



2019.082

Signed at lower left "N García O" (unidentified artist)

Bolivia

Nursing Madonna

Mid-19th century

Oil on canvas with gold, 9 ¼ x 6 7/8 inches

The *Nursing Madonna* is the usual title in English for paintings called in Spanish *Nuestra Señora de Belén* (Our Lady of Bethlehem) or *Nuestra Señora de la Leche* (Our Lady of the Milk). This subject was very popular in the Viceroyalty of Peru from at least 1600. There are many paintings of the subject created in Cuzco in the eighteenth century that are embellished with gold like this painting in the Thoma collection. However, this version dates from considerably later, probably around the middle of the nineteenth century.

Interestingly, the composition has much in common with a painting of Saint Isidore the Farmer signed and dated by an artist who evidently worked in La Paz, Bolivia.¹ Joaquín Castañón created the painting, now in the San Antonio Museum of Art, in 1866. It is very similar to an unsigned version in the Thoma collection (2011.024) in which the saint miraculously draws water from a rock with his mattock (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Unidentified artist, probably Bolivian, *Saint Isidore the Farmer*, mid-19th century, oil on canvas, 52 ¾ x 39 inches.

The detailed depictions of daily life in the Andean countryside that characterize both of these paintings reflect the Spanish and Spanish American current in literature and the visual arts called *costumbrismo*. The development of *costumbrismo* in Spain in the early nineteenth century was quickly followed by developments in literary Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru in the 1840s. Writers, and then artists, documented folk life, for the first time introducing *campesinos* into the subjects of Spanish colonial art. The movement had its roots in both the romantic idealization of nature and the events of day-to-day life and in the scientific urge to catalogue people, customs, nations.ⁱⁱ

In the background of the *Nursing Madonna* are the snowy peaks of the Andes, a llama, and country folk going about their business. The Virgin Mary is dressed in garments very much like those of a nineteenth-century Aymara woman, even with a typical hat surrounded by her halo. The shawl wrapped around the Infant Christ recalls Andean weavings. However, there is another element in the composition that belies the sense that this is a quotidian moment between mother and child, and that is the application of gold. That seems a deliberate reference to the traditions of colonial painting in the region. A “neo-colonial” touch, perhaps.



Fig. 2. Unidentified artist, perhaps Bolivian, *Virgin Mary and Child*, oil on canvas with gold, 41 x 31 cm. Museo de Arte Colonial, Sucre, Bolivia.

There is a painting in the colonial museum in Sucre, Bolivia (fig. 2) that bears certain similarities to the Thoma *Nursing Madonna*. Although the museum attributes the painting to a Cuzco artist of the eighteenth century, it is stylistically much more likely to date from the nineteenth century. Like the *Nursing Madonna*, the emphasis is on the naturalism of the figures, enhanced by Andean textiles and “neo-colonial” touches of gold. While painters in urban centers sought to update their production through new, neoclassical styles and iconographies, perhaps there remained as well a tug toward the art of the recent past.

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ⁱ Pedro Querejazu Leyton, “Joaquín Castañón. Vírgines y santos,” in *Pintura boliviana del siglo XIX (1825-1925). Homenaje a Mario Chacón Torres*, eds. Teresa Gisbert and Teresa de Aneiva, (La Paz: Fundación Cultural del Banco Central de Bolivia/Museo Nacional de Arte/SIART, 2004), 99-101. First published in *Revista Historia y Cultura* 7 (1981).

ⁱⁱFor *costumbrismo* in the visual arts in Peru, see Natalia Majluf, “Pattern-Book of Nations: Images of Types and Costumes in Asia and Latin America, ca. 1800-1860,” in *Reproducing Nations: Types and Costumes in Asia and Latin America, ca. 1800-1860*, exh. cat. (New York: Americas Society, 2006), and Víctor Peralta Ruiz and Charles F. Walker, “Viajeros, naturalistas,

científicos y dibujantes. *De la ilustración al costumbrismo en las artes (siglos XVIII y XIX),”* in *Visión y símbolos del virreinato criollo a la República Peruana. Colección Arte y Tesoros del Perú* (Lima: Banco de Crédito, 2006), 243-273.