



Juan Pedro López (1724-1787)
Saint Rita of Cascia
1751-87
Oil on panel

Saint Rita, also known as Rita of Cascia (1381-1457), was born in the city of Roccaporena (a suburb of the city of Cascia, Umbria) as Margherita Lotti.¹ Born to a deeply pious family, Rita was married at twelve to a nobleman despite her desire to enter a convent.² Rita's husband was an angry, dissolute man, and during their marriage Rita made efforts to convert him, with some success. When Rita was 30, her husband was stabbed because of a family feud and died. Her two sons, who vowed to avenge their father's death, died shortly thereafter of dysentery. Rita entered the Augustinian monastery of St. Mary Magdalene in Cascia a few years later after the deaths of her sons. She remained there until her death in 1457.

¹ The earliest biography of St. Rita is Agostino Cavallucci's *Vita della B. Rita da Cascia* (Siena, 1610). Other notable biographies include José Sicardo Martínez's *Admirable vida de la gloriosa B. Rita de Cassia* (Genoa, 1688) and Giovanni Battista Memmi's *Vita della B. Rita da Cascina* (Macerata, 1732).

² There is some discrepancy as to the name of Rita's husband. Some translations of Sicardo's biography name her husband as "Ferdinando" (Chicago, 1916) while in others he is "Paolo Mancini." In Richard Connolly's 1903 biography, he is "Patrizio." Cavallucci's and other early vitae do not name Rita's husband.

Saint Rita was particularly devoted to the suffering and death of Christ, and in childhood painted the walls of her oratory with scenes from the sorrowful mysteries of the Passion.³ In her later life, Rita experienced a transformative moment of ecstasy: “she prostrated herself at the foot of a crucifix, and began to meditate on the pains our Savior suffered from the crown of thorns which penetrated deeply into His sacred temples.”⁴ Wishing to share in Christ’s agony herself, Rita begged him for “one of the seventy-two thorns which pierced your head and caused you so much pain, so that I may feel a part of the pain you felt.”⁵ Christ granted her wish and gave her a partial stigmata - a wound in her forehead from the Crown of Thorns. The wound in Rita’s forehead remained visible through the rest of her life and after her death, even upon exhumation years later.

It is this moment of St. Rita’s life that is most frequently pictured, and a seventeenth-century print by Arnold van Westerhout is the source for numerous colonial Latin American paintings.⁶ A closer, but inexact match for the Thoma painting is an engraving by Jakob Frey after a painting by Giacinto Brandi (1621-1691; fig. 1) showing the saint collapsed in ecstasy. In the Thoma painting, the saint kneels before an altar, one hand holding down a prayer book and the other at her breast. She gazes rapturously at the crucifix before her, and a beam of light emanates from it in the direction of her forehead. Not visible in this image is the wound left by the miraculous encounter. Behind her, an angel supports Rita and bears witness to the miraculous event.

³ Joseph Sicardo, *The Life of Sister Saint Rita of Cascia*, trans. Rev. Dan J. Murphy (Chicago: D. B. Hansen & Sons, 1916), 32.

⁴ Sicardo, *Saint Rita*, 113.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See PESSCA 830A for corresponding images.



Fig. 1 Jakob Frey, *Santa Rita da Cascia*, engraving after Giancinto Brandi, 1736. Wellcome Collection, London.

While this work is unsigned, it bears numerous hallmarks of the work of Juan Pedro López, the most prominent painter in eighteenth-century Venezuela. López signed only three of the over 200 works he is believed to have authored, and thus the painting must be identified on stylistic grounds. The color palette of pinky-red and ochre found in the robes of the angel and the blue and gray of his wings are typical of López. The pink-ochre clouds at the background of the work are often found in López's depictions of the heavens. Additionally, the ovoid faces, large eyes, and small mouths of the figures (compare the faces in 2020.83 and 2022.3) recall the facial features found elsewhere in López's oeuvre. This work, like others from eighteenth-century Venezuela is painted on panel (see 2020.95 and 2021.20), which was particularly common in popular art.⁷ Like other painters of his era, López worked primarily on canvas but

⁷ Janeth Rodríguez Nobrega, personal communication, August 2021. See Carlos F. Duarte, *Pintura e Iconografía Popular de Venezuela* (Caracas: Armitano, 1978).

made frequent use of cedar panels as a painting surface, and in one series of the *Via Crucis*, mahogany.⁸

⁸ Carlos F. Duarte, *Juan Pedro López: maestro de pintor, escultor y dorador 1724–1787* (Caracas: Fundación Polar and Galería de Arte Nacional, 1996), 65.