

## AN EXVOTO BY JOSÉ PATRICIO POLO-1741

*By Elizabeth Wilder Weismann*

In the autumn of 1946, on a rainy evening after a sunny day spent exploring and photographing colonial sculpture in the towns around Tlaxcala, I purchased a "retablo", an ex-voto painting, in Puebla.

It was larger than the usual retablo—44 cm. by 59 cm.—and unframed. Painted on canvas (which one found, on turning it over to consist of three pieces neatly stitched together and stretched on a wooden frame braced across the middle), the medium was presumably oil. The subject was both dramatic and engaging: in a large empty room with a shattered window, a horse falls with its rider, while a woman watches, her hands clasped, and two visions of sacred images hover over the two humans. Or, as the legend tells us:

Día de el Glorioso San Lorenzo, entrando Joseph Patricio Polo de la Calle en un cavallo alborotado, no pudie... / sujetarlo en el patio, se entró en la sala, donde resbalando los quatro pies, cayó sobre el Gynete, e invocando este... / Dulce nombre de Jesús, y su Esposa a nuestra S<sup>a</sup> de el Rosario, quedó libre, y el bruto tan quieto como si fuera... de 171 en Hua...

The painting had a curious sort of professional look. Although there were errors in perspective which confused the spatial arrangement, it was clearly the work of a more sophisticated painter than most retablos. The silvery, floating quality of the apparitions, and the fact that they were painted more fluently than the real scene, suggested a professional religious painter. It also agreed with the date in the seventeen hundreds, which was supported by various stylistic traits—the pink shadows giving form to hands and feet, the grey-umber tonality (now modulated by the emergence of a brown under painting)—and by the costumes. The painting was in good condition, crazed but not flaking, except where it was somewhat eroded around the edges—it had evidently once been framed. The text had suffered in places, so that one would never know to what the quietness of the horse had been compared, in what town, nor in what year: of the date, 17... I was clear, but we debated inconclusively as to whether the third digit was a 4 or a 9. I surmised that the incident had occurred in Huamantla, where we had only that morning been poking about for remnants of the Franciscan convent,

and noted that the name Joseph was a less usual form than José, as the name Patricio is not common in Mexico—nor Polo, either.

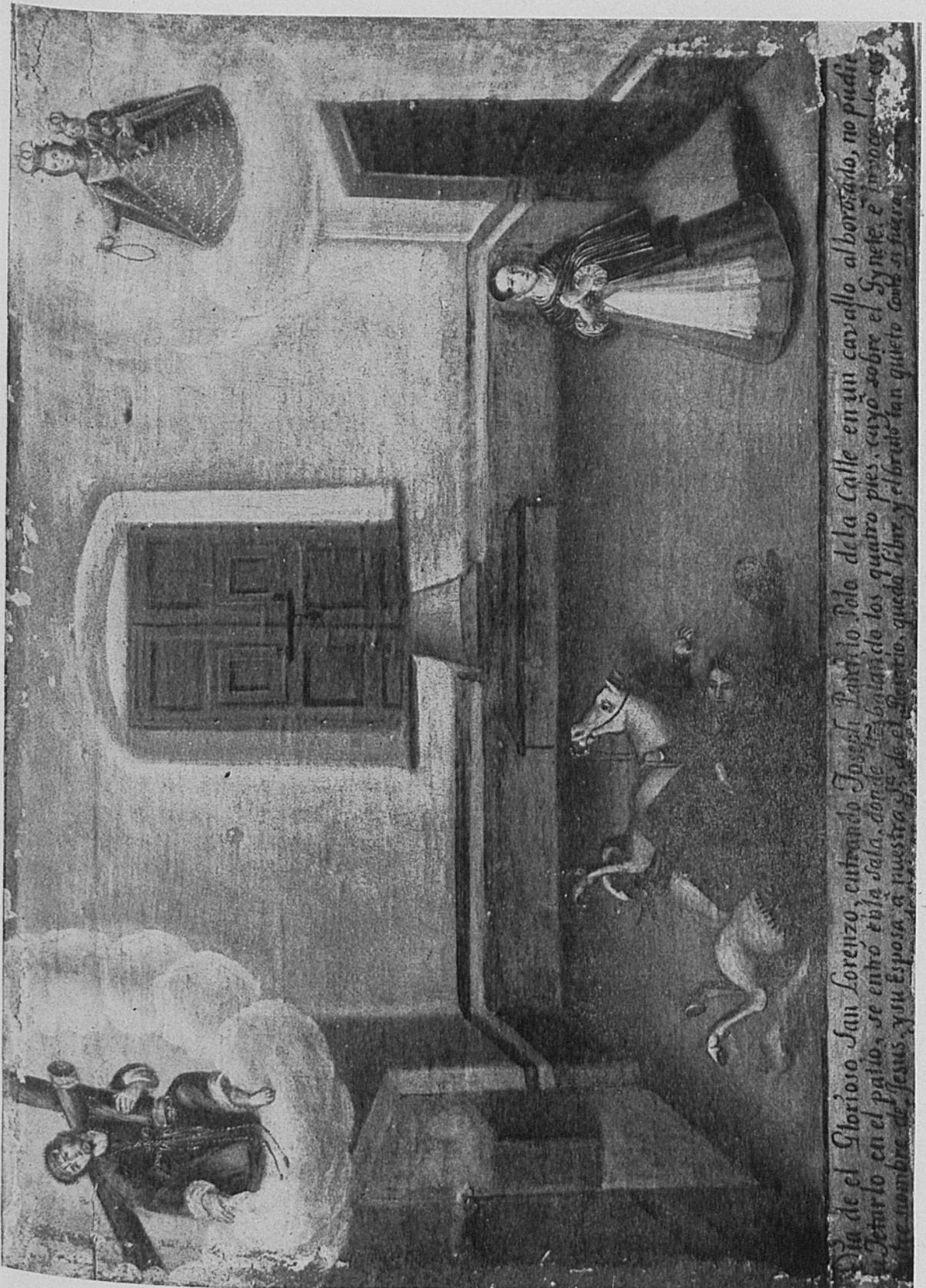
In any case, I found the picture delightful. The bare sala with its shuttered window and window-seat, the studded door, the horseman's hat flying off, the wife's charming costume, with her blue skirt, white ruffles, and touches of scarlet at hem, waist and bonnet, all sounded a note of veracity. The violence of the disaster was completely silenced by the large empty space: horse, horseman, and wife held in their own places, wonderfully detached, and nicely balanced with male and female spiritual patrons. The picture had that quality of the enchanted moment, that fusion of genre and surrealism, which is a principal charm of these *ex-votos*.



Some fifteen years later I began to translate Manuel Toussaint's *Arte Colonial en México* for the University of Texas Press. I had, of course, read the whole book when Don Manuel sent it to me in 1950, and had used it extensively for my work and in teaching courses in Mexican and Latin American art since then. In any case, in the late summer of 1962 I was sitting in the salon of a small freighter travelling from Venice to New Orleans, working against time to finish the first draft before landing. Suddenly, from page 265 of the book I knew so well, a paragraph jumped out:

Bernardino Polo nació en Huamantla, Tlaxcala, y fundó una generación de pintores: su hijo José Patricio y su nieto José Aniceto. Existen algunos quadros suyos en poder de particulares que según el señor Pérez Salazar recuerdan el colorido de Villalpando.

When I got home, I looked in Francisco Pérez Salazar's *Historia de la Pintura en Puebla*, and found a little more information about the Polo family. In 1696 Bernardino Polo was described as "mestizo, soltero, del arte de pintor, natural de la Puebla de Huamantla y vecino de esta ciudad de tres años . . . hijo natural de Sebastián Polo"; this was at the time of his marriage in Puebla to Dominga de Rueda, "castiza, doncella, natural de la ciudad de Cholula". José Patricio Polo was identified as "pintor, hijo de Bernardino Polo y Domíngua de Rueda" when he married Josefa de la Encarnación Aguilar on the fourth of February, 1722. Pérez Salazar cites a Sr. Olivares as owning "escenas de costumbres españolas"



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José Patricio Polo. Exvoto. Siglo XVIII



including bull-fights, by Bernardino Polo, and in the 1963 edition Elisa Vargas Lugo refers to a painting by him in the Galerías de Bellas Artes in Puebla which shows the interior of the Cathedral of Puebla, still with its high-altar in baroque style. The genre quality of these subjects fits well with my retablo, as does Pérez Salazar's reference to the "tonos pálidos y azulosos" of the group.

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So I believe that on the living-room wall in Austin, Texas, we have a painting by a known eighteenth-century artist of the Tlaxcala-Puebla school. Is it not all but certain that José Patricio Polo himself would fulfil those vows to the Virgin of the Rosary and her Son? Does the charming picture of Josefa de la Encarnación not suggest a young man's portrait of his wife? For the date must be 1741: even an eighteenth century Mexican would hardly play so spirited a role around the age of ninety!

I write this note as a tiny contribution to the history of painting in viceregal Mexico, where every small bit of knowledge is preferable to the alternate ignorance. And perhaps as a little sermon to people who (like myself) imagine that they have read and exhausted the resources of such a book as Manuel Toussaint's *Arte Colonial en México*.

Austin, Texas