

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Viceroyalty of Peru, 18th century)

Our Lady of Cocharcas

oil on canvas
115 x 96 cm.; 45.2 x 37.7 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

LONDON

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This curious example of Marian iconography depicts Our Lady of Cocharcas, which has its origins in Our Lady of Copacabana and, in turn, the Virgin of the Candelaria.¹ Also known as Our Lady of the Nativity of Cocharcas, or Mamacha Cocharcas, the Virgin's image, and subsequent veneration, is due to the indigenous native Sebastián Quimichi who, in late 1583, having been miraculously cured of an injury to his hand on an expedition to the Shrine of Copacabana, asked Tito Yupanqui to carve a copy of the image worshipped there, to be transported to Cocharcas.

The image arrived, not without problems, in Cocharcas, a region located in the Peruvian Viceroyalty, between two parallel sections of the silver and mercury routes to Potosí. Initially installed in the parish church, while waiting for a shrine to be built in the Virgin's name, it is said that Our Lady performed so many miracles that she soon had numerous devotees and was the subject of unrivalled levels of pilgrimage in the Andean region. This devotion among the faithful both from the area and beyond is reflected in this pictorial representation of undeniably Baroque origins, and in increasing demand from museums and collectors on both sides of the Atlantic interested, for the first time, in raising the profile of an artistic expression which, for many decades, had been unfairly relegated to the sidelines.

Respecting the iconographic basis of the Candelaria, Our Lady of Cocharcas appears depicted as a free-standing statue, accompanied by the Infant Jesus, and elegantly dressed in bell-shaped robe and cloak, in a clear syncretic reference to Pachamama. As was often the case in the Peruvian Viceroyalty, the blue robe is decorated, simulating the *estofado* technique, with scrollwork and flower and leaf motifs. The garment is secured around the Virgin's waist by a gold belt, tied in the middle. Its golden colour matches that of the broad decorative band around the Mother of God's neckline. She wears her red cloak on top of the robe, also decorated using the *estofado* technique and, on this occasion, doubly ornate thanks to a decorative border running around the fabric, inundating the Virgin's outfit with gold. Her face looks out, snow-white and brimming with youthful vitality, from under a beautiful organza veil, whose fabric is matched by the voluminous cuffs sticking out from her sleeves. The Virgin's oval face expresses serenity. Two thin brown eyebrows shield her almond-shaped eyes, which look fixedly out at the spectator. Marking the symmetry of the face, we see a fine

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and elongated nose, under which her deep red mouth is drawn, small and tightly sealed. On top of the Virgin's head, with the support of two winged infants who are holding onto it, an imposing gold crown rises up, with a cross at the top. The Virgin's right hand holds a bunch of red and blue flowers, along with olive cuttings. On the other side, the Infant Jesus is cradled in her left arm, dressed in the same fashion as his mother: blue robe, red cloak, embroidery around the neck and hands, and imperial crown. The Child, who is opening his right hand in a clearly ceremonial gesture, is holding the orb of the world, in a clear reference to his dominion over the Christian realm. Both figures are depicted on a processional platform with a canopy over it. This structure, which resembles silver, is held aloft by four slender uprights shaped like Solomonic columns with ionic order capitals and decorated, on both sides, by rows of flowers. The upper part of the structure, the canopy, is made up of red fabric decorated with a significant amount of *estofado* work, whose aesthetic matches the cloth that hangs down from the repoussé silver frieze that acts as a base and on top of which, as well as the processional image, we find two vases, arranged symmetrically on either side of the base of the figure.

Widening our gaze, we see how the composition bears witness to parallel stories surrounding the scene's protagonists. As such, and focusing our attention on the left-hand section of the canvas, we see a diverse group of men and women starting out on a pilgrimage from the top of a hill, descending the steep slope of the mountainside until reaching the riverbank. Some on foot, others on horseback, dressed in religious habit or ponchos, they are all attempting to traverse a lake replete with white swans, cross a flock of sheep and make a short-cut through the houses of a village that stands in the middle of their route. Of particular note is the scene in which two men are helping a third man to traverse a steep slope, with the aid of two red ropes. Continuing through the compositional elements, we reach the Pampas, one of the most famous rivers in Peru, it being particularly prominent in terms of its strategic position. On the right bank, dressed in Andean-style skirts and ponchos, two indigenous figures are waiting their turn to cross the river, which is full of naked bodies struggling, either swimming or on horseback, to reach the left-hand shore where some are lending a hand and others are watching. Prominent among those witnessing the scene is a group of religious individuals, to judge by their attire, representing the entire ecclesiastic hierarchy. In addition, and drawing

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attention to the pilgrims' socio-economic diversity, we see two figures dressed in the French fashion, with dress-coats, breeches and wigs, and who are undertaking the final stage of the journey to the long-awaited encounter with the miraculous Our Lady of Cocharcas. Moving on now to the right-hand section of the composition, this time from bottom to top, we find more figures from a wide range of backgrounds, it being worth highlighting one man who, on horseback, is making his way to the shrine with a sunshade over his head. Some in the French style, others in ponchos, whether on foot or riding animals, they approach the shrine, whose two tall towers rise up inside a great walled atrium only accessible through the axis of the nave of the church, and boasting an arch. Our attention is drawn to the Marian iconography strategically scattered throughout the canvas, it being worth noting the litanies represented by the water fountain and tree, both located outside the church, in what one can identify as the main square. Finally, one should mention that the scene takes place against a clearly Andean landscape, at around dusk, to judge by the sun setting between the peaks of the High Plateau.

This pictorial representation of *Mamacha Cocharcas* is a clear example of Andean Baroque, an artistic process and subject not limited to a viceregal reproduction of artistic dogma born of European treatises but, rather, one that took the visual experience and legacy of the Old World and reinterpreted it, assimilating it into a distinct, autochthonous dimension, generating a viceregal art with an undeniable *mestizo* seal where the Baroque and syncretism are unquestionably the main protagonists.

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Unidentified artist, *Our Lady of Cocharcas*, oil on canvas, 18th century. Private Collection

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Unidentified artist, *Our Lady of Cocharcas*, oil on canvas, 18th century. Brooklyn Museum, New York

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Footnotes

¹ On the representation of this type of Marian iconography in Peruvian art, see R. Vargas Ugarte, *Historia del Culto de María en Iberoamérica y de sus imágenes y Santuarios más celebrados*, Buenos Aires 1947; T. Gisbert & J. Mesa, *Iconografía y mitos indígenas en el Arte*, La Paz 1980; and H. Schenone, *Iconografía del arte colonial*, vol. 2, Argentina 1992.