

Blessed mother, beautiful child

Leo J. O'Donovan | Dec. 23, 2009



A portion of Hans Memling, "Virgin and Child With Sts. Catherine of Alexandria and Barbara," early 1480s, oil on wood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York)

Images of the Madonna and Child are everywhere at this time of year, almost as frequently reproduced as scenes of the Nativity and the adoration of the Magi.

Hans Memling's "Virgin and Child with Sts. Catherine of Alexandria and Barbara," from the early 1480s, is an enchanting example from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Mary is shown enthroned with her son before a royal curtain, but the scene is less a court than a spiritual vision. The painting was adapted from a large altarpiece Memling completed in 1479 for Sint-Jans hospitaal in Bruges, Belgium. To the viewer's left a donor prays the rosary as he contemplates the mystic espousal with Christ that St. Catherine experienced in a vision after her baptism. The wheel and sword on the ground represent her later torture and execution.

To the right St. Barbara reads prayerfully, before the tower in which her father imprisoned her before she, too, was beheaded. The grape arbor setting is a somewhat later addition, referring to the increasingly popular devotion to the Eucharist at the time. In the far distance we glimpse the wall of a park or chateau, with visitors at its gate and by a small bridge over a river.

The detail of the painting is jewel-like, as are its colors: Mary's red gown echoed by Catherine's sleeves and the angel to the right, the rhyme of green in Barbara's dress and the background lawn, the black accent of the donor's suit. But this lovely precision in painting is matched by an equal precision in atmosphere: reverent, restrained, resonant. We are far from the sunny warmth, softer palette and fully rounded forms of the Italians. But, with their cooler light, Memling and the other great Netherlandish artists offer us an edge and exact psychology at least equally invaluable.

And the theme is older than we might suppose. The third-century catacomb of Priscilla in Rome has a portrayal of the mother and child, and the fourth-century Great Cemetery there has a full-face, quite hieratic presentation of them. When the Council of Ephesus in 431 affirmed Mary as the Mother of God (Theotokos), regal images became increasingly common in both East and West, and Western iconography even crowned Mary as an empress.

An even more ancient concept in Ptolemaic Egypt sacralized the primordial relationship of mother and child in delicate statues of the great goddess Isis nursing her son, Horus. Hindu theology and art appropriated the relationship as well -- for example, in a marvelous, early 12th-century bronze statue of Krishna's foster-mother, Yashoda, nursing the infant Krishna. In Western India also, in late 14th-century manuscripts from the Book of Rituals used by the Jain religion, various images portray the young savior Mahavira presented by the deity Shakra (Indra) at his birth or being nursed by Queen Trisala. Western Africa consecrated the image of mother and child as well: In the Met's African and Oceanic galleries a fiercely protective, life-size cult figure from Mali embraces her child so closely that he feels still in the womb.



Most of us, though, are more familiar with Byzantine icons of the Virgin and Child.

They multiplied still more after the so-called Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843, when the veneration of icons was finally officially approved and they became more popular than ever.

The wide variety of types included Our Lady Guide of Wayfarers (the *Hodegetria*), the Virgin of Tenderness, and the Nursing Madonna (which first emerged in Egypt as an appropriation of Isis nursing Horus). These Byzantine models greatly influenced the West, where Duccio in Siena and Giotto in Florence developed a more modeled, dramatic and personalized vision for great Virgins in Majesty as well as smaller devotional works. On the way to their breakthrough there were singular artists-in-between such as Berlinghiero of Lucca, whose early 13th-century "Madonna and Child," again from the Met, gives us a Virgin whose anxiously furrowed brow powerfully suggests the destiny of her innocent son.

With the Renaissance in Italy and then in the Netherlands come the multitude of Madonnas (the Italian word adopted everywhere) in which Mary becomes increasingly the ideal young woman of humanism. In the Protestant lands of the Reformation, however, Marian imagery became less common, while in the countries of the Catholic Reformation it flourished even more, especially in Spain. There the fame of El Greco and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo might have been guaranteed simply by their paintings of Mary. If the former risked stylistic exaggeration or mannerism while in his finest work achieving a veritable transformation of earthly into heavenly reality, the latter skirted soft sentimentality but could also touch the most tender core of the human condition, in street urchins or in Madonnas.

In the so-called "Santiago Madonna," Murillo's "Virgin and Child," painted about 1670-72, for example (it belonged for over a century to the Santiago family), the rich hues of Mary's maroon dress and blue cloak, the enveloping light, the child with tousled blond hair tugging playfully at her bodice, comprise sweetness itself. The utter simplicity of the scene, the bare bench on which the mother sits and the dark, undefined background, also compel our attention -- and assure the canvas of its endearing and enduring beauty.

What is this genre or type of the Madonna and Child, the elemental theme of mother and child transposed to a

Christian key? Several things may be said of it formally, and first of all this, that it is both fixed and yet variable. A true representation of the Madonna and Child, whether in sculpture, painting or print, is not a narrative but an abstraction. It is not part of the story of Mary's life as scripture tells it and pious fancy elaborates it -- from Annunciation through Calvary to Assumption. Rather, it imagines mother and child apart from the flow of time, for the instant of our devout attention. Its aching correlative, again a scene of the mother holding her son, is the Pietà, which is imagined not as a deposition but as a moment of mourning sorrow at the heart-stop of time -- again abstractly.

And yet, like great music, the type can encompass seemingly limitless variation. Early Byzantine icons introduce attendant angels. Memling's anachronistic saints comfortably accompany their Lady. Raphael creates luminous landscape backgrounds, introduces St. John the Baptist as a child, gorgeously varies the virgin's pose. And crowns come and go. (But not jewelry; the virgin never wears jewelry.)

Theologically, and perhaps still more important, the apparently simple theme -- not a grand moment in salvation history but a time apart for intimacy and meditation -- in fact bears interlacing, inextricable strands of meaning. In whatever form, it represents a creation theology that affirms the goodness and beauty of the world and its crown in a caring humanity that images God.

Most directly, of course, it implies Incarnation, God's son become Mary's son. But also, the doctrine of soteriology or redemption: The child born with a mission and often holding a symbol of that mission (an apple, a pear) is smaller than his mother but always presented to us as our savior by his mother. There is likewise an incipient doctrine of hope, an eschatology, as we are drawn into contemplating the divine life embodied for us through the mother, so that we might one day share that same life through the son.

Do you have a favorite Madonna and Child? Did your mother? I myself seldom visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art without calling first on the small, splendid "Madonna and Child" that Duccio painted about 1300. It created a sensation in 2004 when the Met paid a fortune for it. But the sensation now, apart from its extraordinary condition, is the well of intimate and healing feeling it conveys.

But we also need images of the mother and child more of our own time, images that can challenge as well as comfort. I think of several printed with utmost simplicity and depth of conviction by Georges Rouault in his great folio of aquatints, "Miserere et Guerre" ("Mercy and War?"), completed in 1927 but not published until after World War II. I think especially of Plate 42, "Bella matribus detestata" ("Wars, the Dread of Mothers?"), a spare profile view of a mother and child that might have been given a number of titles but for which Rouault chose to quote from *The Odes* of Horace, reminding us how fragile and fleeting, how endangered the joys of children in their mother's arms can be. Cherish him, we say to the mother in the print. Hold her, to the child. Rejoice in the moment of intimate embrace. But be aware, as the blunt black modeling warns, that the most assured grace is subject to rejection and abuse.

Blessed mother, beautiful child, remind us in this season to celebrate the birth of Christ how precious and yet how pained our condition can be.

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