

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Quito, Ecuador, 18th century)

*Our Lady of the Incarnation
with Saint Joseph and
Saint John the Baptist*

oil on canvas
102 x 75 cm.; 40.1 x 29.5 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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The advocacy of Our Lady of the Incarnation (fig. 1) symbolizes the mystery by which the Word of God (God the Son) is incarnated in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, taking on human form in obedience to God the Father to reconcile humanity, lost due to original sin.

In this painting, the Virgin is presented half-length and emerging from the pearl-white heavens. An ethereal golden halo made up of rays and stars surrounds her, as a metaphor for hope. Her hands are crossed over her breast, with a white dove representing the Holy Spirit, by whose mediation she has conceived, delicately arranged just above them. Her placid, trusting and tender gaze is directed towards the heavens. She is depicted as a young woman, opulently dressed in a red robe and blue cloak, dotted with stars and floral motifs executed with the finest and most exceptional gold leaf brocade work.¹ Her fine tresses of hair fall gently in ringlets down the sides of her face and over her shoulders.

Towards the top of the painting, God the Father appears in a burst of glory. He is dressed in a sumptuous robe and ample mauve cloak. His beautiful, bearded face is surrounded by brilliant rays of light, while his left hand rests on the orb. Out of the clouds from which He is seen to emerge, we also observe the friendly, tender little faces of cherubim. To the sides of the painting a heavenly host made up of angels and archangels accompanies the scene. Two beautifully-dressed angels gaze tenderly at God the Father and, below them, we can make out the three canonical archangels recognized by the Church, each one surrounded by a swirl of clouds. On the left we have St. Michael the Archangel and the Archangel Raphael, and on the right the Archangel Gabriel and the heavenly protector, the Guardian Angel.

Saint Michael the Archangel is the head of God's heavenly host. He wears armor and intercedes as a judge, weighing souls during the Last Judgment, and as such carries a set of scales. Below him, we find St. Raphael, the doctor and healer. On the right-hand side, under the angel at the top, we observe St. Gabriel the Archangel, who is the messenger sent to the Virgin to announce her divine motherhood. Underneath him is the Guardian Angel, who appears next to a child whom he is guiding and protecting, leading him by the hand and pointing him to the heavens to ensure he does not get lost taking the wrong path.

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The two lower corners of the composition are taken up by St. Joseph and St. John the Baptist, who are adoring the Infant Jesus.² On the left we find St. Joseph, the husband of Our Lady, and foster father of the Child, dressed in a robe with exuberant brocade work and an ornate red cloak. He looks tenderly at the new-born Christ in his crib while affectionately holding out a hand to Him.

The right-hand corner of the painting features St. John the Baptist, who is looking upwards. He is dressed in a robe which leaves one of his shoulders. He is also wearing a red cloak with gold brocade decorations, a color alluding to his martyrdom. His attributes are a staff with a little cross on the top of it, around which a phylactery is wound with the inscription *Ecce Agnus Dei*, and a lamb on a book which he is holding in his right hand.

Our painting's iconographic source is an engraving by Cornelis Galle I (fig. 2), but the iconography is complex, combining subjects and aspects that are addressed in varying religious texts, such as the gospels of St. John, St. Luke and the Doctor of the Church St. Thomas Aquinas. On the one hand, this is an image included in St. John's apocalyptic visions: "A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth." (*Book of Revelations: XII, 1-2*)

On the other hand, and with regard to the inclusion of God the Father at the top of the painting in a parting of the heavens, this could be seen as an interpretation of the text found in the Gospel according to St. Luke (1:35), which reads: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

The mystery or dogma of the Incarnation was widely disseminated throughout the Americas. Following the establishing and consolidation of the original parent convents, each Order undertook to found individual local colleges and monasteries. Some of these female monasteries were unrivalled in their success, growing to the size of little cities. Nuns arrived in the New World in the first decades after the Conquest, and spread through almost all the

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regions currently making up Latin America. In 1558, the Augustinian monk Andrés de Ortega took charge of the Convento de la Encarnación in Lima, bringing it under his Order's jurisdiction. In 1573, the founders of the Concepción convent came out of this monastery. A second group of Concepción convents was established by Spanish nuns in Quito in 1577. This then gave rise to the Concepción convents of Pasto, Loja, Cuenca and Riobamba.³

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Figure 1. *Our Lady of the Incarnation*, Quito school, 18th century, oil on canvas. Museo Nacional del Ministerio de Cultura, Quito (Ecuador)

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Figure 2. Cornelis Galle I (1576-1650), *The Virgin Mary as Bride of the Holy Spirit*, engraving

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Footnotes

¹ On *mestizo* Baroque and the technique of gold leaf brocade and its materiality, pigments, templates and stamps, see B. Belda Lido, *La Técnica de la Brocatería en las pinturas de la Escuela Cuzqueña* (Master's Thesis), Valencia 2013.

² On the iconography of Saint Joseph and Saint John the Evangelist, see H. Schenone, *Iconografía del Arte Colonial. Los Santos*, vol. 2, Buenos Aires 1992, pp. 500- 506.

³ For further information about female monasteries and convents and their important role in evangelisation, see A. Martínez Cuesta, O.R.A., 'Las monjas en la América Colonial', in *Centro Virtual Cervantes*, vol. 50, nos. 1-3, 1992.