

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Nicolás de Correa  
(Mexico, c. 1660 – c. 1720)

*The Baptism of Christ*

oil on panel

99 x 127 cm.; 39 x 50 in.

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Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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Among the busy and distinguished group of painters who were active in New Spain in the last decades of the 17th century and the first decades of the 18th century are the members of the Correa family. It is an interesting family including the prominent figures of, mainly, Juan and José Correa, brothers, as well as their sons: Diego and Miguel, sons of the former, and Nicolás, son of the latter. All of them of mixed race, the fruit of the union of the Master of Surgery Juan Correa, Spanish man born in Mexico, and Pascuala de Santoyo, black.<sup>1</sup> These circumstances are the reason why some documents referring to their son, Juan Correa, describe him as a "master painter of a broken colour".

The most important and well-known member of this family is precisely Juan Correa, who was also one of the most prolific, but also one of the most varied, painters of the Viceroy of New Spain. Little is known of the work of José, his elder brother. But he was the father of Nicolás. He and his uncle Juan turned out to be the most renowned painters of the family. His birth date is unknown, but if we consider the year 1691, shown in his painting *Desposorios místicos de Santa Rosa de Lima* (fig. 1) as a starting point, and if we think that, by then, he was at least 20 years old, we can guess that he was born between 1665 and 1670.

It is sad to admit that there is barely any information regarding his life, or his work, since his catalog consists of just a handful of works. However, we should remember that Nicolás is among the few artists who ventured to create works on nacre-inlaid wood, which are usually known as *enconchados* (mother of pearl inlay paintings) (fig. 2),<sup>2</sup> seductive pieces which, as it is well known, were at their best precisely during those years in New Spain, based on an art mode that had been introduced, together with other many marvels, through commerce with the East, through the Manila Galleon (also known as the Nao de China). The fact that Nicolás Correa followed this trend lets us know about his ability to learn new techniques and his readiness to accept numerous commissions.

The beautiful painting *Baptism of Christ* we are describing here is significant because it enriches the catalog of his small production, while allowing us to also appreciate his qualities as a landscape-painter. The theme required placing the figures outdoors, but the artist had opted for a rectangular canvas with horizontal development, precisely to have room for a good

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landscape background, with two tree clumps on the sides leaving a clearing in the center, behind Jesus and his cousin John, where we can appreciate a city between valleys and mountains, and a brief cloudscape with a burst of glory through which the Holy Spirit descends. Although the treatment is conventional, the lush foliage of the trees contributes to framing the scene and giving it some depth. Nicolás had already shown his taste and love for nature in the delightful background that embellishes the aforementioned painting *Desposorios místicos de Santa Rosa de Lima*, but we think this sensitivity towards nature somehow must have influenced the work of his uncle Juan, who more than other painters of that time had shown a peculiar predilection for including landscapes in his scenes. John is standing on the banks of the Jordan River, here reduced to a meandering stream coming from the background, inside which is Jesus, torso bent and arms crossed on his chest.

Unlike most versions of this theme made by New Spanish painters, Nicolás Correa has added a large group of witnesses on the right side of the composition — the most common scene had been with just a few angels to hold Christ's clothes, a job that is now performed by a couple of children. Among this group of characters, most of them young, a man's side-face figure stands out; he is of old age and has a turban headdress. A soldier, his back turned to the observer, is conversing with him. The convincing interplay of metallic reflections observed in his armor is worth mentioning.

At the time of the baptism of Christ, one of the most spectacular theophanies of his earthly passing occurred, since it is then when a clear manifestation of his dual nature of God and man occurred, which is usually expressed in the representations of this landscape with the burst of glory on the top, where the dove of the Holy Spirit descends and the Father is heard saying "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased", and which, in the painting we are describing, is expressed by that Late Gothic formula in the Latin inscription, taken from Matthew, that sways around the Holy Spirit (Mt, 3, 16-17). This archaic solution, gradually abandoned in the European art since the end of the Middle Ages, remained in force in the Hispanic kingdoms of the New World, and regarding New Spanish art, its use is continued well into the 17th century.

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**Figure 1.** Nicolás de Correa, *Mystical Marriage of St. Rose of Lima*. Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico

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**Figure 2.** Nicolás de Correa, *The Wedding at Cana* (signed and dated 1696), oil and mixed media on wood panel, inlaid with mother of pearl. The Hispanic Society of America, New York

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Said Juan Correa was an important surgeon of that time who performed anatomical dissections in New Spain and worked for the The Court of the Inquisition.

<sup>2</sup> Besides Juan and Miguel González, little by little other artists started to join this trend. Two works by Nicolás Correa are recorded: the painting of *Cristo en la Boda de Caná* [*Christ in the Wedding at Cana*] and a *Sagrada Familia* [*Holy Family*] (1693 and 1694, respectively); see G. Kubler and M. S. Soria, *Art and Architecture in Spain and Portugal and their American Dominions, 1500-1800*, The Pelican History of Art, 1959, p. 313, and picture 173.