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Mateo Montes de Oca
(Mexico, active last third of the 18th century)

Our Lady of Guadalupe

c. 1770

oil on canvas

signed (lower left): *Montedeoca Fce*

55.2 x 42 cm.; 21.7 x 16.5 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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Not much information has survived on the life of this Mexican painter to whom, to date and in the absence of new revelatory documentation, scholars of art history in the Viceroyalty have not dedicated the attention he deserves, to judge by the quality of his few existing known works.

Although sharing the same period as José de Ibarra and Miguel Cabrera might seem reason enough for many of them to have remained in the shadows, I feel the list of New Spanish masters could be suitably embellished by the addition of some less frequently-mentioned names, without casting too many (at times unfair) comparative aspersions.

Awarded the rank of master painter in 1731, Mateo Monte de Oca as skilled in an artistic style that reached the height of its splendor in the last third of the 18th century, halfway between the last gasps of the Baroque and the arrival of the Rococo aesthetic, a decorative style underlying the works he undertook for the chapel of San Miguel in Nolasco, as well as the Guadalupe portraits preserved both in the church of *Nuestra Señora de la Caridad* in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Cadiz (fig. 1), and in the collection of the Tenerife-born Guimerá Peraza, both bearing undeniable parallels with the work we are studying here.

Also helping to date this piece to the 18th century is the presence of border medallions including scenes depicting the Virgin's three apparitions to the indigenous Juan Diego and the Miracle of the Roses, an iconography first established in the works of the Seville engraver Matías de Arteaga y Alfaro in the 18th century, and illustrating Luis Becerra Tanco's opus *Felicidad de México*.

Beyond this display of decorative skill, which I will be returning to later, the iconography depicted by Montes de Oca in strict compliance with the requirements in place for representations of this Marian figure as key protagonist of the visual narrative.

As such, we see Our Lady drawn full length, standing facing the devotee, depicted as an indigenous Virgin but with undeniably European features. Her light brown skin displays shades of grey, as do her hands, which are clasped together in the middle of her breast, in an act of

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prayer, imbuing the scene with a serene mysticism heightened by the tilt of her both beautiful and ingenuous face.

Over her shoulders, the Virgin is wearing a blue cloak, dotted with a host of gold stars, which also covers the Mother of God's head, accommodating her crown. Following the fabric in a downwards direction, we see how it opens up evenly on both sides of her torso, revealing the future Mother of God's ornate pink robe. Respecting the early representations of this apocalyptic avocation, the Virgin appears suspended in the air, supported by a crescent moon under which we observe a winged cherub, pictured gathering up the excess folds of Mary's robe, and tilting his head towards his left shoulder in a clear sign of respect.

Equally true to the authentic composition of this iconography is the aureole that surrounds the figure of the Virgin and which, emulating sunrays, gives way to a characteristic blue sky that acts as a frame on which the narrative medallions have been drawn, symmetrically occupying the four corners, oval in shape and with identical slender gilt borders, held up by four winged angels joined by two floral garlands. It is worth pausing for a moment to mention the innovative device used by Montes de Oca wherein he replaces the more common cloudy background with a bright blue skyscape, thereby departing from the Baroque palette and ushering in the new colors of Rococo. This device, though unusual, is not exclusive to the artist we are studying here, as the New Spanish painter Antonio de Torres also made use of the same lively palette (fig. 2). These two artists also share in their original depiction of the Tepeyac landscape, with Our Lady's shrine appearing in the lower part of the work.

In conclusion, this may be a small-scale work, but in it the artist has demonstrated the full panoply of his natural talent, successfully combining both beauty and skill in his depiction of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

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Figure 1. Mateo Montes de Oca, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 18th century, oil on canvas. Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Cadiz (Spain)

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Figure 2. Antonio de Torres, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 18th century, oil on canvas.
Convent of San José, Antequera (Spain)