

From Mother of God to Domestic Goddess

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Following the 1568 Dutch Revolt and the accompanying rise of Calvinism in the Northern Netherlands, worship of the Virgin Mary was condemned as idolatry. As a result Mariology, a tradition stretching as far back as the sixth-century, would be consciously expunged from the visual culture of the Dutch Republic.¹ Images of the Madonna and Child had previously constituted some of the most important depictions of motherhood in Western culture, reflecting a maternal ideal that women as well as the wider cultural sphere, adulated and looked towards.² As substitution, an array of imagery depicting mothers caring for their children emerged within the newly Protestant provinces. The visual motif of a mother nursing her child was repeated in many Reformation paintings, such as Jan Van Eyck's *Lucca-Madonna* (1390-1441), echoing the religious depiction of Mary nursing Jesus. As Simon Schama notes, "the Dutch abolished images of the Madonna and Child from their churches, only to reinstate them surreptitiously as simple nursing mothers".³ These new depictions of motherhood reflected the changing attitudes of Dutch Calvinist patrons towards religion and social structures. Motherhood, an important state within the culture of Reformation Europe, was no longer represented at the universal level of the Virgin Mary but as a much more intimate and domestic act, reflecting new Protestant understandings of religion and society.

The prevailing Catholicism of the sixteenth century had long positioned the Virgin Mary as the mother of all Christians. The importance of her role within Catholic culture is attested by the prolific use of symbolic imagery centred on the Virgin, encouraging "filial devotion", as well as the conceptualization of

Mary as the perfect mother to both Christ and humanity.⁴ As a result, by the time the Protestant Reformation emerged, she was positioned as both Mary, Mother of God, and as a powerful image of motherhood across Christendom.

For countries impacted by the Reformation, this powerful emblem of motherhood was neutralized by the theological changes that Calvinism produced. When Calvin wrote that, “the finite cannot contain the infinite”, he directly attacked the veneration of images of God and saints within the Catholic Church.⁵ Feeling that it was dangerously close to idolatry,⁶ his theological views led to the subsequent destruction and prohibition of almost all devotional imagery depicting the Virgin Mary and Child within the churches of the Northern Netherlands.⁷

In tandem with this rupture in visual culture, the traditional hierarchy of Dutch Renaissance society also changed dramatically. Prior to the provinces’ independence from Spain, power in the Northern Netherlands had been a top-down affair. The two most important institutions of Renaissance society, the Church and the State were both controlled outside the Netherlands from their centres in the Vatican and Spain respectively. Typical of the time, it was the Pope and his cardinals in Italy from which all theological decisions sprang forth. It was through a hierarchical series of representatives that they maintained control over Dutch politics and society. However the simultaneous independence from Spain and the Vatican, brought with it changes that initiated the Dutch Golden Age. Consequently, such power structures were supplanted by a much more community-based political and religious system. As individual provincial governments began to regulate the Dutch Reform Church, particularly contentious matters were decided on a parish-by-parish basis.⁸ Even faith itself was democratized. Under Roman Catholicism, connection with God was only possible through the intercession of a priest. For most people, understanding the Latin vocabulary of the Bible was only possible through clerical assistance or interpretation. With the changes produced by the Reformation, faith became more personal in the Netherlands. The Bible, translated into the vernacular, was widely accessible to an increasingly literate society and provided a direct connection between the faithful and the Word of God.

A similar localization of authority also occurred within the Dutch government, as political power now ascended from the municipal to the national level. The city council contributed members to the local state assembly, who in turn con-

tributed members to the States General, the highest national council.⁹ Although the position of Stadholder, the country's commander-in-chief with the power to appoint council members at various levels, remained a hereditary position, the sovereignty of the provinces was of great cultural significance during the sixteenth century.¹⁰

As a consequence of these shifts in religious and secular power distribution, Dutch Golden Age society became a culture focused on the local, personal, and domestic. Whereas other Renaissance states were controlled governmentally by a monarch in the capital and spiritually by a Pope in a different country, the Dutch were governed through a system that was locally based, both politically and religiously. This new power invested in the local, contributed to a national interest in the domestic. The Dutch Republic was a state whose power was based on the interests of individual communities, which were themselves based on the family unit. The works of Luther and other Reformation philosophers emphasized the importance of the family, which replaced the Catholic Church as the “principal forum of moral instruction and character development.”¹¹ Therefore, the success of the Dutch Republic was bound to the success of the family unit. While the patriarch of the family was expected to work and contribute economically to the state, the task of the mother was to create a stable, moral, and nourishing environment in which a new generation of Dutch citizens would be reared. Consequently, the cultural weight placed on Dutch women, specifically mothers, was monumental. For preachers and thinkers of the era, a mother's failure or success at raising her children was equal to the success or failure of the nation as a whole.¹² In order to meet such high expectations of motherhood within Dutch culture, women were required to act as the moral guide for their children and ensure the highest standards of cleanliness within the household. The raising of pious and virtuous children was the most important tasks of motherhood.¹³ For many thinkers in Renaissance Europe, breastfeeding was a key factor in raising moral children. However many wealthy Renaissance women were unwilling to nurse their own children due to social customs. Women who followed this custom though, were warned by thinkers such as Bernardino of Siena: “if the one who cares for him has evil customs or is of base condition, he will receive the impress of these customs because of having suckled her polluted blood”.¹⁴ This reflects the perception of Dutch preachers and thinkers, as they were wary of the ‘polluting’ effect of wet-nurses. It came to be considered a mother's proper duty, for the moral health of both her child and country, to breastfeed her own children.

For Catholic Europe, images of the nursing Madonna, also known as *Maria Lactans*, became a visual example for new mothers. Margaret Miles argues that the milk that Mary had fed Jesus was symbolic of the love she had for both him and all of humanity. She writes that in these images the Virgin “nourished the infant Christ—and by identification with him, all Christians”.¹⁵ In paintings such as Jan Van Eyck’s *Lucca-Madonna*, the nursing Virgin functions as both the visual expression of her love for humanity and as the epitome of motherhood for Christian women to follow. Not only did the Virgin Mary demonstrate “humility, obedience, and submissiveness”¹⁶ in carrying the Christ Child, she was also portrayed in the act of nursing the infant herself. The serene devotion to her child at the expense of her own comfort was revealed through depictions of her breastfeeding, presenting Mary as an ideal mother figure for Catholic women to imitate.

However as powerful an icon as the Madonna and Child may have been, for the post-Reformation Dutch, the symbolic impact of this representation of motherhood was no longer effective. Not only was this imagery disparaged by Reformation leaders for theological reasons, they were also out of sync with contemporary culture. Van Eyck’s Madonna was anything but the domestic exemplar for a culture whose pride was founded on that of the local. In contrast to similar imagery, the *Lucca-Madonna* is depicted within an interior space, in what could conceivably be a home. Yet many aspects of this painting suggest that she is an ethereal entity, rather than a human mother. The throne upon which she rests, the fabric and jewels that adorn her and even the interior itself containing beautiful tiles and rich carpet, all distinguish her as a regal and exceptional mother. This contrasts greatly to the households typical of the sixteenth century Dutch Republic.

Along with the focus on local politics and personal religion within Dutch culture, Dutch artists turned towards a much more domestic vision of motherhood. As Schama points out, in post-Reformation Dutch paintings the Madonna would be replaced by a mother and her children in everyday genre scenes.¹⁷ In these depictions of motherhood the figures often possess no distinct or extraordinary qualities. Scenes of parenting became a popular theme for painters of the period such as Gabriel Metsu, Gerrit Dou, and Pieter de Hooch. They all painted subjects not unlike de Hooch’s *Woman with Children in an Interior*, a work that depicts a woman dressed in traditional Dutch garb, sitting in front of a fireplace nursing her sleeping child. When compared to the

Van Eyck painting there are similarities. Both women sit next to a window with the light striking their faces as they gaze down at their suckling infants. They both seem totally engrossed in the task at hand. However, the mother in De Hooch's painting performs this task within a much more modest setting. She sits low to the ground, leaning against a wall and positioned slightly off-centre. Unlike the frontally viewed pose of the Virgin in Van Eyck's painting, this composition enhances a sense of the everyday whilst depicting a mother in the ordinary act of breastfeeding. Similarly, the inclusion of a second child in the scene indicates that the care provided to the first infant is the same care given to all children in their turn. De Hooch paints an ordinary example of motherhood, and it is precisely the commonness of the scene that gives these images of motherhood power within the visual vocabulary of the Dutch Golden Age.

Although ostensibly stripped of religious significance, these paintings often contain suggestions of Marian veneration. As Wayne Frantis points out, the pose of the mother and child in Metsu's *Sick Child* appears to be inspired by *Pietà* works.¹⁸ The contented countenance of De Hooch's *Woman with Children in an Interior*, as well as the way the light falls on her, is reminiscent of the way in which Mary's divinity is depicted in earlier Madonna and Child paintings like that of Van Eyck. Although linked to earlier Christian images, post-Reformation paintings of motherhood portray not the mother of Christ but Christian values themselves. It is no longer the ornamented Virgin Mary that provides sole guidance for Dutch women of the seventeenth century, but rather the Dutch women themselves representing their own cultural values. These women are visually indicating to all Dutch women that one does not have to be chosen by God in order to display the qualities of motherhood – humility, tenderness, compassion – that Mary possessed.

Even when the paintings maintained their explicitly religious themes such as in Rembrandt's *The Holy Family*, the Madonna and Child are removed from the luxurious setting of Van Eyck's painting and placed within a more domestic and personal scene. In *The Holy Family*, Mary's throne is disposed of and her luxurious jewels have been removed. She is dressed in humble fabric, and placed within a modest cottage setting. Like De Hooch's mother, she is depicted within a carpenter's workshop, sitting low to the ground, surrounded by other family members, a familiar setting for a seventeenth-century audience. Rembrandt painted many of these images of the Holy Family within humble interiors and it seems that there was a market for this type of work.¹⁹ It is not clear who the

audience for these paintings would be but their subject matter would appeal most to a Catholic audience, demonstrating that an emphasis on the domestic and every-day in images of motherhood had already begun to cross religious boundaries.

Although two hundred years divide Van Eyck's *Lucca-Madonna* and De Hooch's *Woman with Children in an Interior*, the tradition in which Van Eyck participated stretched back into early Christian history, and remained ever-present until the Reformation. Throughout this visual tradition, depictions of Mary served not only as objects of veneration but also as examples to be imitated. The tenderness of Mary's expression as she looks down on her child and the care she took to nurse him herself, offered an ideal example of motherhood to be followed by all Christian women. Although the importance of Mary in Christianity was hotly debated by Calvin and other Reformation thinkers, such poignant examples of motherhood were still necessary in a culture where national success was considered contingent on domestic harmony. With the most powerful example of motherhood removed from the visual vocabulary of the Dutch Republic, Dutch painters were forced to create new imagery that better responded to contemporaneous culture. Depictions of ordinary women caring for their families filled this void left by the prohibited Madonna and Child. Just as religious and political institutions in the Northern Netherlands after the Dutch Revolt and Eighty Years' War became centred on the local, the art of the Dutch Republic adopted local themes as its subject, finding in the domestic an example that the whole nation could emulate.

Endnotes

1. Jerome Mazzaro, "Dante and the Image of the 'Madonna Allattante,'" *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 114 (1996): 96.
2. Margaret R. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350-1750*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) 47.
3. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 540.
4. Mazzaro, 97.
5. Angela Vanhaelen, "Iconoclasm and the Creation of Images in Emanuel de Witte's Old Church in Amsterdam," *The Art Bulletin* 87, no. 2 (June 2005): 253.
6. Joan Mary Hogan. *The Iconography of Rembrandt's Depictions of the Holy Family (in a Domestic Setting)* (M.A. Thesis, Queen's University, 2008): 22.
7. Schama, 540.

8. Ibid., 59-61.
9. Jan Glete, *War and the State in Early Modern Europe: Spain, the Dutch Republic and Sweden as fiscal-military states, 1500-1600* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 146.
10. Ibid., 147.
11. Peter C. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch, 1629-1684*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 68.
12. “Thou hast begot children not only for thy selfe, but also for thy countrie. Which should not only bee to thy selfe a joy and pleasure, but also profitable and commodious afterward unto the common wealth.” Quoted in Wayne E. Frantis, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 112.
13. Frantis, 112
14. Quoted in Miles, 37.
15. Miles, 6.
16. Ibid., 47.
17. Schama, 540.
18. Frantis, 118.
19. They are discussed at length in Hogan, Chapter 4 “*Two Etchings and Five Paintings*”, 28-51.