

Paintings from South America

The Thoma Collection (1600–1800)

This exhibition presents fifteen works made by artists in present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia during Spanish colonial rule. One of the largest and longest-lasting European empires, the Spanish realms spanned from South Asia to South America, and lasted nearly 500 years. Spanish South American art is a dynamic, unique combination of styles and influences from visiting Italian artists and imported European prototypes translated and adapted by local hands and minds. The works on view represent primarily Roman Catholic subjects. Paintings and sculptures adorned churches and convents across Spanish America, but most of the paintings in this exhibition originally hung in private homes where they inspired both delight and devotion.

The works belong to the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Foundation, which is committed to promoting the art of the Spanish Americas through scholarship and exhibition of its extensive collection from South America and the Caribbean. The Thoma Collection includes paintings by Melchor Pérez Holguín and Bernardo Bitti, both represented here. The artists who created the other paintings cannot be identified, though they reflect styles generated in the Andean centers of Potosí, Bolivia; Quito, Ecuador; and Lima and Cuzco, in present-day Peru.



The Spanish Empire (1600–1800)

Peru

Our Lady of Cocharcas, 1751

Oil on canvas

This highly detailed painting represents a famous statue of the Virgin Mary credited with miraculous powers. In the late 1500s, in what became Bolivia, indigenous artist Tito Yupanqui created a sculpture of Our Lady of the Purification popularly known as Our Lady of Copacabana. Believers associated that statue with miraculous healing, spurring the town of San Pedro of Cocharcas, in present-day Peru, to create a copy that developed its own reputation for facilitating miracles.

This painting showcases the Peruvian statue paraded through the town on its annual pilgrimage. The abundant detail emphasizes the landscape, architecture, people, and customs of Cocharcas, underlining the importance of the devotion to everyday life.

Cuzco, Peru

Our Lady of Mercy with Saints, 1700s

Oil on gold on tin

Arms outstretched, the Virgin Mary in the role of Our Lady of Mercy shelters a group of saints beneath her cloak. The eye-catching use of gold leads the viewer from the Virgin to her parents Saints Anne and Joachim flanking her, as well as the Holy Trinity—God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit—gazing down from heaven. The emblem on the Virgin's chest identifies the saints as Mercedarians, members of an order established in Spain in 1218 to help ransom Christian captives in neighboring North Africa. Active in Latin America, the Mercedarians founded schools to convert indigenous people to Catholicism.

The work's small size suggests that it was used in private devotion. While the use of copper as a painting surface was common throughout the Americas, particularly in Mexico, this work is, unusually, painted on tin.

Lima, Peru

Our Lady of the Rosary of Lima, about 1800

Oil and gold on canvas

This painting depicts a sculpture in the Dominican monastery in Lima, Peru. Originally made in Seville, Spain, by a Flemish artist, the statue was exported to Lima sometime after the city's founding in 1535. Made over two hundred years later, this painting depicts Our Lady of the Rosary as a "dressed sculpture." People carried devotional statues adorned in sumptuous costumes through Spanish and Spanish American cities during elaborate processions celebrating annual feast days or military victories, or in response to epidemics and natural disasters. The grey tonalities around the statue suggest the statue's processional cart was made of silver, an abundant and valuable natural resource mined and exported from South America to Spain.

Cuzco, Peru

The Visitation, 1700s

Oil and gold on canvas

After the Archangel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would bear a child, she went to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, then pregnant with Saint John the Baptist. When the women met, the infant in Elizabeth's womb moved in acknowledgement of the presence of the Christ Child.

There are many representations of this moment in Spanish American paintings, often, like this one, based on European prototypes known through engravings. This one is based on a composition by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (reproduced below). The addition of gold to suggest luxurious textiles is particularly characteristic of paintings created in mid-1700s Cuzco. The walled garden at left symbolizes Mary's virginity and contains plants associated with her purity, such as lilies.



François Ragot (French, 1638–1670), after Pieter de Jode I (Flemish, 1565–1639) and Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577–1640). *The Visitation*, 1648–1670. Engraving. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. 184A.

Attributed to **Bernardo Bitti**

Italian, 1548–1610

Virgin and Child, about 1592–1605

Oil on panel

This painting focuses solely on Mary and the Christ Child. The Virgin Mary gazes at her child with a touch of melancholy, projecting her future sorrow over his sacrifice and her loss. The Christ Child's steady gaze invites the viewer to pray.

Bernardo Bitti, a Jesuit friar from Camerino, Italy, came to Peru in 1572 with the second Jesuit mission. A painter trained in the Mannerist style, Bitti was specifically brought to Peru to create works of art for new Jesuit churches. He painted for his order in Lima, Cuzco, Juli, Sucre, and Arequipa, and was rushed from place to place, so anxious were the Jesuits for works of art. Bitti did not sign his paintings, but his distinct style makes his works easily identifiable.

Melchor Pérez Holguín

Bolivian, about 1660–1732

Saint Mark, about 1714

Oil on canvas

These two paintings represent the Evangelists Saint Mark and Saint Luke writing their gospels, accompanied by traditional emblems that identify them: an angel for Saint Mark and a lion for Saint Luke. They belong to several sets of portraits of the four evangelists made by Melchor Pérez Holguín, one of the rare Andean artists who signed some of his works.

Holguín, who spent his artistic career in Potosí, Bolivia, is recognized for his originality. Although he was familiar with paintings from Cuzco that reached Potosí through the thriving art market, his style is distinctly different. He became a confident master of paintings on a large scale, such as *The Entry of the Viceroy Archbishop Morcillo de Auñón into Potosí* (reproduced below), a richly detailed evocation of the society and culture of the silver-mining city.



Melchor Pérez Holguín (Bolivian, ca. 1660–1732). *The Entry of the Viceroy Archbishop Morcillo de Auñón into Potosí*, 1716. Oil on canvas. 19-2/3 feet long. Museo de America, Madrid.

Melchor Pérez Holguín

Bolivian, about 1660–1732

Saint Luke Painting the Virgin, about 1714

Oil on canvas

Despite his furrowed brow, Holguín's Saint Luke is the epitome of a distinguished artist at work, here painting the Virgin Mary as Mater Dolorosa or Mother of Sorrows. This depiction, showing a solitary, sad Virgin, encouraged viewers to meditate upon Mary's suffering.

Holguín's highly personal style is notable for how he habitually minimizes the bodies of his figures. Their heads are comparatively larger than is anatomically correct, a stylistic choice that allows a greater concentration on the face.

Quito, Ecuador

Saint Joseph Crowned by an Angel, late 1700s

Oil on canvas

This tender image of Christ with his earthly father Saint Joseph showcases the soft tonalities and gentle spirit of paintings made in Quito, Ecuador, in the 1700s. It also reveals the influence of Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), a Spanish saint who promoted the veneration of Saint Joseph in early modern Europe. Saint Teresa belonged to the Carmelite order, one of the religious organizations highly active in converting people to Christianity in South America. To the left, a small angel holds Saint Joseph's distinctive symbol, the flowering staff that won him the hand of the Virgin Mary.

probably Cuzco, Peru

Allegory of the Holy Eucharist, mid-1700s

Oil on canvas

Although titled *Allegory of the Holy Eucharist*, which refers to the sacrament of communion in the Christian Church, the symbolic story presented here also emphasizes devotion to the Sacred Heart. In the center of the composition, a monstrance, or container for the communion host, in the form of a cross stands in front of a large heart referencing the crucified Christ. This symbolizes the Sacred Heart, the visual manifestation of the love of Christ for all humanity. Banners below the six angels on either side of the Sacred Heart contain Biblical quotations that mention hearts.

The doctrine of the Sacred Heart was spread throughout Spanish America by the Jesuits and the composition comes from a widely disseminated print.

probably Cuzco, Peru

The Mystical Winepress, 1700s

Oil on canvas

Although at first glance this image seems to represent Christ carrying the cross on the way to his crucifixion, it actually represents “Christ in the Winepress.” The subject originated in hymns and sermons in Northern Europe around 1100. A winepress is a device that squeezes juice out of grapes to make wine. Over time, the crossbeam of the winepress was transformed into the cross.

Here, God the Father literally screws the crossbeam more tightly, emphasizing the purposefulness of Christ’s suffering and death. In the distance is the vineyard from which Christ’s followers carry grapes to the winepress. A Flemish engraving was the model for this painting (reproduced below).



Hieronymus (Jerome) Wierix (Netherlandish, about 1553–1619). *Christ in the Wine Press*, before 1615. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1953, 53.601.19 (132).

Workshop of Bernardo Rodríguez

Ecuadorian, active 1772–1802

The Presentation in the Temple, late 1700s

Oil on panel

In accordance with Jewish law, 40 days after the birth of Christ, the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph brought him to the Temple in Jerusalem to be presented before God. There, the aged Simeon, at far left, fulfilled a prophecy that he would live to see the Messiah. Instead of emphasizing the infant Christ's circumcision, a frequent feature of similar scenes, this work focuses on his extended family. Paintings of the Holy Kinship (Santa Parentela) were popular in Spanish America. This composition relies on a German print created by 1723 (reproduced below). The fictive, painted, carved frame within the actual frame also reflects German decorative elements.



Johann Andrea Pfeffel (German, 1674–1748) after Johann Georg Bergmüller (German, 1688–1762). *The Presentation in the Temple*, by 1723. Engraving. National Library of the Czech Republic, Prague, Thesis 497.

Cuzco, Peru

Saint Martin in Exile, mid-1700s

Oil on canvas

This painting's story unfolds from background to foreground to reveal the travails of Saint Martin, who served as Pope Martin I from 649 to 655. Martin battled with the Emperors Constantine and Constans II, resulting in his arrest and exile. In the background, we see the pope in prison after arrest. The foreground shows him in later exile on the island of present-day Crimea, where he died. Seated in front of a poor hut that shields him from the wind, Martin writes letters. His red cloak touched with gold and the papal tiara on the worktable reflect the magnificence of the papacy even on this island, surrounded by a choppy sea.

Bolivia

Saint Michael the Archangel, late 1600s–1700s

Oil on canvas

This painting of Saint Michael the Archangel refers to the Biblical Book of Revelation, verses 12:7-9, in which Michael led his angels in battle and “the great dragon was cast down, the old serpent, he that is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.” Painters in Cuzco frequently used the same composition, with Michael treading on the fallen devil, brandishing his sword, but their versions are more likely to include decorative details and perhaps the application of gold. Here, the devil is depicted as a serpent with a very human face, while the billowing lace references the trade in imported Flemish textiles, one facet of the Spanish Americas’ global economy.

Colombia

Our Lady of Monguí, 1600s,
gold embellishment added 1700s
Oil and gold on panel

The village of Monguí lies to the northeast of Bogotá in the region of Boyacá, Colombia.

According to legend, in the 1500s, Monguí was given an image of the Holy Family resting on the flight to Egypt by the Spanish King Charles V or his son Philip II in gratitude for the town's allegiance to the Spanish cause. In some versions of the legend, the king himself had painted the image. The crowned Habsburg double eagle visible on the Virgin's breast recalls this imperial connection. The painting quickly became renowned for working miracles. It remains one of Colombia's most popular devotions today. The brown tones of this version are typical of Colombian art of the 1600s. The gold detailing on the Virgin's mantle and jewelry was probably added in the 1700s.