

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist  
(Guatemala, 18<sup>th</sup> century)

## *Nativity*

c. 1790

carved and polychromed wood

Saint Joseph: 28.5 x 17.8 cm.; 11 1/4 x 7 1/8 in.

Virgin: 26.5 x 16 cm.; 10 3/8 x 6 1/4 in.

Child: 15 x 7.5 cm.; 5 7/8 x 3 in.

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## Provenance

Private Collection, Madrid.

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In his 1978 catalogue, *Estofados en la Nueva España*, Xavier Moyssén presented an interesting document that has remained associated with the works with which it deals.<sup>1</sup> This is the invoice Julián Fernández de Roldán, an intermediary living in New Guatemala, issued to the Marquis of Sierra Nevada<sup>2</sup> from Mexico City, on 7 October 1790, including the varying expenses involved in the “Nativity that has been delivered”. The group of works referred to, as with those being addressed here, is composed of a Virgin and St. Joseph, both depicted kneeling and in contemplative adoration of the Divine Child who, lying in his crib, completes the group. This link, and the fact that we have records of the first group, make it a point of reference, as we now establish a preliminary comparative study to which we will be adding more images, many with the same iconography, supporting the Guatemalan attribution of the carvings we are dealing with here. In turn, we would insist on these works’ importance as benchmark pieces belonging to a sort of religious imagery being produced in said Central American country from the last third of the 18th until the first third of the 19th centuries, and an effective reflection of a system of artistic output driven by a fame and skill that set them apart at the time, making them highly sought-after items.

As part of the rise enjoyed by sculptures depicting the Nativity passage in the Hispanic world throughout the *Settecento*, the Americas also saw a growing predilection for the model we are dealing with here. Based on engravings and paintings, one can observe compositions that bear close parallels in groups of works from Quito and New Spain,<sup>3</sup> though in this case for the old Captaincy General, and in this widespread pattern we should take into account the boost undoubtedly provided by the Order of the Bethlehemite Brothers and their saint and founder, Brother Peter of Betancourt, so devoutly worshipped in the country.

This model would thus reappear time and time again, with barely the slightest variation in terms of the arrangement of gestures or folds in the clothing between one sculpture and another, where the parallels are unmistakable. Along with the painstaking wood carving work, what makes these pieces easily recognisable as Guatemalan is the repetition of the fine carving of heads, faces, hands and hair. We can identify numerous examples of this, such as the one preserved in the Metropolitan Museum in New York,<sup>4</sup> another work of greater dimensions in the Museo de la Basílica de Guadalupe, Mexico City<sup>5</sup> and, in Spain,

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the one we presented from Cadiz's Rebaño de María convent.<sup>6</sup> To this list one could add numerous pieces from private collections, where it is once again worth insisting on the success of the model, and the few differences between each piece. As part of said preferred model, one might well highlight the figure of the Infant Christ, of a type (specifically the one we are presenting here) that could, in terms of its adaptability, be considered very much a benchmark in Guatemalan workshops.<sup>7</sup> In addition to finding it included in Nativity scenes, from which it could be removed for its own separate worship, as continues to be the case for the celebration of Candlemas, it is also quite common to find it in both unitary and divisible ensembles including the Virgin or St. Joseph, in particular with the latter, as well as with a number of other saints.

In addition to the carving, one element leaving no doubt as to the ensemble's Guatemalan origins is its characteristic polychroming.<sup>8</sup> First we observe the elaborate carnation work, lightly polished and with multiple layering to emphasize the sense of volume, and reflect the relevant details. Then there is the *estofado* work, another hallmark of pieces coming out of this region. This is reflected in both the designs and many techniques used by the painter to evoke the rich fabrics imported into the country, popular since some years earlier. With regard to the design, brocade effects predominate, with rhomboidal patterns based on plant elements against gold and silver fields. This is exquisitely achieved thanks to the combination of techniques such as abundant *picado de lustre* punch-marking on the background, the highlighting of the fabric volume using *aparejo* or fine stucco relief, and the use of silver gilding and bronzing. The work was concluded with brushstrokes to emphasize the relief and by the execution of typical little flower motifs, all part of the many combinations to be found in the oft-repeated *maniera* of Guatemalan works to which we attribute this Nativity.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> X. Moysén, *Estofados en la Nueva España*, Mexico 1978, pp. 23–235. The sculptural group referred to is housed in a private collection in Mexico City.

<sup>2</sup> At that time, this related to the figure who had recently acquired the aforementioned title, Joaquín Rodríguez de Arellano Iñiguez, through his marriage to María Jacinta de Serna y Noreña. We are grateful to Dr Javier Sanchez (IIH-UNAM) for his guidance.

<sup>3</sup> A close example in the case of Ecuador would be the famous work preserved in the convent of Corpus Christi (*Las Carboneras*) in Madrid. With regard to Mexico, we could mention those in the Museo del Carmen, Mexico City, or in the Museo Amparo, Puebla.

<sup>4</sup> Catalogue nos.: 64, 164, 168 to 171.

<sup>5</sup> Reproduced in L. Luján Muñoz & M. Alvarez Arévalo, *Imágenes de oro*, Galería Guatemalteca II, Guatemala 2002, pp. 100–103.

<sup>6</sup> P. F. Amador Marrero, 'Ventanas de Cádiz que miran a ultramar: Arte guatemalteco en el convento del Rebaño de María y su re exión como obra múltiple', in P. Amador Marrero et al. (eds.), *Tornaviaje: Tránsito artístico entre los virreinos americanos y la metrópolis*, Seville 2020, pp. 591–621.

<sup>7</sup> These multiple functionalities may explain the orifice found towards the middle, which may also be observed in other pieces belonging to the same iconographic representation.

<sup>8</sup> There is a recent study examining this subject in B. Janeth Porras Godoy, 'El retablo y la escultura en Guatemala, siglo XVI al XIX', PhD diss., Universidad de Sevilla, Facultad de Historia y Geografía, Departamento de Historia del Arte, 2015, pp. 565–627.