

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Cuzco School, mid-18th century)

*Chastity of Joseph; Joseph and the
Wife of Potiphar; Joseph Interprets
Pharaoh's Dreams; and Joseph
Proclaimed Viceroy of Egypt*

oil on canvas
all 64 x 54.5 cm.; 25 x 21.5 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, United Kingdom.

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The four paintings studied below are part of an undetermined series of paintings illustrating the Story of Joseph and his Brothers, as narrated in the Bible (Genesis 37:1-36; 38:1-23; 39:1-22; 40:1-23; 41:149; 42:1-38; 44:1-34 and 45:1-28). These passages provide a detailed description of how Jacob's particular fondness for his son, Joseph, sparked the envy of his brothers, who decided to get rid of him, casting off his tunic and throwing him into a pit, which they then pulled him out of, selling him to some merchants, who ended up selling him on to Potiphar, a minister to the Pharaoh and the captain of his guard, who put him in charge of his household. While taking care of all of Potiphar's affairs, the latter's wife tried to seduce him, but Joseph resisted all her advances, and finally she falsely accused him of attempting to force himself on her, resulting in his imprisonment. While in prison he interpreted the dreams of the palace cup-bearer and chief baker, who were also incarcerated, and at the end of two years he interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams, showing him that through the dreams God was revealing that Egypt would undergo seven years of abundance followed by seven years of scarcity, which would plunge his people into a great famine. Joseph suggested keeping back a fifth of the harvest during the years of plenty in order to avert famine during the years of scarcity. Joseph was named minister of Egypt and, after a period had passed, his brothers arrived looking for food without recognizing him. Finally, Joseph revealed himself to them and to his father, who thought him dead.

European painting has illustrated different passages from this story, especially those relating to Joseph being sold by his brothers, the interpretation of dreams and the temptations of the wife of Potiphar, such as those that appear in the decorations of the Vatican galleries from 1519. Series of engravings, especially by Flemish and Italian artists, contributed to the popularization of models that spread with varying success across the whole of Europe and America.

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Chastity of Joseph, mid-18th century

The two protagonists of the scene, Joseph and the wife of Potiphar, are facing each other inside a room with a tiled floor providing a sense of perspective, decorated with huge drapes and three big pillars framing the external landscape, which has an abundance of foliage, with a skyscape that accentuates the depth of the composition. On the right of the interior space the wife of Potiphar is depicted sitting in an armchair and dressed and adorned in accordance with eighteenth-century fashion, with lace, pearl bracelets and necklace, earrings and a gold pendant, and holding a fan in her left hand. Behind her there is a table on which we see earrings, bracelets, chest jewels and a ring. Joseph is standing opposite her, listening to her talk and dressed in Roman fashion.

The inscription identifying the subject also includes the number 6, which is probably a reference to the painting's position in the original series of works: *Nodesistia de Su propósito laenamorada Señora ante losdesvios de Joseph enCendia mas sudeshonesto deseo y Joseph procurara librarse de todos estos peligros conayunos y oraciones y condistribucion pobres lo mas delaracion* (fig. 1).

(The enamored lady did not desist in her intentions when faced by Joseph's rejections [that] enflamed her dishonest desire all the more. And Joseph managed to free himself from all of these dangers with fasting and prayers and giving more than the fair share [to the] poor).

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Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar, mid-18th century

This is the most popular scene among painters depicting the Story of Joseph, in fact for most of them it is the only one that they deal with, coming back to the same elements time and time again: the wife of Potiphar sat in bed, once again on this occasion dressed and adorned in accordance with eighteenth-century fashion, just as she is attempting to seduce Joseph, who rejects her advances and heads towards the door, while his seductress catches him by the cloak, which he leaves behind. And, as the legend on the lower edge tells us, the woman cries out against the chaste Joseph, who appears once again in a secondary scene, on the left, in which two soldiers are locking him up in prison.

The inscription describes the situation: *Enamorada lamuger de putifar Suama le persuade con Cariños y dadas Mas Como Casto y Justo Joseph. – Resistió y dexo la Capa en sus manos, y pisada de honor dioboses que la forsaba y le prendieran* (fig. 2).

(The wife of Potiphar enamored, his mistress tempts him with affections and gifts. But being chaste and just, Joseph resists her advances and leaves his cloak behind in her hands, who, her honor besmirched, cries out [that] he has taken her by force and for him to be arrested).

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Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dreams, mid-18th century

On this occasion we find ourselves faced with two clearly-differentiated spaces in which two scenes are taking place with different protagonists and surroundings. In the foreground, and at the entrance to a noble-looking building, a figure we can identify as the Pharaoh (despite his clothing being a diverse mixture of garments), is welcoming two men who are approaching from the left, dressed clearly in the male fashion of the eighteenth century. These are probably the palace cup-bearer and baker, whose dreams Joseph interpreted while in prison. On their being freed and presenting themselves before the Pharaoh, Joseph's interpretations came entirely true, which would later lead to his being called to court to give his version of the meaning of the Pharaoh's dreams.

On a secondary level, taking up the whole of the composition's background, we see fields of wheat in which men are working collecting the grain, while others are storing part of the harvest in a number of buildings, where the grain will be kept in preparation for the years of scarcity, as suggested by Joseph.

The legend includes the number 12, which may refer to the work's position within the series of paintings: *En los ...Abundantes Estegran Principe Manda enserrar todo el trigo de estas cosechas. 12* (fig. 3).

(In the [years] of abundance this great prince orders the grain from these harvests to be stored).

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Joseph Proclaimed Viceroy of Egypt, mid-18th century

According to the Biblical text (Genesis, 41:40-43), the Pharaoh spoke to Joseph in the following terms: “You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.” The text continues, telling us: “... he had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him abrek, and thus he put him in charge of the whole of Egypt”. And so it is that we can see him, standing in front of the palace, where the Pharaoh, in the style of a European monarch, recognizes the importance of his minister, while various persons salute him as he passes.

In the same way that the author of these paintings interpreted the figures and spaces where the events took place with the greatest freedom, so the author of the texts (perhaps the painter himself) prefers to speak of the Viceroy as the maximum authority after the King, moulding him to his own reality.

The inscription reads the following: *Constituie las bienvenida del virrey de Egipto Congranregosijo justo y porpueblo aclamadous Salvador en memori* (fig. 4).

(The Viceroy of Egypt’s welcome is formed of great joy and he is proclaimed by [the] people [as] Savior in memoriam).

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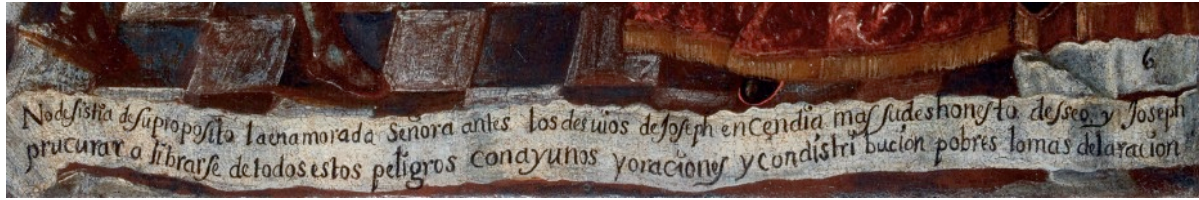


Figure 1. Inscription (detail).

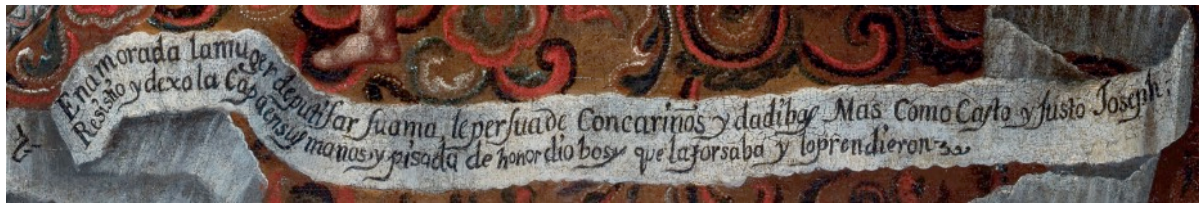


Figure 2. Inscription (detail).



Figure 3. Inscription (detail).

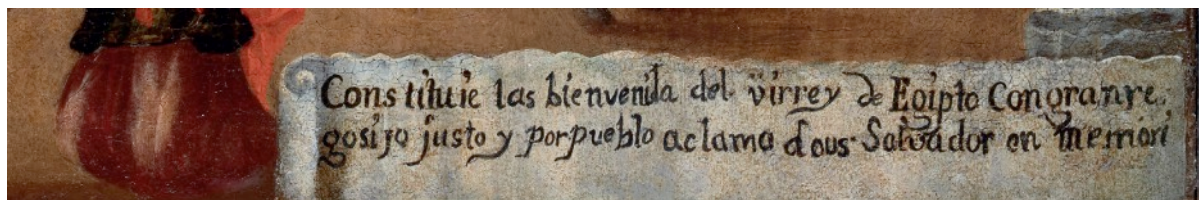


Figure 4. Inscription (detail).