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ROBERT SIMON FINE ART

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**Peruvian, Cuzco School, 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

*Virgin of Montserrat*

Oil on canvas  
18 x 14 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (45.7 x 37.1 cm)

Provenance: Private Collection, United Kingdom.



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The *Virgin of Montserrat* is a much-venerated sculpture preserved at the Benedictine monastery of Santa Maria de Montserrat in Catalonia (Fig. 1). Known locally as *La Moreneta* for her dark skin, the *Virgin of Montserrat* is one of the most well-known and venerated Black Madonnas in Europe.<sup>1</sup> While art historians date the sculpture to the twelfth century, the faithful consider it far older. To them the work was sculpted by St. Luke around the year A.D. 50, brought from Jerusalem to Spain, and hidden to protect it from Saracens in the eighth century before being rediscovered in a cave on the mountain of Montserrat in the ninth century.



Fig. 1. Romanesque, 12<sup>th</sup> century, *The Virgin of Montserrat*, carved wood, Santa Maria de Montserrat, Catalonia.

In form the sculpture follows the type of a *Sedes Sapientiae*, or Throne of Wisdom, but its most celebrated quality is the black color of the figures' skin. In general Black Madonnas did not have racial or ethnic connotations when made, and in fact the *Virgin of Montserrat* does not appear to have had dark skin until at least the sixteenth century. These figures acquired their color in different ways: some darkened naturally, others were treated with tinted varnishes, while a few seem to have been deliberately colored in the late medieval and early modern periods to make them appear older and thus acquire additional qualities of authenticity and authority. While in some instances this darkening has been reversed, the features of the *Virgin of Montserrat* have remained black.<sup>2</sup> It has been suggested that for some in sixteenth-century Spain, the image of the *Virgin of Montserrat's* skin was seen as a marker of Christian triumph, as a dark-skinned person is shown embracing the Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> But more generally miraculous Black Madonnas such as the Virgin of Montserrat are associated with the words of the Bride in the Song Solomon, who represents the Virgin Mary: "I am black but beautiful, O ye daughters of Jerusalem." The nuances and interpretations of these images have varied over the centuries following the cultural interests and prejudices of their audience.<sup>4</sup>

Our painting of the *Virgin of Montserrat* reflects the impact and re-interpretation of the cult image in the New World. The Virgin is represented seated and holding the Christ Child in her lap, following the hierarchical composition of the original sculpture, with both holding orbs in opposite hands. But in our painting each figure wears an ornate crown not seen in the original sculpture, and a sprig of lilies now emerges from the orb held by the Virgin. More significantly, the Virgin and Child have been transformed from their medieval abstract forms into accessible human figures, which gives new meaning to the color of their skin. That Colonial Peru was in good part inhabited by a dark-complexioned, mixed-race populace (including the artists of the Cuzco School) makes both the naturalistic features and the skin color of the Virgin and Child especially consequential.

The two figures seem to be both in front of and apart of the mountain of Montserrat, which shape has been modified to echo the contours of the Virgin and Child. The use of this imagery recalls Colonial paintings that associated and identified the Virgin with the earth goddess Pachamama, venerated by the indigenous population of the Andes. Most celebrated of these is the Bolivian *Virgen del Cerro Rico* in Potosí (Fig. 2). Both the extent of the re-shaping of the mountain and the fidelity with which the characteristic serrated peaks that give the mountain its name are depicted, can be appreciated in a view of the actual mountain range in Catalonia (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Bolivian, mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century, *Virgin of the Rich Mountain of Potosí* (Cerro Rico), Museo de la Casa Nacional de Moneda, Potosí, Bolivia.



Fig 3. Montserrat viewed from the city of Manresa, Catalonia, Spain.

In our painting the Benedictine monastery that houses the original Virgin of Montserrat is prominently depicted at the right, while smaller churches and hermitages are scattered across the landscape. Diminutive pilgrims are also shown climbing the slopes, reflecting the site's status as a popular pilgrimage destination.

As Elisa Foster has pointed out, “copies of the Virgin of Montserrat, especially those that appear in Latin America, provide a new context with which to examine the statue in terms of race.”<sup>5</sup> Significantly, the ornate crown with encrusted jewels worn by the Virgin in the present painting is based on an actual crown—known as *La Formosa* or *La Mexicana*—which was made in Mexico and sent to Spain in 1627 as an offering to the sculpture in Montserrat. The gift of this crown is evidence of devotion in the New World to the *Virgin of Montserrat*, whose dark complexion resonated with the indigenous people that the Spanish were attempting to convert. It is no coincidence that the first miraculous appearance of the Virgin in the Americas, the Virgin of Guadalupe, was a Black Virgin revealed to Juan Diego, a native convert in Mexico City. Foster goes as far as to suggest the Virgin of Montserrat may present a case of reverse influence, in which perception of the Virgin's dark skin in the New World impacted the way that sculpture came to be perceived in Spain in the period.

The iconography of the Virgin of Montserrat was first introduced to the Americas by the Benedictine friar and missionary Bernat Boil, who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second journey to the New World. Prints transported to the New World for use in missionary work and religious instruction often served as source images for artists in the Spanish Colonial world.<sup>6</sup> Local devotion to the Virgin of Montserrat in

Peru was likely aided by the visual parallels between the rough ridges of Montserrat and the familiar landscape of the Andes, as well as the primacy of mountains as spiritual sites in indigenous religious practices.

The Virgin's image was propagated in Peru through paintings made after prints, of which this work is a particularly accomplished example. Our painting can be associated with an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish engraving of the *Virgin of Montserrat* (Fig. 4), which must have been disseminated in the Americas.<sup>7</sup> It relates to several painted depictions of the subject, such as a Spanish oil of the *Virgin of Montserrat* on a throne (Fig. 5). The author of our painting has transformed the engraving into a delicately colored composition infused with pastel colors against which the bold red and blue garments of the Virgin stand out. The treatment of the mountain is almost impressionistic, as the rigid lines of the print are softened and the small buildings and figures are hinted at more than described, some seemingly blending into their surroundings.



Fig. 4. Spanish, 18<sup>th</sup> century, *The Virgin of Montserrat*, The British Library, London.



Fig. 5. Spanish, 17<sup>th</sup> century, *The Adoration of the Virgin of Montserrat*, Museu de Montserrat, Montserrat.

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<sup>1</sup> Elisa Foster, "The Black Madonna of Montserrat: An Exception to Concepts of Dark Skin in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia?," in *Envisioning Others: Race, Color, and the Visual in Iberia and Latin America*, ed. Pamela Patton, Leiden and Boston, 2016, pp. 18–20.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, "The Black Madonna of Montserrat," pp. 23–24, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, "The Black Madonna of Montserrat," p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Black Madonnas have not been systematically studied as images of Black people. Notably, the recent publication *The Image of the Black in Western Art* barely discusses Black Madonnas, noting only that they are "an extremely challenging problem" for the study of blackness and require further research. See: Foster, "The Black Madonna of Montserrat," pp. 25–26; Paul Kaplan, "Introduction," *the Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 2, Cambridge, MA, 2010, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Foster, "The Black Madonna of Montserrat," p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Stella Nair, "Localizing Sacredness, Difference, and "Yachacuscamcami" in a Colonial Andean Painting," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 89, no. 2 (June 2007), pp. 211–214.

<sup>7</sup> This engraving, titled "Deiparæ ad Montem Serratum Imago," is emblazoned with the coats of arms of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, suggesting a Spanish origin. The copy in the British Library was formerly owned by King George III (1738–1820), which helps establish an approximate date for the creation of the print. <http://explore.bl.uk/BLVU1:LSCOP-ALL:BLL01004893159>.