Maria Lactans—Mary Nursing
By Steve Koob

Maria Lactans—Mary Nursing—was an image that inspired artists, artisans and viewers with thoughts of beauty, pleasure, comfort and nourishment for the first 14 Centuries of Christianity. Maria Lactans paintings were especially profuse in the 12th through the 14th Centuries, becoming increasingly realistic and anatomically correct. This development was due to three factors: 1) the medical community’s hunger for more accurate renderings of human anatomy, 2) the invention of the printing press, and 3) a turn toward realism in artistic expression.

These factors also fostered irreverence for the female breast and all depictions of genitalia, prompting the Council of Trent to discourage religious art that did not properly cover certain body parts. The female breast continues as the point of entry image to pornography and obscenity, with the internet overtaking the printing press as pornography’s most prolific distributor.

Exposure of the female breast (except for nipple and areola) is now common fashion, not only for performers and starlets of all genres, but for post-pubescent females throughout our modern culture. Such exposure is so common that many men have been desensitized to the breast’s erotic appeal.

This over-exposure of the breast mocks the virtues of modesty, chastity, and purity, and creates an unhealthy disrespect for the human body—arguably God’s premier creation, and the object of Blessed John Paul II’s “theology of the body”. Several questions come to mind.

Is it possible that a renewed interest in, and development of, Maria Lactans art can renew reverence for the female breast? Is it possible that the religious symbolism, once accorded Mary breastfeeding the baby Jesus, can be reincarnated in the 21st Century? Dare we ask Mary to take on yet another role in the quest for human salvation—the role of restoring appreciation for the female breast as a religious symbol (with human qualities), and a real source of awe, beauty, comfort, delight and nutrition?

Breast as Religious Symbol

“In 1350, the breast was a religious symbol; by 1750, the breast was eroticized and medicalized, no longer usable, or used, as a religious symbol.”

The virgin mother’s bare breast symbolized the nourishment, beauty and loving care that were God’s constant provision—the fruit of His creation.

Breast as Human Reality

Today, as throughout human history, the breast is the first source of nourishment...
for the newborn babe. That was true for Cain and Abel, Jesus, and most newborn infants all over the world. For most mothers, breastfeeding is a common bond and a source of solidarity.

Breastfeeding can also be a source of contention as nursing moms have sometimes had to fight for the “right” to nurse their children in a public location. Discretion (amount of exposed breast) is often the issue, which seems a dichotomy given the common public over-exposure of the non-nursing breast. The superior health benefits of breastfeeding for both child and mother are now well documented and accepted in our society, though the prevalence and length of breastfeeding are still below desired levels.

**NURSING MADONNA PROJECT GOALS**

The first and most important goal is to honor Mary as the nursing mother of Jesus. The second goal is to have Mary be recognized and honored as the primary nurturer of the Church. These may be seen as related to the First Great Commandment—to love God. Two additional goals relate closely to the Second Great Commandment—to love one’s neighbor: 1) to encourage mothers to breastfeed their children in the image of Mary and Jesus, and 2) to encourage a cultural view of the female breast as a source of nourishment, nurturing, comfort, beauty, and joy, rather than as an erotic and lust inducing image.

The hypothesis being tested by this Nursing Madonna Project is that widespread interest in the art of Maria Lactans—Mary Nursing—will accomplish the goals just stated and thereby renew the religious symbology of Mary breastfeeding Jesus—Maria Lactans.

In L’Osservatore Romano, two noted Italian art critics have called for the “artistic and spiritual rehabilitation” of Mary breastfeeding Jesus. Publication in the Vatican’s official newspaper suggests Papal endorsement of this idea.  

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