



2014.057  
Pedro Díaz  
Peru, Lima  
*Our Lady of the Light*  
1807  
Oil on canvas, 45 ½ x 35 1/8 inches

The signature on the painting is no longer clearly legible, with the exception of the capital D, but the painting has been convincingly attributed to Pedro Díaz by Ricardo Kusunoki Rodríguez, who found a reference to it in a self-published book by Emilio Gutiérrez de Quintanilla, formerly director of the Museo de Historia in Lima. The author identified the painting as number 137 in his catalogue of the Criado collection in Lima as *Nuestra Señora de la Luz rodeada de ángeles y santos*. Specifically, Gutiérrez de Quintanilla gave the dimensions of the canvas, which accord exactly with this painting now in the Thoma Collection.<sup>1</sup>

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 the proper right of Mary, the soul of a sinner is pulled away from the gaping maw of a Leviathan by her merciful hand. Mary told the nun that she wished to be painted thus 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 advocacy, 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.”<sup>ii</sup>

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 *because* 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, but instead keeping it from falling into the flames of Purgatory, as in this painting in the Thoma Collection.

Here, the Virgin Mary is dressed in a rose, instead of white, tunic; the soul is pictured as a small child instead of the usual fully grown male figure and she rests on a silver base with silver angels around it, the whole composition framed by a temple. The saints pictured around this central temple were likely selected by the patron who commissioned the work. They include, on the right, from top to bottom, Saints John the Baptist, Saint Paul, Saint Rosalia of Palermo, Saint Michael the Archangel, and Saint Francis of Assisi. On the left are Saint Joseph, Saint Peter, Saint Didacus (Diego de Alcalá), Saint Uriel the Archangel, and Saint Dominic of Guzmán.

On a wide banderole across the bottom of the paintings are, to the left, the Latin text of the prayer “Ave Maris Stella” (Hail Star of the Sea) and, in the center, the prayer “Ave Regina Caelorum” (Hail O Queen of Heaven). The latter antiphon is associated with indulgences, which perhaps explains its inclusion here. On the banderole at far right, is an abraded inscription conceding 80 days of indulgence to anyone praying before any image of Our Lady of Light.<sup>iii</sup>

This subject is relatively rare among colonial paintings from Peru, though it was very popular in other regions of Spanish America. The Thoma collection has a fine example created in Quito, Ecuador (2018.044).

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<sup>i</sup> I am very grateful to Ricardo Kunusoki Rodríguez for sharing this information with me. The catalogue of the Criado collection is a melancholy reminder of how many European paintings from collections of the Limeño elites left that city at the turn of the twentieth century and earlier. A similar exodus of European paintings is reflected in the nearly 1,000 works listed in the *Gran galería de pinturas antiguas* by Manuel Ortiz de Zevallos (Lima: Imprenta del Universo de Carlos Prince, 1900). These paintings, then in the Palacio Torre Tagle, like those in the Criado collection, attest to the great collections of paintings that once embellished the homes of Limeños.

<sup>ii</sup> 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.

<sup>iii</sup> “Por el YII.<sup>mo</sup>S.<sup>or</sup>D.<sup>na</sup>F[...]Lima esta concedido 80 dias [...] por quanto resaren ante qualqui[...]la Luz Di[...] Lima A.<sup>o</sup>1807.” The inscriptions with prayers may have at one time been in the same poor condition, but since the prayers were well known, a restorer was at some point able to complete them.