

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Josef Villanueva

(Potosí, active first half of the 18th century)

Portrait of Our Lady of El Cortijo

1737

oil on canvas

signed and dated: *Josef Villanueva â
16 de Enero de 1737*

inscribed: *R. de N^{sa} del Cortijo de la
Villa de Soto de los Cameros Obpdo.
de Calorra Cop^{do}. de su original â
devocion de Dⁿ Antonio de Benito
y Vallejo Natural de dicha Villa por
Josef Villanueva â 16 de Enero de 1737.*
53 x 38 cm.; 20.8 x 15 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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Several miracles are attributed to Our Lady of El Cortijo: The *Miracle of José González Torecilla*, whom she saved from a charging bull, the animal transfixed while in charging position, the *Miracle Cure of Don Inocente Romer*, to whom Our Lady returns his sanity, the *Healing of Little Girl Ambrosia*, who suffers rickets and is unable to walk on her own and, finally, she is also attributed with *The End of Cholera in 1855*.¹

Although the canvas whose origin we are trying to elucidate in these few lines is the only work known by the hand of its author, we can place it within the historical-artistic framework of the school of Potosí in the 18th century. More precisely, the date of production, as the cartouche indicates, was 16 January 1737.

Villanueva's representation of the High Altar includes a niche within which the Crowned Virgin appears in bright, starry splendor. Standing on a half-moon symbolizing female divinity and fertility, she is presented at the center of the composition, facing forward and cradling the Holy Child in her left arm and holding a candle in her right hand. She is wearing an elaborate robe, decorated with gold brocade, and two angels hold her bright splendor. Decorations with plant motifs with brilliant gilt motifs superimposed upon them present a peculiar aesthetic effect characteristic of paintings from Cuzco, Quito, Potosí and New Spain.

We find several decorative architectural elements that rise up towards the vault, where we observe a group of peering cherubs, lit by a glowing starfish, an allegory of intervention for the human race. Above these cherubs, the following cartouche: *Quae est Ysta Que pro greditur Quasi Aurora con surgens*, together with the cartouches of the Sun: *Elefra ut Sol*, and the Moon: *Pulchra ut Luna*, located on the top left and top right-hand corners of the composition respectively, form an extract of the Panegyric prayer of the founder of the Ursuline order, St. Angela Merici. These beautiful fragments can be interpreted as: *What is that which looks like a crescent sunrise? Beautiful as the Moon and Brilliant as the Sun*. Integrated into the scene, almost merging with the base on which the Virgin is standing, is the coat of arms of Solar de Tejada, accompanied by the aforementioned cartouche, framed by golden rocaille.

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The frontal and flat execution of the painting may be linked to the work of the renowned and multifaceted Luis Niño who, besides being a painter, was also a skilled joiner, sculptor and metalworker. Our richly ornamented painting is the earliest record we have of the Josef Villanueva's oeuvre, a work that brings together many elements of Andean imagery, some of which are also present in the magnificent *Mestizo* stone-carved façade of the church of San Lorenzo, attributed by some scholars to Luis Niño (fig. 1), and which may have served Villanueva as a source of inspiration for this painting.

An example of this is Our Lady of Candelaria, which belongs to the Chapel of San Roque, and is currently preserved in the Museo de la Casa de la Moneda (Mint Museum). Some of the elements and features mentioned are also present in an early canvas attributed to him, dated 1722, which represents Our Lady of Fuencisla (fig. 2).

Finally, although irrelevant to establishing the origin of the canvas, we will return to the aforementioned topic of the coat of arms. The use of heraldry in a composition may refer not just to a single person but, by extension, to members of their family. Family understood not only as those who are biologically related to the holder of the coat of arms, but also people in a relationship of service or patronage with him. It is as such that we cannot claim the person who commissioned this work was directly related to the descendants of Don Sancho Fernández de Tejada. What we can do, however, is place them within the family circle since, as José Luis Sampedro Escolar mentions,² using this emblem served not only to maintain their bonds of lineage, but was useful at Court, in Extremadura, in Andalusia and in the Americas, as a means of presentation and a guarantee of their serious nature to fellow compatriot traders and officials as well as society at large, with whom they would trade and deal on legal and administrative matters. This leads us to believe that, although we don't know other works by Villanueva, he must have carried out his activity as a painter among figures of considerable renown and purchasing power.

Having analyzed our painting in terms of form and style, we may now appreciate the features it has in common with the other pieces we have addressed that served as comparative models, and which reflect the rich Andean and Meso-American imagery. In accordance with what see

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have discussed thus far, I will conclude by highlighting the importance of the painting we have before us here, which constitutes a significant contribution to the field, and whose author may have been a local painter linked to Luis Niño, as it clearly reflects the latter's influence.

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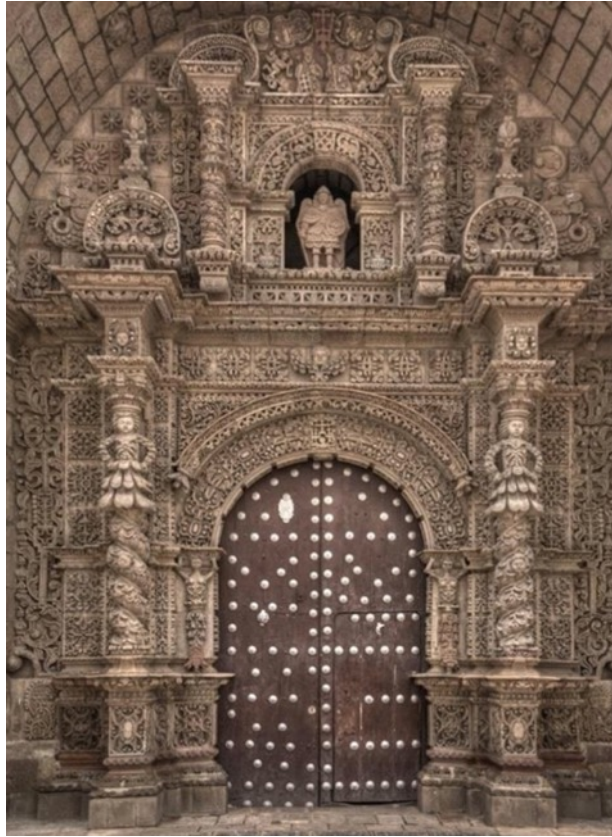


Figure 1. Attributed to Luis Niño, *Mestizo* facade of the Church of St. Lawrence, in Potosí, Bolivia

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Figure 2. Luis Niño, *Our Lady of Fuencisla*, 1722. Museo Nacional de Arte in La Paz, Bolivia

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Footnotes

¹ S. Domínguez, *La Virgen del Cortijo, Episodios Históricos de soto de cameros, donde se venera esta imagen*, Logroño 1888, pp. 35-91.

² J. L. Sampedro Escolar, 'Escudos de Linajes, no de apellidos', in *De sellos y blasones*, Madrid 2012, pp. 389-396.