

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Francisco de Morales
(Mexico, 17th – 18th century)

Our Lady of Valvanera

c. 1700

oil on canvas

signed: *D. Francisco de Morales fessi*

165 x 108 cm.; 65 x 42.5 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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“(…) It is largely to the children of La Rioja, who have been arriving in this area ever since the remote days of the Conquest, that we owe the devotion to Our Lady of Valvanera. It was they who sowed the seeds of this sweet Marian title; they brought fire in their hearts, and soon the sparks were given off to light the flames of this marvelous delight”¹

These were the words of Father Eugenio Ayape, a Colombian Augustinian friar, when referring to the widespread popularity of devotion to Our Lady of Valvanera beyond the geographic limitations of its origins. Although the subject of the image of Our Lady of Valvanera was particularly deeply-rooted in that area, with the iconography originating in the Rioja region, it is also true that the countless individuals who at one time travelled to the Americas facilitated the dissemination of its devotion throughout the Spanish Crown’s overseas territories.

It is also possible the devotion Queen Isabella I professed to this unique Marian image also served as a pretext to fuel the more epic versions of its historiography. So much so that literary figures such as José Ortega y Munilla and the Count of Foxá referred to Our Lady as the “discoverer of the New World”. But if such versions are founded more on local pride than documentary evidence, they do give a glimpse of the extent and intensity of veneration for Our Lady in the Americas, which translated into an extensive repertory of artistic expressions that have survived to this day in the form of paintings such as the one before us here, whose iconographic and devotional origins we turn to now.

According to legend, the Valvanera carving, venerated in the shrine that bears its name in the Sierra de la Demanda mountains, was sculpted by St. Luke and transported to Spain by two followers of St. Paul, Onefimus and Hierotheus. Tradition also tells us that once in the mountains of La Rioja, they built a little chapel for the carving, where it was worshiped until the Muslim invasion, when it had to be hidden to ensure its safety. It was at this point the miraculous event occurred that would shape its iconography, first as a sculpture and then in painting. Legend has it that, faced with imminent danger, a hermit named Arturo decided to hide the Valvanera carving in the hollow of an oak tree, which miraculously closed up behind it. Centuries later, when the Rioja region had been reconquered by the Christians, the second miracle took place, whereby the carving appeared to a criminal by the name of Nuño Oñez.

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Just as he was about to rob a peasant, Nuño saw his victim piously invoke the Virgin, prompting the erstwhile thief to turn his back on a life of crime and live as a penitent. He and a companion named Domingo withdrew to a cave where the apparition of the Virgin told him where the famous carving was concealed. Following Mary's instructions, he found the most prominent oak tree, surrounded by beehive panels and its roots bathed by a spring. Once there, Nuño watched as the bark of the tree opened up, revealing the mysterious effigy of Our Lady of Valvanera.

This is the scene we see depicted in the Romanesque carving which, probably since the outset, has been venerated in the Sierra de la Demanda shrine. In addition, although with the formal adaptations demanded by its pictorial format, this is also the version we see depicted in the canvas we are presenting here, whose authorship we must attribute to D. Francisco de Morales, as indicated by the legible signature at the bottom of the middle of the work: "*D. Francisco de Morales fessit*".

We know little about this painter, perhaps a *criollo*, perhaps an immigrant from the Iberian Peninsula who, like so many during this period, set sail for the New World in search of new and better work opportunities. By his hand, or by that of some merchant for whom the Atlantic was a source of abundance or, even, in the charge of one of the many natives of the Rioja region who believed Our Lady of Valvanera had protective and patriotic powers, the print on which the composition of this magnificent and impressive canvas draws inspiration must have reached the Americas.

In 1994, María de los Ángeles de las Heras y Núñez undertook a study of the engraving and iconography of Our Lady of Valvanera in an article published by Ephialte (De Las Heras y Nuñez, M.A., 1994 pp. 287-293). Said article includes the print which, first published in 1638, is considered Valvanera's iconographic prototype. Respecting the basic model of this original iconography is the anonymous print published in 1657 under the title *Verdadero Retrato de N^a S^a de Valvanera (True Portrait of Our Lady of Valvanera)*, whose innovative details, such as the bees and heraldic motifs, were reproduced by the chalcographer I. Seguenot's print, undoubtedly a source of inspiration for our canvas (fig. 1).

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As such, and adhering to the original sculptural model, we see the Virgin depicted face-on, sat on a folding chair crowned, at the artist's choice, by two eagle's heads visible behind Mary's cloak, constituting a departure from the normal model in which there is only one bird of prey's head. The oval snow-white face of the Mother of God is covered by a head-dress secured at her neck, framing her face and including *rostrillo* edging and frontal. On top of this, the Virgin is seen wearing an imperial crown, gilded and sumptuously adorned. Mary's traditional colors have been respected, red for her robe and blue for her cloak. Both garments are lavishly decorated using *brocatería*, or brocade effect, a stylistic trademark of New Spain and the Peruvian Viceroyalty, and particularly painstaking on this occasion. Both fabrics feature an abundance of meticulous phytomorphic gilt motifs with a proliferation of scrolls and acanthus leaves arranged symmetrically over their entire surface. The cloak, with its rich *fattura*, is secured at the Virgin's neck by a pearl border with a large brooch in the middle. Mary's hands are seen protruding from her two ample sleeves. Her left hand is holding a flower, while her right hand supports the Christ Child, also crowned, who is leaning into the crux of her arm while issuing a benediction. Although its color scheme is different, Jesus' clothing matches that of his Mother, and shares in its opulence. Most noticeable about Christ's portrayal is the forced pose of his torso, violently twisted from the waist up. According to tradition, this odd posture is due to the Child's refusal to witness the sacrilege that a pair of newly-weds were about to commit, as they prepared to consummate their marriage in the House of God, on the epistle side of the altar. The Christ Child, so as not to see them, turned his head violently to one side, which explains the words on the book he is holding, which read: "*Bolvio el rostro X^o P por no ver ū sacrilegio*" (*He turned his head so He would not see sacrilege*)

As tended to be the case in pictorial depictions of Our Lady of Valvanera, and those executed in the 17th century in particular, the image stands on top of a tiered six-sided pedestal, the front of which features a tower flanked by two eagles, replacing the normal inclusion of heraldic lions. We find the same elements on the quarterly shield in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas. According to legend, the carving of the Virgin and Child emerged from the hollow of a leafy oak tree that was protecting it. Helping us to date the *fattura* of the work, we also see a number of bees come out, fluttering around the Marian image.

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The extensive travels of La Rioja natives in both directions across the Atlantic, which gave rise to a large number of recorded churches and fraternities dedicated to Our Lady of Valvanera throughout the Viceroyalties including, for instance, the chapel and fraternity in Lima's San Agustín church, invite us to posit that behind this beautiful canvas was a Rioja-born *indiano* (successful émigré) who, in a combined act of romanticism, faith and attachment to his roots, commissioned this work eternalizing the image of his patron saint through the brush of a talented painter whose identity we have yet to discover.

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Figure 1. I. Seguenot, *Our Lady of Valvanera*, 1679, chalcographic print, published in *Historia de la Imagen Sagrada de María Santísima de Valvanera*

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Footnotes

¹ F. Labarga, 2014, p. 81.