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ART & ANTIQUES



Circle of Juan Rodríguez Juárez

Mexico, 1675–1728

The Vision of Saint Simon Stock

Mexico, 17th/18th century

Oil on canvas

77 x 54 cm

Provenance: Private collection, Spain

The emergence of the religious devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel goes back to the middle ages. In the early 12th century, a group of pilgrims and former crusaders decided to organize themselves into a community and live as hermits, settling in Mount Carmel (Palestine) around a little chapel dedicated to Mary. Thus was born the Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, also known as the Carmelites, and was recognized as a mendicant order by Pope Innocent IV in 1247 through a papal bull.

Tradition tells us it was in this context, in July 1251, that the Virgin appeared to the English Carmelite friar Simon Stock, handing him a scapular (a long garment with just one opening for the head, and worn over the upper body) that would protect him from the eternal flames after death. Following the miraculous vision, the Order took on the scapular as part of its monks' habit, becoming its most iconic symbol, associated as it was with the privilege of salvation for all those who died wearing it according to the so-called "Sabbatine Bull", promulgated by Pope John XXII in 1322, though not disseminated until two centuries later. Devotion to the scapular then spread widely throughout secular society, by means of a reduced version in the form of a cloth pendant that would also save the bearer from the flames of purgatory.

This religious fervor gave rise to an increase in artistic depictions alluding to the subject in the mid-16th century, with Our Lady of Mount Carmel taking centerstage, on many occasions linked to the vision of St. Simon Stock. This devotional expansion also reached as far as the Americas in 1585, thanks to the first expeditions of the Discalced Carmelite friars, who would preach their devotion to Our Lady there for centuries, helped in large part by various publications and writings that were widely disseminated across the Viceroyalty of New Spain. It was as such that, taking the engraved illustrations accompanying these texts as their point of reference, local artists were able to draw inspiration when executing works that would strengthen faith in the scapular even more. One of the most widely-publicized works was *Cries of Purgatory and Ways to Silence Them* (*Gritos del Purgatorio, y medios para acallarlos*), by José Boneta y Laplana, the 1699 edition of which may have served as a model for the canvas we are addressing here (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 José Boneta y Laplana (1638–1714). *Cries of Purgatory and Ways to Silence them*, Zaragoza, Gaspar Thomas Martínez, 1699

Our Lady, accompanied by the Christ Child, is dressed in the Carmelite habit, secured over her breast by a brooch featuring the coat of arms of the Order, and adorned with gilt edging, as well as her beautiful crown. Below her, on his knees, we find

Simon Stock, to whom she is giving a little scapular, while the Child is engaged in a tussle with one of the souls in purgatory who, hanging onto another scapular, is attempting to flee the flames. In front of the saint, we see a book lying on the ground, where we read the words: "*Flor del Carmelo, viña florida al resplandor del cielo, Virgen fecunda y singular. Madre zapirible? Intacta (de) hombre; a tus Carmelitas les proteja, estrella, que nos guíe*" (Flower of Carmel, florid vine of the splendors of heaven, fertile and unique Virgin. Mother (apirible?) untouched by man: you protect your Carmelites, star who guides us), verses in the form of a supplication, frequent in the prayers of Saint Simon Stock, and subsequent to which, according to tradition, the Marian apparition occurred. Another beautifully-framed cartouche appears towards the top of the composition, in the celestial region, held up by two angels, and containing the Virgin's reply after delivering the scapular: "*Este será privilegio especial para ti, y todos los Carmelitas: el que muriere con él, no padecerá el fuego eterno*" (This will be a special privilege for you and all the Carmelites; whoever shall die with it shall not suffer the eternal flames), thereby setting out the protection its use guaranteed.

The iconographic program is thereby completed: supplication, miraculous apparition and divine answer, clearly showing the faithful how the Carmelite Order's fundamental scene took place.

Also noteworthy is the author's possible artistic influences, as one of the attributes does not relate to the saint (a dog with a flaming torch in its mouth), but to St. Dominic de Guzmán, founder of the Dominican Order, to whom the Virgin also appeared, delivering him a rosary that would aid him in his evangelical tasks.

Finally, with regard to the work's authorship, we can clearly discern the influence of the renowned New Spanish artist Juan Rodríguez Juárez (1675–1728), by whom there is a known canvas depicting a similar subject, *Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Sts. Teresa and John of the Cross* (Fig. 2). The facial features of the Virgin and the saint are largely reminiscent of those seen here, as well as the angels' posture and loose wind-swept clothes. As such, despite any confirmed authorship, it is highly likely the work came from the brush of one of said artist's closest followers.



Fig. 2 Juan Rodríguez Juárez, *Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Sts. Teresa and John of the Cross*. Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico

J.G.M.