

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(Viceroyalty of Peru, 18<sup>th</sup> century)

*The Blessed Soul and the  
Damned Soul*

oil on canvas

57.3 x 69.3 cm.; 22.5 x 27.2 in.

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Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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LONDON

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The pictorial representation of the intangible has posed a great challenge for the artists of each generation since antiquity. In this regard, the portrayal of the soul gradually took shape through a range of models until a stereotype was established.

The complex imaginary prefiguration of what occurs after death began to coalesce artistically as early as the medieval period due to its profoundly religious aspect. Depictions tended to include what were known as the “four last things”, which were the stages awaiting mankind at the end of his life: death, judgment, heaven and hell. On certain occasions, as seen here, these were reduced to two: heaven and hell, these being the two potential final destinations of the soul after death.

With the sole purpose of further accentuating the believer’s faith, the representation of heaven and hell was humanized, taking the form of the blessed soul (the embodiment of bliss, in an attitude of peace and serenity), and the damned soul (personification of pain and suffering amidst the flames of hell). The blessed soul is generally associated with a woman, in possession of a sort of mystic aura, accentuated by her gaze towards heaven, expressing peace. Her antithesis, meanwhile, is reflected in the damned soul, in the throes of agony and despair, in a final attempt to escape hell.

The rise in depictions of this kind came about following the Council of Trent (1545-1563), where the existence of purgatory was recognized, being the state reserved for those who, having died in God’s grace, needed further purification before entering heaven. The Jesuit Order also contributed to the dissemination of this notion of different fates or conditions of the soul during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, through devotional books with written tales accompanied by prints that served to consolidate the iconography figuratively. We know of examples from around 1600 by Flemish engravers such as Pieter de Jode I and Karel van Mallery alluding to the four fates of the soul, which subsequently inspired contemporary works by artists such as the Italian sculptor Giovanni Bernardino Azzolino, and his wax models belonging to London’s Victoria & Albert Museum. Major geniuses of the art world, such as Gian Lorenzo Bernini, also dared to tackle this subject matter, as demonstrated by his famous sculptural pair, *Anima beata* and *Anima dannata*, executed in 1619, and preserved today at the Spanish Embassy

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in the Holy See.<sup>1</sup> Pictorially, other artists also portrayed these fates of the soul in accordance with preestablished engraved models, as in the case of Francisco Ribalta who, in about 1610, executed a pair of paintings as devotional works intended for the king's oratory in the Palace of Aranjuez, currently preserved in the Prado Museum's collection in Madrid.

The influence of the "four last things" also crossed the Atlantic, leaving its mark on viceregal art. One example of this is the German engraver Alexander Mair, whose prints on the four fates of the soul, executed in 1605, made the trip to the New World, where they were used as references by various indigenous artists in their iconographic models (fig. 1). Prominent among such figures was Quito's Manuel Chili, "Caspicara", the author of an extremely interesting ensemble of sculptures belonging to Hispanic Society of America (New York), personifying death, judgment, heaven and hell, dated to a much later period, around 1775 (fig. 2).

The work we have before us here summarizes all of the above, to the point of clearly and directly synthesizing the real sense of the iconography. The glory of heaven, symbolized by the blessed soul, depicts a young, blonde woman, crowned with flowers and presenting a delicate, virginal appearance, giving off tranquility in warm and celestial surroundings. Hell, on other hand, with its roaring flames, presents the figure of a grotesque man, crazed and tormented, surrounded by two large-mouthed creatures, natives of the underworld, who further increase the sense of unease. Our attention is also drawn to the differences in the skin complexion of the two subjects, with the pearly white tone of the woman contrasting with the dark hue of the condemned man, whose facial features are intentionally reminiscent of those of an indigenous native, perhaps to serve as a warning to his peers of the danger and suffering awaiting those destined to end up in hell.

We can therefore observe how interest for depictions of this kind carried on in the Americas until well into the 18th century, in large part thanks to the dogmatic spirit of these works, perfect for the purposes of evangelizing new believers, and for reinforcing the beliefs of those who had already converted to the Christian faith.

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**Figure 1.** Alexander Mair, *Four Fates of the Soul: Death, Soul in Heaven, Soul in Purgatory, Soul in Hell*, 1605. British Museum, London



**Figure 2.** Manuel Chili "Caspicara". *A Skeleton, The Blessed Soul, the Soul in Purgatory, the Condemned Soul*, c. 1775. Hispanic Society of America, New York

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> See E. Leuschner, 'The role of prints in the artistic genealogy of Bernini's Anima beata and Anima Damnata', in *Print Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2016, pp. 135-146.