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ART & ANTIQUES



The Creation of the Animals

Unidentified artist
Cuzco (Peru), 18th century
Oil on canvas
69.5 x 90.5 cm
Provenance: Private collection

These are the words with which Genesis relates the fifth and (part of) sixth days of the Creation, those which God spent populating the waters, seas and earth with living creatures. These are the Biblical episodes we see depicted in this unusual and beautiful canvas of a mestizo Baroque *fatura*, and in whose composition one may discern inspiration drawn from the multitude of Italian and Flemish prints that made the journey to the Viceroyalty from the early days of the Conquest, as may be inferred from the presence in the work of animals alien to the Latin American ecosystem. This particular depiction of *Creation*, which leaves out Adam and Eve (also created on the sixth day, along with the land animals) is particularly remarkable in its extraordinary iconography, rarely to be seen in European workshops, and even less so in their Cuzco counterparts. What was most common, either as a series or individual work, was to depict the fifth day (the creation of the birds and sea animals) on one side, and the sixth day (land animals and Adam and Eve) on the other. It was also not unusual to see works in which both days were condensed, treating them as one whole. Finally, there were depictions selectively combining the two days and which, as such, stand as a peculiarity within the Andean iconographic repertoire and as an alternative reading of the events narrated in Genesis. The work we are addressing here falls into this last category, sharing its compositional model with the Creation canvas housed at the Monastery of Santa Catalina, Cuzco.

The composition, executed on canvas in landscape format, is divided into two representational sections, separated by the horizon line. In the upper section we find a half-length God the Father, the creator of Heaven and Earth, depicted on a cloud. Respecting the Syriac canon, he is portrayed as an elderly man with a white beard, topped by a golden triangle-shaped aureole made up of thin lines of gold leaf. He is wearing a sky-blue robe and flowing red cloak. Both garments bear witness to one of 18th-century Cuzco painting's most important calling cards, *brocatería*³². This ornamental technique, which made its first forays into Andean painting in the 16th century, did not reach its expressive peak until the early decades of the 18th century, when artists started to inundate the clothing worn by the figures in their works with print patterns including innumerable volutes and floral and geometric decorations in giltwork. This dynamic *maniera*, undoubtedly rooted in mestizo tradition, should not be conceived of exclusively as a technical display, but as belonging to an Andean idiosyncrasy forming part of the syncretic process the visual arts were undergoing throughout the vast region. As such, Cuzco artists opted to embellish the figures they depicted, not believing the austere attire imported from the Old World was suitable for a divine being.

Over the figure of the Creator, we observe a rainbow, stretching across the composition, flanked on the left by the moon, the bridge between heaven and earth, while on the right we find the sun, a symbol of the

beginning and origin of Everything. Occupying the rest of this upper area are birds. Scattered across the entire heavenly vault, they display their brightly-colored feathers, some in flight, while others perch on the tops of the two trees that, one opposite the other, frame the work. The lower section of the canvas is taken up by a lake, probably Titicaca, judging by the snow-capped mountains rising up in the background, and which help define the horizon. The lake, immense in size, gets narrower the closer it gets to the foreground, tracing an approaching zigzag to the sides of which the two shores rise up, made of brown earth and acting as the stage on which Creation is taking place. The water is teeming with large marine creatures while the shores are depicted as a beautiful compendium of terrestrial life-forms.

It is worth drawing the reader's attention to the exceptional nature of this pictorial work, taking into account the fact that "*landscape painting was not commonly practiced in the Andean artistic context*".³³ Although our work does not, *stricto sensu*, fall into this category from the point of view of intentionality, the result of the artist's work ultimately reflects an aesthetic of a similar *fatura*. Exploring this interesting point in greater depth, Marisabel Álvarez Plata argues that "*the absence of this genre is explained in terms of the educational obstacles faced by artists in the Viceroyalty, given they did not get the opportunity, in the Americas, to study human anatomy, and did not work from models or study landscape*". Furthermore, "*in the painting of the Peruvian Viceroyalty, the landscape was always a secondary element, subordinate to the religious context. When it was depicted, it was done so as a scenographic accompaniment and not as an autonomous genre*".³⁴

S.F.L.



Marten de Vos, *God creating the birds and the fishes*, 1600–1602, oil on copper. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Strasbourg