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Flight into Egypt and Nativity
(Mexico, last quarter of the 17th
century)

oil on mother-of-pearl on wooden
panel

both 32.5 x 36 cm.; 12.7 x 14 in.
(unframed)

48.5 x 52.5 cm.; 19 x 20.6 in.
(framed)

Provenance

Private Collection, London.

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This previously unpublished pair of panels stands as a magnificent example of *enconchado* painting, a hybrid artistic technique that combines oil and tempera painting with mother-of-pearl inlay work. We still know very little about the origins of this artistic method, with some history of art scholars pointing to Oriental influences in a Japanese lacquerware style known as *namban*, which may have reached the New World through the open trade routes of the Manila Galleon or “Nao de China”. Although it is true that the two techniques used in each of the processes are completely different, there is no denying that the result obtained has one common denominator, which is hard to explain without some kind of stylistic inter-dependence having come into play.

However, and beyond whatever influences may have played a part in the inception of this unusual and opulent artform, what does seem to have been confirmed is its material origin, being traced to Mexico City and a family of *maque* painters with the surname González, whose workshops produced the first *enconchado* works for at least two generations.

As such, and focusing on the attractive visual and light effects obtained through this technique, it should come as no surprise that an artform produced over such a limited timeframe (1650-1750) and in such a restricted area (the Viceroyalty of New Spain) has warranted (and continues to do so) the admiration of so many collectors and museums across the globe, with these showcases of iridescence embellishing the walls of such renowned institutions as the Museo del Prado and Museo de América in Madrid, the Museo de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington.

Before examining each of these two superb works in turn, I would like to draw the reader’s attention to the growing interest art historians have been showing of late in the production of this artform and its results, aware as they are of the neglect and oblivion to which these “peripheral” artistic expressions have been consigned over the many years of Universal Art History scholarship, now deciding to take off their Eurocentric spectacles and start looking with all due respect at those artistic expressions born of processes that came about on the fringes of the sort of specialization taking place in Europe after the Renaissance.

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The first signs of this necessary shift in focus came about in the early decades of the last century, courtesy of authors such as Alfonso Reyes and Genaro Estrada, to whom we owe the opening up of an avenue of erudition and dissemination that the likes of Manuel Toussaint and Guillermo Tovar de Teresa continued to tread, and which is now frequented by the numerous and invaluable contributions of the Mexican scholar Sonia Ocaña Ruíz. It is largely to her that we must give thanks for the most important revelations, given that of the 250 works we know of today, only 150 had been recorded in 1980. Recently-discovered pieces include two square enconchado works identified as *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (fig. 1) and *The Circumcision* (fig. 2), and it is to this series of works that the two enconchados we are examining here belong.

This recent and burgeoning intellectual dedication, based on the study of new works that have come to light, as well as the publication of early documentary records found in public and private archives, has enabled us to increase the number of surnames now frequently mentioned in association with the manufacture of enconchado paintings, and to whose orbit it is likely that the two works we are addressing today, *Nativity* and *Flight into Egypt*, belong. In anticipation of forthcoming studies delving into the stylistic peculiarities of each of these artists, for the time being we can at least publish the names of these masters who, along with the González family, played leading roles in the *History of the Enconchado*, it being worth highlighting Nicolás Correa, Agustín del Pino, Pedro López Calderón and a mysterious figure named Rodulpho.

In accordance with the chronological order in which the Episodes from Christ's life are narrated, the first of the two enconchados being studied here is the *Nativity*. The birth of Christ has been one of the most popular scenes depicted in Christian art since medieval times, so its forms of representation and iconographic variations are almost as numerous as the written sources narrating it.

Beyond the literary source on which this visual narrative was undoubtedly founded, all indications are that the author of this painstaking enconchado must have had access to one of the many Flemish prints that made the journey from Europe to the New World, in the context

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of the Counter Reformation and with the purpose of spreading the Catholic faith. This claim is based, among other things, on the arrangement of the holy scene within the ruins of a building, emphasizing the idea that the Church (New Testament) would be built on the ruins of the Synagogue (Old Testament), an iconographic element introduced by 15th-century Flemish painting.

It is as such that we observe how the artist has produced a composition generous in technical virtuosity and color, whose protagonists occupy the central part of the panel. The Virgin, exquisitely drawn, appears kneeling down, showing affection for the newly-born Child, in a display of the maternal/filial bond between them. Her face, which is perfectly individualized, tells us that behind the execution of this piece there is a mother-of-pearl artist who put just as much skill and attention into the drawing as into the inlay work. In accordance with the habitual depiction of the Virgin, Mary is portrayed in an electric blue cloak, whose color is particularly intense thanks to the application of a pictorial layer on top of the big, regular pieces of mother-of-pearl. This garment is also adorned with a decorative gilt hem that helps to imbue it with luminosity. Under the cloak we can make out the Virgin's pink robe, made once more of mother-of-pearl. In the middle, the new-born Child is lying in a manger. Resting on a sheet that his Mother is attempting to arrange Him on, the Infant Christ, wrapped in swaddling cloths, receives the adoration of his father who, kneeling and in an act of prayer, observes the Child from the left of the composition. St. Joseph is also pictured in robe and cloak. Both garments are made up of pieces of polychrome mother-of-pearl, the robe being sky blue while the cloak is a mixture of tones of brown. To Joseph's right, also kneeling down in prayer, we observe the midwife, who presents the same iridescence as the rest of the figures, and whose clothing is also made up of pieces of mother-of-pearl. Behind them, the classical ruins, which have been traced with a fine gilt outline, extend across the whole composition, featuring various silhouettes and details. To the right of the scene, we can see the heads of an ox and donkey sticking out over a wall, witnessing the arrival of God.

The second of the two enconchados, which features the same technique and luminosity as the work we have just described, narrates the Flight into Egypt, an episode depicted in at least two known enconchado works. This iconography, whose graphic source probably had its roots

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in some European engraving, only appears in one canonical text, that being the Gospel according to Matthew:

“When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt”.

The composition shares the same square format and density of color as the *Nativity* described earlier. In the middle of the panel we find the protagonists of the Biblical story, where a succession of large pieces of mother-of-pearl is arranged in an orderly fashion serving as a support for the drawing and providing the desired iridescence to be found in the clothing, rocks, tree trunks and fruits. The Virgin Mary is pictured sitting on the back of a donkey, which St. Joseph is pulling by its halter, with the Infant Christ perfectly swathed in her arms. The Virgin, lavishly attired and in accordance with the norms regulating how she should be represented, is wearing an electric blue cloak, particularly brilliant thanks to the effects of the mother-of-pearl shining through under the pictorial layer. Under her cloak she wears a red robe, both deep and brilliant at the same time. St. Joseph is seen walking on her left, wearing a black hat and with the aid of a stick. Leading the others along in their expedition, he shows concern for his family, looking back at them sweetly with a slight tilt of the head. Over his body he wears a cloak, also made of mother-of-pearl, featuring a range of brown tones and decorated with a fine gold border all around it.

Two trees rise up, framing the scene. A slender palm tree laden down with fruit stands on the right, made up of fragments of mother-of-pearl and a palette of colors restricted to yellows and browns. This is matched by the tone of the stumpy tree trunk on the left of the composition, whose color respects the original iridescence of the mother-of-pearl. A bird is seen perched in amongst the branches, the sole witness of the Holy Family’s forced flight. Towards the back of the composition we can make out the city of Jerusalem, depicted in features of clearly classical architecture.

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Finally, and as one last compositional element that needs to be addressed and studied, we come to the frames. Far from neglecting his work here, our artist has dedicated a level of technique that is worthy of admiration, and which draws close parallels with what we have described in the paintings, thereby showing that the frames were also highly valued. These provide a lavish showcase for a rich ornamental repertoire replete with floral and bird motifs, decorative elements that were common in these kinds of works, and whose inclusion, with their unmistakable Oriental air, points clearly to the González family.

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Figure 1. Anonymous, *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, oil and mother-of-pearl on wooden panel, 17th century, Private Collection

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Figure 2. Anonymous, *Circumcision*, oil and mother-of-pearl on wooden panel, 17th century, Private Collection