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Quito (Ecuador), 1723 - after 1796

The Marriage Proposal

circa 1783/1785

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Oil on canvas
78.3 x 97.2 cm

Provenance: Louis Hermann Collection (1877 - 1959), presumed to have been obtained by his sister Amélie (1883 - 1954) and brother-in-law Enrique Freymann (1888 - 1954), cultural attaché in Mexico, then by descent.



Luis Eduardo Wuffarden

Art Historian

At the end of the 18th century, the Audiencia de Quito became one of the main centers of a costumbrista pictorial production, directly related to the descriptive projects of the Enlightenment. This work is situated in this context of approach to the American environment, whose style corresponds to the manner of Vicente Albán, member of a family dynasty of painters and one of the most outstanding Quito masters of his time. The composition presents three local characters in the foreground and in full-length format, placed in front of an open landscape. The painter has described with great detail the ethnic types and clothing of a lady of the Creole elite and the indigenous couple flanking her, suggesting that the scene captures the two bridegrooms at the moment of their engagement, together with the person who will be the godmother of their wedding. Without a doubt the anecdote is a pretext to draw a detailed portrait of types and customs typical of the late colonial society in the northern Andes.

The position of the Creole lady, at the very center of the canvas, as well as the elegance of her clothing, reflects her high social position. She is wearing typical Creole clothing, clearly different from that of her European peers. Notable among these is the short, flowing skirt, made of fine light blue lace bordered in white, which was repeatedly censored by the ecclesiastical authorities who considered it contrary to decorum. She is covered by an open garment made of red and gold brocade with ornamental motifs inspired by plants. The bodice and the wide, puffed, slashed sleeves, as well as the openwork cloth shoes, are also characteristic of Creole women's attire in South America. Added to this is the display of jewelry, which includes strings of pearls, jet beads, gold chains and bracelets, in harmony with the hair ornaments and the rose she holds in her right hand. All this contrasts with the usual protocolary and cosmopolitan tone of court portraits, in which the choice is made for clothing in keeping with the latest fashions in the major cities of Europe.

The indigenous bride and groom are two young men from the native elite, dressed in the best clothes that people of their status could afford. They could be workers in the service of the woman who is their godmother. She wears a brown skirt with white lace stripes and a black cloak with a kind of white shawl over it. The cloak is held in place by a golden *tupu* or *tipqui* in the shape of a radiant sun. This is a decorative pin of pre-Hispanic origin that remained in use, although transformed, after the Spanish conquest. The woman's sumptuous trousseau is complemented by necklaces and bracelets of pearls, golden beads and pieces of coral. His body is placed immediately behind the Creole woman and his attitude towards her denotes attention and submission. The same could be said of the gestures of the groom, situated on the right, who has taken off his hat and extends it, showing the inside of the cup as a sign of his willingness to comply with the orders of his superiors. His austere black suit reveals white lace breeches that reach down to his calf, while his shirt stands out and forms a sharp contrast with the darkness of his *uncu*. His only additional adornment is the gold metal buckles that fasten his equally black shoes. He is accompanied by an Andean camel in a marching attitude, perhaps an indication of his work as a shepherd or muleteer.

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The conventional way of drawing the features of the three characters, of fine and idealized appearance, which end up being quite similar, is striking. Hence, the painter has differentiated their condition by other means, such as the color of their skin or their clothes. These characteristics are clearly related to the six documented canvases by Vicente Albán that are currently in the Museum of America in Madrid, in which ethnic types alternate with products of the land identified through numbers and explanatory legends. Those paintings were commissioned by the scientist from Cadiz José Celestino Mutis (1732-1808) and sent to Spain in 1783 as part of the materials provided by the Royal Botanical Expedition of the New Kingdom of Granada. Two autograph replicas of that series went on the international market in 2014 and were acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), California. These are *Principal Lady with her Black Slave* and *Indian in Gala Dress*. The work discussed here, on the other hand, is a composition different from all the previous ones, which, although it lacks labels and inscriptions, introduces an additional theme and raises new questions about the activity of Albán and his workshop in the emergence of South American viceregal costumbrism. Undoubtedly, this exquisite work is an extremely valuable contribution that opens a window to the refined Quito viceregal world of the 18th century.

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