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EST. 1817

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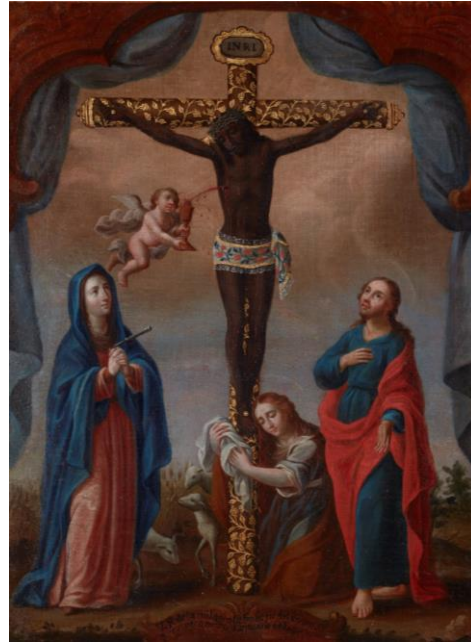
Guatemalan School, 18th century

Black Christ of Esquipulas

Inscribed (at bottom): '*V.R. de la milagrosa imagen del divino Sr q. se venera en su Santuario de Esquipulas*' [True Portrait of the miraculous image of the divine Lord who is venerated in the Shrine of Esquipulas].

Oil on canvas

20 x 15 in. (52 x 39 cm)



Provenance

Private collection, Spain, until 2021.

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'All classes and conditions of people, from the simplest Indian to the most sophisticated members of Guatemala's aristocracy, kneel inside and outside the church, each with lighted candles, each praying or singing while clouds of incense rise to lofty beams. Among them is represented surely every physical, mental and spiritual ill and enough faith to move mountains.' This is what a visitor wrote in the 1930s about Esquipulas (*Four Keys to Guatemala*, New York, 1939, p. 48), located in the eastern part of the Guatemalan Highlands, at the border with Honduras. The object of veneration is the image of a Black Christ (El Señor Crucificado de Esquipulas; fig. 1). After an exceptionally rich cotton harvest in 1594, residents of Esquipulas decided to commission a sculpture of Christ on the Cross by Quirio Cataño (c.1560-c.1622 Santiago, Guatemala), a Portuguese immigrant living in Antigua who delivered the cross to the parish in Esquipulas in 1595. Although a copy of the original contract of the commission survives, many aspects of the Black Christ's origins remain unknown. Traditionally, it has been believed that the black colour of the sculpture's wood was deliberately chosen by the artist to make Christ look like the skin of indigenous inhabitants of Esquipulas, descendants of the Maya Chortí peoples. However, more recent scholarship suggests that the original wood had light tones and was only darkened by being exposed to candle soot, grease, and dust caused by the exceptional number of pilgrims venerating the cross over the centuries. The Black Christ became increasingly popular in the mid-18th century after the Archbishop of Guatemala was miraculously cured of a severe illness. As a result, the cross was enshrined in the baroque Basilica of Esquipulas (fig. 2) which was completed in 1759. The most important pilgrimage site in Central America, it is visited by about 4.5 million pilgrims annually, including 1.5 million in the days leading up to its patronal festival on 15 January and the festival on 9 March which marks the date of the image's arrival to the city in 1595.

The name of Black Christ (*Cristo Negro*) was acquired only relatively recently. The image was previously known as the "Miraculous Crucifix venerated in the town called Esquipulas" or the "Miraculous Lord of Esquipulas." Interestingly, its extraordinary popularity has mainly developed from its acceptance among the natives of Esquipulas, who initially worshipped *Ek-Kampula*, a deity they believed had the power to change the weather. In Mayan culture, it is not unusual for gods to be associated with darkness and the netherworld. The black Christ has therefore become a regional symbol of Guatemalan and Central American ethnic diversity and emerged as a volatile political symbol demarcating Roman Catholic identity in difficult times. As the centuries passed, the image evolved and enjoyed high and low moments of popularity. What began as a light-skinned crucified Jesus in the late sixteenth century had been transformed into a blackened figure by the eighteenth century. Catholic clerics consecrated the shrine in 1916 with the

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blessing of the Vatican, while emerging Protestant groups attacked it as a graven image. Its blackness provoked theological debate and political controversy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and highlighted how ethnic tensions fuelled political conflict and controversy. The changing ethnic character of eastern Guatemala from the colonial to the national periods paralleled the shrine's transformation.

There are numerous devotional images of the Black Christ from the 19th century. However, only a comparatively small number of sculptures and paintings executed in the 18th century are known to exist. Some of those have been brought to Spain, including the present depiction, which can be closely compared with the canvas in the Church of La Merced, Guatemala, from c.1700 (fig. 3). Both pictures display typical decorative elements from the Colonial School within the clothing, the brocade, and the gilt applied in the form of leaves entwined around the cross and on Christ's sendal loincloth, and the incorporation of flowers on the latter. Further versions from the early 18th century include the picture located in Torreón, Coahuila de Zaragoza, Mexico (fig. 4) as well as a canvas with an unknown location (fig. 5).

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Fig. 1: *Black Christ from Esquipulas*. 1594, Esquipulas Basilica. Guatemala - Quirio Cataño (ca.1560 – ca. 1622 Santiago, Guatemala)



Fig. 2: Cathedral Basilica of the Black Christ of Esquipulas

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Fig. 3: *Black Christ from Esquipulas*, School of Guatemala, ca. 1700, Church of La Merced, Guatemala



Fig. 5: *Black Christ of Esquipulas or Our Lord of Esquipulas*, ca. 1700, School of Guatemala, unknown location.



Fig 4. *Black Christ of Esquipulas or Our Lord of Esquipulas with Calvary*, ca. 1700, School of Guatemala, Arocena Museum, Torreón, Coahuila de Zaragoza, Mexico