

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Cuzco, Peru, c. 1720 – 1750)

Jesus of Nazareth

oil on canvas
155 x 112 cm.; 61 x 44 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Madrid.

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This painting depicts a *Nazareno* (Holy Week procession penitent), or Christ carrying the cross. At first glance, the image could be interpreted as a scene from Christ's Passion, but the altar table pictured towards the bottom of the painting, as well as the beautiful vases of flowers, lead us to believe that this is a "portrait of a sculptural image of dressing a Nazareno". This being the case, it could be a portrait of the famous *Nazareno* venerated for so long in one of the side chapels of the church of San Francisco in Cuzco. We could mention two locations in the city with depictions of this subject, one in the Convent of San Francisco, dated 1713 and signed by Juan Flores Sevilla, with the second being the Museo de Arte in Lima. In the work we are addressing here, Christ is pictured stumbling on his way to Calvary, leaning his right hand on a boulder, while holding the Cross in his left. He gazes towards the Heavens, with a look of supplication for God the Father.¹

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This sort of ambiguity in terms of pictorial representation, that is to say a "portrait of a venerated sculptural image", was characteristic of the so-called *divine trompe l'oeil*, a genre that sought to recreate altar images with the upmost degree of realism, but also lending them a certain mysticism that emanated from their many tales of miracles.²

Our painting sticks to the model of Christ as *Nazareno* mentioned above, but features exquisite details such as Jesus' robe, which is beautifully adorned with *brocateado* (a technique simulating brocade), as well as the varying opulent fabrics covering the altar, resembling sumptuous Flemish lace. The gospels mention that, while the Roman soldiers mocked Christ, they dressed him in a purple robe, a color linked to royalty. The color of his clothes is not mentioned before or after this event. It is worth highlighting the great realism employed by the painter when depicting the crown of thorns, wounds, aureole, rope and the beams of the cross with a high degree of naturalism. The scene is completed by two angels wearing floating cloths, who hold the heavy drapes framing Christ, while looking at him tenderly.

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With regard to the elements placed on the altar, the artist was painstaking in his depiction of the fabric covering it, the refined metalwork in the beautiful silver and glass vases, as well as in the silver so-called “carrete”, or bobbin-shaped candlesticks holding lighted altar candles, between which we can discern subtle differences. The vases display a peerless selection of flowers: roses, madonna lilies, little daisies and, most significant of all, the Inca flower par excellence, known as the *kantuta*, along with the *ñucchu*.³ We can observe the red *kantuta* flowers in the vases, and *ñucchu* flowers delicately scattered over the altar cloth, thereby bearing witness to the process of religious syncretism and the ongoing survival of the old customs of Incan rituals. The *kantuta* (in quechuan) is a sacred flower of the Incas, with a red and yellowish tubular bloom, that grows in the Andean regions of Bolivia and Peru. The *ñuk'chu* flower has a brilliant red bloom, visible in the rainy season. During the Inca Empire, flowers were used throughout the year for a range of rituals. They were part of the initiation headdresses of young men of lineage and could also be offered up in *huacas*. They were included in various rituals and were used to decorate the canopies that protected the Inca men and their wives. In the quechuan language, flowers are associated with youth and beauty, being emphasized as an ideal of youth and a metaphor for eternity. These flowers are currently recognized as being sacred, and social groups used them in certain rites included in the Christian liturgy, such as the festival held in Cuzco on the Monday of Easter Week, in which the *Taytacha de los Temblores*, the image of Our Lord of the Earthquakes, preserved in Cuzco Cathedral, is taken out on procession while the faithful throw the sacred *ñuk'chu* flowers into its path, with which they also decorate their homes. For Catholics, the flower's red color symbolized Christ's blood, and in ancient Andean worship it was used as an offering to the old gods *Kon* and *Viracocha*. This barrage of meanings confirms the ongoing survival of old beliefs and the attempt to adapt them to the new Catholic faith in the context of the emerging cultural panorama, standing as evidence and example of the complex phenomenon of religious syncretism taking place. We can see these flowers depicted in numerous artistic manifestations, such as *Ilikllas*, shawls woven with fibers from camelids,⁴ or in *Mama Occlo*, who represented Mother Earth, *Pachamama*, and in the cloak worn by the Inca princess or *Ñusta* Beatriz in the painting *The double marriage of Don Martin de Loyola to Beatriz Clara Coya india and Juan de Borja to Lorenza Ñusta*, Cuzco c. 1725 of her marriage to Martín de

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Loyola (fig. 1), as testimony to the process of transculturation and legitimation that was taking place, and whose meaning was associated with youth and beauty.

Andean painting depicted altar images: sculpted images of the Virgin and the Saints, dressed and surrounded by candlesticks, vases and drapes, sometimes framed by niches as if they were part of altarpieces. The purpose was to thereby recreate the myth of divine presence, a sort of syncretism with the old Andean beliefs in *huacas* or sacred places.

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Figure 1. Anonymous artist, *The double marriage of Don Martin de Loyola to Beatriz Clara Coya india and Juan de Borja to Lorenza Ñusta, Cuzco, c. 1725.* Mali, Lima (Peru)

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Footnotes

¹ J. Mesa & T. Gisbert, *Historia de la Pintura Cuzqueña*, Lima 1982.

² J. Mesa & T. Gisbert, *Historia de la Pintura Cuzqueña*, Buenos Aires 1962.

³ On the sacred flower Ñucchu or Ñupchu and other flowers included in Inca rituals, see E. Mulvany, 'La flor en el ciclo ritual incaico', in *Boletín de Arqueología*, no. 9, 2005, pp. 373-386; E. Mulvany, 'Flores para los incacuna, hua incas y uaccha incas', in *Cuadernos del Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Pensamiento Latinoamericano*, no. 19, 2000-2002, pp. 441-458.

⁴ On images of these costumes worn by the Inca noblewomen during the colonial period, which contained fibres from camelids, see the texts by Guaman Poma (1615), Fray Martín Murúa (1611) and Diego de Ocaña (1601).