

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Hispano-Philippine, 17th century)

Saint Michael the Archangel

ivory, traces of polychrome and gilding
figure only: 61 x 38.6 cm.; 24 1/8 x 15 1/4 in.
height with base: 81 cm.; 31 7/8 in.
weight: 8.380 kg

Provenance

Former Esclasans Collection since c. 1930, Barcelona (Spain).

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Saint Michael was one of the most venerated saints in the Christian world in the years following the Council of Trent. In terms of the ivory figures of Hispano-Philippine art there was a particularly interesting resurgence of worship of the saint in the Renaissance period, fostered in part by the Jesuits, who saw him as a symbol of the Church triumphing over heresy, and because he was especially revered by Saint Francis Xavier. His introduction onto the Isles was colored with certain very particular characteristics, both ideological, due to the danger of heresy in a world far removed from Catholic doctrine, and stylistic, due to the margin provided by his image for depicting Satan at the Archangel's feet, on occasions relating directly to the Eastern world. With regards to the interesting iconography of Saint Michael during the Baroque period, its composition adapted to the conceptual approach of the Counter Reformation. He is most often depicted dressed as a Roman warrior spearing a dragon, Satan or Lucifer, represented by a figure with a woman's body and the tail of a mermaid or a reptile, defeated by the Guardian of the Roman Church.

The popularization of worship of the Saint in the Philippines is a reflection of what Spain exported to its colonies. In terms of iconography, his depiction follows the lead of European models, examples of which exist in ivory, always with the Saint dressed as a warrior, sometimes wearing a helmet, a tassel-sleeved doublet with tails covering a short tunic or pleated short breeches in the Spanish style of the mid-16th century, which became widespread throughout the rural classes during the entire 17th century. In the Philippines, these compositions express far less movement. It is also interesting to point out the varying depictions that have been made of the Devil at the feet of the Archangel. These vary from depictions of Lucifer in the form of an oriental dragon, as we observe in the piece housed at Badajoz Cathedral, to human figures with quadruped legs or the form of a mermaid, these being more in line with the Biblical spirit of woman's seduction by the snake, a sin which is redeemed by the Virgin, the New Eve, as the mother of the Redeemer.

Our exceptional ivory Archangel is depicted holding a sword in his right hand while looking triumphantly down at the devil at his feet. In his left hand he carries a round shield with a flaming sun, on which there are traces of gilding and polychrome. His naturally golden fine hair is combed into a short mane, and tied into a bun above his forehead, in the style

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popular in the reign of Philip III. The beautiful features of the Saint's oval face present clearly Hispano-Philippine characteristics; heavy eyelids over half-closed eyes, a slender nose with pronounced nostrils, prominent chin and small mouth in deep red polychrome. His dress is made up of a doublet or corset with a square neck and plain body decorated with delicate polychrome to represent the sun, moon and stars, crossed by a knotted sash.

He is seen with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, great wings with thin golden lines that trace out the delicate plumage, and boots tucked over under the knee, gathered up by a cherub in the style of Roman legionnaire footwear, like the rest of the clothing used in European art when depicting the archangel, stressing the active nature of his worship: a symbol of the fight against heresy in the world of the Counter Reformation. At his feet, the curious and beautiful figure of the long-maned devil, with its feminine human torso and, from the waist down, the form of a twisting tail. The pedestal on which the work stands is of carved, gilt wood, and presents a very high quality in the carving of naturalistic forms, scrollwork and acanthus leaves.

The sun, moon and stars that adorn the Saint's doublet have a profound theological significance, given that the holy texts consider the Archangel to be the savior of the Apocalyptic Woman, a symbol of Mary and the Church, and a figure to which, according to the apocalyptic texts themselves, the sun, moon and stars pay homage.

This piece accentuates the antithetical character of the devil, face and bust of a woman with the lower part of the body being that of a long-tailed reptile, which Saint Michael is attacking in order to save the Apocalyptic Woman, a precursor of Mary, in a composition that is reminiscent of an engraving of the same subject by Hieronymus Wierix (fig. 1).

It is worth highlighting the high quality and great beauty of the carving, and the exceptional state of conservation that make this piece an unusual work of art.

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Figure 1. Hieronymus Wierix (1548-1624), *The Archangel Saint Michael*, late 16th – early 17th century, engraving