

## Our Lady of Montserrat

Montserrat is a mountain chain near Barcelona, in Catalonia, Spain. It is part of the Catalan Pre-Coastal Range, its main peaks 1,236 metres tall. It is a mountain that astonishes you the moment you see it, for it is so different from all others. Seen from the distance, looming up alone out of the landscape, it is bound to attract your attention. Depending on where you see it from, its silhouette is reminiscent of the toothed blade of a saw. And here you have the clue to its name, for the Catalan word Montserrat means “sawn mountain”. It describes the peculiar aspect of the rock formation, which is visible from a great distance. The mountain is composed of strikingly pink conglomerate, a form of sedimentary rock. It is well-known as the site of the Benedictine abbey, Santa Maria de Montserrat, which hosts the Virgin of Montserrat.

The statue of the Madonna and Child is known as “La Moreneta” (the dark little one). Legend relates that was first known as “La Jerosolimitana” (the native of Jerusalem), since it is believed to have been carved in that city during the early days of the church, and according to Catholic tradition its author was Saint Luke. The image was moved to Montserrat in 718, to avoid the danger posed by invading Saracens. It was later hidden from the Moors in a cave, where it was rediscovered in the IX century. Some shepherds found the lost statue under supernatural guidance in 890. While tending their flocks that night the shepherds were amazed to see lights and to hear singing coming from the mountain. When this was repeated, the shepherds reported the situation to their priest, who investigated. When the priest also heard the singing and saw the mysterious lights, he informed the Bishop, and he also witnessed the phenomenon. The statue of Our Lady was discovered in a cave and was brought out and placed in a small church that was soon erected.

When the Benedictine monks began to construct their monastery, they could not move the statue, and chose to instead build around it. The statue’s sanctuary is located at the rear of the chapel, where an altar of gold surrounds the icon, and is now a site of pilgrimage. The statue presently kept at the Montserrat shrine appears to have been introduced in the twelfth or thirteenth century. Its Romanesque style is consistent with this estimate. Beyond general style, the genre of the statue is certainly that of an ‘enthroned virgin’, typical of the earliest icons of Mary.

Upon his recovery from battle wounds, Ignatius of Loyola visited the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat, where he laid down his military accoutrements before the image. On September 11, 1844, Pope Leo XIII declared the virgin of Montserrat patroness of Catalonia. The hymn to the Virgin of Montserrat, known as *Virolai* and sung every day by the *Escolania de Montserrat*, begins with the words: “*Rosa d’abril, Morena de la serra...*” (April rose, dusky lady of the mountain chain...). Therefore this virgin is sometimes also known as “*Rosa d’abril*”.

