied using the

tip of the brush with rich *estofado* work, particularly noticeable in the host of little gold hoops covering the cloak. In addition, lending the image even greater elegance, we observe how an outer border rich in phytomorphic *estofado* motifs of great size imbues the inside of the garment with a remarkable brilliance. Finally, it worth to mention the decorative technique with which the artist has executed the outside of the cloak, with its intense electric green, attained using the abovementioned *corladura* technique, which involves the application of a varnish, in this case of a greenish hue, to metal leaf, thereby lending the surface of the sculpture the required metallic appearance.

As such, the imitation medieval aesthetic of the image, added to the metallic brilliance of the fabrics with their intense palette of colors, leads us to posit that the artist behind this work wanted to reproduce an international gothic aesthetic he may have been familiar with through one of the many prints arriving on Mexican soil. The composition we have before us here invites parallels with 15th century models, in spite of differences in technique and period, presenting painstaking ornamentation, graceful movement in the fabrics, and a rich metallic range of colors, lending the work a decorative character that counterbalances the martial overtones of the Archangel's iconography (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Israhel van Meckenem (German, c. 1445–1503), *Saint Michael*, 1470–1480, engraving. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

Finally, it is worth pausing to consider the iconography being portrayed, St. Michael defeating the Devil. This visual depiction of the best-known archangel was particularly popular following the Council of Trent, with his image being associated with the Catholic Church's triumph over Protestant heresy, which goes to explain its devotional dissemination on both sides of the Atlantic. This is the same ideological context surrounding the sculpture of *St. Ferdinand, King of Spain* (Fig. 2), symbol of the Christian reconquest in the light of Muslim domination of Spanish soil, in whose aesthetics we can discern shared elements with the work we are studying here, elements that invite us to date the creation of our *St. Michael* to the Mexican city of Queretaro in around 1700.

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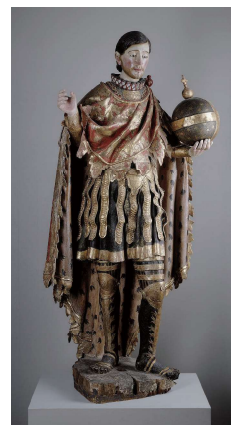


Fig. 2 Anonymous artist from Queretaro, *Saint Ferdinand King of Spain*, 1730, wood with polychroming and *estofado*. Denver Museum of Art