

# COLNAGHI

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Melchor Pérez de Holguín  
and workshop  
(Cochabamba 1660 – 1732 Potosí)

*Saint John the Evangelist*  
oil on canvas  
85 x 66 cm.; 33.4 x 26 in.

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Provenance

Private Collection, Australia.

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As occurs with the majority of Viceroyalty painters, the catalogue of Melchor Pérez de Holguín, probably the most important mestizo Baroque artist to have come out of latter-day Bolivia, lacks the biographical detail to flesh out his identity properly. The son of Diego Pérez de Holguín and Esperanza Flores, he led a tumultuous love life, fathering various children, and is known to have been born in Cochabamba (current capital of the province of Cercado, Bolivia) in 1660, while he is thought to have died in 1732 in Potosí, in the old Peruvian Viceroyalty (current capital of the province of Tomás Frías, Bolivia), where he spent most of his life and career.<sup>1</sup> Known as the Imperial City, Potosí was the most important metropolis not just in Peru, but in the entire Viceroyalty of the Americas. When Holguín arrived, this was the most populated city on the continent, with a population of around 160,000.

This, then, was the context in which Melchor Pérez Holguín lived and died, a painter whose physical image has survived thanks to the self-portrait he carried out as part of the Viceroy Morcillo painting, and whose works, of an unquestionable quality, combined with the merit of having pioneered a prolific artistic school, have earned him the title of cornerstone of Bolivian Viceroyalty painting. He gave rise to a flourishing school that would endure, through his disciples and followers, well into the 19th century and which, as he did, would have to reconcile artistic life with a credulous and miracle-believing Potosí immersed in a Baroque taste tormented by problems of a religious nature given, in the Andean 18th century, far from moving towards acceptance of new dogma, art was forced to survive in a syncretic environment that navigated the combined symbolism of old indigenous beliefs and the demands of Catholicism.

Beyond the syncretism inherent to Holguín's painting, it is crucial to examine the varying influences his highly valued and sought-after brush made its own.<sup>2</sup> To this end, we should consider the three influences (Italian, French and Flemish) with the greatest impact on Viceroyalty painting overall since its inception, and whose wake may still be seen when studying the painter we are addressing here. Firstly, we would draw the reader's attention to the mark of masters such as Bitti,<sup>3</sup> Pérez de Alesio<sup>4</sup> and Medoro,<sup>5</sup> Latin American representatives of Italian Mannerism, whose influence continued into the 18th century through a certain delicacy of execution and the predominance of line. Secondly, and leading the Baroque influence, is the work of the Seville painters of the 17th century, particularly Zurbarán,

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Murillo and Valdés Leal. Their work, in complete accord with the dogma and demands of the Counter Reformation, served to transmit values as an iconographic model. To this core issue we should add the force of Baroque form, the euphoria of its expression which, with scant resistance, invaded Viceroyalty workshops.

Finally, we should note the much-studied influence of European engravings as a key source of thematic inspiration.<sup>6</sup> Prominent here are the Flemish prints that probably provided the iconographic model Pérez de Holguín used for the depiction of this St. John the Evangelist (fig. 1).

His work has been linked to Zurbarán's circle, soaked in mysticism and ascetism, with great contrasts of light and shade, and even *"for its hardness, which is almost Caravaggesque"*.<sup>7</sup> These influences, brought over from Europe, with the prevailing chiaroscuro we can observe in the work we are addressing here, led Paul Guinard to claim in his book on Zurbarán that Holguín was the most important "Zurbaranist" in the New World.

Pérez de Holguín's stylistic character is noticeably personal, with a peculiar pictorial world. This was a highly complicated matter in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, due to the imposition of a pre-established tradition in which foreign elements were copied. As such, the author had three well-defined stylistic periods: in the first we see a prevalence of monks and ascetics; in the second, around 1708, his palette became more brilliant and he undertook large-scale compositions; and finally, around 1714, the artist softened, accentuating the flattening of his figures, this being the period to which the Evangelist series belong, particularly influenced by Flemish engravings.

Another element typical of our artist is the way he drew and composed his figures. His subjects are divided into two specific types. On the one hand, we have the ascetics, who present hard faces, although there are compositions, reminiscent of the one we are studying here, in which the figure is seen gazing at the sky with harder facial features (fig. 2). On the other hand, there are his depictions of mystical figures, who have softer features and a slight paleness we do not find in the first type. It is to this second group that our painting belongs, where we observe

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St. John with his head turned to the left of the composition, illuminated by a light that completely bathes his face, lending this depiction the “*greatest mystical expression that Holguín attained, along with St. John of God*”.<sup>8</sup>

One should also highlight the type of pictorial *maniera* seen in this artist, and which characterized him, identifiable in a marked contrast between the bright tones of the clothes, and other earthier hues, as seen in the background of the work we are studying here.

St. John the Evangelist, the youngest of the disciples and the one “Jesus loved”, appears surrounded by the symbols that represent him, making reference to the story narrated in Jacobus de Varagine’s *Golden Legend*, which tells of Emperor Domitian’s attempt at assassinating the apostle, something I will come back to in greater detail shortly.

As such, we find him in the middle of writing his own Gospel, represented by a book, and with a pen in his right hand. He is sat at a desk, gazing at the sky with his tome in one hand, as forms part of his iconography. He is dressed in a blueish robe, symbolizing his purity and virginity, although on occasions he may be depicted in white or green (fig. 3). On top of that he is wearing a red cloak as, though he did not die a martyr, in the words of Ribadeneira: “*it was not that he lacked the spirit for martyrdom, but rather that martyrdom lacked the spirit for St. John*”.<sup>9</sup> His attribute, the eagle, is seen perched on his right arm. This animal symbolizes the great spiritual content of his gospel, with a far more abstract form of language than the others. Furthermore, it is the only animal, according to the bestiary, that can look straight at the Sun, which would represent God. This sort of iconography was fairly common in our artist (fig. 4).

In the work before us here, we also observe another remarkable element: on top of the Gospel that John is writing a chalice has been knocked over, and from it a snake is emerging, which appears to be attacking the Saint’s attribute. This represents the story of the cup of Aristodemos. This priest handed St. John a poisoned chalice, which he had given to another two people just moments before, and who had died in the act. As such, the Saint took the cup, and having made the sign of the cross, drank the content without coming to any harm. He then

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covered the dead bodies with a cloak, bringing them back to life. He thereby fulfilled the prophecy that appears in the Gospel according to St. Matthew.<sup>10</sup>

To summarize the compositional content of the painting, it is worth highlighting the chiaroscuro that is accentuated in the lightness of the face compared with the elements in the background, along with the emphasizing of the creases or the features of the Saint's face, neck and hands. Also of note is the coloring we can observe in the clothes and chalice, which contrasts with the earthy tones of the background of the composition. All of the above should serve to reinforce the hypothesis of the creation of (at least) a fourth series of Evangelists born of Holguín's brush in the period relating to the last ten years of his life and, as such, of his artistic career, unanimously considered by scholars of the history of art of the Viceroyalty to represent the very best examples of his oeuvre.

The assertion that more works by Holguín exist is further borne out by the presence, in Madrid's Museo de América, of a canvas depicting *St. Luke* (fig. 5) from a yet unknown series.

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**Figure 1.** Cornelis Visscher, *St. John the Evangelist*, 1650, engraving

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**Figure 2.** Melchor Pérez de Holguín, *St. John of God*. Museo Nacional de Arte, La Paz (Bolivia)



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**Figure 3.** Melchor Pérez de Holguín, *St. John the Evangelist*. Museo Casa de la Moneda, Potosí

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**Figure 4.** Melchor Pérez de Holguín, *St. John the Evangelist*. Museo Nacional del Arte, La Paz (Bolivia)

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The biography of the Bolivian painter has been studied, essentially, by L. Zubieta Sagarnaga, *Un pintor de la época colonial Melchor Pérez de Holguín*, Potosí 1930; J. de Mesa & T. Gisbert, 'Un pintor colonial boliviano: Melchor Pérez de Holguín', in *Laboratorio de Arte*, 1952; *Holguín y la pintura altoperuana del virreinato*, La Paz 1956; *Holguín y la pintura virreinal*, La Paz 1977; *Melchor Pérez Holguín me fet, su tiempo, su obra, sus seguidores*, La Paz 1989; M. Chacón Torres, 'Documentos en torno a Pérez de Holguín', in *Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, no. 16, 1963; C. Aramayo Alcérreca, 'Melchor Pérez de Holguín el pintor altoperuano de la época colonial', in *La Prensa*; A. de Morales, 'Melchor Pérez de Holguín, primera noticia cierta sobre el hombre', in *La Razón*, May 1948; G. Adolfo Otero, 'Holguín, el Greco altoperuano', in *Revista Ultima*, 1942.

<sup>2</sup> J. de Mesa & T. Gisbert dedicate an entire chapter to the aesthetic influences on the Upper-Peruvian painter: 'El mundo pictórico de Holguín y sus primeros cuadros. Las influencias', in *Holguín y la pintura virreinal en Bolivia*, La Paz 1977, pp. 125-143.

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, there is a significant amount of literature dedicated to the individual research of each one of these European artists in American territory: J. de Mesa & T. Gisbert, *Bernardo Bitti*, La Paz 1961.

<sup>4</sup> J. Bernales, *Mateo Pérez de Alessio, pintor romano en Sevilla y Lima*, Seville 1973.

<sup>5</sup> J. de Mesa & T. Gisbert, 'El pintor Angelino Medoro y su obra en América', in *Anales del Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas*, no. 18, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the dissemination of prints in the Southern Viceroyalty, see R. Estrabridis Cárdenas, *El grabado en Lima virreinal: documento histórico y artístico*, Lima 2002.

<sup>7</sup> VVAA, *El arte virreinal en Bolivia*, exh. cat., San Sebastian 1974, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> J. Mesa & T. Gisbert, *Holguín y la pintura virreinal en Bolivia*, La Paz 1977, p. 197.

<sup>9</sup> J. Carmona Muela, *Iconografía de los santos*, Madrid 2003, p. 234.

<sup>10</sup> J. Carmona Muela, *Iconografía cristiana*, Madrid 2010, p. 63.