

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Guatemala, 18th century)

The Black Christ of Esquipulas
oil on canvas
52 x 39 cm.; 20.4 x 15.3 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



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Est. 1760

To the left of this rare painting we see Our Lady of Sorrows, and on the right John the Apostle, both looking at Christ tenderly. Mary Magdalene is weeping, her face turned downwards as she kneels, hugging the wooden cross and holding onto the shroud with which they would take down Christ's dead body. We can observe typical decorative elements from the Colonial School in the clothing, the brocade and the gilt applied in the form of leaves entwined around the cross and on Christ's sendal loincloth, and the incorporation of flowers on the latter. Arranged harmoniously around the center, the figures from the scene are placed in a manner that contrasts with works we will be mentioning shortly, taking place in an open landscape with, to his right and under the Christ figure, what looks like a field of wheat, lambs and a little angel filling a chalice with spurts of Christ's blood, almost as if the artist was suggesting that the holy blood of the Messiah stood for life and continuity. To his left there is woodland and, framing the whole scene, an architectural decoration from which two curtains hang, creating a theatrical effect. At the bottom of the composition we also find a cartouche with the following inscription: "*V.R. de la milagrosa imagen del divino Sr q. se venera en su Santuario de Esquipulas*" (True Portrait of the miraculous image of the divine Lord who is venerated in the Shrine of Esquipulas).

There are few surviving comparable works, even if we include the groups of sculptures and canvases depicting the Esquipulas iconography of Christ. The first of these, an original from which a number of copies were subsequently made, corresponds to a carving executed by the sculptor Quirio Cataño in Guatemala in 1594 (fig. 1).

Several researchers have proposed the possibility that artists of this region depicted Christ with dark skin because Esquipulas was a popular center for pilgrimage and worship of the Black warrior god Ek Chuah. Among the Mayas it was common for gods to be associated with darkness and the netherworld, as evidenced by depictions of Ek Balam Chuah, the black jaguar of midnight, and Ek-Kampula. It is possible that one viable option for evangelizers in their colonial project was to assimilate certain beliefs of the native populations to Christian narratives, given that suppressing them would have required far more effort and meant likely failure. The approach of using a Mayan basis on which to develop a syncretism, blending with Christian customs, in such a way that indigenous peoples would continue to venerate

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the same God, but with a different name, is addressed in the line of study suggested by the archaeologist, anthropologist and Guatemalan historian Carlos Navarrete. In the interview “The History behind the Black Christ of Esquipulas,” he quotes Lothrop and Borhegyi, who posited the possibility of a hybridity with a Pre-Hispanic deity associated with the color black being venerated in what was formerly Copan. As Borhegyi mentions, one may argue that the popularity of this worship by the 16th century was primarily due to Pre-Columbian inheritance of a belief in the curative qualities of earth (geophagia). This belief was associated with worship of Ek Chuah in Esquipulas and the holy symbolism of the color black. Once the colony at Esquipulas had been established, the spreading word of its miraculous healing powers attracted both Christians and non-Christians alike, giving rise to the production of images of the Black Christ for worship and veneration.¹ As mentioned above, there are few iconographic depictions of this Christ that survive to this day, a few carved in wood (fig. 2) and a smaller number of canvases.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Figure 1. Quirio Cataño (Santiago, Guatemala c. 1560 – c. 1622), *The Black Christ from Esquipulas*, 1594. Basílica de Esquipulas, Guatemala

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Figure 2. Anonymous artist, *Cristo de las Esquipulas*, Guatemala, 18th century. Museo de América, Madrid

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

Footnotes

C. Navarrete, *El cristo negro de Esquipulas: Origen y difusión- Estudios*, Roma 1989, pp. 97-100.