



**JAIME EGUIGUREN**

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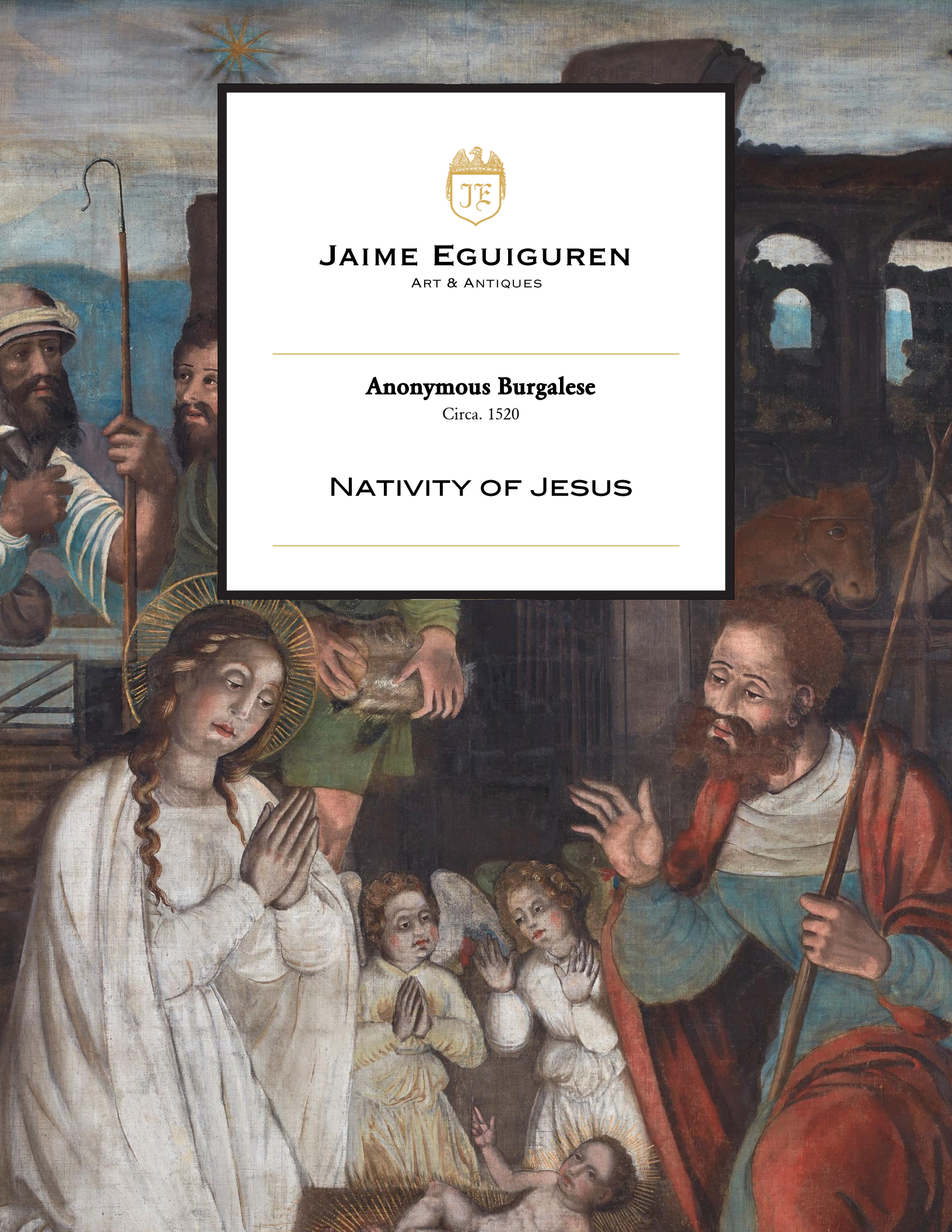
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**Anonymous Burgalese**

Circa. 1520

**NATIVITY OF JESUS**

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**Anonymous Burgalese**

Circa 1520

***Nativity of Jesus***

Tempera on twill (sarga)

194 x 160 cm

Provenance: Private collection

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This unpublished painting executed in tempera and depicting the *Nativity of Jesus* is the companion piece to another unique work also on twill (*sarga*) with similar dimensions and identical style, which employs great subtlety and detail in its presentation of the well-known iconographic subject of the *Tree of Jesse*, which enjoyed great success and popularity in the final centuries of the middle ages.



Anonymous Burgalese, *Tree of Jesse*, Circa 1520, Tempera on sarga

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Presenting the same technique and pictorial execution, these two companion pieces, the *Tree of Jesse*, depicting Christ's ancestry (as included in the Gospels of Matthew 1: 1-17 and Luke 3: 23-38), and the *Nativity of Jesus*, date from the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the artistic context of Burgos, and both present a clear debt to Flemish art, in style and in the choice of iconographic models.

Within the cycle of Christ's childhood, the subject of the Nativity is the first passage, and one of the most often depicted. The description in Luke's Gospel is succinct, narrating that it took place in a stable manger as no other accommodation could be found. Artists took inspiration from other texts that went into the episode in greater detail, such as the *Protoevangelium of James*, the *Liber de Infantia Salvatoris*, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*.

The painting we are dealing with here undoubtedly opted for the Flemish school tradition of including the vision of the Swedish Mystic Saint Bridget, who made a pilgrimage in 1370 to the Holy Places and the Basilica of the Nativity, where she had a vision of the Birth of Jesus, which she included in her famous *Revelations sanctae Birgittae*.

As such, the newly-born appears naked, enveloped in a halo of light, surrounded by rays that illuminate the scene *di sotto in su*. The Virgin Mary, with her golden-ray aureole, dressed in white and with her hair flowing down, is seen on her knees in great devotion, her hands pressed together in adoration of the Messiah who was foretold in the Old Testament. Also involved in this group Adoration is Saint Joseph, in the foreground, holding a shepherd's crook, along with two angels.

This idea of the divine birth irradiating an intense light included in the Vision of Saint Bridget was already present in the *Liber de Infantia Salvatoris* (an apocryphal text from the 9<sup>th</sup> century). Two shepherds approach the manger to glorify the divine child, one of them carrying a lamb over his shoulders.

The iconography of this *sarga* work also includes the ox and donkey that were prophesied by Isaiah: "the ox knows its master; the donkey its owner's manger; but Israel does not know, my people do not

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understand"" (Isaiah 1: 3). It is also worth recalling Habakkuk: "in the midst of two animals thou shalt be known" (Habakkuk 3: 3).

In the night scene we observe a star in the sky that would later guide the Magi. This star also appears in the texts of the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and in the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus da Varagine. The semi-dilapidated or ruinous architecture with round arches and pilasters of a classical design (as is the case here and in so many other Nativity works) tends to appear in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Flemish painting, and alludes to the Synagogue (Old Testament) on which the Church (New Testament) would be built.

Comparison between the two Virgins from these Burgos region *sarga* companion pieces, with the same white tunic, type of aureole and similar physiognomic features, reinforces the argument that they were executed by the same artist. An identical parallel can be drawn between the faces of St. Joseph and the shepherds and the kings of Judah from the Tree of Jesse. Both paintings present the same black drawn outlines to execute the contours of the figures.

*Sarga* painting (also known as gouache painting), where tempera was applied directly to a twill fabric support or onto a previously-applied thin layer of glue, also gained popularity in Spain, no doubt due to the arrival on the Spanish peninsula of linen cloth with tempera supports from Flanders, known as *Tuchlein*. Painters such as Pedro Berruguete (*St. Peter* and *St. Paul* and an *Adoration of the Kings* divided into two canvases, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado), Luis de Morales (*Christ Carrying the Cross*, Yale University Art Gallery and *Embrace at the Golden Gate*, private collection), and Joan de Joanes (*Pentecost*, Museo de Bellas Artes, Valencia) used this technique in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which was occasionally referred to as curtain painting due to the function served by many of these large-scale canvases in protecting altarpieces from light and dust.

Examples of *sarga* paintings are preserved in a number of Spanish museums: in the Museo de Zaragoza (223cm x 220cm; inv.09196), originally from the parish church of Albalate del Arzobispo, a *Virgin with Child and the Guardian Angel* originally from the Monastery of the Order of the Canonessas in the Santo Sepulcro of Zaragoza (114.5cm x 91cm., inv.10048; a *James the Apostle* (75.5cm x 64cm, inv. D-1001) from the Museum

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of Pilgrimage and Santiago; an *Annunciation and Visitation* (205cm x 167cm, inv.P007023), a *Flagellation and Adoration of the Magi* by Diego de Urbina, and the four works by Pedro Berruguete at the Museo del Prado, which according to Mayer originated from the church of San Pedro in Ávila; and the sarga depicting scenes from the life of Saint Catherine attributed to Pedro Berruguete and housed at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, originally from the funerary chapel of Fernando Álvarez de Toledo in the church of San Salvador.



*James the Apostle, Sarga, Museum of Pilgrimage and Santiago*

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In one of her studies dealing with *sarga* works, Rocío Bruquetas claims that: “all Castilian or Andalusian contracts referring to *sargas* that have been consulted belong to the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Later, all we find are contracts for altarpiece curtains, Holy Week monuments, crypts and triumphal arches.” (*Técnicas y materiales de la pintura española en los Siglos de Oro*, Madrid 2002, p.231).

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the humanist Felipe de Guevara mentioned gouache painting: “There are two genres for painting on canvas, one is to do so al fresco, which calls for colors used with glue, or egg whites and other items, the other is to paint using oil, as the ancients did on panels, and some still paint today” (*Comentarios de la Pintura*, Edición Barcelona 1948, p.137).

The craft of the *sarga* painter is included in the 1493 Ordinances of Cordovan painters, which regulated the activities of the guild of painters: “By the date at which they appeared, the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, these ordinances bear witness to the coexistence of a range of types of painting, such as oil, tempera and painting on both panel and canvas. To be precise, the text refers to three professions: *Moorish art*, which appears to include the painting of wooden ceilings and doors, as well as fresco and oil works on walls, (*religious*) *imagery*, which includes gilding and painting altarpieces, carving, panel work and canvasses in general, and *sarga* painting (Sonia Santos Gómez and Margarita San Andrés Moya, “Aportaciones de antiguas ordenanzas al estudio de las técnicas pictóricas” *Patina*, no. 10-11, 2001, pp.266-285).

With regard to *sarga* painting, these Ordinances of Cordovan painters mention that, once the drawing had been completed, the images had to be outlined in black with a layer of animal glue then being applied.

This *sarga* depicting the *Nativity of Jesus* and its companion piece the *Tree of Jesse* present an exceptional state of preservation as they were never varnished, and have therefore kept their original coloring, which is extremely rare. These two examples of gouache painting with iconographic influences from the Flemish school may now join the very limited number of Spanish *sarga* pieces that still survive today, due to their technical characteristics (fragility of the material and their temporary and ephemeral nature).

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