COLNAGHI



José Germán de Alfaro
The Virgin of Guadalupe, 1779

JOSÉ GERMÁN DE ALFARO
(Mexico, b. 1749 and active second half of the 18th century)

THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE, 1779

Inscribed on the reverse: '*Jose German de Alfaro fecit año 1779 Mexico*'

Oil on canvas
106 x 83 cm
41 ¾ x 32 ⅝ in.

Provenance

Carlos Cañal y Migolla (1876–1938), Seville and Sanlúcar de Barrameda, at his residence 'Jaramar', La Jara, Sanlúcar de Barrameda;
Thence by descent to his daughter, Candelaria Cañal y Gómez-Imaz (1919–1996), Señora de Lleó, Sanlúcar de Barrameda;
Thence by descent to her son, Vicente Cañal Lleó (1947–2021), Seville;
Thence by descent to the present owners.

Note:
Carlos Cañal y Migolla (Seville 1876 – Sanlúcar de Barrameda 1938) was a Spanish lawyer, archaeologist and politician, serving as Minister of Supply, Minister of Labour, and Minister of Grace and Justice during the reign of Alfonso XIII.
Vicente Cañal Lleó (1947–2021) was a noted art historian from Seville.

Literature

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Comparative literature

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Katzew, I., *La pintura de castas. Representaciones raciales en el México del siglo XVIII*, Madrid, Turner, 2004.
Moreno Silva, D., 'Erotismo y censura en el siglo XVIII novohispano. Imágenes y objetos censurados por la Inquisición', in *XXIII Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte. Amor y Desamor en las Artes*, Mexico, UNAM, 2001, pp. 353–373.
Rodríguez Moya, I., *La mirada del virrey. Iconografía del poder en la Nueva España*, Castelló de la Plana, Universitat Jaume I, 2003, pp. 214–216.
Toussaint, M., *Pintura colonial en México*, Mexico, UNAM, 1990, p. 172.



The social recognition and artistic prestige achieved by the Oaxacan painter Miguel Cabrera led to his appointment as court painter by Archbishop Manuel Rubio y Salinas. Through the Archbishop's mediation, and at the request of the abbot and chapter of the Collegiate Church of Guadalupe, on 30 April 1751 Cabrera headed a delegation of painters charged with inspecting the sacred *ayate* at first hand. From that moment onwards, Cabrera became the most celebrated copyist of the Guadalupan image, being entrusted with designing the propagandistic campaign surrounding the Virgin's apostolic proclamation as patroness of New Spain in 1754. He was also responsible for a radical transformation in the representation of the Guadalupan effigy, in accordance with the prevailing aesthetic taste of the period.

By looking at this Marian icon one perceives an execution marked by rigorous draughtsmanship and characterised by features charged with a certain childlike innocence, both in the Virgin and in the angel. This effect was achieved through the drawing of an oval, shaded face and a dark, matt complexion, of an almost earthy grey tone, which became increasingly accentuated over the course of the eighteenth century. Among other distinctive characteristics, Cabrera liked to bathe the ever-open mandorla of the image in a torrent of zenithal light, and to apply gold leaf directly onto the brocading of the mantle, the crown, the rays and the stars, in contrast with a radiant white background.

One of the most innovative contributions made within this pictorial genre, however, is to be found in the aesthetic renewal of the cartouches, both as regards the figurative scenes and the decoration of the mouldings and ornaments surrounding the central effigy. About the former, Cabrera remained within traditional schemes, while deepening the gestural language of the body established by previous artists. With complete command of colour and movement, he dissolved the outlines of the figures, presenting them immersed in a vaporous atmosphere charged with theatrical effects. Cabrera repeatedly employs the technique of foreshortening: in the initial episode Juan Diego appears accompanied by one or two angels dressed in graceful tunics; subsequently he reacts violently to the presence of the Virgin, shown from behind, his body extended, his head contorted, one arm raised, one leg poised as if to run away, and his garments swept into the air in a dramatic rapture; the third apparition is confined to the traditional encounter, without any accessory detail; and in the final scene Cabrera renders in detail the throne room, presided over by a heavy red curtain, where Juan Diego unfolds the *tilma* - in some cases upon a table, or held by a servant - before the attentive gaze of the prelate, who, even kneeling, draws close enough to touch it with his hands.

As for the framing of the Marian apparitions, Cabrera's predilection for rococo designs derived from engravings of the French and German schools becomes evident, as has been demonstrated through the analysis of these correspondences.

Gradually the oval profile of the moulding acquired a more realistic form through the succession of scrolls and disguised C-scrolls, which become interlinked in the lower part to support the cartouche bearing the Guadalupan motto or the view of Tepeyac. The landscape composition lost virtually all relevance, becoming increasingly sparse to the point of almost disappearing, especially in works produced in the second half of the eighteenth century.

In this way, Cabrera effectively "patented" a design perfectly attuned to private devotional sentiment, which was quickly copied by his imitators. It consists of a medium-format canvas, with the effigy at the centre and, in the corners, the four cartouches described above, with small, scattered bouquets of roses or roses joined by delicate garlands and ribbons, together with one or more "ruddy, curly-haired" cherubs in various poses, with melancholy gestures, blended into the rocaille ornament of each cartouche. The enormous success achieved by this refined invention is reflected in the multitude of examples sent to Spain by wealthy Indian commissioners. As comparative studies of this serial production have shown, both Cabrera and the members of his workshop must have been involved in meeting such elevated demand. The composition fitted perfectly with the pious interests of the popular religiosity of the time: intimate in character and reserved for the domestic settings of private oratories. Today, most of these canvases are preserved in Spanish and Mexican private collections, with others in various museum institutions.

The present work belongs to this Cabrera-derived typology and was first published by the historian Joaquín González Moreno in the second volume of his *Iconografía Guadalupana* of 1974. It was catalogued as belonging to Don Vicente Lleó Royo, although we know that the work came from the family house in Sanlúcar de Barrameda of his wife, Doña Candelaria Cañal Gómez-Imaz. The cited volume contains a series of errors, for the author states that this image is the one published on the cover; however, it corresponds instead to another work which, also by mistake, belonged to "Doña Araceli Benjumea, widow of Vázquez, who kept it placed in the bedroom of her house, in the Huerta de Nuestra Señora de los Reyes, on the road to Carmona, near the city of Seville". The descendants of the original owners had the painting restored at the beginning of the present century, and there it has remained until today. It was also included in the monograph *Sevilla Guadalupana. Arte, historia y devoción* as a faithful attribution to Miguel Cabrera.

However, the discovery of the inscription "Jose German de Alfaro fecit año 1779 Mexico" on the reverse of the painting (fig. 1) has ultimately determined its true authorship. Very little is known of this painter, who must nevertheless have enjoyed a certain reputation, since he was commissioned to portray the viceroys Martín de Mayorga in 1779 and Bernardo de Gálvez (fig. 2) in 1785, as well as other members of the Creole elite, among them Pedro Romero de Terreros, Count of Regla. A series

of casta paintings on copper from 1787 has also been brought to light, together with certain testimonies concerning his interest in this genre subject matter. In particular, a denunciation before the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Mexico has been examined, relating to his offence against public decency when, at the request of the French clockmaker Juan Sabey, he was painting a pulque tavern scene with a woman "making water". Thanks to the testimony dated 30 May 1786, it is known that Alfaro "had been born in Mexico City, that he was married, was 37 years of age, and lived in Calle San Felipe Neri, in the house known as that of Barón Torre, in an interior dwelling, opposite the Count of Regla". Moreover, in order to demonstrate his innocence, he alleged the pressure exerted by the commissioner when he included the indecorous figure according to the model of the print provided.

This painting is the first documented *Virgin of Guadalupe* in the career of José Germán de Alfaro, and therefore constitutes a significant contribution to his artistic production. The fact that it is a copy after a prototype created by Miguel Cabrera in the middle of the century confirms the continued success of this composition after Cabrera's death – see, for example, the one currently in the Museo Internacional del Barroco (fig. 3). It is possible that a tracing of the design circulated among the disciples and followers of his style, including Alfaro himself, since the arrangement of the figurative repertory corresponds exactly with some of Cabrera's autograph creations. The fact that the identity of the master is found on the reverse may suggest either a strategy of concealment, if the piece was intended to be revalued as an original by Cabrera, or a later addition made at the express wish of the client.

Francisco Montes González[1]
Seville, 24 May 2026.

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Fig. 1: Reverse of the present work, inscribed '*Jose German de Alfaro fecit año 1779 Mexico*'



Fig. 2: José Germán de Alfaro, *Portrait of the Count of Gálvez*, 1785, oil on canvas, 112 x 84 cm (44 ⅛ x 33 ⅛ in.), Museo Nacional de Historia, Mexico City



Fig. 3: Miguel Cabrera, *The Virgin of Guadalupe*, 1765, oil on canvas, Museo Internacional del Barroco, Puebla

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