

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Viceroyalty of Peru, 17th century)

*The Imposition of the Chasuble
on Saint Ildephonsus*

oil on copper
27 x 21.5 cm.; 10.6 x 8.4 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Madrid.

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‘Come and receive from my hand, dearest servant of God, this gift which I have taken from my Son’s treasury. You are to wear this garment on the days of my festival, and given you have always been faithful to my service and defended my fame among the faithful, this garment of glory which will adorn you in this life, you will likewise enjoy in the future life, alongside those who also serve my Son.’¹

This small-scale copper, depicting one of the most popular episodes from the life of St. Ildephonsus, constitutes a clear example of the Baroque aesthetic of New Spain, by setting itself out as a display of dynamism and contrasting luminous interplay.² The choice of this metallic support, frequently used in the Viceroyalty, enabled the painter to engage in all the possibilities offered up by the material, and indulge in extraordinary refinement thanks to the painstaking attention given to detail and the profusion of such characteristic brilliance and color.³

As one might expect from the above, and to use the words of López Torrijos, “*the iconography of the imposition of the chasuble is not only the richest one associated with St. Ildephonsus, but one of the richest iconographies in the History of Art*”⁴ given the fact that, beyond the support provided by the existing historical documentary records for the saint from Toledo, the depiction of this Father of the Spanish Church is inextricably linked to the defense of the virginity of Mary.

The resurgence of this medieval iconography can be dated to the dawn of the 16th century, marked by the Council of Trent reform and the defense of Marian privileges in the face of the growing Lutheran movement. With undeniably deep-seated roots in 17th-century Spanish society, it would enjoy extraordinary levels of dissemination, clearly seen in the New World, so hungry for iconographic Catholic sources from which to trace out the features of a new cultural identity that would foster unity.

The work before us here stands in perfect harmony with the Baroque compositions of the Spanish “metrópoli” where we see, in the foreground, the miraculous act of the imposition. Towards the left of the composition, sat on an episcopal chair which is seen to hover in a swirl

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of clouds shifting between white and grey, appears the Virgin Mary, dressed, as was customary, in a pinkish robe with a beautiful blue cloak on top, and sumptuous gold brocade. The Mother of God's neck is adorned with a necklace whose gold base combines with pearls of varying sizes and from the middle of which what would appear to be an emerald is hanging. This opulent jewel gives way to an elongated and stylized neck leading up to the virginal face, tilted towards her left shoulder, while her almond-shaped eyes are focused on her most faithful defender. Her porcelain-toned face is adorned with raised, stylized eyebrows which share in the fine line of the nose and the little pink lips making up her mouth. A head of curly brown hair, gathered into a ponytail and with a perfect center parting, and decorated with a thin coral-colored ribbon, serves to seat her elegant and opulent crown, which is gold and pearled over much of its surface, and decorated with an interspersed succession of fleurs-de-lis of varying sizes. A halo of light emanates from the virginal head, made up of a series of whitish rays that open up the composition to a sky heavy with clouds, in which a thin orange strip announces twilight. Around it, three winged red-headed cherubs are seen gliding, smiling with their chubby cheeks, and sharing in their delicate features with the tricolor-winged angel who appears to be coming down from the heavens to take part in the miraculous act. With fine and long-fingered hands, the Virgin Mary holds the chasuble, white with ornate phytomorphic decoration in golden tones, and which is combined, in the middle section, with a string of precious gems of considerable size, some red, others black.

In the lower left corner, kneeling on a beautiful and brightly-colored carpet featuring plant and floral motifs, we find St. Ildephonsus, still dressed in his monastic habit, white and secured at the waist, and with a coral-colored stole hanging around his neck. The Saint is raising his arms towards his chest while opening his hands outwards in an act of reverence. His head, respectful with its monk's tonsure and surrounded by a golden splendor combining rays of light of different lengths, tilts slightly towards his right shoulder as he raises his gaze, looking for the gift he is being given by the Mother of God. On a second compositional plane, and witnessing what is about to happen, we observe three virgins behind the Marian throne, sumptuously dressed in light robes with pearls at their necks and ears. In harmony with the intended representation, these appear with immaculately combed hair, highlighting their golden curls adorned with ribbons and diadems. Their virginal condition is indicated by the

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presence of palm fronds of martyrdom accompanying their image. Finally, and as the last compositional element drawing attention to the prodigious events taking place in an inside room, the center right section of the copper features a religious figure who, in an explosive Baroque display, is abandoning the composition, immersed in a sort of dance that sees him cavort into the outside world.

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Footnotes

¹ E. Flórez in *España Sagrada. Theatro Geographico histórico de la Iglesia de España*, vol. 5, Madrid 1747, appendix 6, pp. 508-09.

² On the sources and literary texts on Saint Ildephonsus and their dissemination across Europe, see J. Snow, 'Esbozo de la figura de San Ildefonso de Toledo (607-667), a través de mil años de literatura Española', in *Anales Toledanos*, 1984; A. Custodio Vega, *De patrología española: San Ildefonso de Toledo, sus biografías y sus biógrafos. Y sus Varones Illustre*, B.R.A.H., 1969 pp. 35-107; F. Esteve Barba, *San Ildefonso de Toledo, el capellán de la Virgen*, Madrid 1941.

³ One of the most comprehensive studies on the use of metals as a painting's support in American vicerealties is: C. Bargellini, 'La pintura sobre lámina de cobre en los virreinos de la Nueva España y del Perú', in *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, no. 74-75, 1999.

⁴ R. López Torrijos, 'La iconografía de San Ildefonso desde sus orígenes hasta el siglo XVIII', in *Cuadernos de arte e iconografía*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1988, pp. 165-212.