

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(Cuzco, Peru, first half of the 18th century)

*The Detention of Saint Agnes;
The Miracle of Saint Agnes;
Saint Agnes Sentenced in a
Brothel; and The Martyrdom of
Saint Anges*



oil on canvas

all 42.2 x 31.4 cm.; 16.6 x 12.3 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, United States.

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This series of four little oval panels originating from Cuzco and depicting the life of Saint Agnes of Rome constitutes an important graphic narrative from an iconographic point of view within the context of Viceroyalty art. The hagiography of this young Roman saint has been transposed on many occasions onto pictorial and sculptural supports, with the resultant compositions falling into two core groups.¹ Firstly, those that opt to portray the virginal figure with an abundance of attributes, but distanced from the tempestuous events that marked her short life. It is thus that from the earliest representations characteristic of the Romanesque period, until well into the 18th century, we find numerous examples of Saint Agnes, on her own, accompanied by the lamb, palm of martyrdom and crown, her three recurring attributes (fig. 1). Secondly, and as an alternative compositional group, there are those scenographic representations in which one observes one or more of the varying forms of martyrdom to which the Saint was subjected, and it is into this group that the works we are studying here fall, their serial composition being of particular interest, an approach that is undoubtedly original in the canons of both the Old World and the New.

Fundamental to undertaking any study of this particular iconography is the consultation of the varying documentary sources which, from the late 4th century, constitute the most precise and reliable records of the life and martyrdom of Saint Agnes of Rome. Of these older written testimonies, that of Saint Ambrose is worth highlighting:

*"...she was just 13 years old when she was martyred. Coming home from school one day, the girl met the son of the Prefect of Rome, who fell in love with her and promised her great gifts in return for promising to marry him. She replied: 'My hand has been asked by another Lover. I love Christ. I will be the bride of He whose Mother is a Virgin; I will love him and continue to be chaste'. The boy sought out his father, the Prefect, who had her arrested. They threatened her with flames if she did not renounce her religion, but she was not afraid of the flames. Then they condemned her to death by having her neck slit [...]"*²

This succinct tale is what we see portrayed, with nuances and adapted to the tridentine decorum, in this series of four oil works which I will now describe. Firstly, and in accordance

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with the natural order in which the events occurred, is the painting depicting the arrest of Agnes, forced to walk naked throughout the cities' streets. In the middle of the scene we see the young martyr, her hands bound, flanked by five figures who, although bearded, have indigenous features. Of these, our eyes are drawn to prefects Syphronius' vindictive son, located at the right of the illustration, dressed in courtly 16th-century fashion, with a doublet, smock and breeches. The young saint, with snow-white skin, long and lustrous hair due to, as old tradition tells, a miraculous growth of his main in order to cover his bodies nudity. In this occasion, the painter has reinterpreted the literary version denying us the virginal bareness with a light transparent tulle fabric cloth that contrasts with the rich clothing the martyr still preserves covering her legs which, ranging from red to blue, boasts opulent decoration made up of gilt brocade, an ornamental device characteristic of the Cuzco School.

The second painting depicts the second martyrdom to which the young Roman girl was subjected when, by order of the prefect, she was condemned to be burnt alive. The image, however, respecting the narrative of the events, tells of Saint Agnes' miraculous powers, using prayer to cast the flames aside, and thereby avoid herself burning. The scene is presented before an attentive public, seen on the left-hand side of the composition. In the background, contributing a sense of depth, the city of Rome is seen to rise up. In the foreground, two Roman soldiers are commenting the miracle while a small child points at our protagonist in stupefaction. Saint Agnes, whose facial features match those of the other panels, is wearing a long white robe covering her entire body, secured at the waist with a belt. The Saint signals towards the heavens as if wanting to demonstrate to those present the miraculous power of her faith.

The following scene shows the third miraculous doing at which Saint Agnes, after being send to the brothel, begs to a protecting angel for the prefect's son to be cured, who after trying to taint the young girls' pureness, struck down to the ground, victim of a sudden blindness. The martyr is dressed in a white robe and cloak, with sumptuous gilt floral decoration and crowned by an equally golden nimbus.

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Finally, in the last painting in the series, we are witness to the final act of martyrdom, Saint Agnes having her neck slit by a Roman executioner at Dominican's stadium,³ in which Saint Agnes in Agonie's church stands.⁴ The Saint, kneeling down in prayer in the centre of the image, is opulently dressed for the occasion. Red robe, blue shirt and ochre cloak, all sumptuously adorned with gilt brocade. In the background, three Roman citizens share the scene with two soldiers, all arranged around the gates to the big city.

This iconography, which was particularly deeply rooted in the Italian artistic canon, understandably given the Saint's Roman origin, gradually spread throughout Europe from the early 14th century, becoming a regular feature in the oeuvre of Old World artists. Once she had been accepted as a saint and martyr, the Catholic Church found, in this and other hagiographic models, an excellent tool for transmitting Counter Reformation dogma, arranging for prints with her image to make the journey to overseas territories. Prints that New Spanish artists reproduced, adapting them to their skills, techniques and tastes. As such, we see how these four paintings share fundamental features from the school of the Viceroyalty of Peru, which was the birthplace of many excellent artists.

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Figure 1. Martin Schongauer, *Saint Agnes*, engraving

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Footnotes

¹ For further information on the iconography of St. Ines of Rome, see J. Carmona Muela, *Iconografía de los santos*, Madrid 2008, pp. 205-207; L. Réau, *Iconografía del arte Cristiano*, vol. 4, no. 2, Barcelona 1997, pp. 109-110; and VV. AA., *Guía para identificar los santos de la iconografía cristiana*, Madrid 2018, pp. 160-161.

² E. Salesman, *Vidas de Santos*, vol. 1, 2007.

³ Current Piazza Navona, Rome.

⁴ The church of St. Ines in the Piazza Navona is one of the most interesting churches of the Baroque Rome, the construction of which was started in 1652 under the initiative of Pope Innocence X. Some of the most accomplished Baroque architects left their mark on the building throughout its long and complex construction history: Girolamo Rainaldi, his son Carlo Rainaldi, and Francesco Borromini.