

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(New Spain (Mexico), 17th century)

Tota Pulchra
c. 1650 - 1700

oil on copper
23 x 17 cm.; 9 x 6.6 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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The image we see depicted in this detailed if small copper is a *Tota Pulchra*, an early iconographic forerunner of the Immaculate Conception. This apologetic representation, conceived of as a clear symbolic and visual narrative, became widespread in Europe in the early 16th century, born of the need to find a definitive formula by which to universalize the purity of the Virgin.¹

With the apocryphal medieval iconographies upholding Marian privilege (the *Embrace at the Golden Gate*, the *St. Anne Trinity* or *The Tree of Jesse*) rejected by most of the Catholic Church, they came up with a sort of conceptual jigsaw puzzle: the definitive representation of the combined exegesis of Mary and three, now Biblical, figures: the wife from the Song of Songs, the Woman of the Apocalypse and Mary as a new Eve.²

The depiction of, and veneration for, this Marian image in the New World almost exactly coincided with its spreading across the Spanish Peninsula, given it provided the altar/throne binomial with the perfect catalyst for the evangelical project. As such, and though its iconic composition reached the Viceroyalty already perfectly well-defined, its development subsequently combined the more traditional elements with the inclusion of new or modernizing aspects that would allow the iconographic image to survive well into the 17th century, existing alongside new versions representing the Immaculate Conception which, by that time, had monopolized the Virginal repertory on the Old Continent.

In line with the most archaic versions of *Tota pulchra*, our work presents an allegorical composition in the middle of which, and in the foreground, we find the figure of the Virgin facing the spectator, arranged, as the iconography demands, on a crescent moon, her hands clasped together over her breasts in prayer, and dressed in a crimson robe and blue cloak. Her snow-white face, with its fine features and pink cheeks, is slightly tilted towards her right shoulder, while she looks towards the heavens where, in an act of benediction, God the Father is waiting for her. Painted half-length, bearded and white-haired, He appears with the dove, archetype of purity and simplicity, and symbolic representation par excellence of the Holy Spirit. From the heavens they both gaze down on the Virgin, *clothed in the sun*.

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Complying once more with the demands of this iconographic model, the Virgin is depicted surrounded by symbols, the origin of which are to be found in a range of Medieval litanies, which served to inform the faithful of the main Marian qualities. Our work is indicative of a second phase in the composition of this iconography, which took shape in New World painting in the 17th century, whereby the phylacteries disappeared, and the number of litanies increased.³ The latter, in the case of the work we are addressing here, were included as part of the composition, recreating a physical space between sky and earth. As such, and moving from left to right and top to bottom, we find the following Marian symbols: the morning star the sun, the gate of heaven, the palm tree, roses, the city of God, the cedar tree, madonna lilies, the tower of ivory, the fountain of wisdom, the closed garden, the tower of David, the beast of the apocalypse, the olive tree, the city of the great king, the well, the tree (of Jesse), the cypress tree and the untarnished mirror.

Despite characteristics in the execution of the compositional iconography that might lead us to date the work to mid-17th-century New Spain, the technique and pictorial support feature elements that cast doubt on said assertion. The choice of sheet copper was extremely common among Mexican painters for small-scale, generally rectangular, works, as it allowed (as we can see in the piece before us here) for extremely subtle effects in both colour and the execution of detail.⁴ As such, and focusing on the drawing, we can intuit, from the delicacy of the figures as well as the treatment of the skyscape and the clouds, the brush of an artist who must have been familiar with the work of the Mexican Antonio Espinosa, from whom he also drew inspiration when it came to light and colour.

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Litanies

- 1- Morning Star
- 2- Sun
- 3- Gate of Heaven
- 4- Palm Tree
- 5- Roses
- 6- City of God
- 7- Cedar Tree
- 8- Madonna Lilies
- 9- Tower of Ivory
- 10- Fountain of Wisdom
- 11- Closed Garden
- 12- Tower of David
- 13- Beast of The Apocalypse
- 14- Olive Tree
- 15- City of The Great King
- 16- Well
- 17- The Tree (of Jesse)
- 18- Cypress Tree
- 19- Untarnished Mirror

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Footnotes

¹ On the iconographic origins of the Immaculate Conception and its implementation in the American continent, see S. Stratton, *La Inmaculada Concepción en el Arte Español*, Madrid 1989; I. Martínez, 'Estandarte de la monarquía española. El uso político de la Inmaculada Concepción', in *Un privilegio Sagrado: La Concepción de María Inmaculada. La celebración del dogma en México*, Mexico 2005; and S. Domenech García, *La imagen de la Mujer del Apocalipsis en Nueva España y sus implicaciones culturales*, (Doctoral Thesis), Valencia 2013.

² S. Domenech García, *La recepción de la tradición hispánica de la Inmaculada Concepción en Nueva España: el tipo iconográfico de la Tota Pulchra*, no. 3, Mexico 2015, p. 277.

³ S. Domenech García, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

⁴ On the use of copper as a painting support in Nueva España, see 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*, vol. 21, no. 75, Mexico 1999.