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Manuel Chili,
known as "Caspicara"
(Quito (Ecuador), c. 1723 - c. 1796)

Calvary

polychromed graffito gilt wood
120 x 54 cm.; 47 1/4 x 21 1/4 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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Certain aspects of his life

Manuel Chili, also known as “Caspicara”, is considered Bernardo de Legarda’s (1700 – 1773) successor in the complex art of religious imagery and, along with José Olmos (Pampite) (1670 – 1730), he constitutes the purest essence of the famous Quito School. It is thought he was born between 1720 and 1725 in the Ecuadorian capital. His nickname alone, which in the *Kichwa* language means “Wooden Face” or “Stick Face”, leads one to imagine a man with a copper-coloured countenance, probably with the same smoothness as the wood or sticks he transformed into the works of art that immortalized both him and the indigenous race. According to the historian Jaime Aguilar Paredes, Manuel Chili “gave himself up to religious imagery from an early age, attaining a peerless skill that would put him at the fore of the sculptors of his age, and it is no exaggeration to place him on the same level as the most famous European sculptors”.

Caspicara’s story revolves around the Society of Jesus priests who knew him from a tender age, watching him run around, hanging from the scaffolds and walkways of the main Jesuit church in Quito, and who marvelled to see him become a great artist, full of skill and craftsmanship. It was they, therefore, who decided to take charge of his education, food and accommodation, allocating him a small allowance, as at that time artisans did not enjoy the same privileges as true artists. But the Jesuits’ efforts did not stop there; they also helped hone Manuel’s abilities so he could improve his technique both as a painter and a sculptor. These, in essence, are the roots of the man who years later would become one of the greatest and finest exponents of the Quito School.

The great Caspicara started to gain recognition for his work, where he was tireless, putting in 12 hours a day. He was always to be seen, climbing up the scaffolds, braving danger, despite a terrible fear of heights. Some have commented that, due to this, the artist would remain in silence for hours, his eyes closed, which angered the church chaplain who mistakenly thought Manuel was asleep when he should have been working. Chili’s works began to command greater and greater sums of gold pesos, and as such his fame also spread across both the new and old continents. Images of Christ, Saints and Virgins

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adorned churches across Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela and Spain. There have even been those who have believed that the works of Caspicara, as well as being beautiful, possessed miraculous properties. These days it is hard to put a price on his works, as they form part of Ecuador's cultural heritage and are extremely precious. In 1791, the writer, art admirer and contemporary of Chili, Eugenio de Santa Cruz y Espejo (1747 – 1795), referred to the artist in the following terms: "but this very day you see how the famous Caspicara refines, polishes and approaches perfect imitation on marble and wood, just like Cortez on panel and canvas".

Caspicara's work goes beyond the sphere of creation and art, becoming the most complete and revelatory document of the age. Contrary to those who remained on the fringes of artistic events, Caspicara dove straight in with all his strength, bearing the banner of his race in the midst of the colonial darkness. It is also well worth adding the words of Fray José María Vargas: "in the middle of the 18th century, De la Condamine and Padre Velasco highlighted the skills of Indians and Mestizos in the visual arts. Espejo and Caspicara were the greatest expression of their race, and demonstrated the scope of their abilities, when personal effort outstrips the prejudices of one's surroundings".

Chili's sculptures have received just as much praise for the great feats he carried out in executing expressions and emotions, given that even when the figures depicted are completely immersed in the actions and scenes in which they are involved, their gestures and mannerisms are by no means exaggerated. Instead they are seen as works of great harmony, serenity and expressiveness. Critics also consider Chili to be a master of depth and composition, as well as recognising his merit as one of the few sculptors to tackle groups of human figures. Also exceptional was his incredible work with miniatures, working largely in the field of virtuosity. This is shown in the smooth lines that demonstrate a subtlety of spirit, a balance of temperament, elegance, and excess of perfectionism, an absolute command of the sculptor's gouge, a profound knowledge of urban anatomy, of *estofado* (the technique of painting over gold leaf), *encarnado* (the technique for simulating skin colour), *graffito* and polychrome. In short, expressive painting full of splendour and beauty.

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We do not know exactly when this leading sculptor from the Quito School died, but sadly what we do know for sure is that, as is so often the case with artists even today, Caspicara died in poverty, in the midst of the loneliness and abandonment of a hospice.

Manuel Chili is a great representative of the serene elegance of the 17th century and the revolutionary dynamism of the 18th century. His works are a true marvel, such as *Reclining Christ* (fig. 1), *The Holy Shroud* (fig. 2) and *The Fates of Man* (fig. 3). Contemplating them we are immersed in a profound reflection and meditation on the difficult times Jesus went through to save mankind.

The episode in Christ's Passion involving the Crucifixion is one of the most representative in colonial-era sculpture in Quito. Generally, the Calvary scenes undertaken for the city's reredos and oratories present Christ accompanied by his Mother, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and Saint John. The base is a structure that simulates stone and represents the little mount of Golgotha, on which rest the skull and bones that allude to Adam.

In the centre, on the mount of Golgotha, the Cross towers over the composition. Christ is depicted with his face looking down, his mouth half-open, already dead, and although this is a highly dramatic moment, he transmits a certain peace now that all his suffering is over. His powerfully contoured hair ruffles in a dynamic fashion, his face, eyes and half-open mouth display a grimace of great pain.

His body was sculpted in pale white with a powerful sense of naturalism, highlighting traces of blood on his hands, knees and feet. Little trails of blood trickle through his thick beard onto his neck and run down his body, further bringing out the whiteness of his skin where his wounds and stigmata contrast strongly with their purple colour, denoting the suffering Christ went through prior to his Crucifixion. The blood and wounds are highlighted by thousands of little rubies and diamonds that reflect the light, and add further dramatism to this Passion scene. His pubis is covered by a perizoma (loincloth), a white cloth with broad folds attached to his body with a cord, finely carved with a great sense of naturalism. His lacerated feet are attached to the foot support by one single nail.

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The Mother of Christ is depicted at the foot of the Cross, in an attitude of resignation with her arms crossed against her breast, hugging herself in a demonstration of her great pain and grief. Mary Magdalene is on her knees with her right arm stretched out while her left hand holds her veil, looking disconsolate at the skull and bones of Adam. On the right-hand side we find Saint John with his arms open, sobbing. All express great sorrow and despair, which Caspicara manages to transmit using great skill in the work's colouring, with subtle differences in the reddish tones around the eyes which show tear tracks, thereby revealing his fine command of expressive execution.

It is worth highlighting the great *estofado* and *graffito* work seen in the garments, the subtle and varied tones and skill shown in executing the folds and the sense of depth.

It is possible that this Passion group may have formed part of a *locus orandi*, or devotional place where the faithful would go to pray in private, and where it was common to find images of the Crucified Christ alone. In this case, the presence of the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and Saint John only go to intensify the moment of meditation and to invite female believers to imitate the observing figure of the Virgin Mary.

As is characteristic of works by Caspicara, the hands lend tone to the work, and their position forms a dramatic gesture of supplication. An intensely emotive and theatrical execution of the sculpture aimed at evoking feelings of empathy in the spectator.

In the way the psychological aspects of character are executed in both the face and posture of the Virgin, the artist is providing spectators with a mirror on to her own pain due to the suffering of Christ.

From Spain's earliest incursions at the Royal Court of Quito, the evangelizers promoted Seville's ceremonial format, in which Christ's Passion played the most important role in the Holy Week processions.

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Through dramatic sermons and expressive images, they provoked emotive responses from the faithful, who looked upon the Passion images in their private oratories. The prayers of the Stations of the Cross or the reading of pious works called for visual aids in order to establish a spiritual colloquy as Saint Ignatius would have suggested.

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Figure 1. Manuel Chili, *Reclining Christ*. Museo Nacional del Ecuador, Quito



Figure 2. Manuel Chili, *The Holy Shroud*. Catedral Metropolitana de Quito, Ecuador

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Figure 3. Manuel Chili, *The Fates of Man*. Hispanic Society of America, New York