

**Anonymous, Cordoba (circle of Antonio del Castillo)**

*Immaculate Conception*

17<sup>th</sup> century

oil on canvas

187.5 x 126 cm

inv. no. P02146



### Detailed analysis

The Virgin is represented as *Tota Pulchra* (Song of Solomon 4:7), which diverges from the model waning in popularity that represented the Immaculate Conception isolated and alone, as she is surrounded by attributes derived from the Sacred Scripture—the Song of Songs and the Book of Ecclesiastes—and of the litanies composed to praise the Mother of God.

The Immaculate Conception emerges from the heavens surrounded by light, clouds, and putti that hold some of her attributes and symbols, which also concentrate in the bottom part of the composition. The typology of the Virgin derives from the Book of Revelation that John wrote in the island of Patmos: “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head” (Revelation 12:1).



The sun is associated with God the Father, Christ, or the Messiah, while the moon—which has small cherub heads inside—is associated with the victory over darkness, although some experts believe that its appearance in combination with the sun implies a male-female relationship. The twelve stars represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel, a symbol reinforced by the halo with the twelve cherub

heads—a motif also used by Francisco de Zurbarán in some of his Immaculate Conceptions. She is clad in a red tunic and blue mantle associated to her role as protector.

The Virgin is at the centre of a symmetrical composition where the putti carry white and red roses, lilies, and an olive branch. The rose is the flower represented in the greatest numbers, as a symbol for light and purity. The white rose (or *rosamystica*) represents pure love, and the red rose regeneration and perfection. The lilies, in their stark whiteness, also allude to the virginal condition of Mary and to her Immaculate Conception. The olive branch (*oliva speciosa*) symbolises peace, fertility, and victory—the Virgin as the link between God and men, who gave birth to Christ, the Saviour of mankind.



The symbols and attributes of Mary are represented in the foreground. To the left, we see the locked-up garden (*hortus conclusus*), the sealed fountain (*fons signatus*) and cypress tree on the mountains of Sion (*cipressus in monte Sion*). These are three elements taken from the Song of Songs. The locked-up garden suggests an earthly paradise in the sense of an enclosed, beautiful and organised nature, and is thus associated to Mary's virginity. The sealed fountain alludes to her purity too, since she is a "well of flowing water," having remained a virgin even after the birth of her son Jesus Christ. The cypress, a perennial tree, symbolises the unchanging holiness of the Virgin.

To the right are the well (*putetus aquarium viventum*), the Tower of David (*Turris davidica*), the palm tree, and the City of God (*Civitas Dei*). The well refers to the source of true life, so it is associated to the sealed fountain. The Tower of David—taken from the litanies—symbolises ascent and fortitude, a place secure and protected as are the purity and virginity of Mary. The figure of the palm tree represents the fertility and victory associated to the incorruptibility of the



Virgin. Last of all, the City of God alludes to the virginity of Mary, since it is a locked and walled space, and refers to the Virgin as the first house on earth, as she was chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah.