

# The Survival of Inca Symbolism in Representations of The Virgin in Colonial Peru

Carol Damian

*Tawantinsuyu*, the "Center of the Four Quarters," was the name the Inca gave to their empire, their world. When Francisco Pizarro and his army of 62 horsemen and 102 foot soldiers destroyed that world in 1532, the empire encompassed 350,000 square miles of what is now Peru, most of Ecuador, and parts of Bolivia, Chile and Argentina. A theocratic society ruled by the divine Inca, called Sapa Inca, *Tawantinsuyu* included scores of tribes, states, kingdoms and confederations conquered in the short period of only 90 years. It was unified by a common language, religion, and administrative system with its capital at Cuzco in the Andean highlands.<sup>1</sup>

The term *Inca* is now commonly used in three different senses: as the title of the head of state; to describe members of the highest nobility, the members of the ruler's family; and as a generic name for the empire and its peoples. The family members of the Inca were in actuality the only ones privileged to be called "Inca." This nobility, called *Orejones* by the Spanish because of the large earlobes which distinguished their caste, traced their lineage from the legendary first Inca, Manco Capac, who derived his position from the sun, Inti. He called himself "Son of Inti," and was the personification of the national cult of the sun. Legend claims Inti had instructed Manco Capac with Mama Huaca Ocllo as his wife/sister to teach the people of the earth to worship the sun and thus prosper.<sup>2</sup>

The Spanish Conquest would greatly alter this system of belief and descent. After Francisco Pizarro conquered Peru, the Indians were required to accept two obligations: they had to accept the King of Spain as ruler on behalf of the Pope, and they had to allow the Christian faith to be preached. The effort to convert the native population to the Catholic religion was performed with incredible zeal and included the destruction of what the missionaries termed the "graven idols" of the "pagan" Indians.

While it may appear that the wealth of Christian art which was produced in the Andean Highlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries demonstrates the success of the missionaries in destroying or replacing the objects and symbols of the pagan religion with those of Christianity,<sup>3</sup> closer examination of these works, especially the representations of the Virgin Mary, reveals otherwise. It is clear through the observation of numerous works of art that a total destruction of Inca religion with its art and iconography did not occur.

It is not surprising that the Spaniards were profoundly concerned with transforming Inca religious practices since religion was the most important aspect of the Inca social, political and cultural system. It served the most noble and the most humble. The common person, respectful of the power of the high gods, represented by Viracocha the Creator, Inti the Sun, Mama Quilla the Moon and Pachamama the Earth Mother was also allowed by the Inca to worship his own personal household gods, ancestor gods, and local

gods as well. Believed to represent the powers of nature, a host of locally venerated objects, known as *huacas*, might be anything from a mountain to an oddly shaped potato.

The gods were worshipped on festival days relating to the agricultural cycle which was controlled by a special calendrical system under the supervision of the priests. Festivals were most important occasions for the people of the empire, a welcome respite from daily travail and opportunity for the nobility to display their splendid raiment.

Festivals were also the occasion for the "Cult of the Panaca," a distinctive and unusual aspect of Inca religious beliefs. Figure 1, a drawing by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, an Amerindian author writing at the turn of the seventeenth century to King Philip III of Spain, shows the Inca mummy carried in procession on a litter or *quilla*, a Spanish word meaning to haul or carry. This drawing is of "Corpse Carrying Month" (*Aya Marçay Quilla*). The "Cult of the Panaca" was based on the concept of the immortality of the departed Inca and his eventual return. His wealth and possessions remained with his mummy in his palace under the care of retainers. The mummy was also assigned a niche in the *Coricancha*, the Temple of the Sun, and venerated on holidays or taken out in procession.

Religious worship also involved penance, fasting, and the confession of sins. Confession was a source of priestly power and prestige. Sin and unlawful conduct harmed the community and the individual. Absolution involved bathing or ritual water. Offerings to the gods and the *huacas* were an automatic part of daily existence, and usually consisted of a libation of a small amount of corn liquor (*chicha*) before any activity or special location. On festival days, maize cakes made by the "Chosen" girls, cloistered virgins in the service of the priests, were also offered with the blood of the vicuña. Llamas and other small animals were sacrificed, and objects of gold and silver, cloth and pottery were presented as tribute. Small children have been found, surrounded by similar goods, atop high mountain peaks in sacrifice to the Sun God.<sup>4</sup>

The similarities between Inca religious beliefs and ceremonies to those of Catholicism are apparent. Both were dominated by a high Creator god; both used fasting, communion, penance; both made religion respected by pomp and imposing richness. This certainly accounts for some of the ease of acceptance of Christianity. But, the factor which most contributed to Inca acceptance of conversion was the all-encompassing attitude of religiosity which permeated every aspect of the Indians' daily existence.

Given the pragmatic similarities and ceremonial emphasis, the Inca acceptance of the Christian God was relatively simple. Whereas, the missionaries may have originally seen the Inca practice of Christianity as a replacement for the Inca gods and considered their conversion efforts successful, in reality, the native peoples simply added the Catholic God and saints, which they had grown to respect

and admire, to their own pantheon. Rather than offend the Spaniards who were never hesitant to use force and violence to achieve their goals, the long-subjugated Indian peoples, eager to please, utilized the holy personae of Christianity, in part at least, to masquerade their true beliefs. On more than one occasion, the mummified remains of an Inca ancestor were found hidden beneath the processional litters, and the practice persisted of removing inhumed bodies from Christian burial grounds to local ones next to graves of their pagan ancestors. Disguised within the elaborate robes of the Virgin Mary and other saints, *huacas* were frequently found.

Consequently, the missionaries were faced with the task of destroying such native practices in addition to attending to the difficulties of conversion. In this effort, they placed considerable emphasis on art for visual representation. In a land where few priests spoke the language, the artist provided the means of communication. Religious art and its artists were powerful instruments of spiritual conquest. The artist became the logical assistant to the priest. His function took on moral significance as he was entrusted with the visualization of the concepts of Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

Through their own conquest before the arrival of the Spanish, the Incas had been the beneficiaries of many highly advanced cultures which had preceded them: Paracas weavers, Nazca potters, Chimú goldsmiths, Mochica hydraulic engineers and Tiahuanaco builders. Taking advantage of all the techniques they had inherited, the Incas ingeniously incorporated them into an original style which manifested itself in building construction, textiles, pottery and gold-work. It was the responsibility of the missionary artist to adapt this heritage to the art of Christianity.

Between 1630 and 1780, the abundance of art produced in Cuzco by mestizo and Indian artists, the majority of them anonymous, resulted in the formation of the so-called "Cuzco School of Painting." Cuzco was the site of the first Bishopric in Peru and of the first organized schools. It was only natural that art schools would also be established in the former capital of the Inca Empire. The Inca had gathered the finest craftsmen of *Tawantinsuyu*, the metallurgists of Chimor; the stonemasons of Pukara; the weavers of Huari, to embellish the capital city; the Spanish quickly concluded that they could utilize the talents of these craftsmen to transform the pagan city into a splendid one of Christianity.

The Indian artist was taught to paint by Spanish artists using Spanish, Flemish and Italian engravings and other inexpensive print reproductions as examples.<sup>6</sup> Over time they adopted certain elements from each of these sources to produce a style which was distinctly their own. Characterized by intricate rococo patterns tooled on gold leaf, European motifs reinterpreted by the Indian artist and described as *estofado*, and elaborate garments and jewels, the Cuzco School displays a naive and delightful elegance. The combination of the fantasy world of the Indian as he attempted to comprehend the new religion and its iconography, and the realistic details of native flora and fauna which represented more than the natural world to a pantheistic believer, resulted in a flat design with rigid characters. Harking back to their heritage, the paintings resemble a textile more than a true representation of the physical world.

To the casual observer, the syncretic art style of Colonial Cuzco and the Andean Highlands combines Christian symbolism with native techniques. Upon closer examination, however, the paintings also reveal an iconographic vocabu-

lary of deep significance. A prime example is the treatment of the Virgin Mary in works by native artisans. The association of the Virgin with native beliefs, in particular those of Pachamama and Mama Quilla, and the special love of the Indian for her image are demonstrated in numerous paintings. The native predilection for "statue paintings" is evident in the *Virgin of Bethlehem*, ca. 1780, by an anonymous artist of the Cuzco School (Figure 2). This presentation of the Virgin in a wide flattened-out triangular dress is a peculiarity of the native artisans based on the popularity of dressed statues. The Virgin of Bethlehem stands more as a statue than a painting. Unfamiliar with European painting techniques representing three dimensions, the artist continued the native tradition of decorative relief in the use of flat two-dimensional patternings in the design of the Virgin's costume and the planar approach to the physical body. The profusion of ornamentation and tapestry detail is typical of the Cuzco School.

But what appears simply to be a lovely native interpretation of a traditional Catholic subject is actually replete with subtle symbols of ancient Inca beliefs. The flowers in the vases below the Virgin, for example, are the *nukchu*, the lily of love or sacred flower associated with the "Chosen Women" or *Mamaconas* in the service of the Inca. To this day, they are strewn before the Virgin's litter on processional days, as they had been strewn before the litter of the Inca's mummy on Inca festival days honoring the "Cult of the Panaca." They are represented on numerous Inca vessels and textiles. One example is an *Inca Votive Receptacle with Mamaconas* which is decorated with stylized female figures holding birds and the *nukchu* lily (Figure 3).

To the Spanish, the Virgin Mary stands at the top of religious devotion in Hispanic Peru. Her image was meant to inspire love and goodness.<sup>7</sup> To the native people, on the other hand, she was identified with Pachamama, Earth Mother, and other nature deities, but especially she was related to the Coya (Queen), Mama Ocllo, the wife/sister of Manco Capac, the Mother of the Inca Dynasty, and the *Mamaconas* she taught to serve the Inca. Symbols of this relationship are clearly present in the *Virgin of the Spindle*, ca. 1760 (Figure 4), by an anonymous artist of the Cuzco School, where the Virgin is not just a young girl, but an Inca princess; the curl on her forehead is an Inca symbol of fertility; her very round face resembles the moon. She wears the royal *llauto*, the band of Inca nobility, around her forehead. She is posed with spinning implements and dressed in Inca finery, the *illicla* shawl held by a gold *tupo* pin, combined with European style lace sleeves. The obvious delight in ornamentation and decorative detail in the *estofado* patterns of her garment, and the framing garland of flowers, are the result of a fanciful combination of Spanish Baroque and native traditions. The *Inca Princess* described in a Colonial painting of the seventeenth century by an anonymous artist wears the same costume, *tupo* pin and holds the *nukchu* lilies (Figure 5). The Legend of Manco Capac states that Mama Ocllo taught the Inca women to weave, and for the "Chosen Women" it became a special service to the Inca.

Through its elegant *estofado* and ornate patternings, *Our Lady of the Victory of Malaga*, ca. 1737, by Luis Nino of the Southern Cuzco School at Potosi in present-day Bolivia (Figure 6), reveals the influence of the Cuzco School in the Pan-Andean Highland area. In commemoration of a Spanish event, the Virgin stands beneath an elaborate European Baroque arch decorated in sculptural relief but

profuse with native designs and symbols. She also wears the flat triangular gown of gold and tapestry/brocade of "statue paintings," now so detailed that the Christ Child is lost in its patterns. The interesting semi-circular design on her dress contains references to the moon and appears to be inspired by the gold ceremonial knife of the Chimor Civilization (Figure 7). Knives of this shape have been found in profusion in Chimor tombs and would have been accessible to the Incas who conquered the Chimor Civilization. Another semi-circular half-moon design behind her plays against the rays of her halo and alludes to the Moon Goddess, Mama Quilla, the Consort of Inti. Reproductions of Spanish Apocalyptic images such as the Virgin standing on the moon in Francisco Pacheco's *Inmaculada*, ca. 1590, in the Cathedral of Seville, may have been available to the native artist and the inspiration for the iconography. If so, it was an excellent opportunity for the native artisan to further masquerade his own devotion under the guise of accepted Spanish iconography.

In Colonial Cuzco, the native love of nature appears to supplant much of the rigidity or asceticism associated with the art of Spanish Christianity in the sixteenth century, and complements that of Spanish Baroque of the seventeenth century. It is not surprising then that a love of patterning, evident in the textile tradition of the Indian peoples, and a love of the land, its flora and fauna, dominate the decoration of religious works. They also reflect the same effort at retention of the native lore within the new religious structure and can be interpreted as a subtle kind of resistance on the part of the Indian artisan. In *Our Lady of Cocharcas under the Baldachin*, 1765, by an anonymous Cuzco artist from the Circle of Antonio Vilca, the beauty of the natural scenery abounds with birds and flowers (Figure 8). Based on the story of a pilgrim to the Shrine of Copacabana in the Bolivian highlands whose hand was miraculously healed, the image of *Our Lady of Cocharcas* is represented as a "statue painting" being carried on a processional litter, the perfect shape for hiding small idols and *huacas*. (Missionaries and investigators for the Crown searching for evidence of idolatry often described such

occurrences in ceremonial processions.<sup>8</sup>) The faithful maintained a tradition of physically dressing *Our Lady* on special feast days, also changing her crown and jewels. This practice of dressed altar paintings and statues came from Spain, but gained importance in the New World as an activity of the *cofrades* or brotherhoods. The obvious similarities in style to Flemish paintings with their close attention to natural details, indicate the source of landscape representation for the native artist.<sup>9</sup> These scenes become especially curious when incongruously peopled with Spanish colonials and Indians journeying to their highland shrine. The special devotion to birds, celestial mediators of ancient origin, and the Inca tradition of pilgrimage to certain *huacas* or sacred places such as mountains, underlies the Christian subject matter.

These selected examples from the vast amount of Colonial art of the Andean Highlands demonstrate that Spanish Christianity had not successfully supplanted and destroyed the religious artforms of the native Inca people. The sacred ritual surrounding day-to-day existence, life, death, and survival, had long been visualized in architectural motifs, pottery, golden objects and weaving designs. These became offerings to the multitude of deities and forces in nature to which the Inca prayed. Their apparent replacement by the accoutrements of Christianity was shrouded by an ancient system of beliefs and symbols serving to reinforce their existence, not to destroy it.

Although it has always been the tendency to admit to some Inca survival in the form of "Mestizo" or "Indo-Christian" or "syncretic" motifs, these have been attributed solely to the presence of Indian workers and craftsmen and the relative freedom accorded them by their Spanish "directors." Upon closer inspection, the Inca iconography which survives also represents important symbols of religious beliefs which serve as hidden elements, defiant of conversion. It is the language and visual expression of a strong and intelligent population with a long tradition of ritual iconography that was more reluctant to surrender certain ideas than it outwardly revealed.

University of Miami

1 Alan Lapiner, *Pre-Columbian Art of South America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1976) 307.

2 Don Felipe Huamán Poma de Ayala, *Letter To A King*, trans. from *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, ed. Christopher Dilke (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978) 9.

3 George Kubler maintains "such survivals are so few . . . and had become . . . symbolically inert. Therefore, one must consider the art of the Colonial years in terms of extinction." George Kubler, "On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Precolumbian Art," *Studies in Ancient American and European Art—The Collected Essays of George Kubler*, ed. Thomas F. Reese (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 66. However, in his essay on "The Quechua in the Colonial World," Kubler states that after the Conquest . . . "the disruption in the social order . . . left the structure of Quechua religion relatively intact" (43). Because art and religion in Precolumbian Peru are virtually inseparable, these statements are contradictory. Furthermore, recent anthropological investigation reveals a continuation of native Precolumbian religious practices to this day. Personal research in the Cuzco area confirmed this survival with its accompanying artistic symbolism and led to the subject of this paper and the author's doctoral dissertation.

4 Loren McIntyre, "The Lost Empire of the Incas," *National Geographic* 144 (1973):733.

5 Felipe Cossio del Pomar, *Peruvian Colonial Art: The Cuzco School of Painting*, trans. Genero Arbaiza (New York: Wittenborn, 1964) 55.

6 "Engravings produced in Antwerp, where the printing presses were in the service of Philip II of Spain, were especially influential . . . Devotional books, among them fine editions of Nuncius, Plantin, and Moretus with drawings done by Collaert, Wierix, Goltzius and Sadler, along with copper engravings . . . were sent to America." *Gloria In Excelsis—Exhibition Catalog* (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1986) 25.

7 "With the pressure of the Counter Reformation, the importance of Mary as Mother of God was increasingly emphasized. In Spain her cult grew to monumental proportions." Pál Kelemen, *Peruvian Colonial Painting—A Special Exhibition* (U.S.A.: Meriden Gravure Company, 1971) 23.

8 For the documentation of idolatry and hidden idols, see Pablo Joseph de Arriaga, *La extirpación de la idolatría en el Perú*, 1621, Colección de Libros y Documentos Referentes a la Historia del Perú, ed. Horacio H. Urteaga and Carlos A. Romero (Lima: Sanmarti, 1920) Second Series, vol.1; Huamán Poma de Ayala 69-89; R. C. Padden, *The Hummingbird and the Hawk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) 246.

9 Jeronimo Wierix, *Entrada de Cristo en Jerusalem*, engraving No. 87 in *Imágenes de la Historia Evangélica*, fig. 110 in Jose de Mesa y Teresa Gisbert, *Historia de la Pintura Cuzqueña*, 2 vols. (Lima: Fundación Augusto N. Wiese, 1982) vol. 2. This is one of numerous examples delivered to the New World, *Gloria in Excelsis* 25.



Figure 1. Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *Cult of the Panaca*, ca. 1600, page 256 in *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* (*Codex La péruvian illustré*) (Paris: Institut d' Ethnologie, 1936).



Figure 2. *Virgin of Bethlehem*, anonymous, Cuzco School, ca. 1780, Courtesy of Banco de Crédito del Perú, photography by Sr. Daniel Giannoni.



Figure 3. *Inca Votive Receptacle with Mamaconas*, anonymous, ca. 1400, Museo Regional de Cuzco.



Figure 4. *Virgin of the Spindle*, anonymous, Cuzco School, ca. 1760, Private Collection, Cuzco.



Figure 5. *Inca Princess*, anonymous, Cuzco School, 16th century, Museum of Archaeology, Cuzco.



Figure 6. Luis Nino, *Our Lady of the Victory of Malaga*, Southern Cuzco School, Potosi, Bolivia, ca. 1737, Courtesy of the Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado.



Figure 7. *Ceremonial Knife or Tumi*, anonymous, Chimor Civilization, ca. 1100-1400, Museo Oro del Perú, Lima.

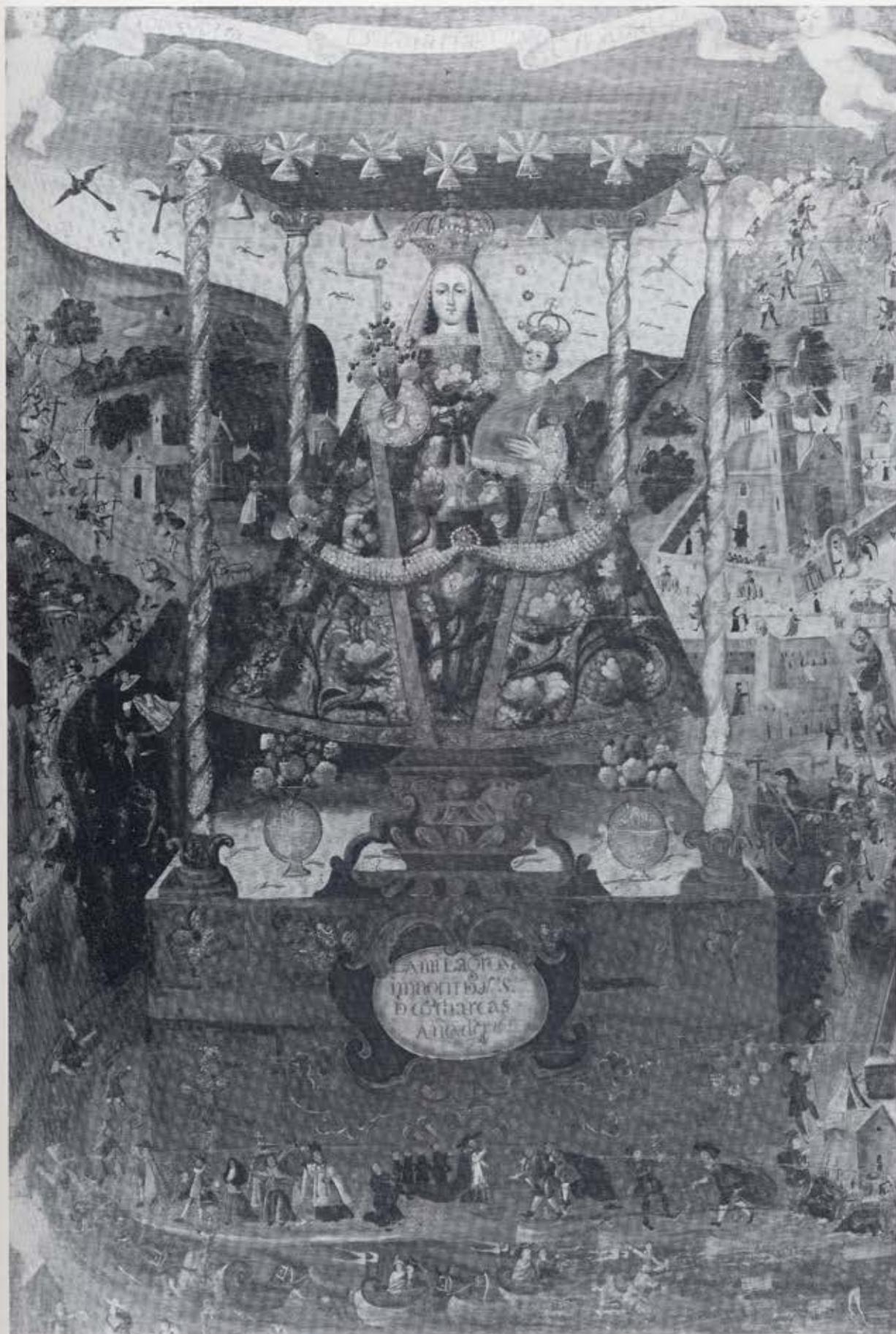


Figure 8. *Our Lady of Cocharcas under the Baldachin*. Circle of Antonio Vilca, Cuzco School, ca. 1765, Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum, Acc. Number 57.144.19, Bequest of Miss Mary T. Cockcroft.