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Art for Domestic Interiors:

Models, Cautionary Tales, and Delights

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number of paintings in the exhibition *Method and Metaphor: Selected Works from the Seena and Arnold Davis Old Master Collection* offer viewers an enticing glimpse into attitudes toward women in Renaissance and Baroque Europe, c. 1400 until c. 1700, particularly as viewed in small-scale works intended originally for domestic interiors. Both idealized and reviled by writers, women were honored for their roles as mothers and wives, while at the same time viewed as dangerous seducers. We see this duality reflected in art, as painters fulfilled commissions for countless images of the Virgin Mary – an idealized model for real women – at the same time they produced images of classicizing nudes to provide erotic titillation for private male audiences. In an era of widespread illiteracy, visual imagery could function successfully as a universal language. It still required “learning,” for paintings’ conventional meanings only made sense to the initiated, that is, to those viewers experienced at looking at imagery and interpreting its subjects and signs. But since most Europeans grew up with these standardized images and types in their churches, public buildings, and homes, their meanings must have been relatively clear. The smaller domestic images examined here were practical and served a variety of functions: they provided models for human behavior, offered cautionary tales highlighting vices to avoid, presented visual delights, and even provided mnemonic visual clues reminding viewers of narratives and events.

The Annunciation remained one of the most popular religious images. Showing the moment when the Archangel Gabriel came before the Virgin Mary announcing, “Hail Mary, full of grace; God is with you,” it confirmed a central tenet of Christian doctrine: Christ, the son of God, is the Word Incarnate. At this moment God’s Word is given flesh, as Mary conceives within her. Countless examples show Gabriel rushing in with the Dove of the Holy Spirit from the picture’s more sacred side (to our left), while Mary receives the divine visitors with humility and submission. We see this in Lambert Lombard’s sixteenth-century *Annunciation* (fig. 7), as well as Francesco Maffei’s century-later example (plate 8). In both, the Virgin kneels and bows her head as rays of light emanate from the Dove above. In Lombard’s painting, God the Father himself rises above the Dove, atop the descending hierarchical axis of the Trinity: from Father, to Holy Spirit, to fully fleshed Son, Christ, present now in Mary’s womb. According to tradition, the angelic visitor arrived at the very moment Mary was reading Isaiah 7.14, “And behold, a virgin shall conceive”: hence, a book lies open before Mary in both paintings. Though it may seem a bit indecorous that a bed appears directly behind Mary in Lombard’s version, that bed, particularly popular in Flemish art beginning about 1440, marks the domestic space as the holy bridal chamber, where the Virgin

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Bride who perpetually remains a virgin meets her Bridegroom, the Lord. Maffei's painting more emphatically reminds the viewer of Mary's perpetual virginity through traditional symbols: a fence in the landscape behind Mary's chamber cordons off her space from the earthly realm, indicating that her womb remains inaccessible, and the white lilies affirm her purity. Red and white roses remind us of her Sorrows to come, as well as her Joys, including this moment of Christ's conception.

While this scene of a divinely enacted pregnancy with the Bride simultaneously virginal and impregnated may seem distant from real women's experiences, such images played active roles in the lives of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century brides. For example, it was believed that some *Annunciations* could assist women in becoming pregnant. While shrines throughout Europe boasted of miracle-working relics related to Mary and the conception and birth of Christ, we must remember that paintings were also “sites” associated with power and miracles. For example, a fourteenth-century image of the *Annunciation* at the church of Santissima Annunziata in Florence was traditionally visited by new brides on their wedding days, due to its efficacy at promoting fertility. For those who could not make a pilgrimage to the church itself, “copies” – which could range from close replicas to freer interpretations – were painted and sold, making available the power of the original all over Europe: large scale replicas for public worship, and smaller replicas for private domestic settings. Thus one possible outcome of viewing such small-sized paintings of Mary's miraculous conception, such as Lombard's and Maffei's, was divine assistance in safely conceiving a child. Viewers were also encouraged to interact with images in more ways than just the visual; for example, some images encouraged recitation of specific texts, which the image was believed actually to “hear.” Probably this explains the inclusion on Lombard's frame of the Latin text spoken by Gabriel when approaching Mary: AVE MARIA/ GRATIA/ PLENA DOMI/NUS TLCVM (“Hail Mary, full of grace, God is with you”). Prayer to Mary while meditating on such images assisted men's and women's invocation of divine intervention: with Mary's intercession on their behalf, women believed they would have a better chance at pregnancy. Countless small, devotional images of the Annunciation like these were used in domestic settings to help promote fertility, among other functions.

Many smaller images of Mary with the Christ Child similarly served as domestic devotional pieces, meant to inspire prayer and meditation. They were also specifically understood to be efficacious with regard to women's most important function: the successful bearing of children. The Davis Collection includes a number of excellent examples of image types found throughout northern and southern Europe in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. The panel attributed to Joos van Cleve (fig. 8) exemplifies a late Renaissance elaboration of what had become a standardized scene of Mary and Christ within a domestic realm. Here the architectural setting appears not at all human and domestic, but monumental in scale and conception, its style a fantastical mélange. The foreground is largely filled with classicizing Renaissance motifs

such as pilasters, putti (in the horizontal relief above Christ), and the ram's skull affixed to a partially fluted column, but the series of Renaissance Italianate portals to the left opens onto a more distant space consisting of an elaborate Gothic portal. There, below the putti and tympanum with the Old Testament story of Cain's Murder of Abel in the middle ground, appears a second image of Mary and Christ, this time as statuary. Typical of Gothic sculpture, Mary there is dressed in traditional nondescript robes, quite different from the costume of the foreground Mary, whose red dress and cape appear to be contemporary Renaissance fashion. Angels move through the Gothic façade, while two women, also in sixteenth-century garb, converse before it. They are youthful, so perhaps they are the two midwives who attended Mary at the birth, but whose talents were unnecessary as Mary delivered miraculously and without pain. Viewers who meditate on this image are richly rewarded, as they move back and forward through time, from the first murder and shedding of blood to the birth of Christ, the shedding of whose blood will redeem his followers from eternal death, and from Mary and Christ as statues to be gazed upon on Church portals, to the living Mary and Christ before them, here and now, in the sixteenth century. And viewers are struck by Mary's melancholy gaze, as she foresees her son's fate. The seven dark columbines in her vase similarly allude to her future Seven Sorrows, while her red dress foretells the sacrifice of Christ's blood. All of these meanings exist simultaneously within this image, for its function is to elicit a rich panoply of appropriate religious meditations.

Marcellus Cofferman's c.1570 bust-length *Madonna and Child* (fig. 6) – a variant of Flemish artist Gerard David's earlier *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, with its well-known depiction of Mary about to nurse Christ, confirms the popularity of this type of domestic devotional image. In fact, David and his shop mass-produced a series of variously sized paintings of Mary about to nourish her child, sometimes set within a landscape, other times within a simple interior. The very fact of replication suggests that Mary's nurturing posture was a type viewed as particularly efficacious – efficacious certainly for meditation, and more generally for salvation. Mary here offers her breast to Christ, and by extension, to the

Figure 8.
Joos van Cleve (Flemish, 1485 – 1540)
*Madonna and Child in
an Architectural Setting*
oil on panel
29 1/2" x 22 1/2"



Images of Mary nursing Christ may also relate to women's real experiences with, and desires for, successful child raising.

viewer, a gesture which already by the fifteenth century established Mary in what was perhaps her most popular role: as Intercessor on behalf of humans. Earlier versions sometimes showed double intercessions, with the adult Christ revealing his side wound to his Father above, and his Mother simultaneously baring her breast to her Son on behalf of all humankind. Cofferman may allude to a popular narrative variant that depicts a statue of Mary with the Christ Child miraculously coming to life and squirting milk from her breast into the mouth of the praying St. Bernard, assuring him of salvation. No doubt viewers of this painting were to hope for a similar occurrence. Mary's milk, like Christ's wound spouting blood and water at the Cross, thus functioned as a symbol of grace and salvation. It is therefore not surprising that reliquaries with drops of Mary's milk were found in cities across Europe, perhaps the most famous at Ste.-Chapelle in Paris, but another at the prestigious church of St. Denis near Paris, and also another in Gerard David's hometown of Bruges, where possibly Cofferman, too, was familiar with it.

Images of Mary nursing Christ may also relate to women's real experiences with, and desires for, successful child raising. Renaissance women were offered conflicting advice with regard to breastfeeding. On the one hand, social custom and Church prohibitions inadvertently promoted wetnursing. Couples were told they could not engage in intercourse while a woman breastfed – it contaminated the milk and so was dangerous for the child – and given the desire for progeny via serial pregnancies and the practice of nursing children for one to two years, it was customary for couples to use wetnurses; by the later fifteenth century, middle- and upper-class families routinely hired wetnurses. These women would be carefully selected from among the lower classes; they needed to be healthy, refrain from marital relations while nursing, and preferably would have just borne a son. But because it was believed that breast milk transmitted the qualities of the nurse to the child, many writers on the family encouraged women to nurse their own children. Similarly, throughout the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, some Churchmen advised against wetnursing, as San Bernardino in fifteenth-century Florence and Erasmus in sixteenth-century Rotterdam made clear. Protestants similarly saw maternal nursing as aiding a child's spiritual development, and wetnursing to be avoided. Thus the proliferation of images of Mary nursing her own child in the fifteenth and subsequent centuries may evidence Catholic and Protestant propaganda in favor of maternal nursing. Further, for a woman to meditate and pray before such an image might have been seen as propitious for the flow of her own good milk.

We see a very different view of female nudity and womankind in the sixteenth-century School of Fontainebleau's *Danaë and the Shower of Gold* (fig. 9). Here, in a non-religious context, the revealing of female breasts was associated with eroticism. This painting, based on Titian's 1546 *Danaë*, made originally for the Cardinal Farnese's private chambers in Rome, relates the classical story of Jupiter's amorous adventures, found, for example, in Ovid and Horace and retold by Boccaccio in the mid-fourteenth century. Danaë's father, in order to protect his beautiful daughter, locked her in a tower, but Jupiter plotted with Venus to overcome that simple obstacle, and came to Danaë in the

guise of a shower of gold. An impish Cupid, having accomplished his task of promoting love, looks up at the descending cloud of divinity as it scatters coins onto Danaë's receptive body. Like Cofferman's devotional panel of Mary baring her breast, this image was replicated numerous times by Titian, his shop, and later artists, often with only slight variations. But of course the audiences for these two images – one certainly never meant to be erotic, the other absolutely so intended – are completely different. An archbishop who described the *Danaë* to the Cardinal before the latter's receipt of his new commission predicted the erotic appeal of the painting, saying that the nude would "make the devil come upon Cardinal San Silvestro" and that this *Danaë* would make another of Titian's famous nudes, the *Venus of Urbino*, look like "a Theatine nun next to this one" (Goffen, 215). Erotic imagery was seen to be dangerous for the masses and appropriate only for the educated male elite; on the other hand, an image of Mary and Child was appropriate to family audiences in domestic settings. So for educated humanists, including the highest ranking members of the Church's hierarchy, these titillating scenes of lovers proliferated, whether of Jupiter and Io, Cupid and Psyche, or Venus and Mars, as in Joseph Heinz's example from around 1600 (plate 8). The Davis Collection *Danaë* is much reduced in size, compared to Titian's almost life-sized original, suggesting that like the religious works we have been examining, it was intended for a domestic interior, one not as grand as the Cardinal's in Rome.



Figure 9.
Fontainebleau School/Pietro
Liberi/Libertino,
[Italian, 1605 – 1687]
Danaë and the Shower of Gold
oil on canvas
13" x 17"

The role of nudity in Renaissance and Baroque art is complicated. It could mean different things and be deemed appropriate or inappropriate in different contexts. Perhaps it is surprising to see full frontal nudity in devotional images of Christ made for



Figure 10.
Giacomo Francia, [Italian, 1486 – 1557]
Madonna and Child with Saint
tempera on panel, 22" x 18 1/2"

middleclass viewers, as for example, in Giacomo Francia's *Madonna and Child with Saint* (fig. 10). This image may seem shocking initially, as Christ stands nude, his body overtly displayed to the viewer, even while his mother soberly looks downward. Francia tries to express visually Christ's absolutely vulnerable humanity, and we recognize that his future bodily sacrifice on the Cross is already completely evident to his sorrowing Mother. The presence here of a Franciscan saint – probably St. Anthony with his crucifix, since there is no *stigmatum* visible on his hand to identify the saint as Francis himself – along with the Franciscan Order's intense devotion to Christ's Passion and specifically to the Holy Cross, confirms Christ's nudity as sign of his

truly human nature and reference to his future suffering. Like Anthony, the domestic viewer is invited to gaze meditatively upon Mary and her Child, imagining the Passion to come.

On the other hand, in Barbara Longhi's *Holy Family* (fig. 11), Christ's fully exposed nudity may provide the viewer access to divine power in a different way. While meditations before this image upon Christ's future sacrifice are still appropriate, the presence of Christ's earthly father, Joseph, encourages viewers to think in terms of family and progeny. Thus such images of Mary and Joseph with child may function as models for human behavior, representing good family values within early modern society. Here we see a simple and humble Mary, with no halo or overt marking of divinity, looking down at her active and lively son; Joseph is similarly attentive, guarding his young family within the dark forest setting. Their representations, combined with Christ's full and complete nudity, signal a special role for this painting, for young wives were encouraged to look upon such perfect images of infants while trying to conceive and especially while actually pregnant. It was believed that whatever pregnant women viewed influenced the growth of the fetus – thus they must avoid looking at monstrous forms, including rabbits, believed to be the source for harelips! Daily gazing upon a beautifully and fully formed, perfect male infant was the best way to produce a healthy son.

Figure 11.
Barbara Longhi
[Italian, 1552 – 1638]
Holy Family
oil on canvas
15" x 13"



The role of Joseph also changed dramatically, as his cult's popularity increased during the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries and artists introduced new scenes involving Christ's stepfather. For example, in the early fifteenth century, the anonymous German

artist called the Master of the Carnations painted his *Joseph's Doubt* (fig. 12), a scene based on Matthew 1.18-21, but only rarely portrayed in Christian art. In it, the elderly Joseph is troubled, having just realized his young betrothed is already pregnant, and so he determines to leave her quietly. In this *Doubt*, the artist uses a specifically German tradition for indicating Mary's pregnant condition: he depicts her with distaff and spindle. As the Virgin's hands spin the thread, it crosses over her fertile womb, thus representing the "thread of life." European goldfinches on the floor near Mary, one of them most unusually eating a large insect, commonly refer to the Passion of Christ – note the red spot on the head of the male – but also to the Resurrection. Even as the angel reassures Joseph that he should not doubt his miraculously pregnant bride-to-be but rather take and provide for her, the viewer is reminded of the eventual outcome of this most fundamental Christian story.

Another rarely depicted scene, appropriate for a family interior is Jan van Scorel's early sixteenth-century painting of the *Holy Family at Work* (cover), where Joseph carries out his occupation

of carpenter, while his young son tries to help and Mary sits reading. Such down-to-earth domestic narratives are totally absent from the biblical Gospels, yet were clearly meaningful to Renaissance Christians. Women were increasingly literate, particularly within the urban population centers of northern Europe, and so could relate to Mary's act of reading a book, while men could identify with the hard-working father. In fact, it is within the context of mercantile Europe and the concomitant rise of the middle class that the meaning of "work" shifted from being a punishment inflicted by an angry God upon the disobedient Adam and Eve, to being a way to salvation, an attitude that would become especially important during the Reformation. Joseph and Mary thus serve as models for truly human behavior, reassuring the viewer that even lowly workers can find salvation.

Mary Magdalene's cult was similarly reassuring to viewers, although she held particular interest for a specific female group within urban Europe: prostitutes. While biblical accounts in no way clarify that the Mary Magdalene who mourned at the base of the cross was a prostitute, medieval Christian tradition had long established her identity as such. We see hints of this belief in the Davis Collection's later fifteenth-century *Crucifixion* (plate 4), an image based on types popularized by Rogier van der Weyden in mid-century. Kneeling while clutching the cross is the woman who so loved Christ that she was called by some the "thirteenth Apostle." But therein lay the enormous popularity of the Magdalene's cult: although a former prostitute, vain and apparently lacking the values associated with Christian poverty and humility, even she could see the light and be forgiven. While the Virgin's perfection was beyond possible attainment, all Christians could on some level hope to identify with the Magdalene as penitential model: a sinner who repented and was saved. Reformed prostitutes in particular could identify with the Magdalene, and those who did joined the Order of St. Mary Magdalene, religious houses established especially for these rehabilitated women. Prostitution was a complicated business in early modern Europe, at first tolerated but regulated and taxed by civic authorities all over the continent; then actively attacked in the sixteenth century, especially with the onset of the Reformation. Prostitutes generally lacked rights, such as the ability to inherit property, and many cities limited which parts of the city were open to them; some required special dress or other identifying signs, such as a handkerchief on the shoulder. Mary Magdalene as depicted in art typically retains reminders of her murky past. In this *Crucifixion*, we see her extravagant dress and jewelry, quite unlike the Virgin's humble garb. Yet she has covered her long blonde hair with a veil and humiliated herself at the base of the Cross. She will be rewarded by being the first to see the risen Christ (John 20).



Figure 12.
Master of the Carnations
[German, 1st half of 15th century]
Joseph's Doubt
tempera on panel
24" x 19"



Figure 13.
Hieronymus Francken I
[Flemish, 1540 – 1610]
Witches' Sabbath
oil on panel
19 1/2" x 25 3/4"

But women also offer dangers, as confirmed by Hieronymus Francken's *Witches' Sabbath* (fig. 13), from the early seventeenth century. Here the scene itself is set within a domestic interior, inhabited entirely by women, but one that has been diabolically transformed into the site for a Black Mass: the large cooking pot contains an unholy potion from which escape monstrous forms that fly out over the unsuspecting populace; the central table holds human bones and hearts (witches were said to be cannibals) as well as books with magical diagrams related to black magic; and the family hearth has become an escape route for the witches who, rubbing themselves with magical powders, gain the ability to fly. The entire interior is cluttered with monsters, bones, witches' familiars (such as the cats to the left of the table and in the right foreground), and – most disturbingly – seemingly ordinary middleclass women who undress in order to participate in this witches' sabbath. This image reflects especially northern Europe's condemnation of and fascination with witchcraft, intensified by the 1486 publication of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*. Written by two Dominicans in Strasbourg who were committed to identifying and wiping out witchcraft, ideas from this text spread across the Atlantic to seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts. Thousands of women and much smaller numbers of men were condemned for witchcraft by the Church or by civil authorities, tortured, and executed, both in Europe and the American colonies. But while Francken's image certainly could

be read as a warning against the dangerous powers of women and their ability to overcome males by nefarious means, it is difficult to take it seriously. Whether this type of painting, a sort of compendium of witches' paraphernalia, could have played a serious role in the condemnation of witchcraft is unclear.

As we can see from these and other paintings on exhibition from the Davis Collection, images played significant roles within European culture. Many of these small-scale works were intended for private domestic interiors, where they could help ordinary women to conceive and carry healthy babies to term and then breastfeed them; might offer models promoting good parental behavior; could provide visual pleasure to male elite collectors; and functioned to warn men against the evils of seductive women. In all these ways, art functioned to maintain social stability. We can only thank Arnold and Seena Davis for depriving their own domestic interior of such richness, and allowing all of us the pleasure of viewing these wonderful paintings.

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