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Attributed to Manuel Chili,
known as 'Caspicara'
(Quito, Ecuador c. 1723 – c. 1796)

Our Lady of Sorrows

last third of the 18th century
carved, gilded, polychromed wood
38.5 x 26.8 x 7.5 cm.; 15 x 10.5 x 2.9 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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It is worth taking a moment to explain to readers just what difficulties scholars of art in the Viceroyalty, and that of Quito in particular, face when it comes to addressing the authorship of the major sculptural repertory decorating the country, given the majority of works are unsigned. This lack of vanity or need for recognition on the part of sculptors, joiners and carvers was fruit of an art whose primary function was to glorify God and transmit the Gospels and where, as such, the consecration of the artists themselves was not deemed necessary.

This absence of documentary certainty forces us to be particularly meticulous in our stylistic analysis of the works, in order to identify a modicum of shared characteristics that might allow our gaze to fall on one specific workshop or artist. As such, taking this as the guiding principle informing this study, and as a source legitimizing the attribution we are putting forward, it would seem that the technical virtuosity of the *fattura* of this beautiful sculptural medallion depicting the *Dolorosa* points to the chisel of the indigenous sculptor Manuel Chili, known as “Caspicara”, the “prince of colonial sculpture in the Americas”.

In this previously unpublished relief work, the Virgin appears as the sole protagonist in the middle of an oval medallion arranged vertically. Our Lady of Sorrows is depicted half-length, facing the spectator and with her head slightly tilted towards her left shoulder. In accordance with the distinctive style of the Quito school to which Caspicara belonged, the Virgin’s face, snow-white and brimming with youthful vitality, is a magnificent example of the carnation technique by which, through the application of pigment on top of a rubber lacquer base and subsequent polishing, the artist was able to attain a simulation of the color of human flesh the appearance of which, as we see in this case, is perfectly naturalistic. As such, this accomplished pictorial layer representing the face of the Virgin is adorned with two fine, raised eyebrows whose brown tone matches the eyes they crown. These, almond-shaped and slightly bulging, maintain a gaze that holds back from the spectator, cast downwards as if by the resignation and the sadness accumulated in the tears which, though lost today, left their mark on the pinkish cheekbones. Her straight and pointed nose dominates the center of her face, lending this Marian depiction an elegance that culminates in the mouth, with its small and tightly-sealed carmine lips. Adding vigor to the depiction is the rounded chin that completes the face, and which stands in contrast to the thin, elongated and bare neck with its

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perfect carnation. Framing the Mother of God's face is a dark head of hair where we can just intuit curious little kiss-curls sketched out at the root. On her head, Mary is pictured wearing a veil and cloak, both made up of delicate undulating planes that appear to cancel out the inherent stiffness of the wood. The veil is white and adorned with a host of brown and reddish stars, executed using the tip of the brush combined with considerable *sgraffito* work revealing the gold leaf hidden under the pigment, also particularly visible in the decorative border running around the inside of the veil and resting directly on the Virgin's head. We can but imagine that a great artist was behind the sculpting of the work we are studying here; elegant and meticulous, it bears further witness to a virtuosity attained by few hands, evident in the execution of the cloak. As tends to be the case with Marian iconography, the outside of this protective garment is blue. Once again in compliance with the aesthetics of the Baroque Quito school, we observe exquisite *estofado* work both in the blue outside of the fabric as well as in the reddish inner lining, this latter being in line with the preference of the Ecuadorian sculptor's palette. The decoration of the Virgin's clothing combines phytomorphic and floral ornamental motifs with other popular devices such as *sgraffito*, featuring fine lines scratched into the surface using a thin, sharp knife, or stiletto. This combination of polychromy with revealed gold leaf is what generates the simulated richness of the fabrics. One's eye is also drawn to the meticulous depiction of the folds we can observe in the clothing around the neckline, carved in wood in the case of the red cloth with its abundant *sgraffito*, and simulated using a sort of glued cloth to make up the Virgin's white undershirt. True, once again, to the demands of Marian iconography, the Mother of God appears on her knees, surrounded by a gold nimbus made up of thin sunrays arranged in parallel, and out of whose combination of sizes a great star is drawn, whose red background matches that of the nine Marian stars going round the divine face. The frame, with its simple *fattura*, as if accepting that the main focus is elsewhere, is oval, with a plain brown molding at its outside edge and another molding combining pearling and gadroons on the gilt inside section.

The image, with its simple composition, does not require the added inclusion of attributes or any other secondary elements to produce its intended emotive charge for, if there is anything that defines Caspicara's *maniera*, it is the transmission of the emotion and cultivated sentiment of his art, peerless throughout the viceroyalties and worthy of the admiration it earned him

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beyond their borders, given he was singularly successful in moving the faithful to the very devotion the Counter Reformation intended.

In the light of the above, we can state that this is without doubt a magnificent work whose authorship can be attributed to “Caspicara” (“skin of wood” in the Quechua language), an Ecuadorian sculptor born in San Francisco de Quito in around 1723, a region at that time belonging to the Real Audiencia of Quito. Considered by scholars of the history of art of the Viceroyalty as the successor to Bernardo Legarda and José Olmos, enjoying the patronage of the Company of Jesus and, finally, Master of his own workshop, he managed to develop a technique and style that were as unique as they were admired, and which have earned him the respect of art collectors and scholars alike.