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Est. 1760



Unidentified artist

(Queretaro (Mexico), late 17th
– early 18th century)

Saint Michael the Archangel

polychromed terracotta

37 x 17 x 14 cm.; 14 5/8 x 6 3/4 x 5 1/2 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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When we examine this original sculpture from Queretaro, Mexico, we can but be well aware of the dearth of documentation surrounding the study of the sculptural heritage of New Spain.¹ However, the success of formal analysis in studying the origins of pieces with similar characteristics leads me to argue the case for the validity of said method on this occasion, too.

The image of Saint Michael (37cm. tall, *ronde-bosse* and executed in terracotta) presents a depiction of the archangel that adheres to traditional medieval iconography. The saint and head of the heavenly hosts appears face-on, standing on a pedestal of imitation marble, his left leg forward, resting on the speared and captive body of Satan. In accordance with the Gothic aesthetic being reproduced, the Archangel Michael is depicted as a young knight wearing 15th century armour, including *erebraces*, cuirass, a mail skirt and cloak. Protecting the lower half of his body are *cuisse*s, *poleyn*s, greaves and *sabatons*. In addition, and also following the iconographic model, his left hand bears his shield while his right hand holds his spear. On his head he has a helmet with a plumed crest and his hands are protected by gauntlets.

Michael's face presents a pale complexion where the pink cheekbones are particularly noticeable. He has two enormous dark, almond-shaped eyes which, topped by two fine raised eyebrows, look down on the Devil, accompanied by a slight tilt of the head in the same direction. His nose, both prominent and markedly straight, contrasts with the delicacy of his lips, which are reddish and closed tightly.

With regard to the carving work, it is worth noting the softness of the folds, with an abundance of undulating movement, especially in the cloak, generating a dynamism which, added to the excellent polychroming, lends the sculpture a captivating effect.

It is key, at this juncture, to address a series of aesthetic details that are an indication of the Latin American origins of this work, and which call on the reader to pay close attention to the specific manner in which the artist has executed the polychroming of this extremely interesting terracotta sculpture, of particular note due to the gilding and *corladura*² varnishing

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work. This may be observed all over the surface making up Saint Michael's body. Without ornamentations added to the garments covering the upper and lower extremities of his armour, we see how the skirt has been polychromed using the tip of the brush, with red and green tones forming successive parallel and undulating lines that skilfully match the folds depicted in the garment. In addition, lower down, the artist has included a border made up of thin, straight vertical lines, also in tones of red and green. Of particular interest is the ornamental repertory the artist has brought to bear on the cloak, so suggestively mobile and rich in colour and brilliance. The red inner lining of this garment features the most elegant and painstaking decoration, combining blue and white floral motifs applied using the tip of the brush with rich *estofado* work, particularly noticeable in the host of little gold hoops covering the cloak. In addition, lending the image even greater elegance, we observe how an outer border rich in phytomorphic *estofado* motifs of great size imbues the inside of the garment with a remarkable brilliance. Finally, it is worth mentioning the decorative technique with which the artist has executed the outside of the cloak, with its intense electric green, attained using the abovementioned *corladura* technique, which involves the application of a varnish, in this case of a greenish hue, to metal leaf, thereby lending the surface of the sculpture the required metallic appearance.

As such, the imitation medieval aesthetic of the image, added to the metallic brilliance of the fabrics with their intense palette of colours, leads us to posit that the artist behind this work wanted to reproduce an international gothic aesthetic he may have been familiar with through one of the many prints arriving on Mexican soil. The parallels with 15th century models, in spite of differences in technique and period, presenting painstaking ornamentation, graceful movement in the fabrics, and a rich metallic range of colours, lending the work a decorative character that counterbalances the martial overtones of the Archangel's iconography (fig. 1).

Finally, it is worth pausing to consider the iconography being portrayed, Saint Michael defeating the Devil. This visual depiction of the best-known archangel was particularly popular following the Council of Trent, with his image being associated with the Catholic

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Church's triumph over Protestant heresy, which goes to explain its devotional dissemination on both sides of the Atlantic. This is the same ideological context surrounding the sculpture of *Saint Ferdinand, King of Spain* (fig. 2), symbol of the Christian reconquest in the light of Muslim domination of Spanish soil, in whose aesthetics we can discern shared elements with the work we are studying here, elements that invite us to date the creation of our *Saint Michael* to the Mexican city of Queretaro in around 1700.

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Figure 1. Israhel van Meckenem (German, c. 1445–1503), *Saint Michael*, 1470–1480, engraving. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC



Figure 2. Anonymous artist from Queretaro, *Saint Ferdinand King of Spain*, 1730, wood with polychroming and *estofado*. Denver Museum of Art, Colorado

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Footnotes

¹ The fact that the sculpture of New Spain has not come down to us in the same terms of quantity and quality as the pictorial canon points to a clear relationship of inferiority when it comes to addressing its study from a scientific point of view, as borne out by the lack of reference literature. However, and despite the obstacles posed by the passing of the years and the stumbling blocks of historical scholarship, we do have a series of introductory studies that can encourage us along this avenue of research. I would therefore highlight the following: P. Rojas, 'Las artes gurrativas: la escultura', in *Arte mexicano: Epoca colonial*, Mexico 1963 and M. del Consuelo Maquívar, 'La escultura de Vocacional', in *México en el mundo de las colecciones de arte*, Mexico 1994, vol. 3.

² For a more in-depth study of this decorative technique, see E. González-Alonso Martínez, *Tratado del dorado, plateado y su policromía: Tecnología, conservación y restauración*, Valencia 1997.