

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist  
(Ayacucho (Peru), 17th century)

## *Saint Michael the Archangel*

carved Huamanga stone, encaustic  
polychrome, gold leaf estofado  
64 x 36 x 18 cm.;  
25 1/4 x 14 1/8 x 7 1/8 in.

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### Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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Huamanga stone, which enjoyed pride of place in ecclesiastical interiors, was not solely used for religious imagery, but also for the construction and decoration of religious buildings, in addition to serving as a support for oil paintings. Secular patronage popularized its use, with commissions for small-scale sculptures for private chapels intended for domestic worship.

Sculptures made of Huamanga stone were executed using two basic methods, one involving free-standing or *ronde-bosse* images, either individually or forming groups, and the other, the so-called "*de arrimo*", which is the one used for the Saint Michael we are presenting here, which were sculptures in high relief with flat backs and profusely carved fronts. This is the older of the two methods, with this type of relief work practiced in the city of Huamanga<sup>1</sup> since the earliest times, being somewhat reminiscent of wooden altarpieces from churches.

This piece, which is extraordinary in terms of its quality and enormous size, was without doubt created in the city of Huamanga, in the province of Ayacucho, which is the origin of this material known as "Peruvian alabaster"<sup>2</sup> due to its malleability and translucent qualities. The model draws inspiration from a 1581 painting by Maerten de Vos (Antwerp, 1532-1603), which engravers such as Hieronymus Wierix (Antwerp, 1553-1619) (fig. 1) would subsequently recreate in prints that were exported to the Americas,<sup>3</sup> thereby inspiring local artists. De Vos depicted Saint Michael as an athletic young man of hermaphroditic appearance. His clothing resembles that of a Roman emperor, dressed in all his military finery, with an anatomical cuirass, tunic and paludamentum cloak. His breastplate features the sun, moon and stars, as Saint Michael was said to rule the universe. In adherence to the established norms of the day, the Archangel is depicted with curly blond hair and a pair of magnificent eagle's wings. Although the style of the image is noticeably *mestizo*, one can discern European influences, and the ornamentation is characterized by Western elements such as the military cuirass referring to Michael's role as leader of the heavenly hosts. The Archangel's wings are unfurled in a gesture of protection for believers, and his shield bears the inscription *Quis Ut Deus* (Who is like unto God). His elaborate helmet is adorned with feathers, and he brandishes a flaming sword. Regarding his clothing, it is worth noting the short skirt, boots and marvelous cloak, featuring ample folds and decorated in brocade effect with golden flowers. The rich palette of

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colours used on the sculpture also catches the eye, as well as the application of gilt elements or *brocateado* (brocade effect) over a good part of the work. The devil is portrayed at Michael's feet, in the form of a serpent with a human head and arms.

It is extremely interesting to note that in 17th and 18th century documents, such figures depicting Saint Michael and executed in Huamanga stone are described in cases of witchcraft on the altars of sorcerers. During the Counter-Reformation (1545-1648), this form of iconography spread successfully throughout Europe and the New World as a champion for the cause of the Christian faith. Depictions of archangels referred to natural phenomena, stars and planets, and as such they were more easily accepted by the indigenous native world. Michael's name appears in the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation as the "great prince" who defends God's people from the Antichrist, and as the head of the heavenly host that threw Satan and his rebel angels down to earth when they rebelled against the Incarnation of Christ.

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**Figure 1.** Hieronymus Wierix, *The Archangel Michael and the Dragon*, 1584, engraving

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> J. Antonio de Lavalle & W. Lang, *Arte y Tesoros del Perú*, Lima 1980, pp. 9 – 33.

<sup>2</sup> J. Antonio de Lavalle & W. Lang, *Arte y Tesoros del Perú*, Lima 1980, pp. 9 – 33.

<sup>3</sup> N. Majluf & L. Eduardo Wuffarden, *La piedra de Huamanga, lo sagrado y lo profane*, Lima 1998, 42.