

FRANCISCAN TREE

MARY, DRESSED IN SUNLIGHT

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception long divided Catholics. However, it was only theologians, high prelates, and doctors of the Church who viewed it as an unresolved issue. The people, in their enlightening simplicity, always believed in the immaculate conception of the sinless Woman destined to be the Mother of God.

From an iconographic perspective, the representation of the Immaculate presented ambiguities that did not help clarify the issue. By the 13th century, there were already paintings dedicated to the Immaculate, but often only experts could recognize this underlying title in the representation. There were no standardized significant signs, and the same image could be interpreted as Mary, Mother of God (if she held Jesus in her arms), or as the Assumed (if her body showed an upward movement while angels celebrated her).

The Dominican and Franciscan Orders, armed against each other, entrusted the resolution of the problem to continuous disputes. The Dominicans appealed to the authority of St. Thomas, who did not find scriptural justification for this title of Mary, while the Franciscans referred to tradition, emphasizing that such a privilege highlighted God's will to preserve Mary from sin because she deserved it as the Mother of His Only Son.

Often, the dispute turned into conflict and argument, distancing the possibility of finding a satisfactory answer for all. Painters also engaged in representing these disputes: Mary was at the center of the scene, with saints, popes, and doctors of the Church, either standing or seated, debating at her feet. With the various interventions of popes and the more open position of the Council of Trent, this movement increasingly leaned towards immaculate solutions.

However, the aforementioned indicators of codified signs, which the language of art typically uses to make its creations more legible, were still lacking. Spain, which had followed these disputes with passion and consistency, proposed its own solution. The painter Francisco Pacheco, in his treatise *Arte de la Pintura* from 1638, provided precise indications on colors, objects, and gestures that should characterize and make the Immaculate recognizable:

“You must [...] paint [...] this Lady in the bloom of her age, around twelve to thirteen years old, a most beautiful child with lovely eyes and a serious gaze, a perfect nose and mouth, and rosy cheeks, with beautiful smooth golden hair (...). She should be painted in a white tunic and blue mantle, clothed with the sun, an oval sun of ochre and white, surrounding the entire image, gently merging with the sky; crowned with stars [...]. An imperial crown should adorn her head but should not cover the stars; her feet [...] rest on the crescent moon with the tips pointing downwards (...); the dragon [...] whose head the Virgin crushed, triumphing over original sin [...]; if I could, I would remove it so as not to disturb the painting.”

These normative instructions by Pacheco referred in many ways to both the Woman of the Apocalypse and the Shulamite from the Song of Songs, the beloved whose purity and beauty are praised: You are all beautiful, O Mary, and the original stain is not in you. Paintings of the Immaculate Conception were commissioned by dozens of patrons and painters. The Spaniard Murillo painted more than forty of them.