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ART & ANTIQUES



Tomás de Sosa

New Spain (Mexico), c. 1655–c. 1723

Saint Anthony of Padua and the Miracle of the Mule

Oil on canvas

205 x 120.5 cm

Provenance: Private collection, Madrid

The life of St. Anthony of Padua was marked by a series of miracles that gave rise to a significant increase in devotion to him.²⁰ One of the most well-known cases occurred in the city of Rimini (Italy) in 1227, as recounted in the biographies written during the lifetime of the Franciscan friar, especially the *Vita Prima di Sant'Antonio*, popularly known as *Assidua*, which dates from 1232, the year he was canonized. This was the so-called “Miracle of the mule”. St. Anthony was walking the streets of Rimini, preaching the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, when a Cathar heretic publicly challenged him, saying he would only believe the dogma if one of his mules, after fasting for three days and refusing to eat when offered normal fodder, prostrated itself before the holy host. After three days, a crowd of witnesses gathered in the piazza, and the mule was led before the saint, where it confirmed the miracle by kneeling before the body of Christ, recognizing His divine presence in the face of its own hunger. Witness to this prodigious scene, and as he had promised, the heretic converted.



Fig. 1 Anonymous Flemish Artist, *Miracle of St. Anthony of Padua*, c. 1500. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

The oldest known depictions of this episode from the saint’s iconography go back to the 15th century. This is demonstrated by the bronze relief work executed by Donatello (1386–1466) for the high altar of the Basilica of Sant’Antonio in Padua itself, and a Flemish panel by an unknown artist dated to about 1500 belonging to the Prado (Fig. 1). Later, in the Baroque period, other major figures such as Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) undertook their own versions, with one canvas by the latter housed in the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse. Likewise, a range of published

books relating to the life of the saint included prints of the scene of the miracle of the mule. This is the case for the *Vida y milagros del glorioso san Antonio de Padua (Life and Miracles of the Glorious St. Anthony of Padua)*, published by friar Miguel Mestre in 1688, with the aforementioned episode printed on fol. 45. This channel is considered to have been the one that played the greatest role in the iconography reaching the New World, as the preaching spirit of the Franciscan Order would lead to copies and interpretations of this sort of print engraving being carried out by workshops, in this case New Spanish ones, to provide visual expressions of their evangelizing narrative.

What biographic records there are on Tomás de Sosa (c. 1655–c. 1723) talk of a New Spanish painter of *mulatto* origins (Spanish father and black mother), by whom we only know of four signed works, with the one before us here being the last of the four, meaning he was still working in 1723, as demonstrated by the signature and date that

appear under the Franciscan saint’s feet: “*Thomas de Sosa fecit Año de 1723*”. His artistic career ran in tandem with that of another *mulatto*, Juan Correa (1646–1716), whose style he would take on, as a pupil, even assimilating his subject matters, given the miracle of the mule had been previously portrayed by Correa for the altarpiece dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua from the Inmaculada Concepción church in Ozumba, State of Mexico (Fig. 2). The parallels between the two canvases are clear, allowing us to posit that it was Sosa who reinterpreted the scene previously conceived of by Correa, whose artistic profile and career were more prominent.



Fig. 2 Juan Correa, *St. Anthony of Padua and the Miracle of the Mule*, c. 1700. Parroquia Inmaculada Concepción Ozumba, Mexico

The figure of St. Anthony of Padua presides over the scene, dressed as officiant and holding a beautiful sun-shaped monstrance containing the Holy Eucharist. In accordance with the hagiographies mentioned above, he is pictured surrounded by other Franciscan friars, four in this case, who are accompanying him under a processional canopy. Opposite them, the heretic, who we can identify by his luxurious clothing, shows his wonder at the miracle that is taking place, his hand pressed to his chest in a way that happens to be highly reminiscent of the same figure from the aforementioned Flemish panel at the Prado Museum, with whom he also shares physical features. Along with him, there are other figures dressed in the “Spanish style” from the early 17th century, with the characteristic ruff collar, perhaps the result of the artist reinterpreting works arriving from Europe, with our eye being particularly drawn to the sophisticated attire of the figure standing between the saint and the heretic, belonging to the social elite. The prostrated mule, meanwhile, is kneeling on the ground in front of the body of Christ, ignoring the bowl of food and pail of water next to it.

Although we cannot be sure of the exact graphic source of this work, the existence of the two canvases by Correa and Sosa leads us to suggest there were a significant number of engravings and paintings circulating between New Spanish and European artists, in this case fundamental to the popularization of the miracles of St. Anthony of Padua in order to relay to the faithful of the New World the message of the great importance of the presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

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