

JAIME EGUIGUREN ART & ANTIQUES



Circle of Basilio Santa Cruz Pumacallao

Cuzco (Peru), last third of the 17th century

Immaculate Conception

Oil on canvas

183 x 138 cm

Provenance: Private collection

The iconographic configuration of the Immaculate Conception is the end result of the complex translation of a series of dogmatic propositions into a visual image. The Virgin Mary, conceived free of original sin, needed to be depicted in an efficient manner in order to become a universal symbol.

The roots of this iconic quest go back to the middle ages, when other models, such as the Tree of Jesse, the embrace between St. Joachim and St. Anne at the Golden Gate, and the Triple Anne, aimed to corroborate the purity surrounding the birth of the Virgin. However, the validity of these images would be called into question, as their narratives were all based on apocryphal texts, so it was decided to assimilate the figure of Mary with those of three other Biblical females: the wife from the *Song of Songs*; the Woman of the Apocalypse, and the New Eve.

It was as such that the iconographic model known as *Tota pulchra* came into being. This innovative compositional subject gradually took shape over the 16th century, featuring the Virgin alongside a number of figurative symbols from the litanies and prayers drawn from the *Song of Songs* and the Old Testament.

This combination of elements would be assimilated in the 17th century by artists linked to the Seville school, such as Francisco Pacheco (1564–1644), Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664) and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1618–1682), who lent their artworks a style of their own, which became extremely popular in the Americas, as the Immaculate Conception constituted a doctrinal and pedagogical synthesis of great importance to the evangelization of the New World, thanks to the religious and political cause espoused by the Spanish monarchy, reaching as far as local communities, and giving its name to churches, chapels, shrines and brotherhoods.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the devotion's great popularity in Peru, where worship of the Immaculate Conception was extremely widespread, with works from the hands of renowned local artists such as Gregorio Gamarra (c. 1570–1642), Luis de Riaño (1596–c. 1667) and Diego Quispe Tito (1611–1681).

Another prominent indigenous artist was Basilio de Santa Cruz Pumacallao (Cuzco, 1635–1710), active in Cuzco during the second half of the 17th century, with the support of the great art patron Bishop Manuel de Mollinedo. He focuses on large-scale Baroque compositions that were both highly dynamic and decorative, was linked

less to the copying of prints than to the works of the aforementioned Seville artists. His most important pieces adorned the walls of Cuzco Cathedral, with the depiction of miraculous apparitions, mystical ecstasy and theological allegories of a triumphalist nature, presenting a brilliant *fattura*, featuring energetic and vibrant bursts of glory or partings of the heavens. He is also attributed with the canvas depicting the *Immaculate Virgin Victorious over the Serpent of Heresy* (Fig. 1), whose iconographic similarity with the painting before us reflects clear formal parallels between the two works.



Fig. 1 Attributed to Basilio Santa Cruz Pumacallao, *Immaculate Virgin Victorious over the Serpent of Heresy*, c. 1680–1700. Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru

The canvas we are addressing here presents a radiant Virgin Mary, in accordance with the description given by Francisco Pacheco in his textbook *Art of Painting*, first published in 1649: “Háse de pintar pues este aseadísimo misterio, esta Señora en la flor de su edad, de doce o trece años, hermosísima niña, lindos y graves ojos, nariz y boca perfectísima y rosadas mejillas, los bellísimos cabellos tendidos del color de oro [...] Háse de pintar con túnica blanca y manto azul, vestida de sol, que cerque toda la imagen, unido dulcemente en el cielo; coronada de doce estrellas compartidas en un círculo claro entre resplandores”. (“This most immaculate of mysteries should therefore be painted showing this Lady in the flower of youth, aged 12 or 13, a most beautiful girl, attractive and serious eyes, perfect nose and mouth, pink cheeks, the most beautiful gold-colored hair [...] She should be painted in a white robe and blue cloak, bathed in sunlight surrounding the entire image, sweetly united with the heavens; crowned with 12 stars arranged in a light circle in an aureole of splendor.”)

The inclusion of a crescent moon under her feet, extremely common in this sort of depiction, has been eschewed in favor of a terrestrial globe being enthusiastically held aloft by three angels. The celestial setting is reinforced by the emergence of more winged angels surrounding Mary, these in turn bearing symbols alluding to the aforementioned litanies of Loreto: such as a rose, representing charity, the queen of the virtues and emblem of the Passion; the Madonna lily, symbolizing Mary's virginal status and conception without the stain of

original sin, and a door, standing for the Virgin's role as the gateway to heaven through which the Savior came to us. Underneath these, in the earthly sphere, we observe vegetation, also carefully chosen to match the litanies, given the palm was a tree that already existed in Paradise, whose leaves were symbols of victory and sacrificial offering, and whose fruit, late to ripen, represented the patience of the virtuous in the face of the rewards of divine justice. Finally, the cypress tree, with its incorruptible resin and hardy foliage, evokes immortality and resurrection, as well as the steadfastness demonstrated by the Virgin in the face of sin. In *Charity as the Queen of the Virtues* (c. 1670) (Fig. 2), a work by Basilio de Santa Cruz, the postures of the angels, their hair, looks and the interlinking of their bodies invite clear comparison with our work. The elaborate composition and the precision of the drawing are typical of the indigenous artist's oeuvre, and may also be observed in the composition we are dealing with here.

To conclude, it is worth mentioning the fine and delicate brocade effect applied to Mary's clothing, an attempt to reinforce her solemnity, and a trademark of Cuzco painting, as well as proof of the introduction of certain indigenous elements into the composition's strict iconographic program that left little room for innovation.

J.G.M.



Fig. 2 Basilio Santa Cruz Pumacallao, *Charity as the Queen of the Virtues (detail)*, c. 1670. Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru