

CASPICARA

A CHRIST OF AGONY



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Manuel Chili, called Caspicara

Real Audiencia of Quito, Ecuador (Viceroyalty of New Granada); ca. 1770-75

fruitwood; approximate height: 48.5 cm

The present sculpture, a *Cristo de la Agonía*, depicting Christ in agony, is an exceptional work of remarkable expressiveness. Its pathos is indebted to the influence of Spain's Golden Age depictions of Christ's crucifixion while its distinct style situates it with the production of devotional art in later colonized territories like Ecuador from which the 'Quito school' genre emerged as a combination of Spanish, Italian, Flemish and Moorish influences.

The 'Quito school' had its genesis in the *Artes y Oficios* established in 1552 by the Franciscan priest Jodoco Ricke at the San Andrés seminary where indigenous artists were trained by colonial Europeans in the production of devotional arts intended to spread Christianity in the New Americas.

The personality of artists belonging to the 'Quito school' are a rare occasion as most art was produced without individuation. Quito artists recognized themselves as instruments of the divine in the production of sacred works whose purpose was to instruct people in the faith. However, the idiosyncratic character of our present sculpture distinctly recalls the hand of Manuel Chili, called 'Caspicara.' The talent of Chili was recognized at an early age, steered by his Jesuit mentors who encouraged his abilities. Chili eventually achieved fame throughout New America and Spain to which King Carlos III of Spain is reputed to have once commented, "I am not concerned that Italy has Michelangelo; in my colonies of America, I have the master: Caspicara."



Immediate superficial characteristics of our sculpture are observable in relation to Chili's productions, such as the feature of embedded glass eyes, subtly painted eyelashes and eyebrows and alternating drops of blood emanating from the neck and from behind-the-shoulders, flowing down the chest in varied lengths with a long drip running down the center abdomen. The bleeding knees and triangular outcropping of blood pouring from the nail wounds of Christ's feet are likewise comparable with his *Sábana Santa* (Quito Cathedral) and *Cristo Yacente* (Museo del Banco Central del Ecuador). More specific are the exaggerated external abdominal obliques running along the back of our sculpture in four lateral protrusions which may be compared against Chili's *Christ at the Column* (Indianapolis Museum of Art) and the figures of the *Fates of Man* (Hispanic Society of America).

In particular, our sculpture favors a period of activity close-in-execution to these *Fates* whose sculptural power and spectacle is commensurate. Especially analogous is the treatment of anatomy observed between our Christ and Chili's figure of a *Soul in Purgatory* (fig. 01), featuring a similarly sculpted upper ribcage, pleated sternum, sunken abdomen, pouched gut and upward gazing expression pervaded by a long straight nose and pursed brow that likewise echo an adoring Magi in his *Nativity* on the altarpiece Chili made for the Convent of St. Francis in Quito. The outer edges of our Christ's hair, descending in wave-like tufts, are consonant with Chili's figure of a *Soul in Heaven* and is likewise reflected on his figure of San Joaquín at the Church of San Francisco in Quito. Also notable is the treatment of blood along our figure's back, articulated in uniquely outcropped strokes



Fig. 01: *Soul in Purgatory*, attributed to Manuel Chili (Caspicara), ca. 1775 (Hispanic Society of America)

terminating in thickened beads that precisely reflect those featured along the open chest wound of Chili's figure for a *Soul in Hell*.

Although distinctly 'Quito school,' sans the glossy polychromy common-to-the-genre, our Christ also appears informed by the ivory crucifixes being imported to the Colonial Americas during the 18th century from the Philippines and east Asia, often considered luxury works respected for their fine craftsmanship and material. In particular, the limply articulated legs and overall vertical disposition of our Christ references these works. However, our sculptor



herewith demonstrates an equivalent, if not excelling capability in the attention to anatomical detail and fine articulation of sinuous veins heightened along the surface of Christ's emaciated physique.

While the long-and-narrow figure of our Christ is indebted to Spanish-Philippine influences and the Flemish manner imbued in that tradition, the upward extended arms and anguished countenance of our Christ may have its impetus in the local milieu of Quito. In particular, the painting, *El Cristo de la Agonía* (Convento de los Descalzos in Lima, Peru; Fig. 02), executed by Miguel de Santiago during the mid-17th century, is particularly analogous to our Christ's expression. The painting experienced much acclaim in Quito where local legends recount Miguel's obsession for realism, prompting him to convince a student to model for the work, tied to a crucifix, and subsequently maiming him to ensure he captured the most convincing portrayal of suffering possible. This same resounding pathos is convincingly expressed in the emotionally charged character of our Christ.

As noted, the distinct lack of polychromy for-the-flesh on our sculpture exposes its natural wooden surface, here intended to imitate the skin tone of the indigenous Kichwa population of Ecuador. Chili's renown eponym: "Caspicara," indeed reflects his indigenous background, meaning "wooden" or "stick face," a probable allusion to both his heredity and talent.

Notably, the lack of polychromy on our Christ suggests it was not intended for a Eurocentric environment but was destined instead for a *locus orandi* or local place-of-devotion where acolytes of

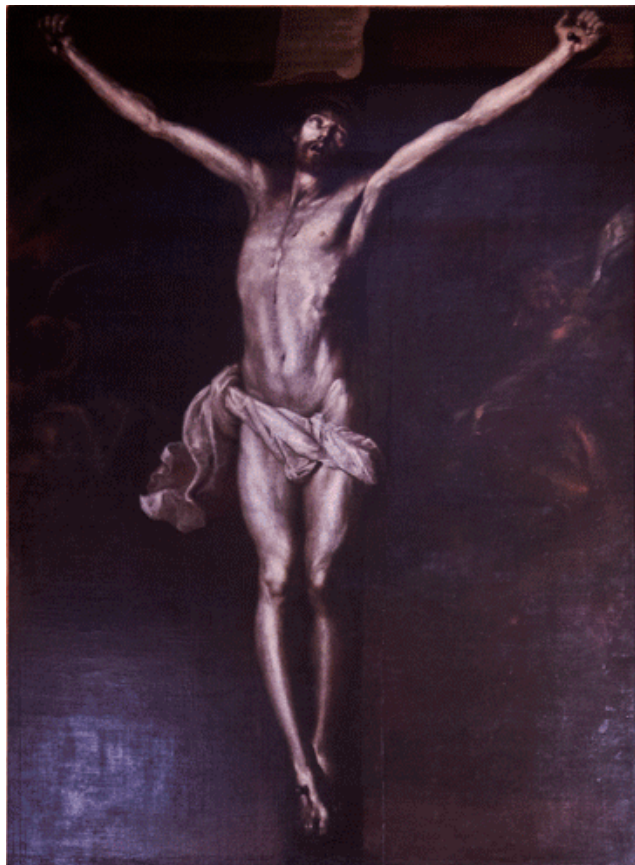


Fig. 02: *El Cristo de la Agonía* attributed to Miguel de Santiago, mid-17th century (Convento de los Descalzos, Lima, Peru)

Christian faith could pray privately, often before a singular image of Christ Crucified like the present one.

While most of Chili's known work features Eurocentric flesh-tones for its polychromy our sculpture alternatively exemplifies a certain pride in the native peoples of Ecuador being an interesting outlier in the artistic-cultural syncretism found in the New Americas and enriching the words of the Dominican Friar and historian, José María Vargas, who commented that Chili was one of "the greatest expressions of his race, demonstrating that personal effort outstrips the prejudices of one's surroundings."



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