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A Virgin of Sorrows Attributed to Juan Correa

ACCORDING TO ORAL TRADITION, the painting of the *Virgin of Sorrows* (figure 1) in the collection of the museum of the Church of San Felipe de Neri in Albuquerque, New Mexico was painted by the Mexican Baroque artist Juan Correa. It is believed to have been brought to the church from Mexico in the 1880s. It is unknown from whom the painting was purchased. The only information known concerning the sale was that the *Dolorosa* was purchased along with a *Crucifixion* also believed to be by Juan Correa, though that attribution seems less probable. In both cases, the attribution to Correa is not supported by any documentary evidence.

The painting of the *Virgin of Sorrows* measures 66 inches by 40 inches. The material is oil on canvas. There is no signature visible due to repeated overpainting. The painting features the figure of the Virgin seated at the base of the Cross. She is clad in a red dress covered by a blue mantle. Her hands are clasped in front of her chest, her head is inclined to the right, and her eyes are turned down. A single sword pierces her breast at an awkward angle. Surrounding the figure are the instruments of the Passion of Christ. Behind her is the Cross, draped with the holy cloth, and missing the top portion which would have borne the plaque with the titulus INRI. The original background of the painting has been obscured by careless overpainting. There appears to have been a low range of mountains at about the midpoint of the canvas. No other background features are perceptible.

The painting has been terribly overpainted. The only areas which appear not to have been affected are the hands, neck, and face of the Virgin (figure 2).



Figure 1. Juan Correa (attrib.), *Virgin of Sorrows*, late-seventeenth century. Photography by Michael Borowski courtesy of the San Felipe Neri Church Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

In these areas the hand of a skilled painter is evident. The colors are soft and well-blended. The white veil around the head and neck is rendered with great attention to its transparency and diaphanousness. The flesh of the face is well modeled and the facial features are strongly-drawn, yet delicate.

Supporting the attribution of the New Mexican *Virgin of Sorrows* to Juan Correa are several formal elements. The facial features are consistent with some of Correa's paintings. The inside corner of the eyebrows are turned up slightly as the master tended to do to represent anguish. As in other Correa paintings, the Virgin's eyelids are heavy. The nose is long and straight and the mouth is small with a nearly invisible upper lip. Below the lower lip is a small but dark shadow very similar to others on the faces of Correa's figures. Similarly, the proportions of the hands, with thick hands and long fingers with upturned tips, are reminiscent of other clasped hands by Correa. One inconsistency with other Correa paintings is the pink blush of the cheeks, but this could have been an alteration by a well-wishing parishioner.

The composition differs from those employed by Correa for known images (those that appear in the catalog by Elisa Vargaslugo and José



Figure 2. Juan Correa (attrib.), *Virgin of Sorrows*, detail, late-seventeenth century. Photography by Michael Borowski courtesy of the San Felipe Neri Church Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Guadalupe Victoria) of the Dolorosa. In only one other catalogued Correa painting of the Dolorosa does the Virgin appear alone. In that case, however, she is shown only to the waist. The other paintings of this subject in which the Virgin is shown seated and full-length include auxiliary figures, generally angels. Perhaps the painter chose to eliminate the angels in this case. Another explanation for the lack of supplementary figures is that they were obscured by repeated overpaintings.

The iconography of the New Mexican painting is consistent with that used by Correa for images of the *Virgin of Sorrows*. Though it appears to have been poorly repainted, the single sword that pierces the Virgin's breast is similar to those that appear in other paintings by Correa. Likewise, the instruments of the Passion that are scattered around the figure resemble in likeness and arrangement the instruments in several of the master's Dolorosas. The column and plate bearing the dice are especially reminiscent of other works. The abbreviated Cross, as mentioned above, is a common feature in Correa's paintings of the subject, as is the disposition of the holy cloth. The lack of, or limited, background articulation appeared in at least four of the painter's works.

The overpainted state of the rest of the painting precludes a search for more attributes of Juan Correa. Thick coats of paint applied by an unskilled hand have covered the vast majority of the image. Some idea of the original treatment of the drapery of the Virgin's dress can be perceived beneath the overpainting. In this area there appears to have been a display of artistic virtuosity with deep folds. Other areas were misunderstood or consciously altered by the later painter and are now illegible.

The painting of the *Virgin of Sorrows* in the collection of the Church of San Felipe de Neri clearly deserves closer study by scholars of Correa. If it were in fact a painting by the Baroque master, it would be a valuable addition to the catalog of his work and would perhaps inspire the restoration of the painting to its original state. ♦