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ART & ANTIQUES



Infant Jesus of Cebu

Unidentified artist
Hispano-Philippine, 17th century
Ivory and wood
Height 51 cm
Provenance: Private collection

The work we have before us here is of particular historic artistic interest due to both the technical quality of its *fattura* and the prominence enjoyed by this specific iconography of Christ, the most widespread in the Philippines²⁰ during the centuries of Spanish rule.

The iconography in question is the *Santo Niño de Cebú* (Christ Child of Cebu), a title of Filipino origin corresponding to the Infant Jesus iconography of the Salvator Mundi, also known as the Infant Jesus of Prague or the Christ Child of the Orb. Although in the work we are studying here the defining attribute (the *globus cruciger*, or orb), has not survived, the position of the Child's left hand, reaching out and with the palm upwards, indicates that it originally held it. The act of benediction presented by the right hand, which is typical of this type of depiction of God as world savior, supports this theory.

We know that the iconography of the Infant Jesus arrived on Filipino soil in 1521 along with Magellan, who took to the New World a wooden carving he gave to "Queen Juana" on the island of Cebu the day she was baptized. The vicissitudes of history denied this image of the Christ Child any major role for the next 44 years, and it was necessary to wait for the expedition led by Legazpi and Urdaneta to reach the conquered land for, following its discovery, it to be raised up as the main image serving the purposes of the evangelical mission, thereby making it one of the main devotions in Magellan's archipelago.

Beyond the specific context explaining the deep roots the *Santo Niño de Cebú* put down in the Philippines, it is key to identify its function as a fundamental part of the spirit of the Council of Trent, which found in the allegories of the Christ Child an appealing way of inviting the recently-conquered into Catholic devotion. To this end, it was key to reproduce images from the Old World, highlighting, in the case at hand here, the introduction into both the Americas and the Philippines of models originating in Seville, where the prototype was the Infant Jesus executed by Juan Martínez Montañés in 1607 for the city's cathedral, and on which there is no doubt that this ivory work draws.

The sculpture is of astonishing quality and lightness of touch. The torso and legs are carved out of a solid marble tusk, with the arms then attached to the body. The Christ Child appears standing up and looking straight at the spectator with his right leg pushed slightly forward. His chubby body is depicted naked, as was often the case for images intended to be dressed in rich and elegant fabrics. In

accordance with the demands of ivory, the Infant Jesus has a snow-white face, serene and brimming with sweetness. He presents Oriental physical features, with it being worth highlighting the broad brown eyes, with fleshy and elongated eyelids, from which he looks out keenly at us. His nose, straight and stylized, with two well-pronounced nostrils, leads on to the mouth, tightly sealed and still testament to the red with which his thin lips were originally decorated. The Infant Jesus' face is crowned by a generous head of curly brown hair where we may discern an interplay of artistic influences, given the presence of the "moña montañésina", or marked "quiff" or "pompadour" in the center of the Savior's forehead, which is a clear indication of some kind of contact with the sculptures that Martínez Montañés and his follower, Juan de Mesa, carried out during the first half of the 17th century. Furthermore, the execution of the neck, wrists and knees is particularly interesting, presenting typically Buddhist folds, a clear sign of the hybridism characterizing Hispano-Filipino ivory works, where Western iconography was a perfect and harmonious match for the local artists, the *sangleyes*, and their virtuoso technique along, of course, with their visual references.

It is also worth noting the rectangular pedestal on which the *Santo Niño Jesús de Cebú* is standing. Made in ebonized and molded wood, the bone inlay panels on the sides with the elegant decoration featuring phytomorphic motifs and acanthus leaves are of particular note.

Although historically Filipino-Hispanic ivory has moved in anonymity (there are no known signed works or documentary references providing any names), both the visual specificities along with the sparing polychrome (limited to hair, eyes and lips) indicate the early date of this work's execution. Furthermore, the exquisite carving, a display of technical skill enjoyed by few, also tells us that what we have before us here is a piece by one of the finest Filipino ivory sculptors.

S.F.L.