

THE VIRGIN OF THE MILK/ VIRGIN AND CHILD

Theme: The Virgin of the Milk is a representation of the Virgin breastfeeding the baby Jesus.

Keywords: Virgin of the Milk, Virgin *Galactotrofusa*, *Virgo Lactans*, Virgin of Humility, Virgin and Child.

Summary: The Virgin of the Milk is a representation of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding the baby Jesus. The origin of this theme dates back to early Christianity, when the Fathers of the Church identified the maternity of the Virgin Mary with the Church. In addition, just like Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, the neophyte enters his or her new life through baptism by the hand of God, and Mary, as the mystical mother of the Church, becomes the mother of all Christians, that is she becomes *Ecclesia*. Then, as their mother she breastfeed them and take care of them just like she did with her own Son.¹ This idea is related to the early Christian custom of giving milk with honey to the neophyte as an allegory of their rebirth into the Christian church, a custom that became a symbol of the Eucharist.²

Attributes and types of representation: The Virgin, with a melancholic gesture, can either appear standing or seated on a footstool or throne while she presents her bosom to the Child to breastfeed him. The Mother and Child can appear in an interior or an exterior space, alone or accompanied by the celestial court in which some angels play musical instruments. Mary usually covers her head with a wimple or she wears a crown, while the Child appears either fully dressed or covered by a transparent piece of fabric. In the oldest representations, the Child holds the bosom of the Virgin Mary with his hand or she is the one offering it to him even though she is fully covered. Later on the virginal bosom is suggested through an opening in her dress, but in the representations of the 15th century, the Virgin explicitly shows her breast.

Primary Sources:

- Luke 11:27: *As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you."*
- *¡Blessed be the bosom of the maiden! ¡Blessed be you bosom, oh Virgin! You have feed the flower that nourishes all other aliments*, Liturgy of the Byzantine Holiday, 6th October and 26th December.
- *Ave Maria, gratia plena,/ Dominus tecum./ Benedicta tu en mulieribus/ et benedictus fructus Ventris tui:/ Jesus Christus/ Filius Dei vivi./ Et sint benedicta/ Ubera tua beata,/ lactaverunt quae regum regem/ Dominum et Deum nostrum*, greeting of the archangel Gabriel in the prayer of the *Ave Maria*.
- *Beata viscera Mariae Virginis, quae portaverunt aeterni Patris Filium: et beata ubera, quae lactaverunt Christum Dominum: Qui hodie pro salute mundi de Virgine nasci dignatus est*, Dominica Infra Octavam Nativitatis, lectio 6.
- *¡Oh mysterious prodigy! One is the Father of all things, one is the Verb of all things, the Holy Spirit is one, even though it is all around us, and one is the Mother-Virgin. I like to call her Ecclesia...She calls her children and gives them nourishment with the holy milk, with the Verb made Child*, Clement of Alexandria, 2nd and 3rd centuries.

¹ Muller, A., 1951, pp. 34-35.

² Trens, 1946, pp. 457-458.

- *The Holy Blood is like the milk drank from my Mother Virgin*, Revelations of Saint Mechthild Von Magdeburg, 13th century.

Other sources, non-written sources: From the shores of Mesopotamia to India, all cultures from Antiquity have a reference to a Lactating Mother Goddess. In the Mediterranean basin, not only in Egypt but also in Greece, this nourishing function was assigned to each one of the principal goddesses of their pantheon. In Egypt, Isis breastfeed Horus, and in Greek mythology it is Hera who breastfeed Heracles and from whose milk the Milky Way was formed. Alongside these images that were later on assimilated by Christianity, in the flight into Egypt there is a story surrounding the Holy Family, told by pilgrims, in which the Virgin seated on the floor feeds her Child. This story was the origin for the iconography of the Virgin of Humility.³

Geographical and chronological framework: The first representation of the Virgin of the Milk appeared in the cubicle of the *Velatio* of the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome, 2nd century. In this representation the Virgin appears seated and pulls closer to her bosom the baby Jesus. In this same catacomb, there is another representation of the Virgin and Child with a prophet in a similar composition. In Coptic Egypt, where the patriarch Cyril of Alexandria defended the divinity of Mary, this iconography was widely represented due to its connection with Isis breastfeeding Horus. This iconography illustrated the mystery of the Incarnation and it showed the carnal relationship of the Son of God.⁴ It also appeared in mural paintings of the convents of Bawit and Saqqara, in manuscript illumination and panel painting⁵.

The iconography of the Virgin of the Milk (*Panagia Galaktotrofusa*) was spread all around the Byzantine Empire from the Palestinian monastery of Saint Sabas to the monastery of Mount Athos by the 7th century.⁶ In the 12th century, this iconography was known all around the Balkans and Europe, where it achieved a great development coinciding with the Humanist movement of the time period. In 1392 the Russian Virgin of Barlovsk (also known as the Virgin of the Blessed Bosom) was created. This Russian variant rejects the naturalism that this iconography was having in Western Europe, regaining its sacred meaning. In addition, the iconography was interpreted as an icon in which the God-Child communicated with Humanity through the mediation of his mother's bosom⁷. In the multiple representations of the Gothic period, in different media and techniques, Mary is represented on the floor or seated on a cushion, following the iconographical model of the Virgin of Humility. She can also be represented in a throne surrounded by saints and angels, standing up, or even kneeling while she feeds her Son. The image can be accompanied by the donor kneeling at the feet of the Virgin, such as in the Virgin of Tobed painted by Jaume Serra (Coll. Román Vicente, Zaragoza), where Henry II of Trastámara was represented.

During the 13th and 14th century, this iconography was widely used in Italian art, where the typology of the Virgin Mary becomes closer to the Byzantine icons: she wears a red tunic and a blue mantle that usually covers her head. The Child takes the mother's bosom with disinterest while looking at the spectator, an image conceived more in a theological than a physical way. Again, Mary can appear seated either on the floor or on a throne, in a composition formed by the Divine Mother and Child surrounded by saints

³ Trens, 1946, pp. 446-448.

⁴ *L'art copte en Égypte, 2000 ans de christianisme*, 2000, p. 73.

⁵ Zibawi, 2003, pp. 89, 90, 146.

⁶ Tradigo, 2004, p. 183.

⁷ Tradigo, 2004, p. 183.

and angels either venerating the image of the Mother and Child or playing music.⁸ The Italian iconographical model had a great influence over the European model of the Virgin and Child. In Medieval Spain, the iconography of the Virgin of the Milk was very famous in the different Hispanic Kingdoms in the 14th and 15th centuries⁹ - especially in the territories of the Crown of Aragon-, although already in the 13th century it is possible to find examples of this iconography in the illumination of the foundation charter of the Brotherhood of the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic in Tárrega (Lérida), dated to 1269 (Archive of the Crown of Aragon) and the altar frontal of Betesa (Museo Nacional de Arte de Cataluña).

Among the Northern Renaissance painters this iconography was also very popular. These artists created a variant where the Virgin, with her uncovered bosom and the Child seated on her lap, faces the spectator or gives soup to the baby Jesus. An example of this can be seen in a painting created by Gerard David (Royal Museum of Fine Art, Brussels).

During the Counter-Reformation the iconography of the Virgin of the Milk was deemed inappropriate for Church decoration even though it had been very popular during the 15th and 16th centuries.

Artistic media and techniques: The Virgin of the Milk is usually represented in sculpture (stone and wood), manuscript illumination, mural painting, and panel painting.

Precedents, transformations, and projection: The origin of this iconography is the representation of Isis feeding Horus-Hapocrates. Isis, the female divinity of vegetation and protector of men against the strength of the gods, was venerated with the name of “mother of god” (*Mout Netjer*) from the 2nd millennium B.C. After the 7th century B.C., Isis was represented as *Isis Lactans*, with Horus -the savior of his father Osiris- on her lap. Her cult spread throughout the Mediterranean basin from the 4th century B.C. because she embodied the idea of salvation. Her cult came to an end in 537 A.D. when Justinian closed her last temple in Philae. Nevertheless, during the first centuries of the Christian era, coinciding with the expansion of Christianity, her cult was in full bloom which allowed for the transfer of the iconography of *Isis Lactans* to *Maria Lactans*, and from Egypt this iconography was later transmitted to the Byzantine world and later on to the rest of Western Christendom.¹⁰ The pilgrimages to the Holy Land helped the diffusion of this iconography, especially in the sanctuaries where the flight into Egypt was recalled, an iconography that later on gave birth to the Virgin of Humility.¹¹ Taking into consideration that the iconography of the Virgin of the Milk was widely spread through the Byzantine model, the Virgin kept her hair covered throughout a long period due to its iconic nature. Nevertheless, as time passed by the veil became smaller and more transparent until it disappeared and only a circlet or a crown was left and that identified her as the queen of Heaven. Furthermore, in the West, her iconography can be related to that of the Woman of the Apocalypse when she is standing over a crescent moon.¹²

⁸ The images that correspond to these iconographic models can be found here: <http://digilander.libero.it/madonneallattanti/sec2.htm> (last access 31/03/2010)

⁹ See images in <http://www.aguainfant.com/arte/htm/virgen-nino/priscila1.htm> (last access 31/03/2010)

¹⁰ Cannuyer, 2000, p. 42.

¹¹ Trens, 1946, pp. 447-448.

¹² Trens, 1946, p. 470.

Typology and related themes: It has already been mentioned the affinity between the Virgin of the Milk and the Virgin of Humility as iconographical variants of the same theme. In addition, it has also been mentioned that the representations where the Child touches his Mother's bosom implicitly symbolize her Divine maternity.¹³ Directly related to mystical vision, the iconography of the Virgin Mary giving her comforting milk to the saints that were devoted to her was created. This is a late development in the iconography of the Virgin Mary, which usually appears next to Saint Bernard and other saints such as Saint Agustin, Saint Dominic or Saint Cajetan.¹⁴

The virginal nourishment is also spill over the devotees in images where popular devotion is also represented, a tradition established in the Late Middle Ages that emphasized the symbolic maternal mercy towards her sons, who instead of waiting for the divine nectar to fall eagerly move towards the Virgin.¹⁵ This is the case on the painting created by Pedro Machuca (Prado Museum), where the souls in purgatory instead of opening their mouths and wait for the holy milk to spill over them, carry their own bowls to gather it. This iconography can also be seen in the central panel of the altarpiece of the Virgin of the Milk created by Antoni Peris (Museo de Bellas Artes, Valencia).

Images:

- *Virgin and Child*, ca. 255, fresco, Catacomb of Priscilla, cubicle of the *Velatio*, Rome (Italy).
- *Virgin of the Milk between two angels*, 892-893, parchment, 38 x 25,5 cm., originally from the Hamouli (Fayoum), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York (USA), ms. 612, f. 1, v.
- *Virgin of the Milk*, 1269, parchment, Foundation charter of the Brotherhood of the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic from the church of Tárrega (Lérida), Archive of the Crown of Aragon, Barcelona (Spain).
- *Frontal of the altar of Betesa*, 2nd half of the 13th century, stucco and tempera on panel, Museo Nacional de Arte de Cataluña, Barcelona (Spain).
- *Virgin of Miravalles*, 13th century, sculpture on the round, polychrome stone, 80 cm. Hermitage of Miravalles, Soto de Aller, Asturias (Spain).
- Bartolomeo da Camogli, *Virgin of Humility*, 1339-1346, tempera on wood, Regional Museum of Sicily, Palermo (Italy).
- Ghissi Francescuccio, *Virgin of Humility*, 2nd half of the 14th century, tempera on wood, 36,7x21,7 cm. Vatican Museum, Rome (Italy).
- Gregorio di Cecco, *Virgen of the Milk*, 1st quarter of the 15th century, tempera on wood, Museum of the Opera del Duomo, Siena (Italy).
- Antoni Peris, Altarpiece of the Virgin of the Milk, 1st quarter of the 15th century, primer ¼ siglo XV, tempera on wood, 386x277 cm., Museo de Bellas Artes, Valencia (Spain)

¹³ Trens, 1946, pp. 607-608.

¹⁴ Some *Gozos* from Benito de Monfort from 1774 to the image of Our Lady of the Milk from the cloister of the convent of the Preachers of Valencia state: “Franqueaste liberal,/ a Domingo, y a Agustino,/ y a Bernardo, el néctar fino/ de tu pecho virginal”. In Trens, 1946, p. 460.

¹⁵ “Cualquiera de los mortales/ que en vuestro amor se alborozan,/ como otro Bernardo goza/ de vuestro pecho raudales:/ son las gotas virginales/ de tan sagrada bebida...”, *Gozos de la Virgen de la Leche*, in Trens, 1946, p. 476.

- Robert Campin (Master of Flemalle), *Virgin and Child*, 1st half of the 15th century, oil painting, 40x30 cm. National Gallery, London (UK).
- Bartolomé Bermejo, *Virgen de la leche*, last quarter 15th century, oil on canvas, 52,8x43,3 cm. Museo de Bellas Artes, Valencia (Spain).
- Jean Fouquet, *Melun Dyptich (Virgin with Child and angels)*, ca. 1452-1455, oil painting, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Ambers (Holland).
- Pedro Berruguete, *Virgin and Child*, 1450-1500, oil painting, Private collection.
- Nicolás Falc6, *Tryptich of the Virgin of the Milk*, ca. 1500, oil painting, 140x103 cm. Museo de Bellas Artes, Valencia (Spain).
- Adriaen Isenbrant, *Enthroned Virgin of the Milk*, early 16th century, oil painting, 28x21 cm, Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid (Spain).
- Master of Astorga, *Virgin of the Milk*, 1st third of the 16th century, oil painting, Museo Nacional de Arte de Cataluña, Barcelona (Spain).

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