

# SÃO ROQUE

Antiques & Art Gallery

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*The Virgin and Child — India, Goa, 17th century (2nd half)*



## THE VIRGIN AND CHILD

Cast, repoussé and chased silver

India, Goa, 17th century (2nd half)

Dim.: 52.0 × 24.4 × 22.0 cm

Weight: 5125.0 g

B296

Provenance: Mário Duarte, collection Coimbra; M.P. and J.M.J. collections, Lisbon.

Exhibited: 'Índia in Portugal — Um Tempo de Confluências Artísticas', Museu N. de Soares dos Reis, Oporto 2021 (cat. no. 41).

This exceptional sculpture, impressive for both its dimensions and its weight, as well as for the technical mastery of its execution, is a *tour de force* of Portuguese India made jewellery, only comparable to a small number of other extant examples connected to Jesuit Religious Houses in Goa and to one other sculpture at Evora Cathedral.<sup>1</sup>

Portraying the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception with the Child, and entirely made in silver, it was most certainly created for a wealthy patron or a major religious institution. Furthermore, due to its truly exceptional artistic merits, it has survived the destiny of many such pieces which were dismantled and melted to be recast into other, more modern objects.

The image is composed of three separate elements; a plinth decorated with large protruding volutes and cherubs, the full body sculpture of the Virgin Mary and the independently cast figure of The Child Jesus.

The sturdy squared pedestal is composed by a thick plate of repoussé and chased silver with cast elements welded to the structure and equally chiselled. These elements, probably sand cast, are characterised by narrow Mannerist style panels and cherub's heads. The Virgin Mary, standing and attached to the pedestal by four quatrefoil screws welded to the sculpture's base, is made out of a thick sheet of repoussé and chiselled silver, with the exception of the head, which was probably moulded by lost

wax casting. The arms and shoulders were produced separately and welded to the body, while the sand-cast hands are riveted to the Virgin's cloak.

The hollow and equally sand-cast sculpture of the Child Jesus is fixed to the larger figure by two finely made bolts; a longer one, fixing the Child's left leg to the Virgin's left arm, and a shorter flattened headed bolt that fastens the Child's right arm, in raised, blessing gesture, to the Virgin's torso, from the interior of the body cavity.

The evidence of threaded orifices to the top of the Virgin's head suggests the presence of a now missing crown, while the two quatrefoil headed bolts attached to the sculpture's back might correspond to structural attachments for a missing element, perhaps a large silver radiant halo, similar to the one described further along in this text.

Gracious but rather hieratic, the figure betrays its Indian origin in its proportions, facial characteristics and obvious decorative *horror vacui*. The Virgin Mary, portrayed in profound contemplation and standing on the lunar crescent, holds the Child, of outstretched arms, on the left, while keeping Her right arm identically outstretched. Unveiled and with exposed ears — a detail characteristic of Hindu religious idols — and long curly hair, the figure is attired in a long draped robe that hides the feet. The whole costume is finely chased, in a European style 'ferron-

<sup>1</sup> Published in Hugo Miguel Crespo, *A Índia em Portugal, um Tempo de Confluências Artísticas* (cat.), Porto, Bluebook, 2021, pp. 120–127, e p. 152, cat. 41.



nerie' pattern that simulates damask or brocade, on a punctured ground, the lining decorated in a different lattice pattern.

A similar European textile design, albeit not as refined in execution, has been identified on the back of a late 17th century Goa made silver coated wooden reliquary that guards a fragment of Saint Francis Xavier (1506 – 1552) surplice. Once kept at Saint Paul's College it now belongs to the Museum of Christian Art at the former Convent of Saint Monica in Old Goa (inv. 01.1.119).<sup>2</sup> These complex textile patterns, in addition to the plinth's erudite late Mannerist decorative motifs, the 'obra de laço' and the acanthus leaves frieze, suggest and reinforce a second-half of the 17th century dating for this sculpture.

Iconography representing the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception acquires particular relevance in Goa from the mid-17th century onwards, once the Portuguese crown was formally gifted to the Virgin Mary by King João IV in 1646, as thanksgiving for intervening in freeing the Kingdom from 60 years of Spanish ruling (1580 – 1640).

This particular sculpture shares both stylistic and production characteristics with a well-known part gilt, repoussé and chiselled monumental image (143 cm) of Saint Francis Xavier. Made ca. 1670 from the silver bequeathed by a devoted Genoese, Geronima Maria Francesca Sopranis, specifically for the making of an ornament for Old Goa's Bom Jesus Basilica, it remained for centuries close to the saint's tomb.<sup>3</sup> It was recorded in 1717 as holding as attributes an enamelled silver lily and a silver cross, reason why the arms were articulated, similarly to the Hindu *utsava murti*. Another silver example, albeit of earlier dating and probably depicting Saint Geracina, does also evidence identical local characteristics, its quality of execution clearly recognisable in the sophistication of the chiselled decoration.<sup>4</sup>

Also comparable in size (70.0 × 30.0 cm) and related in its iconography is a silver image of The Virgin and Child that, according to the inscription featured, was commissioned by Diogo de Brito<sup>5</sup>. Now belonging to Evora Cathedral Museum this large sculpture keeps both of its gilt silver crowns and a large radiant halo, set with stones and coloured glasses, and holds a large gold Rosary in the Virgin's outstretched hands, details that allow for its identification as The Virgin of the Rosary, imagery of intense devotion in Portuguese controlled Asia. Of polychrome face and hands, details that somehow alter the Indian facial characteristics that the image might have portrayed, if indeed it is original, its chased decoration is of identical quality and follows an identical decorative repertoire which, as if produced by the best Lisbon workshops from the reign of King Pedro II, betrays the same erudition of models.

Despite the presence of the lunar crescent, the fact that the Virgin's hands are represented in a position identical to the Evora example, allows for an identification of the present silver sculpture as the Virgin of the Rosary.

Notwithstanding its size and importance, we are still unsure of the original provenance of our Virgin and Child. Research carried out on the inventories of the various Goan Religious Houses, mostly dated from the 19th century, have not shed light onto its original context. However, for its exceptional quality it is undoubtedly one of the most important silver objects ever made in Portuguese India that remain in private hands, having most certainly been produced by local Goan artisans under close Portuguese supervision. ✍ HC

<sup>2</sup> Nuno Vassallo e Silva, *A Ourivesaria entre Portugal e a Índia do século XVI ao século XVIII*, Lisboa, Santander Totta, 2008, pp. 188 – 191.

<sup>3</sup> See: Urte Krass, 'Qualche ornamento stabile, e perpetuo' Die Silberstatue des Hl. Franz Xaver in Goa und ihre performative Vereinnahmung im 17. Jahrhundert', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 2013, pp. 72 – 93.

<sup>4</sup> Hugo Miguel Crespo, *As Jóias da Carreira da Índia* (cat.), Lisboa, Fundação Oriente, 2014, pp. 145 – 151, cat. 123.

<sup>5</sup> See: Maria Natália Correia Guedes (ed.), *Encontro de Culturas. Oito Séculos de Missionaço Portuguesa* (cat.), Lisboa, Conferência Episcopal Portuguesa, 1994, p. 227, cat. XV.219.

