



2020.098  
Unidentified artist  
Peru  
*Our Lady of Loreto*  
17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 32 7/16 in.

This somewhat naïve painting depicts the statue of Our Lady of Loreto, one of the so-called Black Madonnas of Europe, on its altar in Italy. The original wooden statue of the Virgin of Loreto has a rather elongated body and the faces of the Virgin and Child are a deep bronze hue. Like other medieval Marian advocations, the statue was believed to have been carved by the apostle St. Luke, making it an important relic directly linked to the living presence of Mary.

The devotion to Our Lady of Loreto is linked to another holy relic – that of the House of Nazareth, where the Virgin was born, the archangel Gabriel appeared to her at the Annunciation, and the Holy Family had lived after their return from Egypt. According to legend, at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, angels transported the House out of the Holy Land where it was increasingly under threat from Muslim invaders. After a period in Dalmatia, the relic eventually found safe

haven on the Adriatic coast in Ancona, Italy, by a laurel (*laureatus*) grove that gave rise to the name Loreto. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a basilica was erected to house the House of Nazareth, and the wooden statue of Our Lady of Loreto rests in a niche within it.

During the Catholic Reformation, the Virgin of Loreto became an important symbol for the Jesuit order, who were named protectors of the shrine in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. When the Jesuits arrived in the Americas in the 1570s, they continued to propagate devotion to Our Lady of Loreto, consecrating chapels to her at their colleges and churches (in Peru, these include chapels at the Colegio de San Martín in Lima and La Compañía in Cuzco). The advocacy successfully gained favor with the local Inca nobility in Cuzco.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the Jesuits' efforts, the Virgin of Loreto is not a frequent subject in Spanish American art.<sup>2</sup> The iconography is somewhat more prevalent in Mexico, where the Virgin is typically depicted with conspicuously lighter skin. This whitening is the result of the decision taken in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Order commissioned a copy of the original statue from Italy with light skin so as not to “diminish the estimation of the People.”<sup>3</sup> Other examples thought to be from Peru (among them examples at NOMA and in the Huber collection), which also featured lightened skin, have since proven to be Italian in origin.

The iconography of the Thoma painting proceeds from a 1605 engraving by Hieronymus Wierix (fig. 1), in which the statue is shown on her altar in Loreto, flanked by flying angels bearing lit candles and two of the seven oil lamps lit continuously before her. The crowned Christ Child emerges from the neck of the Virgin's voluminous, stiff white and gold mantle, holding a globus cruciger and making a sign of benediction. The Virgin is further decorated with a papal tiara and heavy jeweled chains draped across her chest. Significantly, the Virgin in Wierix's engraving does not have the darkened skin of the original Italian statue it depicts. The rigidly frontal faces of both Virgin and Child in the Thoma painting are a deep chestnut hue, with large, rounded eyes and red lips.

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<sup>1</sup> David Cahill, “The Virgin and the Inca: An Incaic Procession in the City of Cuzco in 1692” *Ethnohistory* 49:3 (2002): 611-49.

<sup>2</sup> See Hector Schenone, *Iconografía del Arte Colonial. Santa María* (Buenos Aires: Educa, 2008), 415-20. Luisa Elena Alcalá has written about this devotion in Mexico repeatedly. See “Acomodación, control y esplendor de la imagen en las fundaciones jesuíticas” in *Barroco Andino. Memoria del Primer Encuentro Internacional*. (La Paz: Viceministerio de Cultura y Unión Latina, 2003), 259-266; “Blanqueando la Loreto Mexicana: Prejuicios sociales y condicionantes materiales en la representación de vírgenes negras” in *La imagen religiosa en la Monarquía hispánica: Usos y espacios*, M. C. de Carlos, P. Civil, and C. Vincent-Cassy, eds. (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2008), 171-93; and Alcalá, Patricia Díaz Cayeros, and Gabriela Sánchez Reyes, “On the Path to Good Health: Representing Urban Ritual in Mexico City during the Epidemic of 1727” *Miradas* 4 (2018): 53-56.

<sup>3</sup> “para que esta no se disminuyesse en la estimación de la Plebe...pareció conveniente que a esta sagrada Ymagen, no se le diese el color denegrido de la original de Loreto” Miguel Venegas, *Templo mystica de la gracia*, mss. Quoted in Alcalá, “Blanqueando,” 176.



Fig. 1 Hieronymus Wierix, *Our Lady of Loreto* (detail), engraving, 1605. British Museum, London.

It is unlikely, however, that the Wierix print is the direct source for this image, as it lacks the details of the niche in which the Virgin stands. The print, for example, shows glimpses of Solomonic columns rather than the simple spiral columns found in other depictions. Other paintings, like this anonymous work at the Church of San Lorenzo di Maggiore in Naples (fig. 2) give insight into the appearance of the niche in the Early Modern era. In both the Thoma and Neapolitan works, the spiral columns support cinquefoil arches set under a triangular arch. The Thoma work omits the interior arch behind the Virgin and shows instead a loosely interpreted design in the background with three inset gems. Other Italian works, including a painting by Giuseppe Cesari from 1600, show the candle-bearing angels in grisaille, suggesting that the source for this image may not have been an engraving.



Fig. 2 Unidentified artist, *Madonna di Loreto*, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century. San Lorenzo di Maggiore, Naples.