

JAIME EGUIGUREN ART & ANTIQUES



Divine Shepherdess

Unidentified artist
Guatemala, late 18th–early 19th century
Carved and polychromed wood, *estofado* and gilt silver
28 x 28 x 14 cm
Provenance: Private collection, Spain

This image, executed at approximately the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, may be linked to the devotional sculpture of the old Kingdom of Guatemala and, to be precise, to the genre which, due to its small-scale format, is generally known as “domestic”, being associated with contexts of private devotion.

The wood chosen for the lower section would appear to be Spanish cedar (*Cedrela odorata*), a popular choice for many artists working in the old Kingdom of Guatemala. One prominent feature is the carving work on the plinth, which presents a very particular stonework effect, rendered in almost geometric patterns. Similar examples are to be found on the Calvaries on display at the Museo Nacional de Escultura in Valladolid, and in the group purchased fairly recently by the Metropolitan (MET) in New York (Fig. 1). With regard to the female image, its execution draws on certain fairly closed compositional designs, thereby helping to maintain volume without requiring the addition of complementary elements, but where great attention is paid to attaining depth, especially in the folds in the cloak and robe, as we observe in our work. The hair is arranged into long clumps that separate forming whimsical undulations. Finally, the approach to sculpting the lambs is similar to that seen in the depiction of the *Infant Divine Shepherd*, belonging to the Fundación Mario Uvence in Chiapas, Mexico (Fig. 2). Once the figures were sculpted, a layer of priming or thin stucco was applied, and then the colors were applied through a series of techniques that make the piece of religious imagery we are dealing with here easily recognizable.

It was onto this priming layer, and executed in the same material, that one can traditionally observe the application of multiple layers of relief imitating vegetation, only drawn in outline, as is so typical of this sort of religious imagery. Other technical variations exist for undertaking this kind of relief work, consisting in the use, prior to the metal leaf work, of a substance of rubbery appearance, applied by the “barbotine” technique, or “pastillage” gesso. This is then coated with a layer of bole, carefully burnished in preparation for the application of the gold or silver leaf. Next, color was used to attain the carnation and *estofado* effects, along with other elements such as the plinth and the imitation of the lamb’s fleece using a brush finish; the precise and perfectly complementary little touches we see in the eyebrows, eyelashes and lips.

In term of the application and combination of silver and gold leaf, which was then painstakingly burnished, we find the former in part of the clothing, in particular in the fabric on the Virgin’s shoulders, the lamb’s fleece sticking out from the former and, of course, in the lambs themselves that accompany her, as well as in the lining of the cloak. The painter worked on the texture of the fabric being imitated after the surface of the metal had been burnished, using a burin or die cutter for the popular “picado de lustre” technique of making punch marks in the metal, creating a series of little boxes arranged in a regular four by four pattern, generating a brilliance that seeks to play on the different chromatic effects of the metal as the light hits it. One parallel we could

mention is the image of *St. Salvador of Horta*, from the church of San Francisco, Guatemala City, executed in 1794. Two different techniques can be seen in relation to the decorative elements that are superimposed. The first is the previously mentioned barbotine application, which adds relief by tracing out a series of plant motifs that resemble simple leaves or palm fronds and are arranged all over the surface to give the impression of a textile pattern with gilt edges. This section of the polychroming is finished with a dark outline made up of a relatively thick line around the entire motif, which serves to create a kind of pictorial shadow that heightens the design in contrast to the general gilding. Everything points to an attempt to create chromatic contrasts based on varying levels of transparency and to enrich the garments, serving as an illustration of one of the aspects of Guatemalan religious imagery’s historical skills.

We conclude our study of the cloak by turning to the braiding at the front and the lining, decorated solely using “picado de lustre”. In the design of this *Divine Shepherdess’* clothing, we can easily observe the use of patterns sourced from 18th-century European textiles. The design we see here consists of various vertical bands of different widths and ornamentations, made up of continuous lines in relief superimposed over the base of the fabric, with profuse “picado de lustre” on top of what must be silver. The dark coffee color combined with the green of the plinth is characteristic of Guatemalan sculpture. This depiction of the *Divine Shepherdess* is based on an iconography of unknown source being, quite possibly, a free version.

There is, in short, no doubt that the sculpture before us here is a remarkable work of the so-called “domestic” variety, which enjoyed great praise in the output of the workshops of Guatemala’s old “Capitanía General”, probably dating from the late 18th century, and most certainly after the change of capital city following the Santa Marta earthquake of 1773. It is an interesting compendium of the sculptural and pictorial skills of said artists, and also a reflection of the techniques and approaches in which the academic literature written to date has come to identify an unmistakable hallmark. Furthermore, this is an iconographic *rara avis* that should still reveal further aspects of the notions underlying its creation.

P.A.M.



Fig. 1 Calvary Guatemala, c. 1790
Polychrome wood, gilt silver, glass, hair
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Fig. 2 Divine Shepherd Guatemala, 18th century, carved polychrome wood with carnation and *estofado*. Fundación Mario Uvence in Chiapas, Mexico