



Unidentified artist
Our Lady Nursing the Christ Child
18th century
Peru, Cuzco
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

In Spanish, this often-painted subject is called *Virgen de la Leche*. English speakers borrow the Italian “Madonna” to call these depictions the “Nursing Madonna.” [See the later painting of the subject in the Thoma collection, where the latter title is used.] In Latin, the subject is *Virgo lactans*. The earliest versions of this iconography in the Viceroyalty of Peru were probably the ones paintings on copper by Mateo Pérez de Alesio from around 1600 (Museo de Arte de Lima and Denver Art Museum). The popularity of this iconic image of mother and child never waned in Spanish America.

This painting is of considerable stylistic interest. The skin tones of Mary and the Christ Child are considerably darker than in most Cuzco paintings in which holy figures have pale skin and rosy cheeks. The darker flesh tones may reflect the artist’s wish to achieve a more naturalistic appearance. This marked lack of artificiality is in bold contrast with the *brocateado* treatment of Mary’s mantle. The dense brocade design is applied as though to a flat surface, with no hint of the forms of her body beneath. The pronounced difference between the warmth of the figures and the cool, hard gold appliqué is clearly intentional.

There are probably two hands at work here: a painter versed in painting in oil on canvas, and another skilled in the manipulation of gold. It is possible that the gold was added to a finished painting at the request of an owner who sought to enhance the beauty and value of the object.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt