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Unidentified artist
(Mexico, 17th century)

Saint Michael the Archangel

c. 1600

oil on canvas

130 x 90 cm.; 51 1/8 x 35 3/8 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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The iconography of Saint Michael the Archangel has been one of the most widespread devotional images in the Christian world since the Medieval period, and is still popular today. Devotion that has translated into a significant number of visual and literary sources on which the painting we are examining here undoubtedly draws:

“And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels. And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.”¹

In accordance with the Biblical story, the Archangel is depicted as a Roman soldier, full-length, standing up and slightly turned to the side. Slim and elegant, the celestial warrior displays the pictorial magnificence of Italian Mannerism, which undoubtedly influenced the original Marten de Vos (1532-1603) painting on which the work we are studying here was based, and which our painter may have been able to appreciate *in situ* (fig. 1).²

In accordance, once more, with the literary and pictorial references, the Archangel is depicted as a beardless young man, with a snow-white pubescent face. His pink-blushed cheeks share center-stage with two little almond-shaped black eyes that imbue his face with great expressivity, and where our gaze is also drawn to the fine, stylized nose and thin mouth with tightly-closed red lips. His head is crowned by short, golden, curly hair over which a round splendor opens out, white at the bottom and blue at the top edge, with thin whitish rays of light.

Casting our eyes over the body of the warrior, we observe his triumphant posture, pointing his right hand towards the heavens while, in a diametrically opposing position, his other hand signals towards the ground, while holding the palm of victory.

Fundamentally respecting the chromatic code reserved and required for the graphic representation of this member of the Catholic body of saints, the Archangel Michael is depicted dressed in a blue cuirass, adorned all over its surface with gold stars, accompanied by a sun

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and moon on his pectorals, the former on the right one, the latter on the left. His armor is further embellished with ruffled orange-yellow sleeves that stick out from his undershirt, and an underskirt of the same colour.

A series of gold cherub heads, arranged like a belt across the pelvic region, give way to the overskirt, made up of thin hanging parallel strips, the same colour as the cuirass, in between which we can make out the underskirt beneath.

Contrasting with the cuirass, which is tight against the body, and yet respecting the rules of decorum set out at Trent, we observe the skirt and cape, both of a light material, caught up in a sort of dance led by the wind, thereby providing the element of movement required by the composition.

Under the Archangel's feet lies the devil, depicted as a young, winged man with a snakelike tail hiding a muscly torso under his arms, crossed over his breast.

Finally, and to conclude the descriptive aspect of the composition, it is worth highlighting that the Archangel is presented with his wings open, in battle stance, framed within a host of fluffy, blue-white clouds against which nine little cherub heads are seen floating, arranged like an arch over the guardian of the heavens, the same arrangement we find in the Marten de Vos canvas and which, however, does not strictly adhere to the model that Samuel van Hoogstraten engraved in 1575, and which Hieronymus Wierix reproduced in 1584.³ To this compositional variation in the design of the background of the scene we may also add the execution of the drawing of the tail of the beast, which is pictured curled up on itself in the iconographical model de Vos sent to Mexico, and which our artist reproduces without any modification. The prints by the Flemish engravers, on the other hand, present the devil with its tail coiled outwards in a single curl. In addition, the position of the Archangel's left hand, which in both the Marten de Vos version and the one we are addressing here is seen with the wrist bending outwards, supports this hypothetical link between the two, as the iconographical model popularized through the varying prints depicts the hand without that outward bending of the wrist.

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This comparative analysis helps us to confirm that, although both models (the pictorial one and the engraving) exerted an influence on viceregal iconographies,⁴ it was the canvas signed in 1581 by Marten de Vos that our anonymous painter saw, and on which he based the work we have before us here. Although the painting's aesthetic already indicated as much, confirmation of this direct influence leaves us no option but to posit the Novohispanic origin of this beautiful canvas of *Saint Michael the Archangel*, which bears a surprising resemblance to a painting bearing the same title housed at the Museo Catedralicio in Burgo de Osma (fig. 2). In the 1980s, said museum took receipt of a canvas from the parish church of La Cuesta, in the Spanish province of Soria. This large-scale painting which was, according to Enric Olivares Torres, one of "most important versions"⁵ existing in Spain, reproduces the same compositional features, executed in exactly the same way, as de Vos's Mexican canvas. Furthermore, although it presents slight variations in technical quality, heightened by the Soria painting's superior state of conservation, the execution of the drawing and the colour would appear to indicate the hand of one single painter (not yet identified) behind both the La Cuesta *Saint Michael* and the work we are presenting here. In 2013, the Spanish journalist Ángel Almazán published research⁶ on the influence of the de Vos *Saint Michael* on the painting preserved in the cathedral museum, and although he was not able to uncover the authorship of the canvas, he was able, thanks to the documentary examination of the La Cuesta parish records, to trace out a hypothesis suggesting the Novohispanic origin of the enormous *Saint Michael*. According to the journalist, it was Baltasar del Río, an *indiano* (native Spaniards who made their fortune in the Americas) resident in Mexico who, having been struck by the de Vos *Saint Michael* from the Cuautitlán altarpiece, commissioned the painting of a copy to be donated to the parish church of Nuestra Señora de los Valles in La Cuesta, where he was born. The dynamic of patronage and the ornamentation of churches at patrons' birthplaces was a common occurrence among Spanish émigrés to the Americas in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Furthermore, it would also seem fairly likely that, carried away by the beauty and symbolic overtones of the *Saint Michael*, he would not have been content with just commissioning the work intended for the church in Soria, but would also have commissioned the same painter to undertake a second canvas (ours) of a smaller size, for his own personal worship.

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The dissemination of this iconographical model was prominent on both sides of the Atlantic, with it also being worth highlighting the painting of Saint Michael preserved at the monastery of Yuso, in the town of San Millán de la Cogolla, in Spain's Rioja region. A version that is once again faithful to the pictorial model of Cuautitlán, bearing witness to the esteem in which both the Novohispanic and Spanish clientele held De Vos's work, and, in addition, the trend of trans-oceanic patronage mentioned earlier given, as the numerous avenues of research embarked on to date have shown, the Rioja region maintained extremely close trade and art links with the overseas territories.

In conclusion, I would like readers to reflect, and even to engage in their own investigations, on the debt that history of art scholarship owes to the works of artistic expression that emerged from the American viceroyalties during the centuries of the conquest. The marked Eurocentrism that has characterized the vast majority of art historians, carried away by an evolutionary and treatise-oriented vision of art, has relegated and mistreated viceregal art, leaving said school bereft of scientific studies, and thereby condemning countless great artists to anonymity, artists who, like the one we are addressing here with this *Saint Michael*, are crying out for us to respect them and rescue them from oblivion.

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Figure 1. Marten de Vos (1532-1603), *Saint Michael the Archangel*. Cathedral of Cuautitlán, Mexico



Figure 2. Unidentified artist, Mexico, c. 1600, *Saint Michael the Archangel*. Museo Catedralicio, Burgo de Osma, Spain

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Footnotes

¹ Book of Revelation 12: 7-12.

² Three of the paintings sent by Marten de Vos to New Spain (Mexico) are to be found in the major altarpiece of the Cathedral of Cuautitlán (*Saint Peter, Saint Paul and the Archangel Michael*), while *Tobias and the Angel* is housed in Mexico Cathedral and *Saint John Writing the Book of Revelation* is preserved at the Museo Nacional del Virreinato.

³ In addition to them, other engravers such Johannes Berwinckel and Johannes Hogenberg made copies of the iconographical model conceived of by Marten de Vos, thereby contributing to its dissemination throughout the new and old worlds.

⁴ The Anonymous *Saint Michael the Archangel* preserved at the church of San Pedro in Lima, Peru, demonstrates that the Flemish prints based on Marten de Vos's *Saint Michael* also reached American soil.

⁵ E. Olivares Torres, 'Imágenes y significados del demonio serpentiforme en el tipo iconográfico de San Miguel combatiente', *IMAGO. Revista de Emblemática y Cultura Visual*, 2015, no. 4, pp. 31-48.

⁶ Á. Almazán, 'San Miguel-Lucifer en dos cuadros derivados de Martín de Vos en la catedral del Burgo de Osma', *El Burgo de Osma* (blog), December 29, 2013, <https://burgodeosma.wordpress.com/2013/12/29/san-miguel-lucifer-en-dos-cuadros-derivados-de-martin-de-vos-en-la-catedral-del-burgo-de-osma/>