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Est. 1760



Circle of Pedro de Vargas
(Montilla (Cordoba) 1553? – Peru after 1596)

The Infant Jesus Blessing

last third of the 16th century

oil on canvas

97 x 70 cm.; 38 1/4 x 27 1/2 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain.

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The childhood of Christ, and free-standing depictions of Jesus as a Child, were extremely popular subjects among artists and patrons from the medieval period on, due to their pleasantness, grace and delicacy.¹ And yet it is possible to discern the true and inseparable theological and doctrinal significance concealed within.

It is in German and northern European 15th-century art that we find the first examples of the Christ Child as *Salvator Mundi*. The sculptural workshops from the Flemish town of Mechelen contributed to establishing the subject's iconographic model, focused on producing Infant Messiahs with almond-shaped eyes, outlined lips and curly hair, in the act of benediction and accompanied by the orb of the world, and which became popular throughout Europe.

Even so, the most effective means of disseminating the form and model of this particular iconography were prints. Great engravers such as Martin Schongauer (c. 1448 - 1491) and Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472 - 1553) became renowned figures behind the varying models depicting this subject, presenting the Child either clothed or naked, standing or sitting, on his own or surrounded by the elements associated with him. Following the latter approach, some decades later the Flemish engraver Hieronymus Wierix (1553 - 1619) would create his own version featuring the Christ Child surrounded by the instruments of the Passion (fig. 1). It was thus that two of Christ's adult iconographies, the *Salvator Mundi* and the *Risen Christ*, were transposed into depictions of the Infant Christ, giving rise to what would popularly be known as the "Child of the Orb".

The rise of devotion to the Christ Child took shape in a number of religious orders, including the Society of Jesus. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola (1491 - 1556) devoted several sections to contemplating the mysteries of Christ's infancy, thereby laying the foundations for said devotion, subsequently popularized by the Jesuits. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Christ Child would be chosen by Jesuit missionaries as the patron saint of

¹ Especially interesting in this sense is Nerea Virginia Pérez López's doctoral thesis, *La Sabta infantil en la barroque Sevillian painting*, University of Seville, 2016.

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the new indigenous fraternities that resulted from the monasteries they founded in the Peruvian Viceroyalty. It was in this context that the figure of Pedro de Vargas played a leading role.

De Vargas (1553 - after 1596) was born in Cordoba, Spain, and left for the New World as a soldier, settling in Lima (Peru) where he learnt the trades of painter, sculptor and gilder. In 1575 he entered the Society of Jesus, where he met the Italian painter Bernardo Bitti (1548 - 1610), with whom he collaborated on a range of altarpieces. Part of his oeuvre is preserved in other cities such as Cuzco (Peru), Quito (Ecuador) and La Paz (Bolivia), generally compositions linked to Jesuit worship. His style, influenced by Bitti and his own personal Mannerism, was characterized by the stylized treatment of his figures, with their fine and slender fingers, the search for transparency through glazes, and the sophistication of his backgrounds.

The foreground of the canvas we have before us here presents the Infant Jesus as the sole subject, enthroned and presenting an expression of serenity, looking out at the spectator. He is issuing a benediction with his right hand, while holding the celestial orb in his left. His clothing is sumptuous, as might befit a high-ranking cleric or even the Pope himself, made up of a long black robe under another vestment reminiscent of the alba or rochet made of fine white linen with lace edging on the lower hem and cuffs, and a deep red mozzetta, worn like a cape and buttoned at the front, with fur lining and delicate transparencies at the collar. On his feet, meanwhile, the Messiah wears sandals, resting on top of a cushion with tassels. To reinforce the solemnity of the scene, the Child is pictured sitting on a throne, an elegant seat with armrests, popularly known as a monk's chair, a common piece of furniture in both Spanish and viceregal homes in the late 16th century and, behind that, a sort of screen, or dossal, with *a candeliери* sgraffito decorations and the sides closed off by large drapes.

The Christological spirit of the work is heightened further by a cut-out leather cartouche bearing the Latin phrase "*Ad omnia / paratus*" (prepared for everything), a message aligned with the premonitory symbols around it: The Cross inside the cartouche itself, along with the three nails and crown of thorns on top, all instruments associated with Christ's Passion.

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The clear influence of Pedro de Vargas' style allows us to compare our canvas with other works attributed to him, such as the *Virgin and Christ Child with Jesuits* triptych (fig. 2), the central scene of which features a decorative dossal, fur lining for the Virgin's vestments and fine, transparent glaze covering her head. The physiognomic features, the almond-shaped eyes, the small mouth and serious, almost mute expression, also point to De Vargas. As such, the work we have before us here may well have come from the brush of one of his most faithful followers, with the help of the Master himself.

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Figure 1. Hieronymus Wierix, *Infant Christ as Salvator Mundi, Surrounded by the Instruments of the Passion*, c. 1600. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Figure 2. Pedro de Vargas, *Virgin and Christ Child with Jesuits* (detail), c. 1595. Museo Casa de Murillo, La Paz (Bolivia)