1 **Mass of Saint Gregory**

1539

Feathers on wood with touches of paint

26 in. × 22 in. (68 × 56 cm)

Musée d'Auch, France

The earliest Peninsular reference to feather paintings occurs in Felipe de Guevara's sixteenth-century *Comentarios de la pintura*:

We must justly concede that the Indians brought something new and rare to art with bird-feather painting. Using the diversity of colored feathers created by nature, which they industriously plucked, divided, separated, and mixed, these indigenous artists modeled realistic clothing, flesh, and objects.

Guevara undoubtedly writes as an eyewitness, having had the chance to appreciate, in shipments from New Spain to Philip's court, manuscripts, precious stones, silver and gold jewelry, and feather paintings, among many other objects that showed the Indians' skill as artisans.

Hernán Cortés also expressed admiration for these indigenous works in a letter written to Charles V from Mexico in 1520:

"Moctezuma has all the things to be found under the heavens in his domain, fashioned in gold and silver and jewels and feathers; and so realistic in gold and silver that no smith in the world could have done better, and in jewels so fine that it is impossible to imagine with what instruments they were cut so perfectly; and those in feathers more wonderful than anything in wax or embroidery." As a result, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's descriptions of the practice of gold- and silversmithing, lapidary, and featherwork during the early period of evangelization are invaluable. The didactic methodology and technique of manufacture used in the Franciscan schools of mechanical arts appear to follow closely those used by the Indians themselves immediately before the conquest, with the sole innovation of Christian images as models.

Colonial featherwork reached its pinnacle during the sixteenth-century process of evangelization, especially in the Valley of Mexico, Michoacán, and perhaps Tlaxcala. Religious chroniclers like Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas have left us detailed information about the importance of this art. Las Casas praises the feather artists (amanentes) who worked in the school of San José de los Naturales—founded about 1527 by the Flemish Franciscan lay brother Pedro de Gante on the exact site where Moctezuma's aviary and imperial workshops had stood—but he reserves his highest praise for the feather artists of Michoacán:

Every day they make images and altarpieces and many other things for us out of feathers, interjecting gold elements here and there that make the piece showier, more precious, and universally admired.
And with no prodding on our part, they make borders for chasubles and capes, and veils and sleeves of crosses for religious processions and services, as well as miters for bishops that . . . could not be more beautiful nor agreeable to the sight. The artists of this kind who outstrip all others in New Spain are in the province of Mecuaucan. 10

Las Casas praises the skill of the amanteca in placing a feather so that,

looked at from one angle, it will seem golden while lacking gold; from another angle, it will have a green sheen without being green; looked at crosswise, it will display another lovely color; and the same from many other angles, all shimmering marvelously. 11

Since its iridescences seemed to correspond to the transfiguration of divine light, feather painting became a favorite medium for all kinds of liturgical garments and devotional images during the sixteenth century. The rich feathers were of a great variety, many coming from faraway lands through trade routes. From Guatemala came guetzal feathers; from hot climates, those of hummingbirds, parrots, and other rare birds. Some birds were raised domestically in order to pluck and sell their feathers.

According to Sahagun'S Historia, there were two techniques used in pre-Hispanic featherwork. For feather clothing, headdresses, and fans, the feathers were sewn or tied with maguey thread in an overlapping pattern onto net fabric or cane frameworks. For feather mosaic pictures or shields, patterns were drawn on maguey-leaf or fig-tree paper reinforced with carded cotton and glue. Then this backing was covered with a bed of trimmed and glue-basted feathers. Over this bed, precious feathers, cut to size with copper or obsidian blades, were applied with bone tools. Fine lines were created by overlapping the layers so closely that some colors almost disappeared, and the contrast between iridescent and matte feathers was manipulated to create various effects.

Among the feathers used were those of the quetzal, hummingbird, parrot, heron, spoonbill, troupial, and blue cottinga. 12 The variety of birds bred in Moctezuma's royal aviary to provide a constant feather supply so overwhelmed the Spanish captain Bernal Díaz del Castillo that he felt forced to abstain from enumerating every kind of bird that was there and its peculiarity, for there was everything from the Royal Eagle . . . down to tiny birds of many-colored plumage. [In addition to others I have mentioned] there were parrots of many different colors and there were so many of them that I forget their names, not to mention the beautifully marked ducks. 13

One of the earliest documented examples of featherwork with Christian iconography is the standard of the Virgin Mary that the Indians of Huejotzingo financed and produced in 1531 to honor Nuño de Guzmán and his conquest of New Galicia. The piece is reproduced in the Harkness Codex, which records the superhuman cost in gold, slaves, feathers, and handiwork that the production of such an object implied. 14 Unfortunately, the standard's whereabouts today is unknown. The oldest known surviving piece of colonial featherwork is this Mass of Saint Gregory.

The importance of the Mass of Saint Gregory for the history of evangelical art lies not only in its technical and artistic excellence, state of preservation, and size, but also in its unique role as a document: it is the only feather painting that records precise information about the time and place of its production and the names of its recipient, patron, and donor, as well as those who may have been responsible for the composition and for approving its propriety or decorum. All of this is registered in the dedicatory legend of the border: “Pau lo III pontifici maxima / en magna indiaru[m] urbe Mexico / composita d[omi]no Didaco guberna /tore cura fr[atr]is Petri a Gante minoritae A.D. 1539” (Fashioned for Pope Paul III in the great city of Mexico of the Indies by the governor Don Diego under the care of Fray Pedro de Gante of the Minorites, A.D. 1539). 15

The governor mentioned here is, without a doubt, Diego de Alvarado Huautitzin, nephew and son-in-law of Moctezuma II. After being deposed as lord of Ecatepec by Hernán Cortés, he was appointed Indian governor (tlatoani) of San Juan Tenochtitlan from 1539 to 1542 by Antonio de
Mendoza, the first viceroy. The fact that Alvarado Huanitzin dedicated the featherwork to Pope Paul III in the name of his people clearly demonstrates the prevailing custom among indigenous lords of sending gifts of fealty to both the reigning pope and the emperor.

Depictions of the Mass of Saint Gregory derive from what appears to be a fifteenth-century legend promoting belief in Christ’s actual presence in the host of the Eucharist. The story goes that the sixth-century saint and some deacons, one of them a doubter, witnessed Christ’s bodily presence on the altar at the moment of the host’s consecration. The image of the risen Christ as the Man of Sorrows surrounded by instruments of the Passion (Arma Christi) may have been conflated with representations of the Mass of Saint Gregory because it had been in use as a visual means of explaining the mystery of the Eucharist to the faithful since the early thirteenth century, when the dogma of transubstantiation was promulgated by the Fourth Lateran Council.

Toward the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries, the devotion of the Mass of Saint Gregory became firmly rooted in Spain: altarscreen with paintings and reliefs of the theme proliferated, even in churches dedicated to other devotions. Extraordinary examples arrived from Flanders, and local artists such as Francisco de Coca and Pedro Berruguete received commissions to paint the theme. Furthermore, the impact of foreign engravings of the subject that arrived in Spain in great numbers via the fair of Medina del Campo and other channels is apparent in compositions such as the Mass of Saint Gregory in the Confessional of Alonso de Madrigal (Salamanca, 1562), which shows strong similarities to an engraving of 1480-90 by Israhel van Meckenem (c. 1445-1503). It is thus not surprising that in the New World the religious orders charged with evangelizing the Indians fervently espoused devotion to the Eucharist and promoted its diffusion through European engravings of the Mass of Saint Gregory bearing papal indulgences. These prints inspired both feather paintings and murals.

Among the great variety of engravings of the Mass of Saint Gregory, those that come closest to the feather painting that concerns us here were produced at the end of the fifteenth century by the prolific engraver Israhel van Meckenem (see, for example, fig. 56). The feather painting, however, simplifies the composition by eliminating the elaborate architectural background and altarpiece, as well as the onlookers beside the altar. Obviously, we cannot say with certainty that the Meckenem engravings served as the precise source since copies or derivative versions, perhaps Spanish, may have been used instead.

The reverse side of the board that supports the feather painting is covered in polychrome lacquerware, a craft technique practiced in Michoacán before and after the conquest. The background is a bright red ochre and displays at its center the monogram XPS associated with devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus, which was revitalized by the Minorite friar Saint Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444) and widely diffused in New Spain by both Franciscans and Augustinians.

The Flemish Minorite Franciscan Fray Pedro de Gante, whose name appears in the inscription of the feather painting, was the founder and guiding spirit of San José de los Nativos, an artisan school for natives attached to the Franciscan motherhouse in Mexico City. As such, he was in charge of supervising and inspecting religious works executed by the natives of the area, and his special religious devotions seem to be reflected in the iconography of both the Mass of Saint Gregory and the monogram of the Holy Name of Jesus. Gante founded the brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament and may also have founded the brotherhood of the Holy Name of Jesus since his cell was one of those expressly dedicated to meditations on the Holy Name of Jesus.

The inscribed date of 1539—the earliest for an existing featherwork—coincides with the year the news arrived in Mexico of the papal bull promulgated by Paul III proscribing the enslavement of Indians and defending their full rationality and consequent lawful access to the sacraments—including the Eucharist. The sacramental symbolism contained in both the theme of the Mass of Saint Gregory and the monogram that dominates the back of the work makes this an especially apt object to dedicate to the pope—even more so in light of the view held by Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas and other missionaries that the art of feather painting

...
What without a doubt seems to exceed all human inventiveness and will impress all other nations of the world as more new than strange and therefore to be admired and esteemed is the art and craft that those Mexican peoples know how to work so perfectly, making from natural feathers with their own natural colors all that which they and other excellent and first-rate painters can produce with paintbrushes.  

As the ranking native government official in the Republic of Indians, Diego de Alvarado Huanitzin offered an extraordinary gift to Paul III, the pope who had recently published a series of declarations protecting the rights of Amerindians. Only two years earlier, on 9 June 1537, Pope Paul III issued the bull Sublimis Deus, news of which reached Mexico in 1539. This papal decree against enslaving the Amerindians and seizing their property pronounced "Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians" to be endowed with the "nature and faculties" necessary to receive the Christian faith solely by "preaching of the word of God and by the example of good and holy living." With this decree, the pope strengthened Emperor Charles V's recent order (probably the one dated 2 August 1530) by adding the penalty of excommunication for those who violated imperial law. Some jurists today consider the pope's unprecedented position on human rights to be the true foundation of international law.

The papal bull was issued in direct response to an escalating contest over human and material resources in the Americas. It is within this politicized, ideologically freighted frame of reference that the significance of this particular Mass of Saint Gregory must be sought. The Holy Roman Emperor and the Roman Catholic Church did not always act in concert as the Sublimis Deus might suggest. A central issue in what amounted to a complex power struggle was whether Amerindians had the ability to maintain dominion over their own property, a topic much discussed by theologians and jurists in Aristotelian terms as dependent on their humanness. Aristotle distinguished between two types of enslavement: through capture and through being born "slaves by nature," constitutionally incapable of fully human powers of reasoning.

The outcome of this debate over the true nature of Amerindians had obvious economic implications: if they were not fully rational creatures, they were legitimately subject to enslavement, conveniently providing the Hapsburg emperor and the Spanish crown with an ample labor force to extract silver and gold from Mexican and Peruvian mines. To speed the decision along, the Royal Council of the Indies encouraged Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, translator of a highly respected edition of The Politics, the text in which Aristotle's crucial discussion of slavery appears, to justify war against the Amerindians, although they ultimately rejected his argument. Alternatively, if Amerindians were merely immature humans, like children—as was argued in their behalf—they possessed the capacity for fully rational thought and only needed proper guidance. The initial step in this educational process, as Saint Augustine had maintained, was their acceptance of the Christian doctrine of salvation—in other words, baptism.

Paul III addressed these complicated issues in no uncertain terms: in the 1537 bull, he sided with the Dominican Julián Garces, bishop of Tlaxcala; the Franciscan Juan de Zumarraga, bishop of Mexico; and other missionaries like Dominicans Bernardino de Minaya and Bartolomé de Las Casas, all of whom defended the Amerindians' capacity to be converted by teaching rather than conquered by force. This contest for Amerindian souls culminated in a famous inconclusive debate between Sepúlveda and Las Casas, held in Valladolid, Spain, in 1550-51. The Mass of Saint Gregory feather mosaic, however, was made eleven years earlier, immediately after Paul III's decree reached New Spain, when an assimilated, Christianized government official of noble Aztec descent like Diego de Alvarado might have felt optimistic about the future and deeply grateful to a pope who recognized the intelligence of the Amerindian peoples.

The iconography of depictions of the Mass of Saint Gregory includes both a Man of Sorrows and the Arms of Christ, associated with the cult of the Passion, a favorite devotion of the earliest
Franciscans in Mexico and a motif that can be associated with a utopian concept of the universal Christian church.\(^3\) The imagery on this featherwork painting was probably derived from a European print similar, or perhaps identical, to an engraving by Israhel van Meckenem of about 1490-1500 (fig. 56), one of ten versions of the subject by the same artist.\(^4\) A Latin inscription below the image in the European engraving indicates that the sheet was intended as an indulgence granted to whoever recited the requisite prayers to the instruments of Christ's Passion.

In this connection, it is important to remember that Saint Gregory the Great, a sixth-century pope and one of the four Latin Church Fathers, defended the religious use of images because they function as a "Bible for the illiterate."\(^5\) As such, images could dramatically illustrate abstract religious concepts like the doctrine of transubstantiation inherent in the mass. There are significant differences, however, between an inexpensive broadsheet issued to pilgrims and a unique gift of state crafted in precious, exotic materials and intended for the chief representative of Christ on earth. Given the timing of the gift, the choice of subject suggests that Pope Paul III was to be praised as a latter-day Saint Gregory, no doubt for his strong defense of the Indians' fully human capacities. Viewed in this context, the featherwork painting is a magnanimous gesture, eloquently rendered in a medium well established in pre-Columbian times as a form of tribute that both the Amerindians and their European conquerors considered the most elevated form of indigenous art.\(^6\)

On close inspection, the featherwork diverges from its print prototype in several respects. The most striking difference is the elimination of representatives of the secular church who stand beside the altar in the print and supposedly include Saints Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, Gregory's fellow Doctors of the Church. In the feather mosaic, only the kneeling assistants and the officiating pope witness the miracle. It is possible to read the elimination of cardinals and bishops from the mosaic supervised by the Franciscan missionary Pedro de Gante as a reference to escalating disputes between the regular and secular clergy, especially since the pope and his deacons, as pictured by Meckenem, could also be understood as tonsured Franciscan friars, members of the regular clergy whose ascetic lifestyle figured prominently in the program of evangelization. During the first few decades of spiritual conquest by the regular clergy, in imitation of the original apostolic era of the "primitive church," a mission system without accountability to the secular church hierarchy had been established. However, tension between the regular and secular clergy over the right to claim Amerindian souls soon developed, as attested, among other things, by a letter written in 1537 to Charles V at a meeting of the New Spanish provincial bishops (who were appointed from the regular clergy at this time) to review the problems of evangelization.\(^7\) Two years later, in 1539, the date of this painting, the first in a

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Fig. 56. ISRAEL VAN MECKENEM, Mass of Saint Gregory, c. 1490-1500, engraving. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Rosenwald Collection, 1954.12.121 (8-21489).
ally hybrid means of communication. Although it is tempting to think the feather painting refers to these contemporary events, this conclusion is impossible to substantiate in the absence of external evidence. Nonetheless, subtle though the changes in subject matter are, given the historical circumstances just described, they are sufficient to render sixteenth-century understanding of the iconography to a certain degree irresolvable and open-ended—like many artistically and culturally hybrid works of colonial art. This feather mosaic is the earliest example.

There is no doubt, however, that Fray Diego Valadés, a Franciscan friar born and raised in Mexico. From his testimony, and from other material evidence such as atrial crosses like the one that stood in the forecourt of the Capilla de los Indios of the Basílica de Guadalupe in Mexico City, we know that rebuslike signs, specifically the Arms of Christ, were a popular devotion among the first Franciscan missionaries, though the iconography is by no means unique to the order. Gante and other missionaries used visual images extensively during the early years of the conquest when language was an extreme barrier to communication, as we know from numerous sources including the important pedagogical text Rhetorica Christiana (Perugia, Italy, 1579) written and illustrated by Gante’s pupil Diego Valadés, a Franciscan friar born and raised in Mexico. From his testimony, and from other material evidence such as atrial crosses like the one that stood in the forecourt of the Capilla de los Indios of the Basílica de Guadalupe in Mexico City, we know that rebuslike signs, specifically the Arms of Christ, were used to teach the catechism. In his book, Valadés provided engraved illustrations of catechism classes being taught in the open-air atrium of the Franciscan monastery in Mexico City. As noted, the Arms of Christ were a popular devotion among the first Franciscan missionaries, though the iconography is by no means unique to the order. Gante and other missionaries used visual images extensively during the early years of the conquest when language was an extreme barrier to communication, as we know from numerous sources including the important pedagogical text Rhetorica Christiana (Perugia, Italy, 1579) written and illustrated by Gante’s pupil Diego Valadés, a Franciscan friar born and raised in Mexico. From his testimony, and from other material evidence such as atrial crosses like the one that stood in the forecourt of the Capilla de los Indios of the Basílica de Guadalupe in Mexico City, we know that rebuslike signs, specifically the Arms of Christ, were used to teach the catechism. In his book, Valadés provided engraved illustrations of catechism classes being taught in the open-air atrium of the Franciscan monastery in Mexico City. As noted, the Arms of Christ were a popular devotion among the first Franciscan missionaries, though the iconography is by no means unique to the order. Gante and other missionaries used visual images extensively during the early years of the conquest when language was an extreme barrier to communication, as we know from numerous sources including the important pedagogical text Rhetorica Christiana (Perugia, Italy, 1579) written and illustrated by Gante’s pupil Diego Valadés, a Franciscan friar born and raised in Mexico.
flowers were formerly associated with sacrifice in pre-Columbian ceremonies and not out of place in Christian settings either. The most striking addition to the conventional Christian iconography, however, is a feature that might have originated in a misunderstanding of the print source: whereas Christ's head is bent in humble submission in Meckenem's engraving, his neck cast in deep shadow, in the Mexican reinterpretation the shadow is red. Is blood flowing from the crown of thorns or gushing from a neck wound? Again, the imagery is unorthodox by European standards, but its significance is difficult to assess. In the European prototype imagery, moreover, blood from the wound in Christ's side flows into the chalice on the altar table in some examples. This detail illustrating the central Eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation is missing in the amanecayotl. There too, the conventional setting in a church interior has been eliminated in favor of an undifferentiated blue background. Isolating each sign against a brilliantly colored ground makes it easier to remember the images, as European treatises devoted to memory training recommend and as other visual examples of the same motif, such as Fra Angelico's mid-fifteenth-century frescoes in the cells of San Marco monastery in Florence attest. Yet the choice of color might also be interpreted as serving a narrative function by indicating an outdoor setting for this particular Gregorian Mass—the priest and his assistants appear to be kneeling on the bare ground—an especially inviting hypothesis because outdoor services were held in open-sided chapels in sixteenth-century Mexico.

Considered in conjunction, these changes in subject matter prompt speculations about the artist's motive. Intentionality eludes modern interpreters, however: the transformations may be meaningful, or they may be no more than misunderstandings on the part of indigenous artists, although it is likely that Gante himself approved the innovations. None of the alterations discussed here may therefore have been considered to interfere with or subvert the orthodox doctrinal content of the image.

The mnemonic devices, moreover, attest to the mental capacity of their users to "recollect," that is, to remember the central mysteries of the Christian faith by contemplating the mnemonic signs that refer to them. Mnemonic signs initiate the inferential process of recollection that is uniquely human, according to Aristotle and his commentators from Cicero to Saint Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. The leaving task of recollection is retrieval—a memory image, wrote Aristotle in De memoria (450b12-23), is like an imprint or drawing, causing us to remember what is not present; a memory drawing, like a painted panel, is an object of contemplation, a sort of copy and a reminder, like a cue card. Thomas Aquinas described memory as the faculty responsible for the conversion of images into abstractions or universals and reserved the term recollection to describe a kind of human reasoning, a "quasi-syllogistic search." In his account of the human arts in De quantitate animae, Saint Augustine defined the third degree of the human soul as memoria, requiring anima aduersio (attention), proper to man and distinct from the sense memory of animals.

In the fifteenth century, Saint Antoine, the Dominican archbishop of Florence whose Summa Theologia was among the earliest books recorded in New Spain, urged his readers to learn the art of projecting sacred concepts into memory figures. In describing and illustrating the basic tenets of medieval psychology, Valades focused on the role played by the art of memory in teaching sacred doctrine to neophytes at San José de los Nativos, where images were placed in strategic locations along liturgical procession routes. Neo-Aristotelian distinctions about various mental operations were further institutionalized in early modern European classifications of the human sciences, and the arts played a particularly significant role in this context. The mental capacity to recollect, that is, to draw a series of inferences, as Aristotle and his commentators defined the distinction between the human faculty of memory and the retentive memory of animals, was both directly cited and indirectly implied throughout sixteenth-century discussions of the American Indians' mental capacities. The same texts and arguments later played a key, and more pernicious, role in racial theory.

The significance of this language of signs in a gift destined for Pope Paul III is clarified by the historical context of the pontiff's Sublimis Deus Mass...
issued some ten years after the opening of San José de los Naturales. In 1539, Paul III would have been ideally well disposed to understand what was implied by the choice of both the subject and the artistic medium. Indeed, for any beholder attuned to the debate, this Mass of Saint Gregory testifies to the truly human nature of Amerindians in terms that preclude the debate of Valladolid by at least a decade. It is perhaps not an overstatement to claim that, by 1539, the terms on which the Indians’ mental capacities were judged were part of an international, transcultural discourse in which the culturally dispossessed also participated—at least to the limited extent of a few assimilated members of the Amerindian elite. Ironically, this erudite gift offered as evidence of his own humanness by a bicultural colonial subject in the language of the conqueror in a medium prized by both colonized and colonizer apparently never reached its intended destination in the sixteenth century. Yet, the same profoundly conceived object can, 450 years later, help explain the checkered history of the utopian idea that humans by nature belong to a universal community of mankind. Culturally hybrid colonial works of art and, more generally, visual modes of crossing cultural barriers, played a strategic, multilateral role in the history of this crucial modern idea.

2  
**Jesus at the Age of Twelve**

*Weeping Virgin*

1520–1560

Inscribed respectively Jean. Bapt. me fecit. Michua[n]j

Feathers on copper

10 x 7 3/4 in. (25.4 x 19 cm) each

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

This pair of feather mosaics depicting the youthful Jesus and his mother was produced in Michoacán, where the pre-Hispanic art of feather painting flourished in the early colonial period under the auspices of Bishop Vasco de Quiroga (1472–1565) at trade schools attached to the region’s Augustinian monasteries, particularly the one in Térripetío, and later in workshops in other towns around Lake Patzcuaro. These examples are signed, respectively, Juan Bautista and Juan Cuiris, though both names may identify the same feather painter.

The mosaics represent the third sorrow of the Virgin Mary expressed in the biblical story usually depicted in art as Christ among the Doctors, in which the youthful Jesus slips away from his family and remains behind in the temple for three days questioning the rabbinical scholars. The inscription that encircles the face of the Virgin conveys her dismay at her son’s defection: *Fili quid fecisti nobis sic et pater tum dolentes quaerebamus te* (Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously. Luke 2.48 Revised Standard Version). Jesus’ response is inscribed on the oval border around his image: *Quid est quod me quaeritis non est me in hoc quo playto me non spatet me cac* (How is it you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house? Luke 2.49 RSV).

The first mention of these delicate feather mosaics appears in an early seventeenth-century inventory of the treasury of the celebrated art patron Rudolph II of Prague (1552–1612), who was named Holy Roman Emperor in 1576. His