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Unidentified Artist

Peru, Cuzco

The Nursing Madonna (Nuestra Señora de Belén)

Eighteenth century, perhaps ca. 1700-1730¹

Oil with gold on canvas, 36 ¼ x 30 inches

Paintings representing the Virgin Mary nursing the Child date from as early as the twelfth century. The subject in Spanish and Spanish American art is generally titled *Nuestra Señora de la Leche* (“Our Lady of the Milk”) or *Nuestra Señora de Belén* (Our Lady of Bethlehem). The latter title derives from a legend that Mary was nursing the infant in the “Grotto of the Milk” in Bethlehem, when a drop spilled onto a rock, turning it white. In early centuries bits of rock from the grotto were thought to be miraculous, for, when soaked in water, the calcium carbonate turned the liquid white as milk, and was imbibed by woman to assure plentiful milk for their babies. It is unlikely that the painter of the *Thoma Nursing Madonna* had the grotto in Bethlehem in mind, but the title of the subject as *Our Lady of Bethlehem* was embedded in tradition.

In an essay first published in 1969, the distinguished art historian Francisco Stastny connected the type as it appears in colonial paintings in Peru to the example (fig. 1) by the Italian-Spanish painter Mateo Pérez de Alessio (1547-1606), who worked in Peru.² Stastny identified Pérez de Alessio’s model in paintings by Gaetano Scipione Pulzone (1544-1598), whom art historians consider an exemplary practitioner of the *contramania* style, a more sedate version of Mannerism that followed the Council of Trent. For Stastny and other South American

art historians following him, Pérez de Alesio's small painting on copper that was probably created around 1604 was the model followed by many other artists in Peru in the following decades. It is far more likely that the artist followed a print or a painted copy of a composition that was widely known throughout Europe and Spanish America.



Fig. 1. Mateo Pérez de Alesio, *Virgen de Belén*, ca. 1604, oil on copper. Museo de Arte de Lima.

It has long been assumed that the roots of painting in the early years of the Viceroyalty of Peru were in an Italian style disseminated by Bernardo Bitti, Mateo Pérez de Alessio, and Angelino Medoro. The development of the art of painting in Spanish South America was much more complicated than that, and the paintings of the Nursing Madonna created in eighteenth-century Cuzco may be ultimately based on Flemish, not Italian prototypes. Although Italian artists painted the Nursing Madonna in the sixteenth century, the subject was well established in the Northern Renaissance much earlier. An example is a painting attributed to Gerard David of ca. 1490 (fig. 2), in which the position of the limbs of both Mary and the Child are very like those in the Thoma painting. We know that Flemish paintings, especially small works on copper, and many engravings were imported into the Viceroyalty of Peru during the colonial period, reflected here in the floral frame typical of Flemish, but not Italian, paintings. It is more likely that the Thoma painting, therefore, was based on a Flemish model that became immensely popular in colonial Cuzco and was reproduced there in many versions.



Fig. 2. Gerard David, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1490, Berlin: Gemäldegalerie.

The Thoma painting perfectly represents several iconic characteristics of paintings from colonial Cuzco: the sweet faces and expressions of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child, the exquisite rendering of gold to suggest richly embroidered brocade, and the framing of the devotional image with roses. The latter, so often depicted by Cuzco painters, is another reminder of how many Flemish devotional paintings there must have been in the Viceroyalty of Peru in colonial times.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

¹ This date range was suggested by Luis Eduardo Wuffarden.

² See Francisco Stastny, "Pérez de Alesio y la pintura del siglo XVI," *Anales del Instituto de Arte Americano y de Investigaciones Estéticas* 22 (Buenos Aires, 1969): 69-84. Reprinted in Francisco Stastny Mosberg, *Estudios de arte colonial, Vol. 1*, eds. Sonia V. Rose and Juan Carlos Estenssoro Fuchs (Lima: Institut Francais d'Études Andine, 2013), 85-117.