



2018.039

Mateo Pérez de Alesio (1547 Lecce, Italy-1616 Lima, Peru), attributed to.

*The Virgin Mary Reading*

Peru, Lima

Ca. 1589-1616

Oil on canvas, 21 ¾ x 19 7/8 inches.

Inscription (on the book): “*Maria madre de gracia*”

Mateo Pérez de Alesio was born in Italy to a Spanish father (Antonio Pérez) and an Italian mother.<sup>1</sup> His initial training as an artist was probably undertaken locally, but he was in Rome in 1574, where he is said to have contributed to the decoration of the Sistine Chapel. Between 1575 and 1576 Pérez de Alesio worked alongside Federico Zuccaro and others on the frescoes in the Oratorio del Gonfalone in Rome. It is said that Alesio’s colleagues discovered one morning that the artist had destroyed some of his own paintings in the oratory because he was dissatisfied with them. This prompted him to leave Rome headed south to the Spanish Kingdom of Malta, which was governed by the Order of Malta. In Valletta, Alesio painted fresco decorations in the Hall of the Ambassadors in the order’s palace that had been completed in 1571. In 1581 Alesio was back in Rome where, the following year, a set of engravings representing the artist’s Maltese frescoes were published.

Pérez de Alesio himself learned the art of engraving while in Rome (1581-1583), and he undertook fresco decorations in the churches of Sant’Eligio degli Oreficci and Santa Catalina de la Rotta. Alesio must have felt that his career in Italy was not going as well as he might have liked, and in 1583 he left for Spain in the company of his fellow artist Pedro Pablo Morón. Alesio might have had in mind eventually making a career in Peru, but more likely was following a number of his artist colleagues to Spain with the hope of working in the monastery/church of El Escorial, whose construction had recently been completed. Philip II had brought Italian artists such as Pellegrino Tibaldi, Luca Cambiaso, and Federico Zuccaro to Spain to decorate the vast structure with fresco paintings, a medium not mastered by the Spanish artists of the time.

Alesio was welcomed to Seville as a disciple of Michelangelo, which gave him a considerable boost among the intelligentsia and the sizable artistic community of that booming trade city in the late sixteenth century. Alesio worked in Seville from 1583 to 1587. He was not prolific, but his accomplishments are well documented. They include, most notably, an enormous fresco painting of Saint Cristopher for the Cathedral of Seville and a painting in oil on canvas representing *Santiago at the Battle of Clavijo* (Church of Santiago, Seville).

Alesio left Seville for Peru in 1589, apparently determined to become wealthy in the viceroyalty. His work for the Cathedral of Seville gave Alesio quick access to the court of Viceroy García Hurtado de Mendoza in Lima. In 1590 Alessio signed a contract as “*pintor de su señoría el Virrey*” (“painter of his lordship the viceroy”). Until 1590 there was no painter from Europe in Lima who came with such a fine reputation as Alesio, so he became instantly the preeminent artist in the viceregal capital. His portrait of the viceroy is today known in a copy in the Museo Nacional de Historia in Lima.

Alesio achieved great social and artistic success in Lima, but most of his oeuvre there was destroyed by a succession of earthquakes. Extensive fresco decorations for the churches of San Agustín and Santo Domingo were described by the Augustinian chronicler Antonio de la Calancha and by the Dominican Juan Meléndez in the seventeenth century.

Besides the large fresco commissions, Pérez de Alesio is documented as having painted smaller works of devotional subjects. The first notice of a painting on copper produced in Lima was an image of Our Lady by Alessio. Years ago, the art historian Francisco Stastny attributed to the artist a painting of the “*Virgen de Belén*” on the reverse of a copper plate representing the *Holy Family of the Oak* that bears Alesio’s signature. Other small-scale paintings by Alesio are mentioned here and there in documents, including those among the eighty-four paintings listed in the inventory of his estate.

The Thoma painting representing the *Virgin Mary Reading* is attributed to Mateo Pérez de Alesio by comparison with the style of the *Virgen de Belén* (Museo de Arte de Lima). The painting is clearly by the refined hand of a European artist of around 1600. However, the Spanish colonial frame is evidence of the origins of the work in the Americas. The application of gold in the elegant “inscription,” the halo of the Virgin Mary, and the hem of her garment also suggest the presence of the canvas in the Viceroyalty of Peru. Italian artists like Alesio did not normally apply gold embellishments to their canvases, so he likely did not do so. However, gold was often added to not only contemporary paintings in eighteenth-century Peru, but to those, like this one from an earlier time to give them a new, richer appearance.



CARL & MARILYNN THOMA FOUNDATION  
1925 Cedar Springs Rd, Suite 205 | Dallas, TX 75201 | 214.971.7770 | [thomafoundation.org](http://thomafoundation.org)

---