

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(Titicaca (Viceroyalty of Peru),
first half of the 18th century)

Our Lady of Copacabana

oil on canvas attached to
a wooden panel

36.5 x 30 cm.; 14.3 x 11.8 in.

Provenance

Private Collection.

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The work we have before us here is a beautiful portrait of the most famous *mestizo* Virginal advocacy in the Peruvian Viceroyalty, and one of the most popular ones throughout South America, *Our Lady of Copacabana*.¹

Worship of Our Lady was started in 1584, in the town of Copacabana, on the shores of Lake Titicaca in the remains of an old Incan temple, by Francisco Tito Yupanqui, an indigenous Bolivian and devotee of the Virgin.² From that point on, her image was repeatedly reproduced thanks to the paradigmatic process of religious syncretism which, through efforts using art to reconvert and superimpose, successfully incorporated pre-existing myths and beliefs into the models set out by the Catholic Counter Reformation.

Following her initial exaltation, the popularity of *Our Lady of Copacabana* spread both inside the American continent and beyond, thanks to the numerous miracles associated with her image. Strategically disseminated by the most efficient means available at the time, the superstitious aura enveloping the image of the Virgin gave rise to an enormous artistic repertoire filling the walls of houses, palaces and churches with paintings and sculptures.

Looking at the way the iconography of this revered Marian figure evolved, we see how depictions of her, following a process involving the devotional redefining of Pre-Hispanic icons, were no more than an adaptation of the *Virgin of Candelaria*, to which her own attributes and meanings were ascribed.

As such, Our Lady appears enthroned within a structure simulating silver, supported on four Solomonic columns over which there is a keel arch pediment. This is topped by a semi-circular crown with phytomorphic decorations, presided over by a scallop shape of the same *fattura* as two others located on the top corners of the pediment. This odd way of arranging the Virgin, within a throne structure made to look like silver, is evidence of the influence of Luis Niño, a multi-faceted Bolivian artist who was particularly skilled at depicting silver objects (fig. 1).³ On the throne we see Our Lady, elegantly dressed in a bell-shaped cloak, clearly a syncretic allusion to Pachamama. The Virgin's robe is presented as a sort of *horror vacui*, replete with embroidery, pearly decorations, precious stones and lavish ornate giltwork, with the same

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appearance and elegance as the imperial crown sitting above her mystical oval face. The Infant Christ is cradled on her left arm, while her right hand holds a candle which, along with the four candlesticks arranged at the base of the throne, symbolize Marian purification, the origin of the advocacy resulting in this mestizo representation, the *Virgin of Candelaria*.

Outside the architectural structure of the throne, and on the left of the Virgin, we find Jesus Christ. Placed on a white cloud and depicted from the waist up, he is crossing his arms over his chest while holding a bunch of white Madonna lilies in his right hand, a symbol of Marian purity. Of particular note is the opulent and painstaking *brocatería* work to be seen in the Savior's clothing, presenting the same technique and appearance as is found in the religious figure depicted, half-length, on the right-hand side of the composition. Identified as a bishop in the act of praying, he wears a miter and reddish pallium, dark habit and crosier. This decorative technique, originating in Cuzco, steadily spread throughout the extensive regions of the Viceroyalty, becoming a hallmark that would also define the schools of Lima and La Paz. It is to the latter that the painting we are studying here belongs, in which can identify parallels with the work of the disciple of Pérez de Holguín, Gaspar de Berrio, a painter who was particularly generous in his application of brocade (fig. 2).⁴

Over both figures, floating in front of a sky-blue background, and about halfway up the work, we see two little winged angels, giving way to a pair of five-stemmed candelabra that further emphasize Mary's status as the true light of the world. Continuing towards the upper third of the composition we find, on the left-hand side and resting on a white cloud, St. Michael the Archangel. Dressed as a Roman soldier and opulently attired in garments rich in brocade, his left hand holds a shield while in his right hand he bears the knife with which he will defend the heavens. Opposite him, and also on a cloud, an angel is seen to be raising his right hand towards heaven, the same hand which is holding what we can identify as the sacred heart of Jesus. Finally, and as the last elements making up the composition, our eye is drawn to the two angels in red robes and gilt brocade resting on the top of the throne structure, both carrying bouquets of roses, the Marian symbol of love.

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Figure 1. Luis Niño, *Our Lady of the Rosary with Saints Dominic and Francis of Assisi*, 1737, oil on canvas. Museo de la Casa Nacional de Moneda, Potosí (Bolivia)

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Figure 2. Gaspar Miguel de Berrio, *Virgin surrounded by Saints*, 1730-1762. Museo Isaac Fernández Blanco, Buenos Aires (Argentina)

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Footnotes

¹ On the iconography of the Virgin of Copacabana in the art of the viceroyalty, see P. Querejazu, 'La Virgen de Copacabana', in *Revista Arte y Arqueología*, no. 7, 1981. For a more intellectual approach to the subject, see *Virgenes Sur Andinas. María, territorio y protección*, Chile 2015.

² Researchers José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert write about the legend of Tito Yupanqui in *Escultura Virreinal en Bolivia*, La Paz 1972.

³ On the influence of Luis Niño on Bolivian art, see P. Querejazu, 'Luis Niño, el Famoso desconocido', in *Revista de la Fundación Cultural del Banco central de Bolivia*, no. 7, April – June 1999.

⁴ In the absence of a monograph on this unknown painter, there are references to his life and work in I. Cruz, *Lo mayor en la Historia de la Pintura y Escultura en Chile*, Santiago 1984, and J. de Mesa & T. Gisbert, *Holguín y la pintura altoperuana del Virreinato*, La Paz 1956.