



2018.044
Unidentified Artist
*Our Lady of the Light*ⁱ
Quito, Ecuador
Late 18th century
Oil with gold on canvas, 27 ¼ x 19 5/8 inches

The iconography of Our Lady of the Light was established around 1722 when a Jesuit priest in Palermo, Italy wanted a new image of the Virgin Mary to carry with him on missions. He asked a nun known for her intimate visions of Mary to inquire how she might wish to appear in this new image. The nun described a composition in which the Virgin Mary, clothed in blue and white, is crowned by two angels while another offers a basket filled with hearts to the Christ Child, who takes the hearts from the basket one by one. To Mary's proper right the soul of a sinner is pulled away from the gaping mouth of a Leviathan by her merciful hand. Mary told the nun that she wished to be painted this way with the title "Most Holy Mother of the Light." Promoted at first by Italian Jesuits, the devotion spread rapidly through Spain and its American colonies. In a sermon in Madrid in 1756 the Jesuit Diego de Ribera declared the *Madre Santísima de la Luz* the patron saint of missions and there are many mission churches in the Americas dedicated to this avocation, including a number in the southwest of the United States such as that at San Xavier du Bac near Tucson.

This rapid dissemination of the new devotion was propelled by miracles attributed to the image. In his book *Invocación de Nuestra Señora con el título de Madre Santísima de la Luz* (1751) the theologian José de Tobar noted that the graces granted by the “Holy Images of the Mother of Light are innumerable, cannot be counted, are infinite.”ⁱⁱ

For the Jesuits, the operative word in the title of the devotion was “light,” but a spiritual light distinct from the “light” of the Enlightenment promoted by the Spanish king Carlos III. This distinction was symptomatic of the conflicts between the religious order and the monarchy that would lead to the expulsion of the Jesuits from Spanish realms in 1767. The church hierarchy also took issue with an aspect of the iconography of the *Madre Santísima de la Luz*: the image appeared to demonstrate that the Virgin Mary could save souls from perdition without the assistance of Christ. As of 1760, she was no longer to be pictured pulling a soul from the maw of the Leviathan. Instead, artists painted Our Lady of Light, as in this painting, holding the soul safely away from danger. This is a small adjustment that made the difference between heresy and religious orthodoxy.

This painting by an unknown artist working in Quito, Ecuador in the late eighteenth century exemplifies the light colors and figural elegance of that colonial school. Restrained applications of gold contrast with the over-all cool tonalities that make the red of the hearts and the hungry mouth stand out.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

ⁱ There is another painting of this subject in the Carl & Marilyn Thoma collection, a work by the Lima artist Pedro Díaz, inv. no. 2014.057.

ⁱⁱ Enrique Giménez López, “La devoción a la *Madre Santísima de la Luz*: Un aspecto de la represión del jesuitismo en la España de Carlos III,” *Revista de Historia Moderna* 15 (1996), 214 (213-231).