Madonna Images and the Construction of Femininity in Modern Art

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The image of the Madonna, the mother of Christ, is one of the most common motifs in the history of art. Early Christian art portrayed the Madonna as an idealized woman and a virgin, but the images and the society in which they were created had unrealistic standards of femininity. In the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church stopped being a prominent patron of the arts. Madonna images were painted far less often, but still remained an important symbol for artists. However, they were no longer symbolic of an unrealistic ideal woman. In the modern era, artists re-appropriated the image of the Madonna. She became a symbol to represent all women, blurring the division between the holy and the secular. At the hands of the modernists, the Madonna was no longer the virgin mother promoted by the early Catholic Church. Instead, she was a real woman who was sexually liberated, endured great suffering, and gave strength to women and all oppressed people. These images not only presented the Madonna in a realistic and empowering way, they also changed the way in which the Madonna is perceived in art. Portrayals of the Madonna in modern art shifted to reflect the lives and needs of ordinary women and, in doing so, promoted a healthier and more empowering construction of femininity in art.

Early Christian art portrayed the Madonna as the ideal woman, but the ideal that it presented was unrealistic and dangerous for women. The most positive early Christian images of the Madonna portrayed her as "the mother of the light of the world" and as a queen (Amato 16-18). They portrayed her as the mother of the light of the world because she is the mother of Christ, who through his birth and eventual sacrifice, defeated death and darkness. They portrayed her as a queen because she is the mother of Christ the king (Amato 16-18). Although these portrayals of the Madonna seem positive on the surface, they both set her above all women. In these portrayals, the

Madonna's holiness removes her from ordinary women, making it difficult for women to connect with the Madonna on a personal level. The Catholic Church also had rules for depictions of the Madonna that early Christian artists had to follow in their work. These rules were designed to display the Madonna's modesty and emphasize her virginity (Amato 29). The restriction on Madonna images in early Christian art reflects a larger dangerously patriarchal understanding of gender roles in the society in which they were made. In this society, the Madonna images were "intended to authorize an ideal of sexless and obedient womanhood and to shame living women for their desires" (Orsi 8). The Madonna was contrasted with Eve, who was portrayed as a "temptress" who brought sin to humanity (Cuneen 292). Because the Madonna was exalted as the ideal of womanhood, she was the model on which early Christian society expected all women to base their lives (Katz 87). The church ridiculed women who didn't conform to its standards of celibacy, and labeled them as "whores" (Cuneen 281). The emphasis on the Madonna's virginity in the early years of Christian society and Christian art created an unhealthy standard that was impossible for women to live up to. Women were unable to see themselves in the images of the Madonna, and those who rejected the oppressive male-dominated standards of sexuality and femininity had to suffer humiliation at the hands of the Church.

When assessing the importance of Madonna images, it is essential to consider the symbolic significance of the Madonna image itself. Madonna images in early Christian art had such a great influence over people because the images were designed as devotional objects. A devotional object differs from an object of aesthetic consideration in that the audience does not distance itself from the devotional object. While an audience looks at an aesthetic object as a work of art separate from its actual experience, the audience of a devotional object sees the object as containing that which it represents (Orsi 4-5). In other words, when viewed as a devotional object, an audience considers that the artwork depicting the Madonna is the Madonna herself. This lends authority to the image

and to the social values that it attempts to reinforce. Els Maeckelberghe asserts that one can only properly view an image of the Madonna if one looks at it as a symbol, distinct from the historic figure that it portrays. She applies semiotic theory to images of the Madonna to assert that, like all other symbols, the Madonna symbol has meaning that is contingent on the context in which it is created and received (84-85). Understanding the symbolic nature of the Madonna image is essential to understanding portrayals of the Madonna in modern art. One must also accept that symbols change in different contexts to appreciate the way in which artists in the modern era transformed the meaning of the Madonna image and the way in which it constructs femininity. Maeckelberghe states that the only consistency across Madonna images is that they are all female gendered. For this reason, there is a mimetic relationship through which one sees the Madonna image as representing all women. The result of this mimetic relationship is that the Madonna image serves a role in constructing one's understanding of womanhood (85-86). Artists in the modern era understood the correlation between Madonna images and the understanding of femininity and made Madonnas that were more representational of real women. Robert A. Orsi makes note of another consistency across Madonna images. He writes that because the Madonna is so revered and holds such an important place as a religious figure in the popular psychology, it is impossible to completely disassociate religious undertones from any Madonna image, even if that image is not intended to be a devotional object (4-5). Modernist artists also used the religious undertones of the Madonna to their advantage when transforming the way in which the image is understood.

Artists in the modern era transformed the symbolism of the Madonna image to be representational of real women rather than an unrealistic idealized woman. The shift in the imagery was possible because of the changing context in which art was made starting in the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church was no longer the most active patron of the arts. Because of this, artists were able to follow their own motivation in their portrayal of the

Madonna rather than the Church's standards for her representation (Katz 104). Melissa R. Katz writes that although it seems depictions of the Madonna would be out of place in this new secular art world, "Artists found Mary a useful foil for expressing universal notions of female identity and appropriated her image to suit pictorial needs independent of historic precedent" (104). The loss of patronage ironically liberated artistic representations of the Madonna from the Church. The old standards of religion were no longer appropriate to life in the modern era. Instead, the modernists represented the lives of real women in their works. However, the modernists still saw value in the Madonna image and in its religious undertones. Sally Cunneen writes that the Madonna:

> is a complex figure, both a vulnerable sharer of the human condition and a signal of hope, of what we can become at our best at different stages of our lives. In scenes of the Nativity and the Crucifixion Mary embodies the greatest joy and the greatest suffering that life offers. She is the wise human figure who reveals the presence of the sacred in all creation, as well as the absorbing passion of the divine for the human (309).

The modernists represented a secular world in their art, but still made use of the image of the Madonna. Their Madonnas, however, were very human Madonnas, not simply saintly archetypes. In the worlds created by the modernists' artwork, the secular became the new holy, and the ordinary woman became the new Madonna.

The modernists' Madonnas were realistic everywoman figures, rather than the unrealistic image presented in early Christian art and society. Sally Cunneen notes that contemporary feminists tend to understand the Madonna as a courageous single mother rather than as a Blessed Virgin. They reject the Church's notion of the Virgin Birth, which asserts that the Madonna gave birth to Christ despite remaining a virgin. The contemporary understandings of the Madonna argue that the Madonna either willingly conceived Christ out of wedlock or was a victim of a rape that impregnated

her (282). Cunneen states that such theories of the conception of Christ are empowering because they show that "concepts like 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' do not exist in God's mind" and could help to end "domination" and "submission" created by personal relationships (289). These contemporary takes on the Madonna and on the conception of Christ portray her in a much more realistic way than Church doctrine. Just as contemporary feminists reject Church doctrine to present a more realistic portrayal of the Madonna, modern artists defied tradition and the church's standards of representing the Madonna to present her as an ordinary woman.

Max Ernst's 1926 painting *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, and the Painter* (Image 1) and Emil Nolde's 1917 woodcut *Madonna* (Image 2) both break precedent in their depiction of the Madonna as an ordinary woman. Ernst's painting puts the Madonna in a position not imagined in early Christian art. She has the Christ child lying over her knee and is spanking him. The implication of this painting is that the Christ child, whose halo has humorously fallen to the ground, has misbehaved like any ordinary child would. The Madonna, like an ordinary mother, has to do the dirty work of disciplining her misbehaving child. Nolde's *Madonna* is a tenderer and more intimate scene that also breaks precedent. Nolde depicts the Madonna breastfeeding the Christ child. According to the traditional rules of the Archbishop of Milan, it is inappropriate to show Christ nursing because it disrespects the modesty of the Madonna (Amato 29). Nolde's *Madonna* succeeds precisely because it ignores this precedent. The loving gaze between the Madonna and the feeding Christ depicts the beauty of motherhood. The Madonna's head is uncovered, revealing a very modern haircut, and neither she nor Christ are adorned with halos. In fact, there is nothing except for the title that reveals that the woodcut is a Madonna and Child image rather than simply a mother and child image. The identity of the Madonna and Christ do not give the image its holiness. Rather, the bond between mother and child, a bond achievable by most ordinary women, gives the image its holiness.

Dorothea Lange's 1936 photograph *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* (Image 3) and Weegee's 1939 photograph *Mother and Child in Harlem* (Image 4) both re-appropriate the traditional Madonna posture with real women as subjects. Lange's photograph depicts a woman and her family suffering in the American Dust Bowl. Like a traditional Madonna, the mother is surrounded by her children and holds her infant child. There is no man present in the photograph. Unlike a traditional Madonna, she is depicted with three children rather than just the infant Christ – she is certainly not the Virgin Mother of early Christian art. She also lacks the serenity of a traditional Madonna. Pain is evident on her face and in the positioning of her children who cling to her but look away from the camera. The youth of her children suggests that she is a young mother, but she appears much older because of the wrinkles that stress has created on her forehead. She is an ordinary woman, working to support her children. Her determination to support her children despite being alone gives the image its qualities of holiness. Weegee's photograph uses a similar technique to Lange's but with more allusion to traditional Madonna imagery. In the image, a woman is shown holding her single infant child. Again, no man is present in the image. The mother's face seems serene like a traditional Madonna. Also, the lighting of the photograph creates a shadow above the mother and child that is suggestive of the halos that would adorn a traditional Madonna and Child. Suffering, however, is also present in this photograph. The glass of the door behind which the mother and child stand is broken, suggesting that the single mother raises her child in a rough neighborhood. As in Lange's photo, the motherly love and protective stance of the mother in Weegee's photo gives the woman her holiness. Both of these images depict real women, directly captured through photography, as modern-day Madonnas. They have real struggles and must suffer, like all women, but their love for their children makes both of them as holy as the traditional Madonna images after which they are posed.

One of the ways in which modernist artists transformed the meaning of the Madonna image from that projected by early Christian Art was by liberating the sexuality of their Madonna figures. As previously noted, the Catholic Church had very strict rules for how the Madonna could be portrayed in early Christian art. The Archbishop of Milan's early rules state: "It is not proper to depict [. . .] the breast and the neck of the Virgin uncovered. These parts may only be included if great care and modesty are used" (Amato 29). In most early Christian images, the Madonna looks away from the viewer as a sign of her modesty (Orsi 4). Many modern Madonnas do not follow these rules and precedents of modesty. The modernists' Madonnas are real women portrayed with an honest sexuality, not Divine Virgins.

One of the most spectacular Madonnas of the modern era is Edvard Munch's 1894 painting *Madonna* (Image 5), which depicts a sexualized Madonna. Munch's *Madonna* does not have the modesty of an early Christian Madonna figure. She is completely naked in the portion of her body that the painting depicts, and she looks directly at the viewer through half-closed eyes. Her hair is down and she seems to have the features of an ordinary woman rather than the classically proportioned face of many traditional Madonnas. She arches her back and her arms are thrown into the air as if in sexual ecstasy. Her arms blend into a swirling background that is made of her skin color and the darks used as shadow in the painting. The presence of the darks and the ghostlike wispiness in the background suggest a pain that also shows up on her face, which is expressionless and almost skull-like. These darks also work their way into her halo, suggesting that her very human pain is inseparable from her holiness. The divine cannot be present without the mortal. She is holy not because she is the Madonna but because she is a tortured soul enduring the deep pains of the human experience. Munch's portrayal of her is very empathetic. She seems to be a woman he intimately understood. He may have seen himself in her, or he may even have loved her. Regardless, the reason for her holiness is clear. She is a normal woman, but she is holy because she endures. She

is holy for the precise reason that the early Christian Madonnas are removed from their audiences: she is real, an ordinary person, not greater or more divine than any of the people who make up the audience to the painting.

Pablo Picasso's 1903 painting *La Vie* (Image 6) challenges the chastity ideal promoted by early Christian Madonna images by reversing the dichotomy of virtue through which early Christian art traditionally contrasted the Madonna and Eve. Picasso's painting represents a modernism in which the traditional understandings of chastity as a virtue and sexuality as a vice no longer apply. Cunneen writes that in contemporary feminist understandings of Christianity, the Madonna is no longer the chaste foil to Eve. Instead, the Madonna, the Mother of God, and Eve, the Mother of humankind, are viewed as sisters. There is a continuity between them (292-295). Picasso's painting does not establish a continuity between the Madonna and Eve. Instead, it works within the traditional dichotomy but contradicts expectations by displaying Eve as far more innocent and relatable than the Madonna, who the painting portrays as insensitive. The two figures on the left of the painting are symbolic of Adam and Eve, based on their nudity and the fact that they cling to each other. The two figures on the right are the mother and child, symbolic of the Madonna and Christ. The Madonna seems to be admonishing the Adam and Eve figures. She stands stiff, is puritanically covered from ankle to neck in contrast to the almost completely nude Adam and Eve, and has a scowl on her face. Picasso paints the Adam and Eve figures far more empathetically and relatably. They cling together, not in a reckless lust, but in a protective love with which they want to guard each other from the hostility directed towards them. The Eve figure has an incredibly sad expression on her face, seemingly a sadness of shame or humiliation. The Adam figure looks directly into the fierce eyes of the Madonna and holds his finger up to her in defense of his lover. There is a human warmth visible in the relationship between the Adam and Eve figures that is not present in the cold expression of the Madonna. The painting is monochromatically painted in blue, lending an

additional sadness to the depiction. The paintings in the background suggest that this painting is one based on the artist's life, occurring in his studio. This adds additional intimacy to the scene, as the audience relates not just to Adam, the archetype, but to Picasso the painter. Following the narrative of the painting, it is likely that the child in the Madonna's arms is the son of the Adam and Eve figures, it seems the Madonna points him out while admonishing them as an example of their irresponsibility. However, understanding the child as a Christ figure suggests that the child will redeem his parents and justify their love. Picasso's painting makes a complete break from the traditional understanding of the Madonna's virginity as virtuous. Instead, the sexuality of the Adam and Eve figures makes them virtuous, while the Madonna's chastity makes her appear to be cold and inhuman.

Along with sexuality, another way in which modernist Madonna representations reflected the lives of real women was through their honest depictions of suffering. There was a precedent in early Christian art of *matirium* scenes in which the Madonna is depicted suffering (Amato 27). One of the changes in modernist Madonna images was that the *matirium* images made up a much greater proportion of the major Madonnas than in early Christian art. The tranquil Madonna of early Christian art was much rarer in the work of the modernists. A reason for this is that tranquility is rare for real people in life's most intense moments, which the modernists captured in their work. Real women can connect more easily with a suffering Madonna than an unnaturally tranquil Madonna because all people suffer in their lives. It gives them a point of relation with the Madonna image. Cunneen notes that *matirium* images are particularly empowering for women enduring tragedies in their own lives (298-300). The empowering qualities of *matirium* images reflects a way in which the Madonna serves one of her traditional functions in the images created by modernist artists. The Madonna, as Mother of God, was traditionally viewed as the best intercessor between God and people (Katz 87). In the artwork of the modernists that depict her suffering, she serves the

same role. Women can relate to her, see that even the holiest of women suffer, and find comfort that they are not alone in their pains.

Kathe Kollwitz's mother and child works are some of the most heartbreaking imagery of the Modern Era and demonstrate the power of *matirium* images, even when the mother and child are secular. Kollwitz's mother and child images largely come from personal experience. Her son died in World War I, and many of her images reflect an attempt to come to terms with his death and the massive scale on which young men were murdered in the war (Gabler). The majority of her mother and child works do not directly employ Madonna imagery. Rather, they are very autobiographical and reflect the personal lives of her and her son. Kollwitz's 1923 engraving *The Sacrifice* (Image 7) is a particularly striking example. The engraving is more evocative of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac than of a Madonna image, but it employs the imagery of a mother and child. The mother holds the child up seemingly to the world as a whole. Knowing Kollwitz's biographical information helps to inform a viewing of the engraving. Just as the war, the evils of the world, took Kollwitz's son, it seems that the world at large will consume the child in the engraving. The mother clings to him desperately and both of their faces hold blank expressions, seemingly paralyzed by fear. However, the child moves away from the mother despite her efforts. He is lost, regardless of what his mother does to try to save him. Kollwitz's 1903 etching *Woman with Death Child* (Image 8) reflects her deep empathetic connection with the suffering of mothers who lost their children even before her own son died. The mother in the etching buries her face in the chest of her dead son. Her arms hold him tight to the body as if by pressing him against herself, she could take her own life and give it to him. The son tragically lies limp in her arms, his youthful head dropping down to her feet. Kollwitz did not only make use of secular mother and child images. She also employed traditional Madonna imagery in her 1928 woodcut *Maria und Elisabeth III* (Image 9). The woodcut alters the emotion of a traditional Visitation image, in which the Madonna's cousin Elizabeth joyously greets her and immediately

recognizes that the Madonna is pregnant with the Christ child (Katz 41-42). In Kollwitz's Visitation, the mood is painful. There is a sadness on the faces of both women. They do not embrace and rejoice upon seeing each other. They do not even look into each other's eyes. They communicate in a whisper. It is as if they are not celebrating the birth of God, but are fearful that the Madonna will bring a child into the world who inevitably must suffer and die. The fact that Kollwitz uses both secular mother and child imagery and traditional religious Madonna imagery to tell the story of her own life reflects the power and importance behind the Madonna image. Kollwitz was a woman who suffered deeply in her life and clung to the old forms of the Madonna and the mother and child as a way to express the intense pain in her life. It is impossible to know, without being her, whether her painting truly brought Kollwitz any comfort, but it is clear that she related her personal life and her suffering to the Madonna through her art.

The modernists used the Madonna not only to comfort suffering, but re-appropriated it as a feminist symbol to empower women and counter patriarchal oppression. Even the Madonna's virginity, the quality that early Christian patriarchal society used to shame women, is being reconsidered in new feminist understandings of the Madonna. Katz notes that women who pledged a life of chastity in imitation of the Madonna in the early Christian era were able to defy social customs, assert their will independently of a man or their parents, gain control over their own bodies, and choose not to marry and have children (91-92). While ordinary women have begun to find strength in the Madonna, the agency of the Madonna herself is also being rediscovered by feminists. Cunneen notes that the Madonna is no longer simply a "model of passive obedience and artificial goodness" (278). Now, she is seen as a woman who had the strength to accept a mysterious new life, to endure suffering and humiliation, and to stand up for her son, her God, and her personal beliefs when it was considered illegal to do so (Cunneen 278). Just as feminist theory is

reconstructing the way in which their audiences understand Madonna images, the modern artists used Madonna symbolism to promote feminist messages in their work.

The photography of Gertrude Kasebier is a wonderful modern example of Madonna imagery being re-appropriated to promote a feminist message. Kasebier's 1897 photograph *Adoration* (Image 10) transforms a traditional Madonna scene to focus on the woman at the center of the photograph. In a traditional Adoration image, shepherds, kings, and others gather at the birth of Christ to observe the child and give him praise (Katz 53). In Kasebier's photograph, only the mother and child are present. The kings and shepherds are unimportant in the adoration of the child. All that is important is the love of his mother. She holds him and looks lovingly into his face as he stands confidently. The emphasis here is again on the experience of the ordinary woman and on the important and powerful role that she plays in shaping the child's life. In Kasebier's 1904 photograph *The Heritage of Motherhood* (Image 11), the emphasis is on a single woman's suffering. The woman is intended to represent the Madonna after the Crucifixion as there are three crosses placed by hand into the background of the photograph. Her pain is evident in the photograph, but there is a nobility in her suffering. She stands in stark contrast to the desolate, almost surrealistic, background that surrounds her and even begins to envelop the bottom of her dress. Despite all the terror that makes up her world after the loss of her child, she is strong and she endures. She mourns as anyone would at the loss of a loved one, but she refuses to let the pain take over her. The most powerful of Kasebier's feminist Madonnas is her 1889 *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* (Image 12). The photograph is of a mother and daughter rather than a mother and son. In the photograph, a mother places her arm supportively on her young daughter's back. Her daughter stands tall and with pride. The bottom half of a Madonna image in back of the woman and girl frames the scene. The photograph captures strong women as Madonnas on three different levels of signification. In the background, there is the symbolic Madonna, and in the foreground are Madonna as a real woman

and a new Madonna for the next generation of womanhood. The mother's supportive arm and bent head, seemingly giving words of wisdom to her child, suggest that the empowerment of the Madonna is something that is passed down. The mother may have once been the young girl standing with pride and is now passing that strength on to her daughter. There is a unity of strength in the women that relates back to the Madonna. In all of her Madonna images, Kasebier portrays images of the strength within all women.

The modernists also used Madonna images to empower oppressed people throughout the world. Artists in the modern era on every continent of the world created Madonnas reflecting the lives of the people in their cultures. This was particularly important for populations that have been marginalized. Katz writes that in such populations the Madonna becomes a "defender of the vulnerable, refuge of the marginal, and champion of the lowly" (109). Artists recreated the Madonna in the image of their own populations. Populations that were historically silenced or taken advantage of by the West were able to transform the imagery of the dominant Western culture into a form of self-representation. This transformation was empowering as it forced the West to acknowledge that the works of artists and nations that it traditionally devalued are aesthetic achievements and incredibly meaningful.

The Vatican's Missionary-Ethnological Museum features wonderful examples of Madonnas created by international artists and reflecting the lives of people in their cultures. Den Fet-Ma's 1870 sculpture *Madonna and Child* (Image 13) is a Chinese Madonna. The Madonna in the sculpture represents the Chinese culture in her hairstyle and dress. Her hair is tied at the top of her head in a style representative of the culture, and her dress seems to represent the fashion worn in China at the time of the sculpture's creation. The Madonna also has facial features such as thick eyelids that help to identify her as East Asian. An anonymous 1978 *Madonna and Child* (Image 14) sculpture from Kenya in the Vatican museum is also very representative of the culture in which it was crafted. The

Madonna, like Fet-Ma's Madonna, wears clothing in the fashion of her culture. The facial features also identify the Madonna and child as East African because of their full lips and nose. One of the most spectacular international Madonnas in the Vatican collection is Guenu's late nineteenth to early twentieth century *Madonna and Child* (Image 15) sculpture. Rather than simply creating a Western-style Madonna with the human features and the fashions indigenous to his Solomon Islands, Guenu creates a work in the style indigenous to his native land. The Madonna's skirt and jewelry seem to reflect the fashions of the culture in the Solomon Islands at the time of the sculpture's creation, but the face is completely stylized. Rather than trying to apply Western aesthetic principles to his Madonna, Guenu creates a sculpture that presents the Western symbol of the Madonna through the aesthetic principles of the Solomon Islands. The nose of the figure is elongated and very prominent in the sculpture, the eyes and mouth are constructed from large oval shapes, and the ears of the figure are also very large and elongated. By representing their cultures through the traditional Western Madonna images, international artists force the Western world to recognize them and their contributions to art.

Artists in the modern era not only changed the ways in which the Madonna image symbolically represents women, they also changed the way in which the Madonna image is understood in the context of the history of art. The world could never be the same after a modern era in which traditional values and understandings of the world fragmented, an era that encompassed two world wars, the dropping of two atomic bombs, and history's worst economic depression. Similarly, the art world could never be the same after the incredible innovations made by the modernists. Even the Madonna, one of the most traditional images in the canon of Western Art, has to be looked at with an understanding of how the modernists transformed the image. The modernists did not simply utilize the canon of the hundreds of years of Madonna images that preceded them. Instead, they recreated the image of the Madonna and endowed the canon with their

own representations. These images have already become inspirations for the artists following them. Andy Warhol's 1984 painting *Madonna and Self-Portrait with Skeleton's Arm (after Munch)* (Image 16) recreates the image of Edvard Munch's 1895-1902 woodcut and lithograph *Madonna* (which is a later version in a new medium of the same image from his 1894 *Madonna* painting that was described previously in the paper). Just as the modernists developed their style by studying and recreating the works of the classical masters, late modernists like Warhol and contemporary artists are learning from the modernist masters and re-appropriating modernist works in their own work. The work of the modernists transformed the image of the Madonna into one that is representative of all women. It is an image in which women can see reflections of their own lives, in which they can find comfort when they struggle, and by which they can feel empowered and liberated. The Madonna is certainly not a dead image in art. It will be exciting to see how contemporary artists and the next generation of artists continue to use the image to reflect changes in the world and how they will transform the image even further.

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