



JAIME EGUIGUREN

ARTS & ANTIQUES

Luis Lagarto

(Seville, 1556-1624?)

**THE VIRGIN AND
DIVINE CHILD**

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Vellum paper, a term derived from the old French *vélin*, meaning 'calfskin' or 'calf leather', is a type of parchment which is very useful for printing highly detailed images.

27cm (10.63 in) x 20 cm (7.87 in)

Including frame: 60 cm (23.62 in) x 52 cm (20.47 in)

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As is well known, and thanks to the research conducted by the Mexican historian Guillermo Tovar de Teresa, this highly prestigious and prolific painter from Seville arrived in New Spain around 1585, to fulfill a commission to decorate choir books for the Cathedral of Mexico. Later he would do the same job with the books of the superb Cathedral of Puebla, specifically, in 1600, when he signed a contract with the Chapter of the Cathedral to illuminate "the necessary letters, in the number, order, and manner commanded and instructed by said Bishop, Dean, and Chapter, for the library said Holy Church is building in this city..."¹

He was one of the best Mannerist illuminators of the Hispanic world and a prolific artist who created works of all genres: decorative capital letters in choir books, executory letters, reliquaries, and stunning miniatures on vellum, traced in very fine gold lines and colorful tones. A man of culture, he made a great contribution to the arts in New Spain, Spain, and to the artistic style of his time, due to his wonderful designs and representations which were unparalleled in the New World. Being born in Seville, and probably trained in Italy, Luis Lagarto was the spearhead of a family dynasty of artists who flourished in Mexico.

In the composition of this painting on vellum, with Lagarto's typical colors and drawing, the "Virgin Mary" holds the "Divine Child" in her lap, in a moment in his childhood when he enjoys playing – he holds a small scale farmhand saw in his small hands (an essential carpentry tool used to saw trunks to make boards and planks). Lagarto, therefore, does not depart from the models that recreated this theme before or after his times, such as the Spanish artists José de Ribera or Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, the Flemish artist Gerard van Honthorst, or the French artist George La Tour, just to mention a few. Although most painters included only Saint Joseph and Infant Jesus, with the tools his father would use to teach him this trade, many other artists, such as Lagarto, gave preference only to the Virgin and her child.

This artist from Seville represents this scene, which can be dated in late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century, in line with the tradition of painting these themes using a new expression, and following Italianate models and schemes. The attentive observer will immediately perceive a more intimate communication between two beings, who are actually one, i.e. who have not been separated yet. We are then in the presence of new feelings, away from the traditional seriousness of arts in previous centuries. The fact that the smiling Virgin, finely clad and demarcated by an exuberant and colorful nature valance celebrating the wonders of the World, including, as can be seen, plants, birds, and insects, is holding her child in her lap so gracefully and in such a close communication, surrounded by cherubs and two big smiling and elegantly dressed angels crowning her, with a Flemish-influenced alpine, rocky, sinuous landscape as a background, does not cease to move us.

We are in the presence of human and divine tenderness.

The Virgin and the child deeply united to each other.

The signature and date are missing in this work. However, it takes us to an interim period in the production of this particular artist.

On July 20, 1538, Charles I of Spain and V of Germany granted the city of Puebla its Coat of Arms. The Royal Charter, currently kept in the City Council Archive of said city in Mexico, was made in parchment. This is mentioned because the similarity between some elements in both works, both the valance and the angels, both in the Coat of

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Arms granted through a Royal Charter to the city of Puebla and in this painting, never ceases to amaze us. The same century, the same pictorial tradition, a different hand.

Luis Lagarto was an exceptional painter. His art flourished in Mexico, from which he undoubtedly drew local influences. His production, always rich and colorful, sometimes exuberant, of strokes, including, as has already been mentioned, delicate gold lines which ennobled the clothes in his compositions, helped cover the demand required by public worship and private devotion, and not always, as other artists of his time, did he sign his numerous works. There are plenty of examples of his production, and they have survived in private collections to this day, as this "Virgin and Divine Child". And of course we remember his delirious paintings on vellum: "Adoration of the Shepherds" of 1610, "Allegory of the Virgin of the Rosary" and "Annunciation" of 1611, "Saint Lawrence" of 1616, "Marriage of the Virgin" of 1619, and the "Tota Pulchra" of 1612, 1619, and 1622.

Lagarto showed us breathtaking celestial visions. When we are enjoying his art, we understand that he could always manage to express, with his paint brush, "the maximum in the minimum", according to the French maxim, also expressed by Albert Camus (remember his paintings in vellum are of a small format).

We are certain that it brings us closer to the spirituality of his time. Within the history of art of the sixteen and seventeenth centuries in Spain and Mexico, Luis Lagarto's style is still shining today, surrounded by a soft, cheerful, and flowery mysticism.

ALEJANDRO DE ANTUÑANO MAURER

NOTES

1. The Contract was found by the historian from Puebla, Francisco Pérez de Salazar, and included by Guillermo Tovar de Teresa in his study about the Lagarto family, titled "Un rescate de la fantasía: el arte de los Lagarto, iluminadores novohispanos de los siglos XVI y XVII", Fomento Cultural Banamex, 1988, page 228. Christ Crucified figure.

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