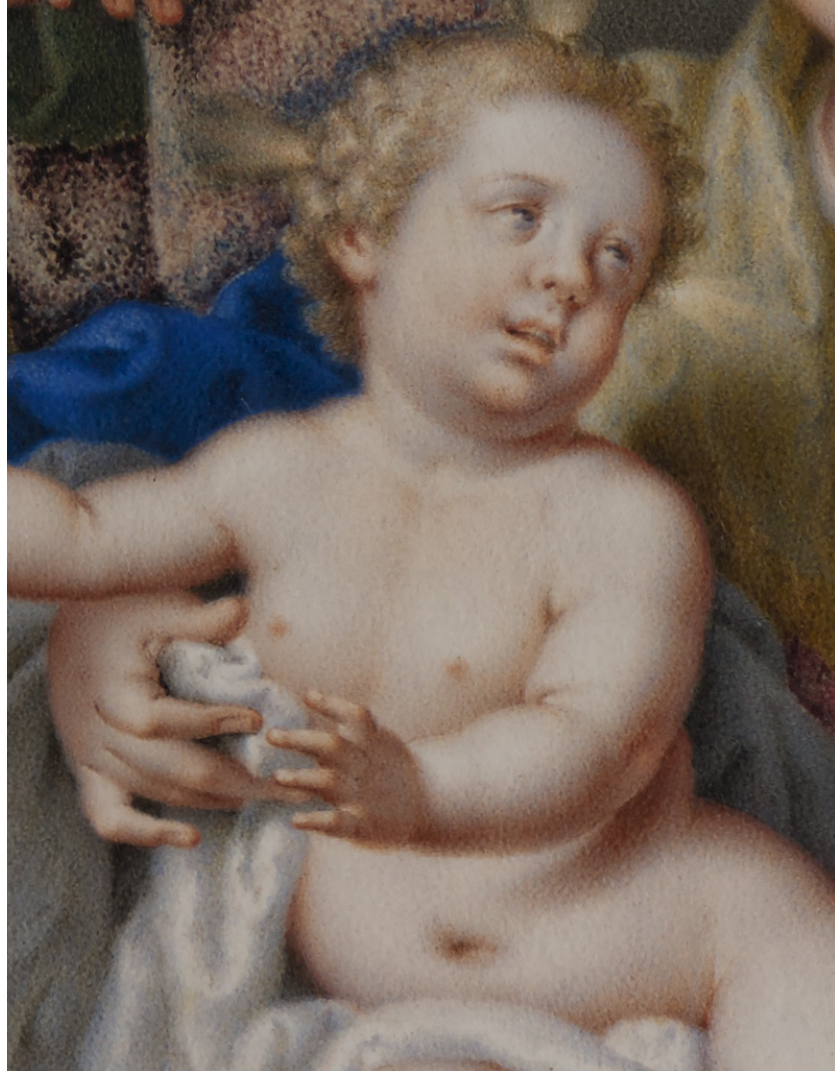


# SPECIAL CHRISTMAS PROGRAMME



*The Holy Family with Saints Joachim  
and Anne, by Luis Meléndez*

14-28

DEC 2023    JAN 2024



To celebrate Christmas, for the third year running the Fundación María Cristina Masaveu Peterson is displaying a work related to the Nativity cycle. This year's piece is a miniature by Luis Meléndez that joined the Masaveu Collection in 1999.





COLECCION MASAVELLI

Sancti Spiritus in honore matris et patris ad Dei honorem et virginis matris oratione

The painter Luis Egidio Meléndez de Ribera is known chiefly for his extensive production of still-life paintings for one of the private drawing-rooms of the Prince of Asturias, the future Charles IV. However, a lesser-known side of his output during the previous reign of Ferdinand VI is the series of miniatures on parchment he executed around 1756–58 to illustrate choir books of the Royal Chapel. In fact, Meléndez was already a self-proclaimed ‘painter of miniatures and oils’ at this early stage in his career.

Particularly prominent among Meléndez’s works cited by Ceán Bermúdez is ‘a holy family for the portable oratory of the Prince of Asturias, which deserved the esteem of all experts’. To be precise, this successful miniature was not a single work but one of a pair, as the painter himself stated in a memorandum: ‘[...] two works of his profession for Our Lord the Prince. One of them two Pictures of the Holy Family, of the same size, drawing, one in Oil and the other in Miniature, the first was placed in the portable Oratory of His Highness and I believe His Highness has the other one in his bedchamber’. Although there is a certain amount of confusion regarding the identification of both versions in recent publications on Meléndez, what





Isaia

Isaia

**S**

icut Ovis pro caecis  
ad occisionem ducitur  
et non dicitur se dolum

Cap. LIII

Cap. LXI

et os

is unquestionable is that in 1768 Meléndez would have been paid fifteen thousand *reales* for the *Holy Family* on copper alone. As is logical given the consistency of the support, it would have been placed in this oratory that accompanied him on all his seasonal sojourns at the various Royal Sites. The artist painted another version on vellum as a gift to his patron, which is the one in the Masaveu Collection. Both the oil paintings and the miniature would have been designed to proclaim the painter's skills in these very different artistic media.

The years from 1767 to 1768 were a period of hectic activity, as all the court painters were then involved in the decoration of the New Palace in Madrid, working on the ceiling frescoes. As a result, a younger generation of artists of secondary status at the court was enlisted to execute the paintings on copper for the portable oratory of the Prince and Princess of Asturias. Indeed, Luis Meléndez's *Holy Family* on copper, currently unlocated, would have been accompanied on the right by a *Saint Charles Borromeo* by Mariano Sánchez (in remembrance of the saint after whom Prince Charles was named) and on the left by a *Saint Louis of France* (patron saint of Princess María Luisa of Parma) by an unknown Diego Díaz.





As the oratory was shared by Princess Charles and Princess María Luisa, the presence of this popular iconography of the Virgin with Saint Joseph was quite appropriate as a private image of spiritual inspiration for both spouses. In fact, a Holy Family also including Saints Joaquim and Anne had presided over the portable oratory of Ferdinand VI when still Prince of Asturias since 1734. It is furthermore evident that the Child Jesus is the centrepiece of Meléndez's composition, owing perhaps to the couple's worrying family situation in 1768: after several years of marriage they had still not produced a male heir. Later on, when Princess María Luisa of Parma commissioned Francisco Bayeu to execute another portable oratory for her own personal use in 1785–86, she wished for a very different depiction for the central painting on copper, Our Lady of Sorrows. Continuing with this attempt to establish the female devotional models at the court of the Bourbons, it should be pointed out that the Mater Dolorosa likewise presided over the oratory designed by Mariano Maella for María Luisa's daughter, the Infanta María Isabel.







Since this version on vellum of Luis Meléndez's painting on copper appeared on the Madrid art market, there has been confusion over its provenance owing to the misreading of the label on its back. The label states that, when in Bilbao in order to swear an oath to uphold the privileges in Guernica, Ferdinand VII gave this painting to the owners of the house where he stayed. It is known that this makeshift royal palace in Bilbao, which lodged the king and queen from 16 to 25 June 1828, was in the Arenal district, next to the church of San Nicolás, and may have belonged to Francisco Mazarredo and not, as has been published to date, to the art historian Juan Allende Salazar.

José Manuel de la Mano





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## IMAGE

Luis Meléndez (Naples, 1716 - Madrid, 1780)

*The Holy Family with Saints Joaquim and Anne*, 1768

Tempera on parchment, 44 x 34 cm

Masaveu Collection

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