



# Saint Barbara

Fray Bachiller Bartolomé de Arenas

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GALLERY









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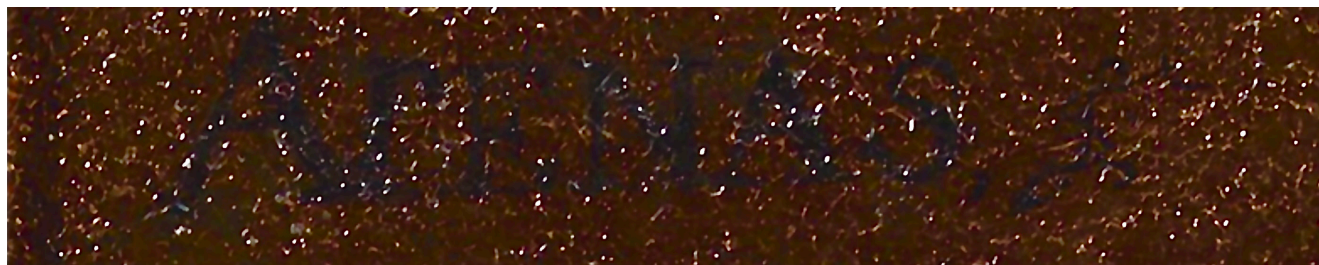


***Saint Barbara***  
**Fray Bachiller Bartolomé de Arenas**

Mexico  
17th century (active 1670)  
Signed lower left ARENAS F

Oil on canvas  
40.16 × 29.33 in

Text by: Gonzalo Eguiguren





## Bartolomé de Arenas: A Master in the art of Painting

### Introduction and Historical Context

Bartolomé de Arenas emerges as a pivotal figure in the artistic panorama of 17th-century New Spain. His most extraordinary work, *Saint Barbara*, signed and exceptional within the corpus of Marian iconography, has become a foundational piece for exploring his technical mastery and the artistic and religious connections that shaped his career. This painting not only demonstrates his skill as a painter but also his ability to integrate decorative and symbolic elements that reflect the convergence of European and Indigenous traditions.

According to Manuel Toussaint, Bartolomé de Arenas is documented as having collaborated with Juan Sánchez Salmerón, a prominent painter active during the late 17th century in New Spain. Salmerón, whose style reflects strong influences from Cristóbal de Villalpando and Juan Correa, was known for his religious compositions characterized by dynamic use of light and intricate detailing. (Fig. 1) While Salmerón's oeuvre is primarily focused on devotional themes, this collaboration suggests that Arenas operated within a broader artistic network, sharing techniques, materials, and perhaps stylistic innovations.

Although no direct stylistic links between Salmerón's documented works and *Saint Barbara* have been established, the connection highlights Arenas' engagement with the major artistic trends of his time. It also reaffirms his position within a generation of painters who, while maintaining European models, developed distinctive forms of visual synthesis that resonated with local materials, symbolic traditions, and ornamental grammars. In this sense, *Saint Barbara* offers a compelling example of that hybridity: a work of devotional purpose, but also of aesthetic translation, where sacred meaning and decorative opulence operate in dynamic balance.

Arenas' artistic production developed in a historical context marked by the complex interplay of European and Indigenous traditions. This cultural exchange, largely promoted by ecclesiastical and political figures like Payo Enríquez de Ribera, allowed for the integration of local materials and techniques—notably the decorative traditions associated with Michoacán lacquers, such as those from Peribán, Olinalá or the Taller de los Galgos—into viceregal art, enriching the visual culture of the period. While there is limited direct evidence linking Ribera personally to the promotion of these lacquers, his previous role as Archbishop of Michoacán and later as Viceroy of New Spain positioned him at the intersection of religious authority and cultural policy, providing valuable contextual framework for understanding the networks in which Arenas operated.

### Payo Enríquez de Rivera: Archbishop, Viceroy, and Promoter of Sacred Culture

The artistic trajectory of Bartolomé de Arenas cannot be fully understood without considering the political and ecclesiastical framework of New Spain during the government of Fray Payo Enríquez de Rivera—viceroy from 1673 to 1680 and archbishop of Mexico from 1668 to 1681. A Spanish prelate of Augustinian background, originally from



**Fig. 1** Immaculate Conception. Juan Sánchez Salmerón. Museo Nacional del Virreinato, México DF. México



Seville and trained in theology at Alcalá, Enríquez de Rivera represented a rare case of double investiture: spiritual and temporal authority, unified in a single figure whose administration combined moral reformism with a strategic use of the visual arts as instruments of legitimation.

After serving in Guatemala and Michoacán, Enríquez de Rivera was appointed viceroy at a moment of institutional reorganization. He soon became one of the key promoters of religious infrastructure projects, architectural restorations, and public festivities infused with symbolic display. His tenure saw notable improvements to the Cathedral of Mexico, the commissioning of retablos and devotional paintings, and the renewal of ecclesiastical spaces in both urban and Indigenous areas such as Texcoco, Tlalmanalco, and Teotihuacán. These efforts have been documented by chroniclers such as Cavo, as well as by modern scholars who emphasize his use of architecture, ritual, and imagery to reinforce viceregal authority.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to his territorial governance, Enríquez de Rivera fostered a courtly and intellectual circle that included artists, chroniclers, theologians, and members of the viceregal bureaucracy. Among them was Bartolomé de Arenas, who appears in period sources as his household cleric and likely court painter. This direct connection to the viceroy's domestic sphere places Arenas within the highest sphere of artistic patronage in New Spain, helping to explain both the technical refinement of his work and his access to privileged materials, ornamental vocabularies, and visual references.

Within this context of sacred representation and political aesthetics, the painting of Saint Barbara gains new interpretive weight. It is not merely a devotional image, but rather an object produced within a courtly environment where religious piety, political symbolism, and ornamental sophistication converge. Even if no direct commission from Enríquez de Rivera is currently documented, his profile as a reformer, cultural patron, and promoter of sacred art allows us to situate the work within the official visual language cultivated under his rule.

### The Importance of Arenas' Rediscovery

The analysis of two portraits of Payo Enríquez de Ribera, one signed and the other unsigned, has opened new avenues for exploring Arenas' artistic contributions. These portraits, housed in prestigious collections, stand out for both their technical quality and historical significance. The signed portrait, located in the Palacio del Ayuntamiento in Mexico City,

bears the inscription "ARENAS," reinforcing the hypothesis that Arenas was not only a distinguished religious painter but also a portraitist associated with the spheres of viceregal power.

This study aims to delve into the importance of Bartolomé de Arenas as an artistic intermediary between local and European traditions, highlighting how his work reflects the cultural and political dynamics of his time. To achieve this, it will address both the comparative study of Payo Enríquez's portraits (Figs. 2a and 2b) and the analysis of *Saint Barbara*, integrating references to Michoacán lacquers as a potential decorative influence.

### Analysis of Payo Enríquez de Ribera's Portraits

#### The Portraits of Payo Enríquez de Ribera: A Window into Bartolomé de Arenas' Legacy

The study of the portraits of *Payo Enríquez de Rivera*, attributed to *Bartolomé de Arenas*, represents a significant advance in the reconstruction of the artist's career and his integration into the ecclesiastical and



**Fig. 2a** Archbishop of Mexico, Viceroy, and Governor. President of the Royal Payo Enriquez de Rivera Portrait. Fray Bachiller Bartolomé de Arenas. Palacio del ayuntamiento de México, Ciudad de México, a México.



**Fig. 2b** Fray Bachiller Bartolomé de Arenas. Palacio del ayuntamiento de México, Ciudad de México, a México.

<sup>1</sup> See *Fray Payo Enríquez de Rivera y el fortalecimiento de la autoridad virreinal, Mexico City*, Universidad Anáhuac, 2015; Patricia Galeana, *Virreyes de la Nueva España*, Mexico City, FCE, 2013; Manuel Toussaint, *Arte colonial en México*, Mexico City, UNAM, 1962.



viceregal networks of late 17th-century New Spain. These two portraits—one signed and the other attributed—provide a valuable case study for understanding both the painter’s technical ability and his proximity to the most powerful social and political circles of the period.

The signed portrait, dated 1674 and currently housed in the *Palacio del Ayuntamiento in Mexico City*, presents Payo Enríquez in his capacity as Viceroy of New Spain, following his formal investiture. Although the painting has not been catalogued under Arenas’ name by the institution that holds it, a signature reading “ARENAS” is clearly visible at the lower right, just beneath the subject’s left hand. While the inscription appears to have been reinforced at a later date, it allows for a confident attribution to the painter and constitutes a new identification established by the present author. The earlier portrait, dated 1673 and held in the *Museo Nacional de Historia at the Castillo de Chapultepec*, shows Enríquez de Rivera as Archbishop of Mexico, a role he had held since 1668. Although unsigned, the portrait’s stylistic consistency with the signed version—particularly in the treatment of light, physiognomy, and vestments—strongly supports the attribution to Arenas.<sup>2</sup>

Stylistic and Technical Comparison

The comparative analysis of the two portraits reveals a remarkable consistency in Arenas’ style and technique, strengthening the attribution of the unsigned portrait:

**1. Treatment of Light and Shadow:** Both portraits demonstrate a masterful use of chiaroscuro, providing volume and depth to the figures. The directed illumination on Payo’s face highlights his authority and charisma, while carefully distributed shadows create contrast with the dark background.

**2. Details in Textiles:** The garments in both portraits are characterized by their dark and restrained design, reflecting the formal and dignified nature of Payo’s ecclesiastical and viceregal roles. While the textiles lack elaborate patterns or a sense of dynamic movement, their rigid folds and precise depiction convey the authority and solemnity associated with Payo’s dual positions as Archbishop and Viceroy. This sobriety emphasizes the symbolic focus on Payo’s status rather than on decorative richness.

**3. Composition:** In both portraits, Payo is depicted standing, a posture that underscores his authority and presence as both a spiritual

and political leader. The upright stance enhances the formal tone of the compositions, with attributes such as the staff and his coat of arms reinforcing his dual roles as Archbishop and Viceroy. This positioning is emblematic of official portraiture of the period, designed to project dignity and command.

Symbolic Differences Between the Portraits

Despite their stylistic similarities, the portraits reflect the distinct roles of Payo Enríquez de Ribera at the time of their creation:

• **Unsigned Portrait (1673):** This portrait presents Payo as Archbishop of Mexico, emphasizing his ecclesiastical dignity. The tone is more restrained, aligning with his religious position, and the color palette is subdued to focus on his spiritual authority.

• **Signed Portrait (1674):** Created after Payo’s appointment as Viceroy, this portrait adopts a more opulent aesthetic, with richer decorative details such as gold accents and vibrant colors. These elements symbolize his political authority and elevated status as the King’s representative in New Spain.

The Relationship Between Arenas and Payo Enríquez de Ribera

The connection between Bartolomé de Arenas and Payo Enríquez de Ribera highlights the patronage networks that defined artistic production in New Spain. According to Manuel Toussaint, Arenas served as a domiciliary cleric close to Payo during his tenure as Archbishop of Mexico, facilitating the commission of these portraits. Payo’s subsequent role as Viceroy in 1674 likely enabled Arenas to continue working with him, consolidating his reputation as a trusted portraitist in the viceregal court.

These portraits stand out not only for their artistic quality but also for their symbolic power, underscoring the importance of official imagery in legitimizing viceregal and ecclesiastical authority. By capturing both the spiritual dignity and political influence of Payo, Arenas positioned himself as an artist deeply embedded within these dynamics.

The Significance of the Portraits in Arenas’ Career

The discovery of the signed portrait and the attribution of the unsigned one reshape our perception of Bartolomé de Arenas’ legacy. They reveal him not only as a religious painter but also as a portraitist for key figures of 17th-century New Spain. These portraits solidify his ability to handle high-profile commissions, placing him among the most prominent and talented artists of the period.

<sup>2</sup> The signed portrait of *Payo Enríquez de Rivera*, held in the *Palacio del Ayuntamiento* of Mexico City, has not been officially catalogued under the name of Bartolomé de Arenas. However, the signature “ARENAS”, clearly visible at the lower right of the canvas, just beneath the sitter’s left hand, confirms the authorship. The identification and attribution of this work to Arenas was established by the present author based on direct examination and comparative analysis.





Fig. 3 Saint Barbara, Fray Bachiller Bartolomé Arenas. Gonzalo Eguiguren Gallery.

## Analysis of Saint Barbara

### Saint Barbara: A Religious and Decorative Masterpiece

The painting *Saint Barbara* (Fig.3), attributed to and signed by Bartolomé de Arenas, stands out as an exemplary fusion of religious symbolism and technical sophistication. This work combines European artistic traditions with local influences, positioning it among the finest examples of colonial sacred art in New Spain. The saint is portrayed in a solemn composition, holding her traditional attributes: the tower, symbolizing her imprisonment and perseverance, and the palm, representing her martyrdom. What makes *Saint Barbara* particularly remarkable is not only its devotional imagery but also the intricate ornamentation of the saint's garments. Arenas employs floral and faunal motifs to enrich the visual narrative, including an exotic bird and a quadruped with a raised paw—possibly a lion or a dog—that reflect his capacity to fuse European sources with localized reinterpretations of global ornamental vocabularies. Although the iconographic sources point to Asian export silks, particularly those circulating through the Manila galleon, the treatment of the motifs in *Saint Barbara* goes beyond citation. There is a technical and conceptual kinship between the painterly surface and the visual logic of Mexican lacquerware: not because one imitates the other, but because both function as material translations of the same textile repertoire. In lacquer, this translation is executed through color layering, incised patterns, and vegetal varnishes; in painting, through contour, pigmentation, and spatial flattening. The result is not imitation, but parallel interpretation: a shared gesture of adaptation across media. Arenas, in this sense, does not merely borrow decorative motifs—he emulates the ornamental grammar of lacquerwork, channeling it through the pictorial medium with devotional intent.

### Technical and Decorative Analysis

**1. Floral and Faunal Motifs:** The intricate patterns on *Saint Barbara's* garments reflect Arenas' exceptional attention to ornamental detail and his sensitivity to the visual vocabularies circulating in viceregal New Spain. The designs—though not copied from any known lacquerware—exhibit a decorative rhythm comparable to that found in regional lacquer traditions, particularly in their symmetrical layout, surface density, and the dynamic interplay of floral and faunal elements. Rather than functioning as direct imitations, these motifs appear to be parallel translations of Asian textile models, such as Chinese export silks, reinterpreted through both painting and decorative arts.

Among the figures incorporated into the robe's design are an exotic bird and a quadruped with a raised paw, likely a lion or a dog—each evoking layered symbolic associations. These creatures not only adorn the



saint's garments but also expand her iconographic register, reinforcing her sanctity through references to vigilance, nobility, or spiritual ascent.

In addition to these embroidered creatures, *Saint Barbara* is adorned with a selection of fine jewelry, including strands of pearls and a shell-shaped tiara. The pearls, traditionally associated with purity and divine grace, emphasize the saint's spiritual virtues. The tiara, reminiscent of a scallop shell, may evoke baptismal symbolism, aligning her narrative with themes of rebirth and spiritual transformation. Arenas' meticulous rendering of these elements illustrates his ability to fuse material opulence with theological depth, offering a devotional image enriched by ornamental and symbolic complexity.

**2. Color Palette and Textures:** The chromatic palette in *Saint Barbara* is both vibrant and controlled, dominated by tones of green, red, blue, and gold, with subtle silver accents. Arenas deploys this color range not only for visual harmony but also to enhance the symbolic and material richness of the composition. Through carefully modulated shadows, he builds depth and texture, particularly in the layered garments and ornamental motifs.

The fabrics depicted correspond to two distinct textile lineages that circulated widely in viceregal New Spain: on one hand, the green tunic likely evokes Chinese export silks—such as those from Canton or Nanjing—which arrived via the Manila galleon and were prized for their floral complexity and luminous finish; on the other hand, the crimson mantle bears the ornamental rhythm and scale of French or Italian bizarre silks, particularly those produced in Lyon, Venice or Genoa. While the bizarre style is typically dated to c. 1705–1720, formal precursors and proto-bizarre motifs were already being developed and circulated by the 1670s, often through design books, pattern samples, or conserved textile fragments.<sup>3</sup>

In viceregal contexts, the flow of such materials was far from linear. Through privileged networks of commerce and gift exchange, visual models could arrive early, or conversely remain in use well beyond their peak in Europe. As such, the painted textile in *Saint Barbara* should not be read as a direct citation of a dated fabric, but rather as a reinterpretation of an active ornamental repertoire that persisted and evolved across multiple media.

The painter's application of gold and saturated color contributes to the work's visual luminosity, enhancing its resemblance to other ornamental traditions—such as lacquerware or ecclesiastical embroidery—without directly imitating them. The use of green in particular, possibly derived from pigments like malachite or verdigris, provides chromatic contrast

and devotional resonance. Further pigment analysis could clarify the materials involved and shed light on Arenas' technical responses to the hybrid ornamental landscape of his time.

**3. Symbolic Integration:** The ornamental designs in *Saint Barbara* align with the saint's narrative of resilience and faith. The exotic bird, often associated with spiritual ascent, and the mammal, symbolizing vigilance or strength, reinforce her attributes. These elements are strategically placed to guide the viewer's focus toward the saint's serene expression and her traditional symbols of martyrdom. The tower, a traditional attribute of Saint Barbara symbolizing her imprisonment and perseverance, is depicted with remarkable attention to architectural detail in *Saint Barbara*. Arenas' choice to render the tower with subtle highlights and shading not only reinforces its structural presence but also imbues it with symbolic weight. The precise depiction of the tower, with its clean lines and proportionate perspective, reflects Arenas' ability to balance symbolic narrative with aesthetic harmony, directing the viewer's gaze toward the saint's serene figure. An angel flies toward Saint Barbara, holding a crown of flowers to place upon her head. This act, despite the saint already wearing a shell-shaped tiara, symbolizes her dual recognition as a queen of divine grace and a martyr rewarded with eternal glory. In Christian iconography, flowers often represent spiritual victory, purity, and the triumph of faith over suffering. The angel's action reinforces the narrative of Saint Barbara's sanctity, illustrating her heavenly reward and the eternal honor bestowed upon her for her unwavering devotion and sacrifice. This dynamic gesture not only highlights her celestial exaltation but also connects the terrestrial elements of her martyrdom with the heavenly real.

The vibrant green present in *Saint Barbara* plays a significant role in the visual and symbolic impact of the painting. The richness of the green tones, used prominently in the saint's garments and decorative details, provides a striking contrast to the warm reds and golds, creating a balanced and harmonious composition. The green not only enhances the overall luminosity of the painting but also draws attention to specific elements, emphasizing the saint's divine presence and the intricate patterns of her attire.

From a symbolic perspective, green often represents renewal, hope, and eternal life in Christian iconography. In the context of *Saint Barbara*, the green could be interpreted as a reflection of her steadfast faith and her reward of eternal glory. This interpretation aligns with the broader narrative of her martyrdom and sanctification.

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation builds upon insights shared by Manuel Pérez Sánchez (personal communication, August 2025), regarding the fluid chronology of *bizarre* silks and the reuse of ornamental models in viceregal visual culture.





## Ornamental Affinities Between Painting and Lacquer

The richly decorated surface of *Saint Barbara* reveals a refined ornamental logic that resonates with the visual language of Mexican lacquerware, particularly those produced in Michoacán—in centers such as Pátzcuaro, Uruapan, Peribán, and Olinálá. This affinity is not the result of direct imitation, but rather a shared approach to translating Asian textile motifs into local artistic media.

The robe's dense arrangement of floral and faunal motifs—organized in rhythmic, symmetrical patterns—reflects the same ornamental grammar found in both lacquer and embroidery. These visual systems originate in Chinese and Southeast Asian silks, which circulated widely in the viceroyalty through the Manila galleon trade. Each medium—painting, lacquer, textile—interpreted those designs using its own materials and techniques, but with a comparable aesthetic intent: to evoke richness, elegance, and symbolic layering.

In painting, this translation occurs through pigment, gold, contour, and modulation of surface, while in lacquer it is achieved through vegetal varnishes, mineral pigments, and incised outlines. Though materially distinct, both languages reflect a unified ornamental sensibility, shaped by global circulation and adapted to the devotional and decorative needs of New Spanish art.

Within this visual ecosystem, *Bartolomé de Arenas* demonstrates an acute awareness of the ornamental codes at play. His proximity to Payo Enríquez de Rivera, who governed in Michoacán before assuming the viceregal post, suggests access to privileged visual networks where textiles, lacquers, paintings, and liturgical objects formed a cohesive symbolic culture. *Saint Barbara*, in this sense, is not only a devotional image, but a painterly expression of global material imagination, where the surface becomes a site of translation between fabric, lacquer, and sacred narrative.

While the ornamental repertoire likely derives from Asian textiles, the way in which these motifs are applied on the painted surface—through gilding, silvering, contouring, and chromatic modulation—bears a notable resemblance to the techniques of lacquerwork. Arenas may have known lacquered objects directly, or simply shared their aesthetic logic. The use of metallic highlights glazed with tinted varnishes—a practice akin to the technique of *corla*, employed not only in polychrome sculpture but also in painting, to tone gold and silver surfaces with colored lacquer—produces effects strikingly similar to those seen in *bateas*, *barniz de Pasto*, and other decorative arts. In this sense, *Saint Barbara* not only shares ornamental models with lacquer, but also adopts some of its visual strategies, affirming the porous boundaries between devotional painting and the luxury crafts of the viceregal world.



## Arenas and the Aesthetic Circulation of the Global Baroque

The painting *Saint Barbara* stands as a testament to *Bartolomé de Arenas*' technical refinement and his ability to participate in the ornamental discourse of his time. Its vibrant composition and densely articulated surface reflect not only the artist's pictorial skill, but also his sensitivity to the global networks of imagery, material, and style that shaped the visual culture of colonial Mexico.

Rather than merely blending European techniques with local elements, Arenas' work reveals a deeper process of visual translation—in which motifs, materials, and compositional strategies drawn from diverse origins were adapted into a coherent and symbolically charged language. In *Saint Barbara*, this process is evident in the convergence of Asian export silks, European bizarre fabrics (especially those produced in Lyon, Venice, or Genoa), and a surface logic akin to that of lacquerware, whether encountered directly or echoed through shared ornamental codes.

Although no documentation links Arenas to a formal workshop or guild, his documented role as *clérigo domiciliario* of *Payo Enríquez de Rivera*, together with his signed portrait of the viceroy, strongly suggests that he operated within the domestic and administrative orbit of the archbishopric and later the viceregal court. This proximity implies not only access to elite patronage but also the likely establishment of a working space aligned with the ceremonial and visual culture of high office. The recent identification of Arenas' signature in the portrait of Enríquez de Rivera provides direct evidence of this relationship, offering new grounds for attribution and archival research.

In this sense, Arenas is not merely a mediator between “local” and “European” traditions, but an active participant in the visual economy of the global baroque—a painter who understood that sacred art, like luxury crafts, could operate as a surface of convergence between continents, materials, and meanings. (From Figs 4a to Fig. 4h).



**Fig. 4a** Detail of a Lacquer Tray from Pátzcuaro with a Scene of Almsgiving (Inv. 6928). Museo de América



**Fig. 4b** Detail of the Decorative Brocade on Santa Barbara's Dress. Fray Bachiller Bartolomé de Arenas. Gonzalo Eguiguren Gallery





Fig. 4c



Fig. 4d



Fig. 4e

**Fig. 4c** Detail of a Lacquer Tray from Pátzcuaro with a Female Figure (Inv. 6923). Museo de América.

**Fig. 4d** Detail of the Decorative Brocade on Santa Barbara's Dress. Fray Bachiller Bartolomé de Arenas. Gonzalo Eguiguren Gallery

**Fig. 4e** Detail of the Decorative Brocade on Santa Barbara's Dress. Fray Bachiller Bartolomé de Arenas. Gonzalo Eguiguren Gallery



Fig. 4f

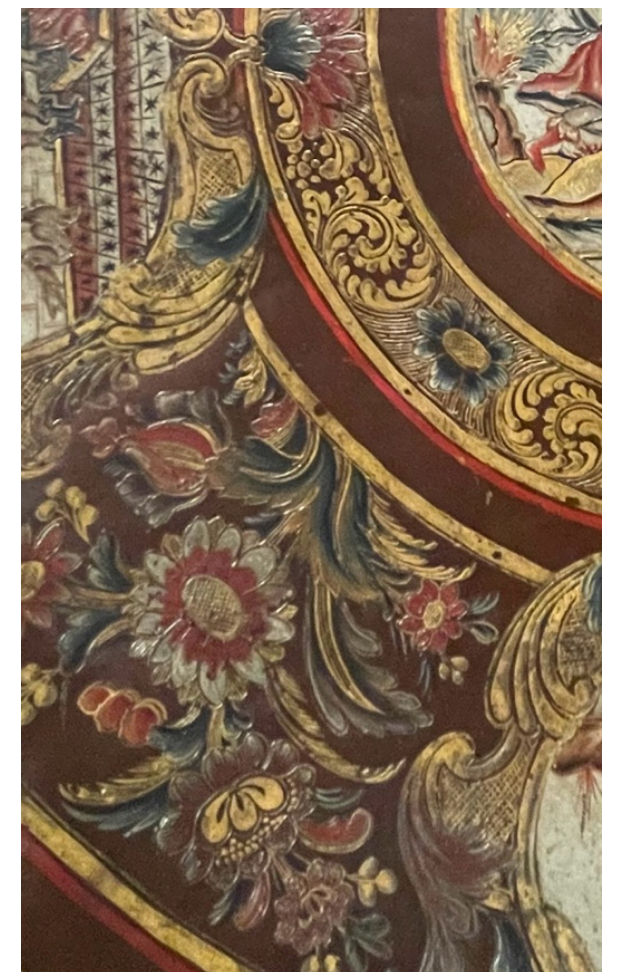


Fig. 4g



Fig. 4h

**Fig. 4f** Detail of a Lacquer Tray from Pátzcuaro with a Haunting scene (Inv. 6921). Museo de América.

**Fig. 4g** Detail of a Lacquer Tray from Pátzcuaro Bilis and Cauno with Scenes from The Metamorphoses (Inv. 6915). Museo de América

**Fig. 4h** Detail of the Decorative Brocade on Santa Barbara's Dress. Fray Bachiller Bartolomé de Arenas. Gonzalo Eguiguren Gallery













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