

The Wall Street Journal
July 9-10, 2016

Masterpiece

“Four Fates of the Soul” (c. 1775) Believed to be by Manuel Chili

Dazzling Reminders of Mortality

In ‘Four Fates of the Soul,’ Death and the three alternatives that await the deceased’s soul—Heaven, Purgatory and Hell—spur the viewer to contemplation with compelling detail.



A meditation on the afterlife from Latin America. Photo: The Hispanic Society of America

by Judith H. Dobrzynski

Every now and then, a dazzling work of art resurfaces, seemingly out of nowhere. It happened recently with a quartet of little polychrome wood sculptures made in Ecuador in the 18th century and purchased by the Hispanic Society of America Museum and Library at an art fair in New York in May.

These “Four Fates of the Soul,” which have been in a private European collection for the past 80 years, escaped the notice of art historians and seem not to have been published. They are, said Mitchell Coddington, the Hispanic Society’s director, “totally unique in our experience”—and totally arresting.

Ranging in height from 6¼ to 7½ inches, these half-length figures portray in striking detail Death, represented by a skeleton, and the three alternatives that await the deceased’s soul: Heaven, seen as a prayerful figure cloaked in a floral tunic; Purgatory, depicted as a contrite, naked supplicant; and Hell, a wretched, fiery figure evincing terrible pain. As a reminder of our mortality, they send shivers up the spine, rattle the brain and—as intended—provoke meditation on eternity.

The damned soul, surrounded and completely reddened by flames, is the most captivating, the apotheosis of the series. This condemned man screams out, head cocked toward heaven, mouth agape and tongue extended, perhaps hoping for a drop of watery respite (like the rich man in Hades in the Gospel of Luke). Tears stream from his glass eyes, which are red. His wild hair is afire; his body seared. His arms, one plagued by a toad, the other by a leech, are fettered at the wrists and chained to his neck. His pain is so great that he tears open his chest in anguish.

Though they are unsigned, Mr. Coddington and other experts are convinced that the sculptures were made by Manuel Chili (c. 1723-1796), an indigenous artist known as Caspicara (“wooden face” in Quechua). He was one of two prominent sculptors in 18th-century Ecuador; the other, Bernardo de Legarda (c. 1700-1773), being one of his teachers. By their era, Spanish missionaries had been importing Spanish Renaissance and Baroque artworks for centuries, giving rise to the Quito School, which mixed their intense, often gruesome realism with indigenous sensibilities. The New World artworks, like Caspicara’s figures, were richly colored, lavishly decorated, largely religious pieces that, even when depicting bloody themes, often glisten with gold and silver.

Caspicara carved many works that can be seen in Ecuador’s churches and museums. Among his distinguishing characteristics are a markedly accurate portrayal of human anatomy, the ability to capture emotion, and precise carving. Historical accounts cite King Charles III of Spain (1716-1788) saying, with some bravado, “I am not concerned that Italy has Michelangelo; in my colonies of America I have the master Caspicara.”

For his “Souls,” Caspicara probably drew on one of two sets of European prints (which can now be seen in the collection of the British Museum). One sequence comprises four similar images, c.

1610-1620, made by Egbert van Panderen, a Dutch engraver. Another array contains six prints, c. 1615, by the German engraver Alexander Mair; it adds a dying man and a bishop's coat of arms, neither, it seems, made by Caspicara.

The Van Panderen match is closer, but even he was just an inspiration. Caspicara literally fleshes out each soul, giving each a torso, changing their poses and investing them with emotion the prints lack. While it's uncertain whether these sculptures were part of an altarpiece or displayed on their own, perhaps in niches, it is clear that their master carver was a perfectionist: They are completely finished in the round, with each strand of hair on the back of their heads delineated, each rib visible.

The "Souls" start simply with the skeleton—a fairly faithful representation except that the decayed body, including rotten teeth, is elongated for emphasis—and escalate in intensity. The celestial soul, with highly polished rosy cheeks, cherry lips and individually painted eyelashes, is surrounded by clouds. He (though some think this figure is female, Mr. Coddington believes all four are male) wears a rosette-bedecked blue garment with a lustrous belt and sleeve ends, an effect achieved by placing a layer of gold or silver leaf beneath the paint and finish.

Like the blessed and damned figures, the sunken-cheeked soul in purgatory gazes skyward; he emits tiny glass tears from his glass blue eyes, which also have eyelashes. Caspicara elongated his fingers, perhaps to stress the physicality of his pleading. He is suffering, tinged with flames, but not as terribly as the condemned soul.

In essence, Caspicara makes all four more expressive than their inspiration, a more compelling spur to contemplation.

The idea of representing souls is not unique in Spanish and Spanish Colonial art; but depicting these four manifestations does seem to be. For all four of Caspicara's soul-stirring pieces to have survived together is rarer still. At a time when many museums are rushing to make up for their past lack of interest in art from Latin America, the Hispanic Society has snagged quite a catch.

—Ms. Dobrzynski writes about culture for many publications and blogs at www.artsjournal.com/realcleararts.

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