

BRIDGING HEAVEN AND SPAIN: THE VIRGIN OF MERCY FROM THE LATE
MEDIEVAL PERIOD TO THE AGE OF EXPLORATION

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The Virgin of Mercy is a Marian devotional image type recognizable by its portrayal of Mary protecting the faithful with her cloak. This thesis situates the iconography of painted panels within their historical and cultural context in Spain from the late medieval period to the Age of Exploration. I explain the image's origins and introduce its various versions, focusing on three major frequently commissioned subtypes: the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*, plague commissions, and the Mercedarian's Virgin of Mercy. I present a case study of one famous version of the type, the *Virgin of the Navigators*, and focus on the Spaniards and Amerindians beneath the cloak, situating them in relation to the historic debate that called into question the very humanity of the peoples of the Americas. The thesis explores the painting's possible statement the patrons may have been making through the artistic treatment of both groups.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Virgin of Mercy is a Marian devotional image type immediately recognizable by its portrayal of Mary protecting the faithful with her cloak.¹ To its late medieval viewing audience, any given image was a reassuring picture of protection. For contemporary viewers, these same images visually reference the broad cultural issues feared by the original devotees of her cult. Spanish examples of the Virgin of Mercy are no different. Moreover, by understanding the iconographical references in panel paintings of the type from Spain, the viewer can almost envision the cultural pulse of Spain from the late medieval period to the Age of Exploration. The image has enjoyed a long history of patronage and a diverse range of sheltering figures. While its first appearance was as an ancient sheltering cloak type featuring pagan deities, it was transformed in the late Middle Ages as one of many versions of the Virgin. It was commissioned in the hope of preventing the Black Death, and has been one of the first paintings in European history to reference the exploration of the New World. Beneath the miraculous, healing cloak, groups of mortals have been depicted as varied as royal and ecclesiastical authorities, monks, nuns, townsfolk, children, naked people, the family of the Catholic Monarchs, New World explorers and *conquistadores*, and natives of the Americas.

While the topic of the Virgin of Mercy has been explored in the body of extant scholarship concerning the type, Spanish examples, that is, images commissioned and produced by Spaniards and destined for devotional use within the Iberian Peninsula have

¹ This image type is known by several different but related titles that have been used to refer to this and other Marian types: The Virgin of Mercy, The Madonna of Mercy, Our Lady of Mercy, The Virgin of Misericordia, The Madonna of Misericordia, etc. These versions have also been translated into the different European languages. For the sake of simplicity, this thesis will refer to the type in English as The Virgin of Mercy.

yet to be considered. This thesis focuses on panel paintings of this type from the late medieval period to the Age of Exploration in the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. For the sake of convenience, the thesis refers to the Iberian Peninsula as “Spain” even though clearly in this period the regions of the peninsula today known as Spain at that time could not yet be considered a unified country. Even in the decades immediately following the marriage of Isabel I of Castile and Fernando II of Aragon, the area primarily consisted of several kingdoms, the largest and the two from which the examples discussed in this thesis come, are Castile and Aragon.

The lack of available scholarship about Spanish examples of the Virgin of Mercy frustrates one’s study of it. The history of devotional painting in late medieval Spain has not been well researched in the English language, lacking in-depth analysis since Chandler Post published his series of books on Spanish medieval painting in the first half of the twentieth century.² The body of extant scholarship on the subject and related topics spans at least the last century, with slightly over half of the literature written during the past fifty years.³ These materials and others have discussed the origins of the Virgin of Mercy, its theological meaning, examples in English, French, German, Italian, and Armenian art, and its association with the plague and other subtypes. Scholars have

²Chandler Rathfon Post and Harold E. Wetthey, *A History of Spanish Painting. Volumes 1-12*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930.

³ Some important works include: Catherine Oakes, *Ora Pro Nobis: the Virgin as Intercessor in Medieval Art and Devotion*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2008; Susan Solway, “A Humanistic Source of the Madonna of Mercy,” *The Art Bulletin* 67, no. 3 (1985): 359-368; Barbara Wollesen-Wisch, and Susan Solway, “The Madonna of Mercy,” *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 4 (1986): 674-676; Christa Belting-Ihm, *Sub Matris Tutela: unters zur Vorgeschichte d. Schutzmantelmadonna*. Heidelberg, 1976; E. Guldan, *Eva und Maria, eine Antithese als Bildmotiv*, Graz-Cologne, 1966, 340; G. Llompert, “La Virgen del Manto en el siglo de las Reformas,” *Estudios Lulianos*, VI, 1962, 299ff; D. Lathoud, “Le thème iconographique du ‘Pokrov’ de la Vierge,” *L’art byzantine chez les Slaves, deuxième recueil dédié à la mémoire de Théodore Uspenskij, (Orient et Byzance. Études d’art medieval, v)*, Paris, 1932, 302f; Paul Perdrizet, *La Vierge de Miséricorde; étude d’un thème iconographique*. Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1908; Léon Silvy, *L’origine de la Vierge de miséricorde*. Paris: “Gazette des beaux-arts, 1905, with further references.

discussed the religious and military orders in Spain that developed their own versions of the Virgin, which they applied to every Marian image type including the Virgin of Mercy, yet they do not mention the type itself or art commissioned by the orders. One lone article specifically focuses on the altarpiece of the *Virgin of the Navigators*, the topic of Chapter Three, and, while seemingly comprehensive in its scope, even that does not situate the central panel, a painting of the Virgin of Mercy, within the wider corpus of paintings of the type nor does it provide more than a few brief paragraphs about the representation of groups of Spaniards and natives of the Americas beneath the cloak. There is nothing written beyond a few sentences in one of Post's volumes about one particular subtype of the Virgin of Mercy, the *Sponsorship of the Virgin* that connects the visual subject matter to the life of Saint Dominic in *The Golden Legend*.⁴ Thus, while there is literature that discusses many aspects of the type, Spanish examples, whether they are painted panels, sculptures, textiles, or any other media, remain largely understudied.

This thesis focuses, then, on Iberian painted panels of the Virgin of Mercy from the late medieval period, specifically, the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries. This was a moment that followed their initial emergence and saw a dramatic increase in their patronage. The thesis answers the following question: Why was a Marian devotional painting type that otherwise had no prior historical or iconographical tradition in this part of Europe suddenly commissioned so ardently? The thesis takes a historical and iconographical approach to the topic, providing cultural background information when necessary, and discusses the Virgin of Mercy over the course of three chapters.

⁴ The *Sponsorship of the Virgin* was known in Castilian as *El Patrocinio de la Virgen*.

The first chapter, “The Origins and Meaning of the Virgin of Mercy,” will address the first part of the originating question, that of the non-Spanish origins of the type, its historical background, and its meaning in the later Middle Ages. This chapter has several goals. First, it traces the visual origins of the type to its formal iconographic ancestors which first appeared on imperial coins. Second, it explains how the Virgin of Mercy can be considered under the broader heading of a “sheltering cloak type,” the identity of its protective figure changing throughout its history. Third, it explains how this sheltering cloak type was passed down through the centuries of the early medieval period in Europe to be copied by Cistercian monks on instruments with which their Order sealed letters and documents, substituting, of course, the Virgin for the pagan virtues. Fourth, the chapter examines the wealth of Marian literature produced by twelfth and thirteenth century writers, among them, Bernard of Clairvaux and Caesarius of Heisterbach, and concentrates on the examples that most clearly demonstrate their contributions to the Virgin of Mercy type in particular. The chapter then explores the major iconographic meaning central to the type by explaining the importance of both the Virgin in this specific role and of her use of the cloak, a relic considered to have miraculous healing powers that had inspired a cult following at Chartres Cathedral.

The second chapter, “Iconography of the Virgin of Mercy in Spain,” transports readers to the Iberian Peninsula. To begin to answer the second half of the originating question, namely, why this devotional type was commissioned in Spain, this chapter focuses on the different iconographies of her representation and their devotional use. It visually analyzes a basic representation of the type. After a brief discussion of some of the possible variations on this basic expression, it introduces three iconographic subtypes

that were commissioned in Spain, first, the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*, second, plague commissions featuring the Virgin of Mercy, and, third, the Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy.⁵ These three were among the major subtypes of this image commissioned in the Iberian Peninsula in the late medieval period, although there were surely more. Chapter Two describes how these subtypes were different from the mainstream, basic type, provides a historical background for each, and illustrates each with examples of painted panels. Finally, the iconography of the Virgin of Mercy, as the chapter demonstrates, was central to its role in medieval Spanish devotion, as part of altarpieces in churches throughout the Iberian Peninsula.

The third chapter, "*The Virgin of the Navigators as the Virgin of Mercy*," is a case study of the panel named in the title.⁶ To further explain why the Virgin of Mercy was commissioned in Spain, in this case, during the first decades after the 1492 exploration, this chapter examines how the *Virgin of the Navigators* was a reflection of and response to profound cultural changes taking place in the Iberian Peninsula during this period. It introduces the House of Trade in Seville, its famous altarpiece, and the recent scholarship, and focuses largely on the central panel, closely examining the groups of people beneath the cloak, both Europeans and Amerindians. Finally, it explains the heated cultural debate referenced by these two groups, especially by the group of Amerindians, and demonstrates one of the ways the Virgin of Mercy type could be used to respond to historic events.

⁵ In English, this subtype was called *The Virgin of the Mercedarians, Mother of Mercy*, of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy; in Castilian, *La Virgen de la Merced, Madre de Misericordia, de la Orden de Nuestra Señora de Misericordia*.

⁶ The painting is sometimes also referred to by scholars as the *Virgin of the Seafarers*

Finally, the thesis concludes with some final remarks. It revisits the original aims of the project, briefly summarizes and interprets the research, and discusses the contributions the project has made to existing scholarship. It also charts a path for future research, identifying some of the many fascinating potential topics related to Spanish paintings of the Virgin of Mercy that this project could not incorporate. By the end of the thesis, the reader will understand how cultural factors such as the plague or the Valladolid debate that influenced the subject matter of a painted panel or an altarpiece were critical issues that impacted peoples' daily lives; visual references in these works to these phenomena provide modern viewers sense of the pulse of late medieval and early sixteenth-century life.

CHAPTER II

THE ORIGINS AND MEANING OF THE VIRGIN OF MERCY

The Virgin of Mercy was not a Spanish invention. Its origins as a visual type and the literature that helped promote its popularity are to be found outside of the Iberian Peninsula. Neither was its composition originally developed as a Christian image. In fact, one can trace the ancestry of the image as far back as the ancient Roman Empire. The Virgin of Mercy itself was a product of continental Europe in the late Middle Ages, its iconography stimulated by a variety of literary sources and popular beliefs. This chapter will begin to answer the originating thesis question by discussing these literary and visual origins of the Virgin of Mercy, as well as the cultural background of its iconography, specific to its late medieval reinterpretation that gave it such visual potency. The aim is to justify its appearance in Spain.

Susan Solway has convincingly traced what is now known as the Virgin of Mercy to ancient Roman imperial coins.⁷ As such, in terms of its basic design, it should be considered part of a “sheltering cloak type,” since the act of protection with a cloak by a hierarchically larger figure has been applied historically to pagan deities, personified virtues, Christ, the Virgin, and about twenty Christian saints.⁸ Solway traces the first appearance of this sheltering cloak type to coins depicting a male god, Jupiter, who allegedly saved Trajan’s life during a mid-winter earthquake in Antioch in 114-15 A.D. by extending his mantle behind the emperor and using it to lead him to safety.⁹ Trajan

⁷ Susan Solway, “A Numanistic Source of the Madonna of Mercy.” *The Art Bulletin*, 67, no. 3 (1985): 359-368.

⁸ Solway, “A Numanistic Source of the Madonna of Mercy,” 367.

⁹ Trajan, incidentally, was a Roman emperor born in the Iberian Peninsula.

was apparently so grateful for this act of mercy that he had the sheltering cloak image type created and preserved for posterity on an issuance of coins. Later varieties of coins (Figure 1) stamped with female personifications of virtues, *Pietas* and *Concordia*, however, are a more compelling visual source for the Virgin of Mercy type.¹⁰ These virtues, draped in classical garments, are shown in the center of the compositions standing on lines meant to represent the ground, their bodies facing the viewer frontally but their faces in profile. With their mantles, they shelter mortals depicted hierarchically half their size. These sheltered figures, in turn, usually lift their hands up to the personification, pleading with her for the protection she provides. Coins featuring *Pietas* and *Concordia* in this act of protection were among the most popular, enjoying multiple minting cycles and circulation throughout the Empire in each of the major denominations. Coins are small, portable, collectible, and virtually indestructible, thus withstanding the test and potential damages of time. As such, they survived from the Roman period to the Middle Ages, hoarded by collectors, and would have been available to the Cistercian monks who reinterpreted the originally pagan image for their own Order's use.¹¹

Indeed, the first known appearance of the Virgin of Mercy in the late Middle Ages was on Cistercian seals with which they sealed letters and documents. The image

¹⁰ Solway, "A Numismatic Source of the Madonna of Mercy," 361.

¹¹ While the Virgin of Mercy image has been traced to these coins' portrayals of the sheltering cloak type, there is, admittedly, at least a thousand years' time span between the original circulation of the coins and their reinterpretation into the Virgin of Mercy. According to Barbara Wollesen-Wisch's article, "The Madonna of Mercy," *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 4, 1986, 674-676, Christa Belting-Ihm's book, *Sub Matris Tutela: Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte der Schutzmantelmadonna*, Heidelberg: 1976 provides a thorough study of the origins of the Virgin of Mercy which was unavailable to me because I do not read German. *Sub Matris Tutela* would likely explain the origins and development of the image from Roman times to the later Middle Ages and be able to account for such a wide gap between the occurrence of the coins and the seals, as this thesis cannot.



Above: Aureus of Trajan, ca. 115-117. *Pietas*/AVGVST. London, British Museum
Below: Aureus of Antonius Pius, ca. 148-9. *Concordia*/TR POT III COS II. London, British Museum



Figure 1: Roman coins featuring personifications of Pietas and Concordia. London, British Museum.

was stamped into the wax blob with an instrument called a matrix. There are two early seals of the Virgin of Mercy that merit attention. The first, the earliest verified presentation of the image survives only in a nineteenth-century drawing. (Figure 2)¹² This seal was from the monastery of Beaupré at Grimminge, Belgium and is reliably dated to 1335. Here, the Virgin holds the Child, who helps her open a side of her cloak to show a crowd of pious individuals. They are surrounded by a complex poly lobed ornamental frame and, outside that, a circle of inscriptions. The Virgin steps forward on a plinth, her cloak encompassing even the feet of the faithful; the entire composition is contained within the lobed circle and the inscriptions around it.

The earliest extant example of a Cistercian seal featuring the Virgin of Mercy is from the abbey of Cercamp, near Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise, France, from 1352 (Figure 3). The two images are similar in that the Virgin still holds the Child and stretches her cloak over groups of faithful on either side; she stands on a horizontal line, faces the viewer fully frontally, and is framed and completely contained by a partly damaged inscription. The basic composition of these two examples, moreover, echoes that of the coins featuring *Pietas* and *Concordia*, in that the images all feature a hierarchically larger female figure using her cloak to shelter smaller mortals. The main differences are the number of mortals protected beneath the cloak and the Virgin's frontal position. To transform these coins' sheltering cloak type with their female personifications into the same image type with the Virgin Mary required those responsible for this reinterpretation to have a preconceived idea of the image they sought to create visually. This would have been possible given their familiarity with literature that promoted such an image, as will

¹² Bony and Perdrizet also mention a very early presentation of the Virgin of Mercy on a panel now owned by the Vatican Museum, painted by a "Giotto-like" artist from the first half of the fourteenth century. Bony, "An Introduction to the Study of Cistercian Seals," 223.



Figure 2: Nineteenth-century drawing of Cistercian Seal, 1335, Monastery of Beaupré



Figure 3: Cistercian Seal, 1352. Abbey of Cercamp, near Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise, France

be explained later in the chapter. This step thus gave concrete expression to the Cistercian order's Marian devotion to the Virgin as its special protectress, and at the same time created the recognizable image type now known as the Virgin of Mercy. In this way, the ancient, ancestral sheltering cloak type, like many other formerly pagan images, survived the passage of time and was adopted centuries after its initial appearance to function in a similar role in the service of a different religion whose principle female figure, the Virgin Mary, was believed to be a combination of *Pietas*, *Concordia*, and every other virtue.

This newly developed Virgin of Mercy image was used at first only on Cistercian seals, but due to the Cistercians' strict adherence to their rule prohibiting the use of the figurative arts, which otherwise could have been decorated with the Virgin of Mercy, it was thanks to other monastic communities that the type became popular. It was eventually adopted and commissioned by other religious orders such as the Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites, Mercedarians, Servites, and the Carthusians. Because these orders were less austere with respect to imagery in their places of worship, they commissioned versions of the Virgin of Mercy which, once translated by artists from the small seals into larger works of art, were displayed in monasteries, churches, and cathedrals.¹³ This enabled the type to enjoy greater public visibility and thus to inspire similar works commissioned by laypeople. An early example of the Virgin of Mercy in Italian painting is the fresco from the 1380's in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, Assisi, Italy (Figure 4). The Virgin, this time not holding the Christ Child, extends her

¹³ The gap between the time Cistercian seals of the Virgin of Mercy were first produced and the development of paintings of the image is also a significant number of years that the thesis only briefly accounts for, if only because I could not find paintings of the image any earlier than the last decades of the fourteenth century in any European region. There were surely images created in some media, likely including painting, soon after the first Cistercian seals were created; many of these early images may not have survived the passage of time or may be on display in museums or private collections that I do not know about. These first paintings would most likely have been from Central Europe or from Italy.



Figure 4: *The Virgin of Mercy*. Unknown Artist. 1380's. Fresco. Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, Assisi, Italy.

cloak behind the faithful kneeling at her sides against a decorated background. This is only one of probably hundreds of versions of the Virgin of Mercy commissioned in the fourteenth century and attest to the universality of this formal composition with its simple yet powerful apotropaic message which no doubt instantly endeared it to those who sought the protection of the Virgin.

The Cistercians may not have been the monastic order that helped spread the Virgin of Mercy throughout Western Europe, but they more than made up for their lack of public imagery with their literary output for their late medieval audiences. The major sources to popularize and disseminate the Virgin of Mercy type were the recollections of a miraculous vision in the *Dialogus miraculorum* and passages from Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs. These writings, meant for the monastic readership within which the type first flourished, were among the most influential religious literary works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, read by the religious communities and disseminated to the public through sermons. The earlier of the two texts are the sermons of Bernard, (1090-1153). Bernard, the abbot of Clairvaux, was one of the dominant figures of his time in the history of the Church. His influence on Europe's politics, literary output, and religious life cannot be overestimated. He was extremely well versed in the Scriptures, wrote many sermons, letters, and treatises, and his writings were eloquent, passionate, superbly crafted and "seductively persuasive."¹⁴ His contribution to the rising cult of the Virgin is found mainly in his sermons based on an Old Testament book, the Song of Songs, in which he applied metaphor after metaphor of the biblical text to Mary. In one sermon passage in which he discussed the Virgin's use of

¹⁴ Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, 4.

her cloak with relation to Christians, he likened her protective use of the mantle to a “mother who opens her arms to her children.”¹⁵ Indeed, the Virgin is considered to be Christians’ spiritual mother, and the church, her children.

The other Cistercian literary work that helped to popularize the type was that of the *Dialogus miraculorum*, a compilation of stories of visions, many of the Virgin, written in 1220-1230 by Caesarius of Heisterbach, a monk from the diocese of Cologne.

The passage of the text that concerns the Virgin of Mercy reads as follows:

A few years ago a certain monk of our Order, who was particularly devoted to our Lady, while in an unconscious state experienced the contemplation of Heavenly glory. Seeing the various Orders of the triumphant Church, the Angels, the Patriarchs, the Prophets, the Apostles, the Martyrs, the Confessors, and, grouped according to their insignias, the Canons regular, the Premonstratensian Canons, the Cluniacs, he was troubled about his own Order. He looked all around but could not see anyone from his Order present in Heaven. Turning toward the blessed Mother of God, he wailed and asked: ‘Why then, most saintly Lady, do I not see any persons from the Order of Cîteaux? Why have the most devoted of your servants been excluded from these beatitudes?’ And the Queen of Heaven told him: ‘Members of the Order of Cîteaux are, to the contrary, so dear and so intimate that I keep them warm under my arms.’ And opening the large and marvelous mantle which covered her, she showed him an innumerable multitude of monks, of lay brothers, and of nuns. Filled with the greatest joy, the monk gave thanks, and, his spirit having reentered his body, recounted to his abbot all that he had seen and heard. The abbot, in turn, reported the event to the abbots assembled in the next chapter. All were filled with joy and with the most ardent love for the Mother of God.¹⁶

This passage, with its impressionistic language, contains some important details: in it, the Virgin opens her “large and marvelous mantle” to reveal the community members of Cîteaux, whom she protected. This image of the Virgin with her cloak extended behind those she protected, surrounded by the heavens and the earth below

¹⁵ Perdrizet, *La Vierge de Misericorde*, 20.

¹⁶ Translation of Caesarius’ text found in: Solway, “A Numismatic Source of the Virgin of Mercy,” 360; Perdrizet, *La Vierge de Misericorde*, 22; Caesarii Heisterbachensis, *Dialogus miraculorum*, VII, 59. Edition. Strange (Cologne, 1851), t. II, 79.

would have been an easily isolatable image among the community of heavenly hosts the monk envisioned, effortlessly separated therefore from other imagery and able to stand on its own as a devotional painting or other image. It was also strikingly similar to the iconography that later developed on their aforementioned seals.

Even before Caesarius compiled the *Dialogus miraculorum*, material existed, both literary and oral traditions that supported the eventual development of the type. These sources, both Biblical and drawn from the wealth of late medieval miracle stories, creative literary texts, and liturgical writings, among others, further popularized the type. Of those based on the scriptures, particularly from the Book of Psalms, there are many references to the mercy of the Divine in terms of the refuge mortals take in God (Psalms 2:12), references to protection in a more military sense (Psalms 3:3, 5:12), as well as other forms of shelter, protection, and mercy the Lord shows to his people. Most pertinent to the Virgin of Mercy is one of six verses from Psalms 91: “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.”¹⁷ A similar verse is also found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, where in the temple, Christ grieves over Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who struck down and stoned the prophets who were sent to you? How many times have I wanted to gather up your sons like a mother hen gathering up her chickens under her wings, and you have not wished it?”¹⁸ This mental image of a hen gathering up her chicks under her wings, with its emphasis on female protection, especially the message of the hen’s feathers, the “avian equivalent perhaps of draped arms” most clearly finds its counterpart

¹⁷ Psalms 91:1

¹⁸ Matthew 23:37

with the Virgin of Mercy type.¹⁹ The Gospels and the Psalms, Catherine Oakes explains, “were crucially important in their influence on the monastic mindset of the Middle Ages, the latter because of their central position in the daily recitation of the hours set down in the breviary.”²⁰ Later medieval books of hours also used these core verses from Psalms in prayer books for laypeople. In this period, it was common for metaphors from the Book of Psalms to be transferred by Marian supporters and theologians from God to the Virgin Mary.

Popular liturgical texts and miracle stories also offered literary support for the visual image type. Hymns sung in Mass, for example, were also sources of mental imagery of the Virgin of Mercy. An excerpt from one particular fifteenth-century hymn, which may have been based on Psalms 91:1, reads: “O virginal flower, Mother of the eternal king/Protect us with your wings/Lest we are oppressed with many evils.”²¹ Oakes also mentions several miracle stories that were also popular throughout the Middle Ages. The tale of the Jewish boy in the oven, as depicted in Figure 5 recounts a Jewish boy who participated with Christian friends in the Eucharist; when his father heard of this act, he became enraged with his son and, to punish him, threw him into a red-hot oven. The boy, however, emerged unscathed, having been protected from the fire by the Virgin, who covered him with her mantle. First written in sixth-century Constantinople and translated into Latin by Gregory of Tours (d. 594), the story was eventually “incorporated into the so-called ‘elements’ series of Marian legends which, according to the eleventh-century

¹⁹ Oakes, *Ora Pro Nobis*, 103

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 101. (*O flos virginalis, Mater regis aeternalis, Nos protege tuis alis, Ne premanur multis malis*)



Figure 5: *The Miracle of the Jewish Boy at Bourges*. F.W. Tristram of the grisaille painting in the Lady Chapel, Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire. 1500.

compiler, illustrated Mary's control over the elements."²² A similar story from a century later recounts Mary's protection of a pilgrim who manages to escape a sinking ship but who himself would have met the same fate if not for the Virgin, who came to his aid by wrapping her cloak around him or, in another common scenario, holding the cloak over him. The impressionistic language describing the power of the Virgin's use of her cloak to protect those in need, was thus woven into sermons, extracted from the Old Testament and applied to the Virgin, and was the focus of popular miracle stories that supported the growing cult of the Virgin and the Virgin of Mercy image.

As demonstrated thus far, the Virgin of Mercy type had a complex heritage both during antiquity, in its first appearances as a sheltering cloak type featuring Roman gods and personified virtues, and, centuries later, during the late Middle Ages. Beliefs about not only the Virgin Mary, but also her cloak, lent the Virgin of Mercy type visual and theological potency. The next section of the chapter will thus be devoted to a discussion of the central role of the Virgin in the Christian belief system, emphasizing her protective character, and the origins of one of her most identifying features—her protective cloak.

After Christ, the Virgin Mary is the figure about whom the most has been written in the history of Christianity and much of the literary output concerning her was a product, as we have just seen, of the later Middle Ages. As Catherine Oakes notes, "The Virgin's power as an intercessor is rooted in her divine maternity."²³ Indeed, this divine maternity is the basis for all Marian theologies and iconographies that stem from it. According to Christian theology, God chose the Jewish maiden, Miryam, or Mary, to

²² Ibid, 104.

²³ Oakes, *Ora Pro Nobis*, 7.

immaculately conceive and bear his only begotten son, Christ. The Council of Nicea's edict in 431 that the Trinity, that is, God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are one divinity in three parts, makes Miryam at once both a mortal woman and the Mother of God. Only by birth from a human mother could God be born as a man, and only by birth as a mortal man could God, as Christ, suffer death by crucifixion. By his death on the cross, Christ became God's sacrifice to his people, so that those who believed in God should have eternal life. Mary's maternity, then, "can be seen as a symbol of God's humanity."²⁴ The Christian faithful could relate to her because she was human; at the same time, she was unique in that she was a virgin who had miraculously conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit, and, later theology would decree, had remained a virgin not only after having given birth, but also throughout her entire married life and had furthermore herself been conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁵ She was, therefore, not just a virgin, but The Virgin, blessed among women to bear the Christ Child who would provide believers a path to salvation through his death and resurrection. It is this relationship with Christ that formed the basis for the theology of the Virgin of Mercy type, since Mary, as God's mother, had a special intercessory or bargaining power with him that no other mortal or their patron saints could enjoy. This could take the form of intercession between mortals and God, protection of mortals from what medieval Christians considered to be the wrath of God, and her sponsorship of certain groups of believers. By spreading her cloak around groups of the pious, Mary is

²⁴ Ibid, 8.

²⁵ Marian theology is complex; the Council of Ephesus, in 431, first declared her to be the Theotokos, or the Mother of God. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the polemic raged among Catholics in support of or against the rising cult of the Immaculate Conception of Mary; this dogma only became official in 1854.

understood to protect them from all harm, including the wrath of God, even though in most cases God is not depicted as part of the composition.²⁶

Central to the visions, miracle stories, legends, and to the Virgin of Mercy image type is the Virgin's mantle. Medieval Christians believed that the cloak existed as a relic. This holy object had endured quite a complicated history. It survived several journeys, stolen from its place of origins, Palestine, enshrined within the Byzantine Church of Blachernai in Constantinople, and later donated to Chartres Cathedral, where its cult flourished.²⁷ To explain how the cloak first came into possession by those who founded the Church of Blachernai, a legend survives. According to the famous fifth-century tale of Galbrios and Kandidos, the Virgin's cloak, said to be made of wool, was believed to have been passed down from virgin to virgin in a Jewish family that traced its lineage back to Biblical times. It was stolen by a pair of brothers of the same names as the title of the story and carried to Constantinople, where the Emperor Leo (401-474) and Empress Verina (d. 484) commissioned the magnificent church at Blachernai in honor of the Virgin and her most holy garment.²⁸ It was highly prized because, according to legend, the Virgin used it to swaddle and nurse the Christ Child as an infant; it came, therefore,

²⁶ For a thorough study of the virginity of Mary, see Brian Reynolds' *Gateway to Heaven: Marian Doctrine and Devotion, Image and Typology in the Patristic and Medieval Periods*. For an excellent history of Marian devotion, see also Miri Rubin's *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*.

²⁷ There is a conflicting story about the transfer of the veil from Blachernai to Chartres. Louis the Pious, son of Charlemagne and father of Charles the Bald, supposedly purchased the cloak from Irene and brought it back to central Europe, where he put it for safekeeping in Chartres. Also problematic was its assumed identity as the Virgin's chemise, the *sancta camisia* at Chartres in the later Middle Ages, although it was referred to in literature by a variety of different names and later considered to be the veil by the nineteenth century. See Jane E. Burns, "Saracen Silk and the Virgin's 'Chemise': Cultural Crossing in Cloth". *Speculum*. 81 (2): 365-397, 2006; Margot Elsbeth Fassler, *The Virgin of Chartres: Making History Through Liturgy and the Arts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010; Holger A Klein. "Eastern Objects and Western Desires: Relics and Reliquaries between Byzantium and the West". *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*. 58: 283-314, 2004.

²⁸ Shoemaker, "The Cult of Fashion," 55-56.

into contact with the bodies of both Mary and Christ, and became stained with Mary's breast milk as she nursed the infant Christ. It was believed to be incorruptible, indestructible and to possess miraculous healing powers; it allegedly saved Constantinople from military assault in the seventh century.²⁹ While the cloak was venerated at Blachernai from the end of the fifth century, it was not identified specifically as a cloak, but as a "garment"; it was not until later, around the tenth century that the term "cloak" or "mantle" was applied to the item.³⁰

During the early Middle Ages, the garment, or a piece of the original garment (or even a copy of the original) was taken on its second major journey. It traveled, as a gift from Empress Irene (752-803) in Constantinople, the capitol of the Byzantine Empire, to Charlemagne's court at the center of Europe. Charlemagne (742-814) was the first Western monarch to bring much of Central Europe under one rule since the fall of the ancient Roman Empire and to revive the cultural identity of the continent. His grandson, Charles the Bald (823-877), inherited the relic and in 876 donated it to the Church of Chartres, its final resting place. At Chartres, it soon became the focal point of a growing cult of the Virgin, venerated through pilgrimage.

The Virgin is recognizable in imagery throughout Western Europe thanks to the artistic tradition of depicting her wearing this cloak, usually painted blue, over her red dress. She was, moreover, depicted this way in every type of portrayal.³¹ Why, then, was the Virgin's cloak so critically important to the Virgin of Mercy? By not only referencing

²⁹ Ibid, 57.

³⁰ Ibid, 63.

³¹ For example, the Virgin and Child; the Pietà; the Immaculate Conception; The Black Madonna; The Virgin in the *hortus conclusus*, etc.

the cloak in this type, but by portraying the Virgin using it to fulfill the protective powers Christians believed it possessed, patrons extended the visual power of this relic to their own regions in Christendom, and its proven protective powers to their own people. In this type, the Mother of God, she who was most blessed among women, deemed worthy of bearing God's one and only son, is portrayed spreading her cloak, which referenced that most venerated relic believed to perform miracles of healing and salvation, around those who approached her in supplication, symbolically protecting them from all harm.

The universal visual appeal of this type became popular throughout Western Christendom, reproduced in every region and available media and for seemingly every pious member of society who could afford to commission an image. As we shall see in the next chapters, the type also traveled to the Iberian Peninsula, where it enjoyed representation in a basic form and inspired specific subtypes that met different societal needs.

CHAPTER III

ICONOGRAPHY OF THE VIRGIN OF MERCY IN SPAIN

The image with its protective qualities discussed in Chapter One were widely circulated, in visual and literary form, throughout Western Europe during the later Middle Ages. From this imagery, a basic representation of the type developed. As a testament to the adoptability and adaptability of this particular image, subtypes became prevalent throughout Western Christendom. One subtype featured the Virgin of Mercy with flagellants beneath the cloak, another included Last Judgment iconography while other panels were commissioned in response to the Black Plague. Patrons usually requested the type in simple terms; an example of the phrasing used in contracts for altarpieces with painting workshops mentioned “the Madonna saint Mary of Grace, that is, how she sheltered the people with her cloak.”³² She is perhaps the most immediately recognizable of several types of Marian intercessory images in late medieval and early modern Christian art.³³

The text and imagery also traveled from Central Europe to the Iberian Peninsula. While there were surely earlier images of the Virgin of Mercy commissioned in Spain, the oldest example I have been able to find is a sculpted, painted keystone decoration completed in 1379 and located directly over the choir of the Cathedral of La Seu, Barcelona (Figure 6). This image, one of many keystone decorations in the vaults of La Seu, retains the round shape of the Cistercian seals. It also differs from the seals in several ways. The first is in its depiction of the angels who appear behind the Virgin on either side, the second, its size, about three-and-a-third feet long. The transformation of

³² Judith Berg-Sobré, *Behind the Altar Table*. 271.

³³ See Catherine Oakes’ excellent study of the intercessory role of the Virgin in late medieval English art.



Figure 6: *The Virgin of Mercy*. Unknown Artist. 1379. Cathedral of La Seu, Barcelona, Spain.

this image from a diminutive—about one and three quarters to two inches in diameter—Cistercian seal created in France to an over three foot long sculpted ornament made for a Spanish cathedral within a period of about forty years is a testament to the fast spread of the image throughout Europe.

This chapter discusses the Virgin of Mercy type in the Iberian Peninsula. There are many Spanish images that survive from the period and they can be categorized into several distinct groups. The majority fall into a category that this thesis refers to as the “basic type” or “basic expression” and an example of this category will be introduced first. Next, to provide the reader with a broad understanding of the iconographical complexities of the Virgin of Mercy in Spain, the chapter discusses some of the noteworthy variations on the basic type with which artists altered it to meet the demands of the patron. These variations are unique to specific works, and are not consistently featured in other paintings of the type. They are the visual records of specific, perhaps regional events or reflect the personal tastes of the patron. Therefore, while these elements differ from the basic expression, they cannot be categorized into actual distinct subtypes, but offer details that still distinguish them from the “basic” Virgin of Mercy painting.

Yet other examples clearly fall into one of several categories of subtypes of the Virgin of Mercy. These subtypes are distinguishable from the rest by their unique, shared iconographical additions representative of themes in European and Spanish society such as the imminence of the wrath of God, death by the plague, or the threat of capture by the enemy, all serious concerns of the specific time period. Some of the more common European subtypes were patronized in Spain and at least one developed in the peninsula

that reflected the iconography of an organization native to the region. This chapter introduces three subtypes that were important to Spanish artistic heritage. The discussions of these subtypes are illustrated with painted panels and descriptions of their own specific historical backgrounds and identifying iconographies. The first is the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*; the second, images associated with plague commissions; the third, the Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy.³⁴ These painted panels were also an important part of Spanish devotion in the late medieval period, which the chapter discusses. By highlighting these subtypes and connecting them to important historical events in Spain in this period, this chapter demonstrates how the iconographies of representation could be adjusted to meet the needs of those who sought her protection.

What would the most basic expression of a late medieval Spanish painting of the Virgin of Mercy look like? In such a work, Mary stands full-length in the center of the composition. She bridges the gap between heaven and earth with the celestial realms, represented in plain gold leaf, above her shoulders. She wears a red, brocade, or gold dress tied at the waist with a rope belt. She also wears a white head veil and her blue cloak ties at the neck with an elaborate, jewel-encrusted brooch. She is crowned and haloed; her crown, halo, and dress glisten with applied gold leaf. Her cloak and dress neckline are usually trimmed with an elaborately gilded, embroidered hem. The drapery of her dress may indicate her otherwise concealed *contrapposto* stance. Her long blonde hair flows over her shoulders. Two angels, one on either side of her, support her cloak. Instead of carrying the Christ Child, she holds her arms out parallel to the ground so that

³⁴ The title, "Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy" is one I have coined and will use throughout this chapter in favor of the wordier title with which past art historians have referred to the subtype as, "The Virgin of the Mercedarians, Mother of Mercy, of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy," or, in Castilian, "*La Virgen de la Merced, Madre de Misericordia, de la Orden de Nuestra Señora de Misericordia.*"

her cloak covers groups of Christians who stand or kneel with their hands in prayer on either side of her and who are portrayed hierarchically smaller than she. The most typical assortment is a variety of figures from different levels of Spanish society: royal and ecclesiastical authorities in the foreground, whose sumptuous garments and headwear are amply covered with gold leaf, and behind them, the heads of more common folk, their status in society identifiable thanks to their own hats or tonsured heads. The ground, represented by brown earth, is visible at the very bottom of the panel.

Because it includes most of these features, Juan de Nalda's painted panel, *The Virgin of Mercy* serves as a concrete if somewhat hypothetical example of the basic expression of the Virgin of Mercy type (Figure 7). The Virgin stands in the center of the composition, holding her arms out at her sides to encompass the mass of people gathered beneath her cloak. She is wearing a red and gold leaf brocaded dress, a blue cloak, and a crown and halo. Angels assist with the cloak so that her hands are free to focus attention on the faithful. Here, the sky is a plain light color, and pious individuals gather on the brown earth and green turf at her feet. Amongst their ranks, on the left, stand a pope, bishop, and a cardinal, with other clergy and tonsured monks among them. On the right kneel a king and queen, along with other ladies, nuns, and monks.

Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this basic iconography was altered to include a variety of different settings, believers beneath the cloak, divine or devilish figures, and items attributed to Mary so that from the basic type, subtypes emerged that "individualized" it. Above her shoulders, in one painting, a scene of the countryside was depicted; in another, a harbor with ships. She may be sitting instead of standing, and in rare instances, holds the Christ Child in her arms or on her lap. Her



Figure 7: *The Virgin of Mercy*. Juan de Nalda. 1480-1500. Oil on panel. Convento de Santa Clara, Palencia, Spain.

iconography was blended with symbolism from other Marian types, including the Immaculate Conception and the Stella Maris.³⁵ She could even have been dressed not in the colors typically attributed to her, the traditional red dress and blue cloak, but in the habit of the religious or military order that commissioned the piece. The believers under the cloak soon included monks, nuns, children, naked figures, female saints, the authority figures of military orders and their patron saints, the donors of the painting or altarpiece in which the panel was located, and townsfolk. These changes were made to meet the expectations of the patron, who wished to symbolize some occasion, mark an achievement, or describe the relationship for which the painting was commissioned.

As this brief overview of Spanish panel paintings of the Virgin of Mercy type attests, paintings varied iconographically from the most basic expression of faith in Mary's protective role to versions unique to the time, place, and milieu within which they were commissioned. Examples from these categories certainly outnumbered those of the main subtypes, to which we will now turn. Among these subtypes there were three most commonly commissioned subjects, which this chapter will discuss in detail. The first was the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*, the second, images associated with plague commissions, and the third, the Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy. One way late medieval Spaniards altered the familiar composition of the Virgin of Mercy type into iconographically unique images was in explicit representations of her protecting the faithful from divine wrath.

This could be expressed symbolically in several different ways; the two subtypes created

³⁵ While this thesis was not meant to be nor did time permit a comparison between the Virgin of Mercy and other Marian types such as the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin and Child, such a comparative study would be very useful to help explain these particular Virgin of Mercy paintings that contain the crescent moon or the Virgin holding the Christ Child. It would also be useful to compare medieval devotion among Marian types.

out of this effort are the *Sponsorship of the Virgin* and the category of plague commissions.

The *Sponsorship of the Virgin* was a common theme probably known throughout much of Christian Europe in the late Middle Ages, referred to in the languages of the different European regions, and containing different versions of iconography. As with the title, the “Virgin of Mercy”, the Castilian version of the title, *El Patrocinio de la Virgen* is used interchangeably with both “Virgin of Mercy” and with other titles for other Marian images, creating confusion as to whether it is just an epithet applied to any Marian image, whether it can be used in lieu of the “Virgin of Mercy,” or whether it in fact references a subtype of the Virgin of Mercy. For the purposes of this chapter, it is the title of a subtype of the Virgin of Mercy. The subtype developed as one of several ways to illustrate the wrath of God against sinful humanity—it is a testament to popular fears of God’s anger and revenge and to the Virgin’s role as protectress.

There seems to be no scholarship besides that of Chandler Post’s that provides any background information to the origins of the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*, either literary or visual, any reason for the invention of such a subtype, or any history of its use in Spain beyond what little has been written about the paintings this chapter will discuss. The late Professor Post was one of the most prolific North American scholars of Spanish art history during the first half of the twentieth century; his seminal twelve volume work on Spanish medieval painting is a primary source for examples of painted panels of the Virgin of Mercy. In one of these volumes, he noted that a late medieval literary source, *The Golden Legend*, helps to explain the inspiration for the subtype.³⁶ In his brief

³⁶ Post, *A History of Spanish Painting*, Volume IX, 503-4.

discussion of the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*, Post notes that the subject “is manifestly derived from a passage in Saint Dominic’s life in *The Golden Legend*, where he enjoys a vision of the Virgin deflecting the darts by presenting to Christ both he and Saint Francis as missionaries to restore humanity to righteousness.”³⁷

The Golden Legend, or *Readings on the Saints*, as it was originally called, was assembled and authored in about 1260 by a Genoese by the name of Jacobus de Voragine. It was a religious work that compiled facts, legends, and stories of miracles about those the Church officially supported as worthy of public veneration. Within the stories about the saints, endless iconographical possibilities emerged; in the story of the life and works of Saint Dominic, one finds the passage to which Post was referring that mentions Christ’s wrath in the face of mortal transgression, and his intent to destroy humankind by throwing each of his three spears, one spear for each category of transgression, at them.³⁸ It reads as follows:

A Friar Minor, who had long been a companion to Saint Francis, told the following story to several friars of the Order of Preachers. While Dominic was in Rome, waiting upon the pope for approval of his Order, one night in a vision he saw *Christ, aloft in the air, holding three spears that he brandished over the world*. His mother ran to him and asked what he was about to do. He said: ‘The whole world is full of three vices, pride, concupiscence and avarice: therefore I will destroy it with these three lances.’ The Virgin fell to her knees and said, ‘Dearest Son, have pity and temper your justice with mercy!’ Christ replied, ‘But do you not see the wrongs they wreak upon me?’ Mary answered: ‘My son, curb your wrath and wait a little, for I have a faithful servant and valiant warrior, who will go all over the world and conquer it and subjugate it to your rule! And I will give him another servant to help him, who will fight loyally at his side.’ Jesus said: ‘My anger is appeased and I yield to your plea, but I would be pleased to see these men whom you wish to commit to so high a

³⁷ Post, *A History of Spanish Painting*, Volume V, 55-56.

³⁸ Saint Dominic was born in Spain in 1170 in the village of Calaroga, Castile, the diocese of Osma, and studied in Palencia.

destiny.’ At this she presented Saint Dominic to Christ, who said: ‘This is a good, strong battler, and he will be zealous in doing all that you have said.’ Then she brought St. Francis to him, and Christ commended him as he had the first. [my emphasis]³⁹

There are some key points in this passage critical to the visual iconography they would soon inspire. Christ is described as being located in the heavens, holding three spears which symbolically represent his anger, and attempting to throw them down to earth to destroy sinful mortals. Spears, depicted in this subtype as arrows, in Christian art “are generally used to suggest a spiritual weapon, dedicated to the service of God.”⁴⁰ The Virgin, while she is not described in the text in the role of the Virgin of Mercy, is nonetheless the merciful character in the scene and presents to Christ the Saints Dominic and Francis. This passage would indeed seem to provide a source for the iconography of the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*, depicted as follows in a panel painting.

The right side of a triptych by Juan Rodríguez de Solís, in the Torres-Arias Collection in Madrid, may be considered a typical depiction of the *Sponsorship of the Virgin* (Figure 8). The central panel is now missing; its pendant to the left is a panel of Saint Veronica holding a piece of fabric upon which is painted Christ’s countenance. In the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*, the Virgin of Mercy fills the bottom half of the painting, while behind her is a landscape with trees and a plain sky. Nearest to the point of the arch, encircled in atmosphere and clouds, a bust of Christ appears, his robes encircling his bare chest so that the wound in his side is visible. More difficult to see in the badly pixilated black and white image is the arrow he clutches in his right hand and raises to throw down on the mortals clustered around the Virgin, who in turn raises her eyes

³⁹Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 47-48.

⁴⁰Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, 170.



Figure 8: Triptych, *The Sponsorship of the Virgin and The Sudarium of St. Veronica*. Juan Rodríguez de Solís. Torre-Arias Collection, Madrid.

toward him sweetly in supplication. There may be an angelic assistant to Christ's left who also holds an arrow. This visual reference to the textual passage demonstrates how the Virgin of Mercy, more than any other Marian type, provides a handy visual solution to represent her as interceding directly with Christ for those whom she protects, literally shielding the faithful from the spears using both her position as Christ's mother and her cloak's proven protective powers of salvation.

For a more explicit version, we might consider a second panel by the same name (Figure 9). In this painting, from the Episcopal Palace at Teruél attributed to the "Master of Teruél," the Virgin of Mercy again occupies the center of the painting, assisted by angels to spread her cloak over the groups that kneel at her sides. Behind her is a wall, the top of which is decorated with what look like garden vegetative motifs. However, unlike any of the previous paintings discussed above, she turns to her right, raising her right hand in a peaceable yet quelling gesture to Christ, who appears full-length this time, enthroned at the upper right and who, himself assisted by two angels, draws back his arm, arrow clearly in hand, intent on hurling it down on the faithful Christians below. An even more curious addition is the two architectural structures on either side of the Virgin of Mercy. These have three stories each, with Roman arches on the front and both sides. In each of the six architectural spaces is a male personification of a cardinal sin, with labels indicating each sin painted below on the outside of the structures. The personifications have already been mortally wounded by Christ's arrows, each in the part of his body corresponding to his sin: Envy in the eye; Avarice in the back; Sloth in the leg; Lust in the genitals; Gluttony in the stomach; Anger in the heart. At the bottom of the painting, the seventh sin, Pride, lays wounded with an arrow sticking out of his chest, but only his



Figure 9: *The Sponsorship of the Virgin*. Aragonese Artist. Tempera on panel. Originally from Bishop's Palace, Teruél.

bust is visible. The painting appears to have been cut at the bottom, eliminating not only the lower half of Pride's body, but probably other details as well. The details of the lost area of the panel are curious: why would the artist have singled out one of the sins and placed him at the bottom? Why choose Pride, specifically, as that isolated sin? Perhaps the information from the lost panel portion would have answered that question, especially if a donor portrait were included. Representing a mortally wounded personification of Pride near the donor portrait may have been meant as an antidotal statement to the patron's own pride in his ability to visually enhance the Episcopal Palace at Teruél with such an expensive commission. Perhaps by placing Pride at the bottom of the panel, the artist could portray him suffering the appropriate punishment for the vice he personified: humiliation.

This painting can be understood as a combination of imagery. First of all, the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*, including the Virgin of Mercy and Christ with angelic helpers and arrows is depicted in much greater detail than was the case in de Solis' triptych. In this example, Mary more directly intervenes with Christ's destructive mission. The *Sponsorship of the Virgin* is here joined by the inclusion of iconography of the Cardinal Sins, whom the Virgin clearly does not protect although she offers pious individuals a safe harbor underneath her cloak. This depiction of the vices is one of many in a long tradition of portrayal in medieval art.⁴¹ It may, however, be one of very few works of art of its kind that was combined with iconography of the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*. The Cardinal Sins are part of a demonology with ancient roots in both Christian and Jewish thinking and were considered to be "non-human rational creatures intent upon subverting

⁴¹ For an excellent introduction to this complex iconographical tradition, see Jennifer O'Reilly, *Studies in the Iconography of the Virtues and Vices in the Middle Ages* (New York: Garland Pub, 1988).

intimacy between God and human beings.”⁴² These creatures were depicted both as devilish figures and as human personifications in medieval imagery that would tempt Christians by appealing to their human weaknesses and encouraging their excessive pursuit of the temptations of the flesh. While the opposite of the Vices, the Virtues, were not clearly depicted, the Virgin would seem to protect the virtuous beneath her cloak. These Christians may have been tempted by the same moral concepts as are personified as the Vices, but their confidence in God has not been so shaken that they despair and abandon the Christian faith.⁴³ Indeed, they turn to Mary, so that she might intercede with Christ on their behalf and so they might not meet the same fate as these personifications and other figures. This panel, then, employs a different set of iconography than before to illustrate a complex set of both theological and popularly-believed concepts. The main iconographical addition to the Virgin of Mercy that visually marks it as a subtype is the inclusion of Christ with arrows in the top of the panel.

Whereas the *Sponsorship of the Virgin* illustrated the Virgin’s general protection against the wrath of God, medieval Christians considered God’s anger at human sin to manifest in several ways. Death by the Black Plague, for example, was a sign of divine punishment for human sins. It was brought to Europe on Italian merchant ships from the Crimean seaports in 1347 and was by far the most devastating disease late medieval Europe had ever experienced, with then-unexplainable and terrible-looking symptoms and a horrifying mortality rate, both in terms of the speed of the onset of death and the

⁴² Newhauser, *In The Garden of Evil*, 5.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 10.

sheer numbers of victims.⁴⁴ While the first and worst wave of plague spread through Europe from 1347-1353, reaching the Iberian Peninsula by 1348-9, subsequent outbreaks continued, lasting off and on until 1500. Late medieval Europeans lived in constant fear of the threat of outbreak when death would once more seem frighteningly imminent. Because people did not understand about bacteria and viruses, the only cause they could think of that would trigger such a destructive disease was God's wrath at mortal sin. Thus, Christians turned to their faith, and most importantly, to the creation of devotional imagery that they hoped might ward off the danger of God's wrath upon themselves and their communities.

The Virgin of Mercy was among the most popular devotional type to be commissioned in response to outbreaks and was therefore frequently represented in art of the period, as were images of the patron saints of the plague, Saint Sebastian and Saint Roch.⁴⁵ While the disease was believed to be God's curse on sinful Christians, it was not visually depicted in the same way as the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*, with arrows and the presence of Christ. Instead, plague commissions were identified simply by the inclusion of arrows, which, in addition to serving visually as God's spiritual weapon, were also a symbol of the plague.⁴⁶ In fact, the arrow is perhaps the "oldest emblematic sign of plague; darts and arrows falling from heaven—as described in the Golden Legend's

⁴⁴ Benedictow, *The Black Death, 1346-1353: The Complete History*, 44. For an in-depth study of the Black Plague, see Ole Jørgen Benedictow, *The Black Death, 1346-1353: the Complete History* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2006); John Kelly, *The Great Mortality: an Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of all Time* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005); Norman F Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: the Black Death and the World it Made* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

⁴⁵ Christine Boeckl also notes that "Marian images associated with pestilence are the Misericordia and Mary as the Apocalyptic Woman, frequently depicted as the Nikopoeia (the Virgin holding her son with both hands) seated on a large cloud bank. A sacra conversazione type surrounded by plague saints could also indicate a plague commission." 53.

⁴⁶ Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, 170.

chapter on St. Gregory—often indicated plague. Bundles of arrows...were also interpreted as the Lord's punishment."⁴⁷ Plague commissions of the Virgin of Mercy also may be accompanied by inscriptions that specifically refer to the disease. The following plague-time commissions illustrate two slightly different iconographical representations devised by late medieval Spanish artists.

The first, *The Virgin of Mercy*, by Bonanat Zaórtiga is an example of a plague commission on a painted panel (Figure 10). This was the central panel of an altarpiece dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and its specific dedication was believed to protect men and women from the plague.⁴⁸ Here, the Virgin's hands are in prayer, while her angelic helpers hold up her cloak. The cloak prevents four (rather difficult to see) brown arrows, two on either side of her shoulders, from harming the groups of pious individuals clustered on either side of her. This panel, and especially the altarpiece of which it was a central part, with its generous use of punched gold leaf, deep blue lapis lazuli paint, and the sheer cost of the whole endeavor, among other aspects, speaks to the price patrons were willing to pay to ward off potential or ongoing plague outbreaks.

Yet another plague commission featuring the Virgin of Mercy is visible in Figure 11. This is an early fifteenth-century example of an isolated, polychromed relief lunette by an unknown artist from Castile. Although not a panel painting, which is the focus of this thesis, it serves to represent an alternative depiction of a Virgin of Mercy commissioned against the plague. Instead of depicting the arrows raining down on the

⁴⁷ Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence*, 47.

⁴⁸ Berg-Sobré, *Behind the Altar Table*, 238.



Figure 10: *The Virgin of Mercy*. Bonanát Zaórtiga. 1430-1440. Tempera, stucco relief and gold leaf on wood panel. 223 x 126.8 x 18 cm. Barcelona, Museum of Catalan Art.



Figure 11: *The Virgin of Mercy*. Unknown Artist. 16th century. Castilian School. Current Repository: Museu Federico Marés.

cloak, the Virgin has caught them neatly in her hands and holds them in two bundles as described by the above quote. In this way, she takes even more of an active role in preventing them from harming the faithful gathered beneath her cloak than she did in examples such as Zaórtiga's where they are deflected off her mantle.

This chapter's discussion of two subtypes, the *Sponsorship of the Virgin* and plague commissions featuring Mary in a protective role served to introduce the reader to some of the iconographical variety of the Virgin of Mercy in late medieval Spain. These subtypes, however retain particular aspects of the "basic type:" the Virgin still wears colors traditionally associated with her: the usually red dress and blue cloak. The third major subtype of the Virgin of Mercy was adopted by organizations within Spain that altered her iconography so that by her attire and the items attributed to her, she became

not only a visualization of protection and intercession, but also a visual reference to that particular organization.⁴⁹

The Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy is the third subtype this chapter will discuss. It is an iconographical creation of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy, a religious and military confraternity founded in Barcelona in the first third of the thirteenth century by Saint Peter Nolasco.⁵⁰ While scholars debate about whether Nolasco was Aragonese or French, he surely founded the Order in Barcelona, inspired by a vision in which the Virgin requested that he and his friends establish an organization there in her name to ransom Christians captured and held hostage by Muslims.⁵¹ At that time, this was a constant threat, especially close to the frontier between the Spanish Christian regions of Castile and Aragon and the Islamic stronghold in Andalusia. The frontier was constantly moving south as generation after generation of Castilian and Aragonese kings succeeded in ridding territories that once were Christian of Muslim control. Christians faced the constant danger of being captured, held captive, and perhaps being used as slave labor or as a bargaining tool to gain territory or money from Christian monarchs. Ransoming work, then, to free captives and reunite them with their families, was a career for some Christians, who would collect enough money from their communities to buy the freedom of prisoners. There were already organizations within Spain such as the Order of Santiago

⁴⁹ The Order of Our Lady of Mercy is not the only Order or religious group that has conferred upon the Virgin their own habit in which she is portrayed in these Virgin of Mercy renditions. The *Virgin of the Carmelites*, by Valdés Leal, wears the "brown habit and the badge of the Carmelite Order." Elizabeth du Gue Trapier, *Valdés Leal: Spanish Baroque Painter*. New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1960. 20.

⁵⁰ There is some debate regarding the actual year the Order was founded. Some assert it was 1218. Others claim a date in the 1230's. See Brodman's *Ransoming Captives*.

⁵¹ See James Brodman, *Ransoming Captives in Crusader Spain: the Order of Merced on the Christian-Islamic Frontier* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986); Bruce Taylor, *Structures of Reform: the Mercedarian Order in the Spanish Golden Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

that did ransoming work, some of which had been around since a few centuries after the initial Muslim invasion of the Iberian Peninsula. The Order of Our Lady of Mercy was based in large part on similar orders and joined a contemporary host of private, religious, and military attempts to ransom captives.

Saint Peter Nolasco had been collecting alms and ransoming captives before founding the Order, having learned the trade from his father and having practiced it with a group of friends likewise concerned about the welfare of their communities. Nolasco's vision of the Virgin, which by all accounts was not specifically one of the Virgin of Mercy, but simply of an appearance of the Virgin to him, inspired him to formalize his and his friends' endeavors in a state-sanctioned organization. The vision was later depicted in historical paintings such as one by Francisco de Zurbarán (Figure 12). In this canvas, Saint Peter Nolasco, wearing a brown, pre-Mercedarian habit, kneels in the presence of a vision of the Queen of Heaven. Mary is clothed in the white habit, cloak, and scapula of the Mercedarian Order she intends to establish, and, surrounded by a choir of angels, offers an identical habit to the kneeling saint. Within days of receiving the vision, Nolasco appealed to contemporary royal and ecclesiastical authorities, King Jaime I of Aragón and his confessor, San Raymundo de Peñafort, and within weeks had founded the Order, in the Cathedral of La Seu and dedicated it to the Virgin. The young Jaime I is said to have presented Nolasco with what they adopted as their coat-of-arms. As Figure 13 demonstrates, it is divided into two halves, the upper portion with large white cross on a red background, and the bottom half with four red stripes on a gold background, the royal coat of arms of Aragon. This emblem the Order added to their existing habit, affixed to the front of their scapulae.



Figure 12: *The Virgin Bestowing the Habit of the Order of the Mercedarians upon Saint Peter Nolasco*. Francisco de Zurbarán. 1628-32. Oil on canvas. The Getty Center.



Figure 13: Mercedarian Coat-of-Arms

Since the Order of Our Lady of Mercy had been founded based on inspiration gained from a vision of the Virgin and was dedicated to the Virgin, the Order commissioned many images of her, including many of the popular types, among them, the Virgin of Mercy. These early paintings probably looked much like the basic type, with Mary wearing her red dress, blue cloak, and other attributes. The Order eventually developed a variety of symbols that referenced its organization, such as their own habit and coat of arms, and a yoke such as oxen would wear that captives would be locked into to prevent their running away.⁵² They applied some or all of these symbols to every Marian image they commissioned, including the Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy, creating a version of the Virgin that specifically referenced their organization and symbolized their mission. These later paintings featured the Virgin dressed as a Mercedarian, in a white dress tied at the waist with a rope belt, a white cloak, white scapula, and the coat-of-arms of the Order affixed to her chest. In some panels, she may hold a broken iron yoke with a thick chain which she lifts, effortlessly, in one hand and in the other hand, a set of devotional white scapulae, or set of two fabric squares connected with rope, upon which is embroidered, in this case, the same coat of arms affixed to the scapula she wears. In other paintings, two yokes may lay at the feet of the faithful beneath her cloak, arranged symmetrically in the extreme foreground of the composition. These paintings are, essentially, a subtype of the Virgin of Mercy that references the Order of Our Lady of Mercy.

A painting now in the Esclasans Collection, Barcelona, by an anonymous Aragonese artist, is an example of one of the Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy panel

⁵² The olive branch is another attribute discussed by María Teresa Ruíz Barrera, in her book, *La Virgen de la Merced: Iconografía en Sevilla* (Pamplona: Revista Estudios 2002).

paintings (Figure 14). She wears the white Mercedarian habit with the coat-of-arms affixed to her chest, and protects a crowd of women.⁵³ This painting is unique not simply because the Virgin represents the Order of Our Lady of Mercy, but because of the combination of the faithful, a specific group of Christians, gathered beneath her cloak, and the scene above her cloak. The protected crowd of women most likely represents the eleven thousand virgins of Saint Ursula, with the saint herself one of the two figures in the immediate foreground, Ursula's arrow attribute on the ground between them. The story of Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins was another tale recorded in *The Golden Legend*. Its protagonist, Saint Ursula, was an English princess who would not marry unless her suitor gave her an entourage of eleven thousand virgins with whom she would spend three years before marriage traveling through Central Europe. She also required that her suitor should be educated in the Christian faith and baptized. These conditions were met, Ursula departed with her entourage in ships bound for Cologne, where the barbarian Huns were attacking the city and slaughtered the entire company when they reached the shore.

It was this massacre that is featured in the background behind the Virgin. The ships in which the company sailed are depicted within a harbor with landscape on either side; on the beach, crowds of tiny figures gather, some watching, others committing the heinous crime, yet others the victims. The latter are thus the same individuals who are symbolically protected beneath the Virgin's cloak in the foreground.

⁵³ Post identifies the women as female saints identifiable thanks to the attributes they hold or that lay on the immediate foreground. He mentions St. Ursula, who he says kneels in the left foreground, her arrow emblem resting on the ground in front of her; behind her, Mary Magdalene holds her jar of ointment; opposite St. Ursula is St. Catherine of Alexandria with her broken wheel; behind her is St. Catherine of Siena, the Dominican nun. Chandler Post, *A History of Spanish Painting: Volume X: The Early Renaissance in Andalusia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950). 144-148.



Figure 14: *The Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy*. Artist unknown. Early 16th century. Esclasans Collection, Barcelona.

This raises a question: why would a narrative scene from the life of Saint Ursula, as well as a multitude of female saints beneath the Virgin's cloak, be included in the commission of a panel of the Virgin of Mercy? Unfortunately, Post, the authority on this painting, gives no clue as to the patron, provenance, or original destination for this work; he is not even certain whether it is of Valencian or Sevillian origins. The patron must have had reason to commission this combination of iconography, perhaps for a contemporary by the name of Ursula or for a monastery, church, or altarpiece dedicated to the saint. This more complex painting was not the only panel of the Virgin of Mercy to include the individuals related to the event that it depicts. Chapter Three will closely examine another example of the Virgin of Mercy beneath whose cloak other groups are protected who are intimately connected to the seascape also featured in the painting.

The Virgin of Mercy thus enjoyed patronage throughout the Iberian Peninsula in the late Middle Ages in a variety of different iconographic treatments. Its immediately recognizable and understandable visual message made it a primary choice for depiction for those seeking an explicit testimony to Mary's intercessory powers with the divine, protection from the plague, and those seeking to reference their own organizations through its powerful symbol of protection. Panel paintings of the Virgin of Mercy were a central part of late medieval Spanish devotion and examples served several purposes depending upon their individual iconography. Many paintings were symbolic, meant for contemplative devotional use, because in this composition, Mary symbolically protects those under her mantle. Other panels were more complex and contained narrative elements which referred to well-known stories, such as the background scene in the Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy work discussed earlier. The Virgin of Mercy was also

commissioned as a votive painting, primarily to prevent the plague in this period. Votive panels were meant as a preventative measure against plague outbreaks and usually included a dedicatory inscription to that end. Many, if not most panels were commissioned as part of altarpieces throughout the Iberian Peninsula in this period, which were the primary focus of public religious rituals, including the celebration of the Eucharist as well as for more private devotion. As one would expect from a period in which the cult of the Virgin was reaching an all-time high, the overwhelming number of altarpieces were either dedicated to Mary or contained narrative and symbolic panels of episodes of her life and contemplative panels focusing on some virtuous aspect of her nature.⁵⁴

As the Mother of God, Mary more than any other patron saint was uniquely positioned to plead on pious individuals' behalf with, they believed, her angry son. Her presence in these devotional paintings, using the proven protective powers of her cloak, provided Christians with this reassuring visual reminder. The next chapter will demonstrate how this late medieval devotional type continued in popularity into the early years of the Renaissance in Spain. Its very composition allowed patrons to include within it a variety of complex messages tailored to reference the profound changes Spanish society was experiencing in the Age of Exploration.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 202.

CHAPTER IV

THE VIRGIN OF THE NAVIGATORS AS THE VIRGIN OF MERCY

As the previous chapter demonstrated, the Virgin of Mercy was widely commissioned throughout the Iberian Peninsula in the late Middle Ages for many reasons and in a variety of iconographical representations. This chapter will continue to address the thesis' overarching question, that is, why a Marian devotional painting type that otherwise had no prior historical or iconographical tradition in Spain continued to be patronized in the Iberian Peninsula in the Age of Exploration. To do so, it will present a case study of a single, very special panel of the Virgin of Mercy called *The Virgin of the Navigators*, completed around 1531-36 (Figure 15). This painting, and thus, this chapter, advances the chronology of the thesis to the Age of Exploration.

This chronological shift is noteworthy, especially with regards to the content of the *Virgin of the Navigators* and the altarpiece surrounding it by the same name (Figure 16). To be sure, this altarpiece was a work of art commissioned and created within a centuries' long tradition of formal liturgical ornamentation. The artist and workshop that produced it continued in this tradition of altarpieces in the style of the master they trained with, complete with the typical components of altarpieces of the period. The world as they knew it, however, was changing. The last decade of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth were for Spain somewhat of a Renaissance in the artistic sense, visible to some degree in *The Virgin of the Navigators* itself. But more than that, these years were an expansion of the Spanish world, thanks to the Catholic Monarchs' quest for a new route to India and the access they desired to the spice trade. Instead of discovering that new route, explorers found a continent full of people of a race different than their



Figure 15: *The Virgin of the Navigators*. Alejo Fernández. 1531-1536. Oil on panel.
Current Repository: Alcázar of Seville.



Figure 16: Altarpiece of *The Virgin of the Navigators*. Alejo Fernández. 1531-1536. Oil on panel. Current Repository: Alcázar of Seville.

own and until then unknown to them. This discovery and subsequent exploration, colonization, and evangelization of the New World by Spaniards brought a newfound knowledge of these lands and their inhabitants back to the Old World. At the heart of this activity was the House of Trade in Seville, founded to administer Spain's business transactions with the New World. The altarpiece they commissioned to transform their main audience hall into a chapel was a visual summary of Spain's self-image in that period. The central panel of the altarpiece was, among other things, a statement of protection by the Virgin of the two groups of peoples most intimately connected with the discovery.

The Virgin of the Navigators can arguably be considered one of the first in the early modern period to reference the exploration of the Americas and was probably also one of the first to depict, within the same work, not only the principal European figures responsible for the actual exploration but also representations of the peoples of the "New World," whom this thesis will identify as "Amerindians." Uniting these peoples is the Virgin of Mercy, who includes both under her cloak and portrays the House of Trade's exploratory ships beneath in a seascape. By presenting these two groups of people together, the painting also references the heated debate that developed in Spain around the issue of these new peoples that Spanish colonists were encountering. This connection between the panel and the cultural dispute contemporary to it has yet to be explored in the extant scholarship and is vital to understanding the meaning behind the central panel's visual message. This chapter will examine how the *Virgin of the Navigators*, as a painting of the Virgin of Mercy, was a reflection of and response to these cultural changes taking place in the Iberian Peninsula in the Age of Exploration. The discussion unfolds

throughout the following trajectory. It begins with a history of the House of Trade, an introduction to and visual analysis of the central panel and the altarpiece and introduces the major recent research. It then closely examines the two groups of figures beneath the cloak and interprets them in terms of their relation to the exploration of the Americas by their patron and the debate that its discovery sparked in Europe. Finally, it explores the message that the central panel makes about this argument.

In 1503, eleven years after Christopher Columbus' (1451-1506) celebrated initial voyage to what he thought were the "West Indies," the House of Trade was established in Seville by King Ferdinand (1452-1516) and Queen Isabel (1451-1504), the reigning monarchs of the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. From the start, the business regulated all aspects of commerce, shipbuilding, navigation, map-and instrument-making and migration between the Americas and Spain and would exercise this authority for the next three to four hundred years. Soon after the creation of the House of Trades, its large audience hall, the Hall of Justice, was converted into a chapel by the inclusion of the altarpiece of the *Virgin of the Navigators* by Alejo Fernández.⁵⁵ Its central panel can be divided into three horizontal areas: at the bottom, a seascape complete with a variety of early sixteenth-century ships; in the middle third, the Virgin with cloak outstretched and a multitude of the faithful beneath it on either side of her, and at the top, the heavens, depicted by blue skies, white clouds, and a warm glow illuminating the heavens. Flanking her on the left and right, clockwise, are panels depicting four saints central to Spain and Spanish America: Saint Elmo, Saint John, Saint James, and Saint Sebastian. These panels are separated by carved, gilded wooden frames, complete with intricate molding above

⁵⁵ *The Virgin of the Navigators* (in Spanish, *La Virgen de los Mareantes*) has also been referred to as *The Virgin of the Seafarers*, all of which equally describe her role as protectress of sailors and, here, explorers of the New World.

the upper panels, and an elaborate *guardapolvos*, or dust guard, framing the exterior of the beautifully restored altarpiece.

The major recent research on the panel is an article by Carla Rahn Phillips, “Visualizing Imperium: *The Virgin of the Seafarers* and Spain’s Self-Image in the Early Sixteenth-Century.” While Phillips correctly identifies the painting as part of the corpus of paintings of the Virgin of Mercy, she neither situates the painting within the history of the type in Spain nor provides more than a brief interpretation of the figures beneath the cloak. As mentioned above, the *Virgin of the Navigators* was no ordinary painting of the Virgin of Mercy. While the type was flexible enough to include any number of different Marian attributes and settings, it was rarely accompanied by such a detailed setting, obvious portraits, or inclusion of non-European peoples beneath the cloak as that of the *Virgin of the Navigators*. Within the corpus of panels of the Virgin of Mercy discussed in Chapter Two, this painting is a version of the basic type whose combination of iconographical features results in a truly unique, undeniably Spanish conception reflective of the dynamic cultural forces shaping Spain in the period of its commission. Moreover, similar to the Mercedarian’s Virgin of Mercy discussed in the previous chapter, both the setting and the mortals beneath the cloak together reference an event; both settings even include a seascape, one in the top of the panel, the other in the bottom. In the case of the *Virgin of the Navigators* the event is not a religious legend but an historical reality: the exploration of the Americas.

The most astonishing feature of this painting is the inclusion of both Europeans and Amerindians beneath the Virgin’s cloak (Figure 17). The representations of Europeans were clearly meant to be portraits of important personalities of the House of

Trade, while the Amerindians are understood by scholars to be representative of all of the peoples of the Americas. Each group's artistic treatment, however, differs notably from the other in terms of clothing and physical features. These differences take the form of several sets of opposites, which are important because it is through this treatment of the subject matter that Fernández expressed the House of Trade's choice of visual message, the significance of which will be explained later in the chapter.

Beginning with the portraits of Spaniards in the foreground, some but not all have



Figure 17: Detail of *The Virgin of the Navigators*. Alejo Fernández. 1531-1536. Oil on panel. Current Repository: Alcázar of Seville.

been identified or tentatively identified. As Phillips states, “presumably, many of the people who visited the chapel...of the Hall of Audiences...would have recognized (the faces of the most important personages of the Spanish exploration), at least in the

sixteenth century. With time, collective memory faded, and modern scholars have had to speculate about the identity of each of the portraits...⁵⁶ Those identified mainly occupy the front row beneath the cloak; starting at the far left, the kneeling portrait of Christopher Columbus may be the most secure identification, and wears a sumptuous gold brocade robe trimmed with brown fur. His white hair hangs in ringlets around the top of his otherwise bald head. Beside him kneels a young man, supposedly Martín Alonso Pinzón, who made the first transatlantic voyage with Columbus in 1492. He looks away from the Virgin, is clean-shaven and wears a red robe and matching cap over his dark brown hair. The figure clutching the cane and with the full white beard to Pinzón's right has been thought by scholars to be Amerigo Vespucci, although Phillips suggests that that may instead be a portrait of Doctor Sancho de Matinezo, who served as the first director of the House of Trade from 1503-1521, and who was a great patron of the arts.⁵⁷ Beside him, a yet unidentified man garbed in purple kneels in prayer, his hands crossed over his chest and kneeling on only one knee. To the Virgin's immediate left, the blonde man, also unknown to modern scholars, wears a sage green tunic with elaborate neckline, puffy sleeves, and a skirt. Beside him, although only visible in a bust portrait, is identified by most as the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, with his red hair, moustache and beard black beret and a dark cloak. Finally, the figure to the far right is usually thought to be Hernán Cortés, who sports a dark moustache, sideburns and wears slip-on shoes and leggings. The other faces among the crowd are as yet unknown; some directly engage the viewer with their view. The Spaniards, then, are clothed, reflect a range of

⁵⁶ Phillips, *Visualizing Imperium*, 832.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 832-833.

ages, are located beneath the cloak in the most prominent positions, and adopt a variety of poses, even occupying locations on the clouds that step out or behind one another.

In the farthest recesses of the cloak, behind the fair-skinned company of *conquistadores* can be seen a group of dark-skinned men to the Virgin's right and a group of women to her left. Beyond basic features that distinguish the peoples based on gender, it is obvious that they are not meant to be portraits of actual individuals, but generic representations of the peoples of the Americas as they are not dressed in the clothing they would have worn as natives of their homelands. Their face shapes and stature are also all the same, possibly representative of one single tribe of natives. They are not differentiated between young and old, nor are there peoples of mixed races beneath the cloak.⁵⁸ They are mostly visible from the waist up, and their details are more difficult to see, due both to their location in the shadows of the cloak and their darker skin against the dark background. They are clearly spatially distanced from the Spaniards and line up along either side of the Virgin, all stand at the same height, their bodies are rotated to face the Virgin, and all adopt the same attitude of prayer. The men, all but one, are naked above the waist; the women are draped in light colored cloths. The lack—or near lack—of garments on the Amerindians, since the Spaniards are clothed, is worth noting, and it is possible that the artist borrowed iconography from a particular subtype of the Virgin of Mercy that gives the *Virgin of the Navigators* added meaning.⁵⁹ This subtype is related to

⁵⁸ Not long after the discovery and conquest of the Americas, and the intermarriages between Europeans, American indigenous, and African slaves, Europeans became preoccupied with visually cataloguing and naming the variations of skin color that resulted from the intermarriages. These visual catalogues were called “casta” paintings, and showed heterosexual couples, each spouse from a different racial background, along with their offspring, themselves revealing a mixture of the skin colors of the parents.

⁵⁹ Phillips also contemplates the Amerindians' lack of clothing, noting that the artist would have known first-hand how the peoples of the Americas dressed as Spanish explorers brought some of them to Spain.

the theme of the Last Judgment, and an English example illustrates the point (see Figure 18).

In an illuminated manuscript page completed in the fourteenth century, the Virgin of Mercy spreads her cloak over a crowd of standing, nude believers, some tonsured, others crowned, whose hands are in prayer. Above the Virgin, the figure of Christ sits, his raised hands spewing blood from the nail wounds, surrounded by angels and other iconography. Catherine Oakes explains this imagery as the Virgin's protection of the faithful in the face of the Last Judgment, when, according to the Bible, Christ returns to earth to judge humankind, allowing the good access to their heavenly reward and condemning the evil to the eternal hellfire. One of the iconographic ways artists depicted this Last Judgment in conjunction with the Virgin of Mercy was to represent the mortals naked beneath the cloak. This was a way (albeit rare) to visually communicate the message of access to the reward of the salvation of one's soul in the face of the Last Judgment, which was an event the *conquistadores* clearly wished the Amerindians to achieve.⁶⁰ Through their evangelical mission to those they had discovered, they wished to save souls from the misery of hell, and Fernández may have very likely represented these peoples as naked or semi-naked to symbolize their status as potential Christian neophytes and, through the act of baptism, which the clothes may well reference, the salvation of their souls in the face of the Last Judgment.

She also mentions that cloth wraps were traditionally given to adult neophytes preparing to be baptized. 834.

⁶⁰ See Phillips' discussion of Columbus, Magellan's, and Cortés' belief in their own evangelical services and duties to the natives of the New World, 844.



Figure 18: *The Virgin of Mercy of the Last Judgment*. Artist Unknown. Mid 14th century, folio 1 v. Oxford, Bodlian Library, MS Bodley 691.

The combined presence of Europeans and Amerindians beneath the cloak raises a key question: why are they both there? Are they emblematic of some desire of the House of Trade that the central panel of their altarpiece should be a tribute to the discovery of the Americas, or might there be a more profound meaning? This chapter argues that there is indeed a deeper reason for the inclusion of both parties. The Europeans and Amerindians protected by the Virgin are reflective of an issue unique to the period—the

entire sixteenth century, in fact— that quickly became a concern to Spaniards as the exploration of the Americas extended to the colonization and evangelization of its peoples. The inhabitants of these newly discovered lands seemed so different, physically and culturally, from Europeans that Spaniards were not certain whether they were actually human beings or simply human-like creatures, or especially, how to treat them. A heated debate developed, with two Dominicans at the forefront. Bartolomé de las Casas, Bishop of Chiapas argued in support of concept that the Amerindians possessed souls and deserved humane treatment at the hands of Spanish colonizers. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda opposed him, claiming that these peoples deserved harsh treatment. He reasoned that reducing them to slavery accorded with both Catholic theology and natural law. While this debate was initiated by the discovery of the Americas by Columbus and the first generation of explorers, it would have been in full swing by the time the *Virgin of the Navigators* altarpiece was commissioned. Pope Paul III later tried to resolve the issue with his bull *Sublimis Deus*, in 1537, in which he “declared that Indians did in fact possess souls and thus were subject to Christian conversion.”⁶¹ In Spain, the polemic culminated in the so-called Valladolid debate, held at the College of Saint Gregory, Valladolid, in the former Kingdom of Castile from 1550-1551. While it is not clear who actually won the dispute, extreme opposition to de las Casas’ arguments continued.

The heart of this polemic was visually translated into the artistic rendering of the groups of peoples beneath the Virgin’s cloak by the patrons and the artist of *The Virgin of the Navigators*. The Europeans and Amerindians can be understood to symbolize several opposing concepts, even while they are presented together in the same panel, all “equally” protected beneath the Virgin’s cloak. Clothing, or the lack thereof, physical

⁶¹ Ibid, 32.

features, location, and posture, as described above, are the four major factors that distinguish the Spaniards from the Amerindians. They serve to differentiate between the powerful and the powerless, the conquerors and the conquered, and, in the Spaniards' perspective, the civilized human beings and the yet unbaptized heathens. Yet, importantly, they are both also nonetheless included under the loving, merciful protection of the Virgin's cloak. Mary thus ministered to both groups' needs. She was a beacon of hope and faith to the explorers of unknown lands and at the same time gently showed the Amerindians the way to salvation through Christ, covering both groups with her protective mantle from which thousands had previously sought refuge. The Virgin of Mercy is thus an essential part of the painting because its own protective imagery incorporates this historically specific, culturally relevant subject matter. By systematically representing these two groups differently, the House of Trade could visually express its views of both peoples in relation to the divine.

This remarkable painting seems to make a statement about the debate about the Amerindians, eleven years after Columbus' first discovery, and nineteen years before the actual Valladolid event, chronologically the time when the issue would have been at the forefront of contemporary thought. The opposites discussed above which differentiated the two groups may be interpreted as a way to appease viewers on both sides of the debate. Those who believed that the Indians did indeed have souls just like Spaniards would likely have been gratified to see Amerindians included beneath the cloak, a gesture to the belief that they were fully human and were permitted the same treatment by not only the patrons and artist but also by the Virgin. Viewers, on the other hand, who believed that the Indians did not have souls may have objected to their depiction beneath

the cloak, but would have at the same time noted their segregation from the Spaniards. The House of Trade, therefore, seems to take a nuanced, perhaps apologetic stance in favor of the argument for the Indians' humanity. The Virgin of Mercy type provides a clever, conscious, convenient solution with which to convey this set of complex messages, at the same time political, religious and humanistic, about those she shelters that can be traced to history making, profound changes experienced by Spanish culture in the Age of Exploration.

The other aspect of the Virgin of the Navigators that makes it part and parcel of the Age of Exploration and expands the Virgin of Mercy type beyond its usual imagery is its setting. Below the Virgin of Mercy and nearest to the viewer is an expanse of water upon which no less than ten different seafaring crafts float (Figure 19). These, like the portraits beneath the cloak, are rendered with remarkable specificity. They are fully rigged, outfitted with an assortment of different colored flags, staffed by tiny figures that interact with one another, and fish can be seen swimming in the waves around them. This is an extraordinary depiction of some of the fleet managed by the House of Trade, the vessels upon which Columbus and others made their living, and a presentation of at least three different types of flags and banners. The central ship, a large Spanish galleon, was an enlarged carrack-style ship, with its stern rudder of advanced design and outfitted with three to four full sails, although they are not unfurled in all their glory in the painting. Other notable features of carracks were their bowsprit, or tall central wooden pole, fore and aft castles, the cabin-like structures at both ends, and special protective whales along the sides. A carrack was ideal for trade, and was able to transport large cargoes across the sea, particularly goods between Seville and the Americas. The three principal ships used



Figure 19: Detail of *The Virgin of the Navigators*. Alejo Fernández. 1531-1536. Oil on panel. Current Repository: Alcázar of Seville.

by Columbus in his first exploratory venture in 1492 are probably depicted in this scene. The Niña was a galleon like the central ship in the painting; the Pínta and the Santa María would have been smaller caravels, or ships originally used by the Portuguese and highly efficient for maneuvering and navigating. The large ship to the right looks like a square-rigged caravel with oars on either side. Other galleys and *fustas*, or smaller boats not equipped for ocean use, accompany the large crafts in the Virgin of the Navigators.⁶²

As a simple observation of the painting confirms, the Virgin of the Navigators does not actually bridge heaven and Spain in the way the title of the thesis suggests—

⁶² For excellent guides to sixteenth-century ships and shipping vocabulary, see: Archibald R. Lewis and Timothy J. Runyan, *European Naval and Maritime History, 300-1500* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Edwin P. Harnack, *All About Ships and Shipping; a Handbook of Popular Nautical Information* (London: Faber, 1952); Pablo Emilio Pérez-Mallaina Bueno and Carla Rahn Phillips, *Spain's Men of the Sea: Daily Life on the Indies Fleets in the Sixteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Roger C Smith, *Vanguard of Empire: Ships of Exploration in the Age of Columbus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

there is no land depicted beneath her that refers to the Iberian Peninsula itself. Instead, it portrays the ships of the Spanish explorers and the open waters they charted. For this reason, the painting can be understood to bridge a wider gap: not just Spain but the broad expanse of Spanish colonial empire being formed in this period. The Virgin protects all of God's proverbial children under her cloak while at the same time encompassing not just the Old World—the world of these ships, of the Spaniards, and of the patrons of the painting—but the ocean that linked the empires at large.

In conclusion, the *Virgin of the Navigators*, packed with iconography and cultural and historical references, can be understood in several ways. First, in the *Virgin of the Navigators*, the Mother of God protects both believers and neophytes with her cloak, that relic from which thousands of pilgrims had previously sought relief from sickness and from which cities found relief from attack. At the same time, she acts as a beacon of hope and safe travels to seafarers embarking on one of the greatest international expeditions to date and to the newest batch of believers, a way to salvation through Christ. Second, the painting may be understood as a variation on the basic Virgin of Mercy type that borrows the concept of the naked figure beneath the cloak from the subtype of the Virgin of Mercy in the Last Judgment to underscore the neophyte status of the discovered and colonized peoples of the New World. It should be understood as the House of Trade's radical yet apologetic visual response to the Valladolid debate due to their commission that included, for one of the first times in European history, Spaniards and Amerindians and which located both groups beneath the mantle of the Virgin. Finally, it is a comment, however compromised, supporting the very humanity of the natives of the Americas, a debate that modern viewers will find unfathomable, but which was at the forefront of

Spanish minds at the time. As such, it is a visual record of the exploration, colonization, and looks forward to the events of evangelization of the Americas.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to introduce the reader to examples of the Virgin of Mercy in the Iberian Peninsula during the later Middle Ages and early Age of Exploration. Its originating question asked why a Marian devotional image that had no prior historical or iconographical origins in the Iberian Peninsula was so ardently commissioned during this period. The reasons discussed in this thesis can be understood as a combination of two important factors. First, several historical phenomena unique to the period provided reasons to request painted panels of the Virgin of Mercy. Patrons sought protection from a variety of sources of harm to themselves and their communities as have been described in Chapters Two and Three. They feared a vengeful divinity determined to rid the world of human sin, they hoped such paintings would prevent their death by the Black Plague, and they sought protection from harm caused by the perils of ocean travel. Other reasons came from affiliates who sought to represent the Order of Our Lady of Mercy through paintings of the Virgin of Mercy that decorated their establishments and those who sought to communicate cultural and religious messages through this type. Second, the apotropaic message of the Virgin of Mercy composition proved ideal for meeting patrons' needs in the face of these historical events. Thus, the image that offered the visual protection of the Virgin was created at a time when it was particularly relevant to the lives of medieval Spaniards.

The three chapters can be understood as a progression throughout time as well as throughout the geographical scope of the Virgin of Mercy. Chapter One covered the type's ancient Roman and pan-European origins. Chapter Two offered an overview of the basic type, its possible variations, and the three most commissioned subtypes in late

medieval Spain. Chapter Three focused on a very close examination of one particular, iconographically complex painting that stretches the topic into the Age of Exploration.

It should be evident now that this particular Marian type was important in Spain. The paintings discussed included categories of the Virgin of Mercy patronized in other European regions as well as those that were a critical part of Spain's artistic identity, just as French, German, and Italian examples discussed by other authors were important to their individual geographical and cultural regions.⁶³ Among the pan-European subtypes of the late Middle Ages were paintings of plague commissions and the *Sponsorship of the Virgin*. The Black Plague too affected the entire Iberian Peninsula just as it did the rest of Europe. Subtypes and paintings specific to Spanish heritage included the Mercedarian Virgin of Mercy. These panels reference an organization founded in Barcelona and dedicated to the ransom of Christian captives from slavery under Muslim masters that was a problem faced particularly by the Iberian Peninsula and other kingdoms in the Mediterranean on the borders of Christian lands. While paintings of the Mercedarians' Virgin of Mercy were also commissioned outside of the Peninsula as the organization established itself in many other countries, including in the countries of Latin America, the Virgin's Mercedarian habit and other attributes in each painting ultimately reference the Order of Our Lady of Mercy rooted in Barcelona during the later Middle Ages.

The *Virgin of the Navigators* is another painting whose contents are undeniably Spanish and connected to a specific historical situation unique to Spain. The Virgin of

⁶³ Time unfortunately did not suffice to include panels of the Virgin of Mercy from other European regions of the period beyond Figure 4. An overview of the type from other regions such as France, Italy, and Germany would be helpful to illustrate how the Virgin of Mercy differed between artistic traditions within Europe. It would also likely aid in answering the originating question by providing an understanding of the genealogy of the type in Europe as related to its entrance to the Iberian Peninsula.

Mercy was not an uncommon subject for the main panel of an altarpiece, yet the Virgin of the Navigators' remarkable choice of iconography and the artistic treatment of those beneath the cloak renders it an exceptional example among works of the type. That the critical details of its commission are fully known—its purchase by the House of Trade, founded by the Catholic Monarchs, their sponsorship of such an exploratory mission at a time when other European powers were reluctant to invest in such a risky venture—increases the impact of its iconography, especially in terms of importance to Spain. At the same time, ironically, these details increase the impact of its importance to the European experience and effort of discovery, exploration, and global expansion in the sixteenth century as one of the first paintings to reference the exploration of the Americas and reflect the achievements of the House of Trade.

Future research will hopefully continue to expand the current canon of Spanish art to include the Virgin of Mercy. Research remains to be done on a number of different related projects. One could focus on examples of the Virgin of Mercy in media other than painted panels, for instance, in sculpture, of which there are several from around the early Renaissance. Other media include but are not limited to ceramics, textiles, illuminated manuscripts, architectural ornamentation such as versions of the Virgin of Mercy that grace the doors of hospitals and other buildings from the sixteenth century. Research could also explore the complex literary relationships that developed equivalents in Spanish visual culture inspired by passages from literature such as the *Dialogus miraculorem* and *The Golden Legend* as they relate to late medieval Marian iconography.

Another fascinating study would involve research that focuses on the transmission of the type from late medieval Spain to early colonial art in Spanish America, as well as a

comparative study of eighteenth-century examples of the Virgin of Mercy in Spain and Latin America. Many of the oil-on-canvas examples of the Virgin of Mercy that I have found from Mexico, alone, are striking in their large size, inclusion of the Trinity, protection of entire assemblies of monks, nuns, and clergy, blends of Marian iconography, relative lack of indigenous peoples beneath the cloak, and written descriptions at the bottom or on the sides. Also unusual within Mexican paintings of the sheltering cloak type are those in which Saint Francis replaces the Virgin as the saint protecting those with his mantle; in some examples, he even hoists images of the Virgin of Guadalupe over his head. It is clear that the Virgin of Mercy type and the various subtypes of it available in the later Middle Ages provided a rich and multi-faceted iconographical tradition upon which each generation of artists drew for inspiration, extending from the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance and beyond in both European and colonial European cultures.

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