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Bernardo Bitti

Camerino (Italia), 1548 – Lima (Peru), 1610

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ca.1585-1599

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Oil on canvas

75 × 64 cm (29.53 × 25.20 in)

Literature: Una colección de pintura en Venezuela, Bilbao, Editorial La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1981

Provenance: Arnold Zingg, Caracas, Venezuela

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Bernardo Bitti occupies a central position in the history of art of the Viceroyalty of Peru as the principal introducer of Roman-rooted Italian Mannerism in the Andes. His prolonged activity in Lima, Cusco, Arequipa, Juli, and other Andean centers led to the consolidation of a highly recognizable formal language, characterized by the idealization of figures, the primacy of drawing over color, the spiritualization of emotions, and a distinctive treatment of drapery and textiles.

The composition presents the Virgin in three-quarter view, her head gently inclined and her gaze lowered, holding the sleeping Christ Child upon her lap. The scene is structured through a stable pyramidal composition, reinforced by the cascading blue mantle and by the visual counterbalance of the Child's body—a compositional device frequently employed by Bitti to achieve equilibrium, introspection, and devotional clarity.

The Marian face conforms to a clearly defined idealized canon: an elongated oval, broad forehead, softly arched eyebrows, lowered eyelids, and a small mouth, rendered with an exceptionally smooth and refined modeling. This facial type recurs with notable consistency throughout numerous documented works by the artist, allowing for the identification of a stable prototype within his mature production.

The Christ Child is depicted in a state of serene abandonment, with a soft anatomy, rounded limbs, and gentle tonal transitions, devoid of dramatic emphasis. The inclination of the head and the closed eyes reinforce the atmosphere of intimate devotion while symbolically foreshadowing the future Passion, in accordance with a restrained and contemplative iconography.

One of the most distinctive features of Bernardo Bitti's style is his treatment of drapery, characterized by structured, broad, angular, and firmly articulated folds. The textiles do not fall in a naturalistic manner; rather, they appear constructed as near-sculptural volumes that organize and stabilize the composition.

This approach, inherited from late Italian Mannerism, reflects the primacy of drawing and an intellectualized conception of form. In the Virgin's blue mantle, the folds are sharply defined, with controlled chromatic transitions that convey a sense of structural solidity. The red tunic, in turn, is composed of broad, stable planes of color, reinforcing the notion of drapery conceived as volume rather than surface description.

From a comparative perspective, the painting shows close affinities with documented Marian compositions by Bernardo Bitti in both Lima and the southern Andean region. In the *Virgin and Child* attributed to Bitti in the Museo Pedro de Osma (Lima) (Fig. 1), the same facial canon, inclination of the neck, and introspective expression are evident. In the *Madonna of the Little Bird* in the Cathedral of Cusco (Fig. 2), a similar treatment of the mantle's folds and the same idealized conception of the Virgin's face can be observed. Likewise, in the *Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist* in the Cathedral Museum of Sucre (Bolivia) (Fig. 3), clear parallels appear in the handling of the Virgin's mantle, the elongated Mannerist neck, and in specific details such as the small dimple on the Virgin's chin—a recurring hallmark of the master's work.



Fig. 1 *Virgin and Child*, attributed to Bernardo Bitti. Museo Pedro de Osma, Lima. Oil on canvas, 47 × 37 cm

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These correspondences extend beyond general formulas to precise details of execution, including the restrained, elongated gestures of the hands and the use of linear radiant halos, further strengthening the attribution to Bernardo Bitti.

The painting is executed in oil on canvas, a support widely employed by Bitti during his activity in Peru. The ground appears fine and homogeneous, allowing for smooth modeling of the flesh tones and delicate tonal transitions. The brushwork is controlled and even, without visible impasto, favoring a polished finish and a visually unified surface.

The chromatic palette—deep blues, muted reds, ivory-like flesh tones, and neutral backgrounds—fully corresponds to the color schemes documented in Bitti’s mature oeuvre.

The iconography belongs to the type of the Virgin of Tenderness (**Madonna della Tenerezza**), adapted to the American Counter-Reformation context. The scene emphasizes restrained emotion, compositional clarity, and devotional accessibility, in keeping with the pedagogical and spiritual ideals promoted by the Society of Jesus.

The stylistic, technical, and iconographic analysis of *The Virgin and Child* allows the work to be situated, with a high degree of probability, within the corpus of Bernardo Bitti. The formal coherence, quality of execution, characteristic treatment of structured drapery, and fidelity to the artist’s Marian prototypes provide solid academic grounds for this attribution.



Fig. 2. *Madonna of the Little Bird*, oil on panel, 110 × 78 cm. Cathedral of Cusco, Peru



Fig. 3. *Virgin and Child*, attributed to Bernardo Bitti. Museo Pedro de Osma, Lima. Oil on canvas, 47 × 37 cm.

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