

**FUNDACIÓN MARÍA CRISTINA  
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**IMAGE**

Artemisia Gentileschi (Rome, 1593–Naples, after 1654 1654)  
*The Virgin nursing the Child*, 1609–10  
Oil on canvas  
FMCMP Collection

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Fundación María Cristina  
Masaveu Peterson  
Photographer: Marcos Morilla

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Open:  
Tuesday to Friday: 11am–8pm  
Saturdays: 10am–8pm  
Sundays and public holidays: 10am–3pm  
Closed:  
Mondays (including public holidays),  
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31 December.

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Timed entry

The ticket office remains open until half  
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To prevent unnecessary waiting, you are  
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More information about the programme of guided  
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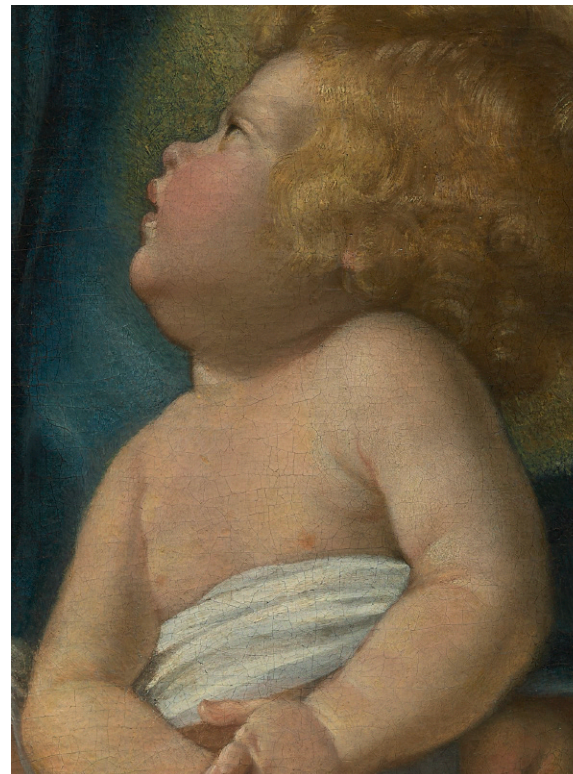
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# SPECIAL CHRISTMAS PROGRAMME



*The Virgin nursing the Child,*  
by Artemisia Gentileschi

**03–25**  
DEC 2025 JAN 2026

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To celebrate the Christmas season, for the first time in Spain the Fundación María Cristina Masaveu Peterson is showing *The Virgin nursing the Child*, a work recently acquired by the Foundation on the international market.

This delicate and moving composition of the Virgin and Child is an early piece by Artemisia Gentileschi. It was painted in Rome when the artist was still a teenager training in the workshop of her father Orazio (1563–1639). Her few surviving works from this period are logically related to the style and artistic practices of her father, who may have encouraged and had a hand in these early paintings. Indeed, this picture returns to a theme which Orazio Gentileschi also painted around the same time and of which there are two known versions by him, one in Bucharest and the other in Rome.

The iconography depicted was very popular in Catholic spirituality, especially from the late Middle Ages onwards: the *Virgo lactans* or Virgin breastfeeding. The subject was eventually discouraged by the Council of Trent (1545–63) for reasons of decorum, as although the nursing Child symbolised the solace and protection Mary provided to all believers, it also required showing the Virgin's breast. Seventeenth-century artists dealt with this issue in different ways.

Orazio Gentileschi portrayed the Child suckling (in the Bucharest version) as well as the previous moments when the infant seeks his mother's breast, which is not actually shown (in the Rome version). In this composition belonging to the Fundación María Cristina Masaveu Peterson, Artemisia captures the moment in between: the Virgin conceals her right breast with a nursing cloth while modestly placing her hand around the breast she is offering the baby. The two exchange tender glances. Mary appears engrossed in thought, conscious of the tragic fate that

awaits the Child Saviour, naked and barely covered by a lightweight white cloth – an image that foreshadows his death on the cross. The young woman's features – large eyes, sinuous lips, a prominent chin and abundant curly hair – are reminiscent of those of the artist, who used herself as a model for many of her compositions.

This form of depicting from life was characteristic of Caravaggist painting, to which much of the Gentileschi's output of the late 1610s belongs. The way in which Mary fills the space, emerging from an empty setting defined solely by the spotlighting that emphasises the intimacy of the scene, is also reminiscent of the style of Caravaggio (1571–1610). She is sitting on a nursing chair or *sedia da balia*, whose low seat forces her to bend her legs to support the infant on her lap. This arrangement, together with the pronounced folds of the clothing and their contrasting lighting, lends the figure – designed to be viewed from below, *di sotto in sù* – a monumental appearance.

This representation is also linked to works by Michelangelo (the Pitti and Doni tondos) that were revisited with sensitivity and tenderness, saturated colour and thick brushstrokes in the paintings of Scipione Pulzone (1544–1598). Pulzone was an important point of reference for religious representations in late sixteenth-century Rome and his works are a good example of the Counter-Reformation painting practised in the city until well into the seventeenth century.

This composition, which must have been an excellent showcase for the painter's artistic skills given its size and subject matter, was well received. Its success is borne out by the fact that at least three other copies were made following the artist's departure for Florence shortly after marrying in 1612. One is in the Galleria Spada (Rome) and the others are in the Galleria Palatina (Florence) and the Pignatelli Collection (Caen). All four canvases are



similar in size, and the technical studies conducted on three of them show that they were based on the same template or cartoon, an outline of the main figure to which slight variations and nuances of colour and light were subsequently added.

The initial model was this picture in the Fundación María Cristina Masaveu Peterson, and Artemisia may have taken the canvas with her to Florence; the painting's theme and format made it suitable for private oratories. The most refined of the versions, especially in terms of formal details and painterly nuances, is the one in the Galleria Spada, where the Child displays visible changes with respect

to this initial model. The use of cartoons to duplicate specific figures or motifs in different compositions was a practice that Artemisia learned in her father's workshop and is known to have used at various times in her career to replicate themes – especially the biblical heroines – that largely accounted for her fame as a painter: Susanna and the Elders, Bathsheba at her Bath and Judith with the Head of Holofernes. All these works have a powerful narrative impact and expressive force, which, coupled with a life story brimming with independence and vitality, make Artemisia one of the most important figures of her time.