

1998

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Recommended Citation

Morris, Michael (1998) "Some Protestant and Catholic Images of Mary in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Art," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 49, Article 7.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol49/iss1/7

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SOME PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC IMAGES OF MARY IN NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART

*Michael Morris, O.P.**

In 1810, a group of young painters in Vienna, who had found their art training at the Academy there meaningless, traveled to Rome with the intention of renewing religious art on their own. Occupying an abandoned monastery, they deliberately chose to imitate the works of Dürer, Perugino, and the young Raphael. Fra Angelico, the painter monk, was also one of their artistic heroes, and their own "monkish" lifestyle within the walls of the abandoned monastery, along with their peculiar appearance, caused them to be mockingly nicknamed "The Nazarenes" by the Romans. The name stuck, and an artistic movement was born. Several of the artists converted to Catholicism, and one of the founders of the movement, Johann Friedrich Overbeck, spent nearly a decade working on a canvas that came to be emblematic of their attitude toward art and religion. The painting, *The Triumph of Religion in the Arts* (Fig. 1), was perhaps inspired by a poem composed by Wilhelm Schlegel.¹

In the upper register, it reveals an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, herself a symbol of the Church, holding the infant Jesus on her lap while surrounded by figures of the Old and New Testaments. In the lower register, Overbeck painted an assembly of artists and leaders from both the religious and secular worlds, drawn from various periods of history, who utilized

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¹This is the opinion of Keith Andrews in his *The Nazarenes: A Brotherhood of German Painters in Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964). See page 126, note 67b.

their talents for the glory of God. Van Eyck, Mantegna, Memling, Gozzoli, Dante, Charlemagne, and Pope Gregory the Great are among the many figures depicted standing around a fountain, symbolic of baptism and the wellspring of everlasting life. The work, which was completed in 1840, carries with it a not-so-subtle condemnation of classical antiquity and Protestantism, while expounding the glories of Catholicism in the history of Christian art. While the Nazarenes were highly controversial in their day, they nevertheless exercised an enormous influence on other artists, both Catholic and Protestant, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While art historians do not readily look to Protestantism and its historical iconoclasm as being the seedbed for Christian iconographic depictions of Mary, there are a significant number of works by Protestant artists which contribute to the artistic understanding of how Christ's mother has been conceptualized in the modern era. This has been particularly true in England and in America.

The English artists most certainly affected by the Nazarenes were a group of mainly Protestant painters who came to be known as the Pre-Raphaelites. Like the Nazarenes before them, they flirted with a quasi-monastic lifestyle² and sought to revive painting by paying careful attention to nature while imitating the spiritual qualities found in art prior to Raphael. The poet and painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. John Ruskin, the art theorist, came to be their champion. Ruskin came from an evangelical background and Rossetti's family, while originally from Italy, embraced Protestantism in various degrees. The women in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's family were devout Anglicans. The men were not. Nevertheless, he found in scripture and religious themes the most perfect kind of poetry imaginable, and he contributed to the fostering of such art in many of his own canvases.

²A copy of their *horarium* and their division of labor can be found in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. See *Plan for a Proposed Monastery* (John E. Millais, October 3, 1850), contained in a scrapbook bought at the Combe sale of 1894 (lot 201), and arranged and bound in 1941: MSS. no. 145, 4M (Prints and Drawings Department, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (Fig. 2) was the first work to be exhibited as a Pre-Raphaelite painting. Shown at the Free Exhibition in London in 1849, it bore the mysterious letters "PRB" and was accompanied by two explanatory sonnets. It shows the Virgin Mary in the interior of her family's home, busy embroidering under the exemplary guidance of her mother, Saint Anne. Mary alone seems to be aware of the presence of an angel in the middle of the room. Otherwise, the scene is one of ordinary domesticity, suggesting the humble origins of Mary's family. As in Medieval and early Renaissance art, the painting is filled with detailed symbolism. The angel stands guard over a pile of books representing the virtues, while up above the dove represents the Holy Spirit. The red robe and the cruciform trellis are symbols of her son's passion and death. The grape arbor is a symbol of the Eucharist. And the white lily is emblematic of Mary's purity. The painting shows Mary's family at work, and yet the Virgin's gaze seems fixed on a vision of her life's destiny. Rossetti incorporated his own family as models for his figures. Here, his mother posed for the head of St. Anne, while his sister, the poet Christina Rossetti, was one of the models used for the image of the Virgin.

In another painting exhibited the following year, Rossetti returned to a Marian theme. *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (Fig. 3) represents the Annunciation of the Virgin. Again, Christina Rossetti posed for Mary, while a brother, William, modeled for the head of the archangel Gabriel. The painting was planned as an exercise in the color white, the symbol of purity. It is long and narrow because Rossetti had planned to make it part of a diptych, with its companion piece (never realized) representing the death of the Virgin. The title of this work is taken from the Latin translation of Mary's response to the archangel's announcement that she would be the mother of Christ. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" is a phrase of humble resignation touched by contemplative wonder. Both qualities are seen in Rossetti's careful rendering of Mary's face. The stillness of that face contrasts with the wispy energy of Mary's hair which dances in the imagined wind stirred up by the entrance of the Holy Spirit flying through the open window. Traditional symbolism again appears in this canvas. The haloes, the dove, and

the lily are common to Christian art. Less common is the representation of a wingless archangel. And the red stole which Mary had been embroidering in Rossetti's previous picture is now complete; the color signifies the Passion of Christ while the liturgical form signifies his priesthood.

In time, Rossetti told a friend what the mysterious letters "PRB" meant. That friend told others and it was eventually revealed in the newspapers. Critics immediately thought that the Brotherhood was some kind of Roman Catholic cabal, dedicated to the subversion of English art by its revival of medieval symbolism and devotional themes. The full force of critical fury then fell upon the work of another PRB member, John Everett Millais, when his *Christ in the Carpenter's Shop* (Fig. 4) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1850. The painting shows the interior of Joseph's carpenter shop. Christ has accidentally injured his hand. Mary consoles him while John the Baptist brings a bowl of water to cleanse the wound. As expected, the PRB attention to symbolism abounds. The wood and the nails found in the workshop prefigure Christ's death on the cross. The wound in the palm of his hand drips blood onto his foot and these are prefigurements of the stigmata. The water bowl carried by his cousin John signifies the lad wearing an animal skin loin cloth as the Baptizer who would pour water over Christ's head in the Jordan river. The dove, perched over the head of Jesus, imitates the position of the Holy Spirit's presence in the scriptural rendition of Christ's baptism,³ while the sheep in the background represent the Christian flock. Millais, who was much attracted to the sermons and tracts of the Oxford Movement, based this painting on a homily that had much impressed him. But one critic who was not impressed with Millais' painting was Charles Dickens, who used a popular journal⁴ to attack the artist's depiction of Christ as "a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-haired boy in a night gown" and the figure of Mary "so horrible in her ugliness that she would stand out from the rest of the company as a monster in the vilest cabaret in France or in the lowest gin-shop in England."

³Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-33.

⁴*Household Words* for June 15, 1850.

Treating the Holy Family in such a detailed, realistic, and almost documentary way was seen as blasphemous by Dickens and other critics. The painting became so controversial that it was removed from The Royal Academy exhibition and brought to Queen Victoria for a private viewing.

William Holman Hunt, who wrote the history of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood⁵ and was in his own estimation its intellectual leader, recorded the controversy of the group's religious works as one fueled as much by religious prejudice as it was by matters of aesthetics. Hunt had high church and low church friends, but felt most comfortable among the Evangelicals. He devised his own elaborate system of painterly symbolism based on scriptural typology.⁶ In order to better understand biblical culture, Hunt made several trips to the Holy Land. This resulted in a number of canvases with themes centered on Christ in scripture and in which the Virgin Mary appears as an important supporting player. *The Shadow of Death* (Fig. 5), painted in Jerusalem and finished in 1873, was actually begun in a carpenter's shop in Bethlehem with the artist paying close attention to every detail in an attempt to capture some cultural—if not historical—veracity. For proper lighting effects, he studied the sky from a rooftop in nearby Jerusalem and continued to work on the painting there. He published a long pamphlet explaining the unusual subject matter of this work in which Christ pauses to stretch after toiling in the carpenter shop. His mother, Mary, has been examining the gifts brought to them by the Magi, when suddenly she looks up to see the shadow of her crucified son casting itself on the workshop wall. The crossboard, nails, pincers, and hammers are all symbolic of his passion and death, as are his nakedness and the red headband resting at his feet. The very depiction of Christ working at a job was a revolutionary concept in nineteenth-century art, one that was much appreciated

⁵William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan, 1905).

⁶For a study of Hunt's religious attitudes and theory of artistic symbolism, see George P. Landow's *William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism*, published for the Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press in 1979.

by working-class admirers of Hunt's painting, both in England and in Jerusalem. The figure of Mary, however, recoiling in shock at what she sees, would seem to imply some element of foreknowledge of her son's tragic death. This issue is only apparent in Hunt's painting and we have no record of the artist's intention behind the pose.⁷ But the history of art is not lacking in works which reveal the Virgin Mother's foreknowledge of her son's grim fate. In the eastern tradition of the Virgin *Hodeghetria*, Mary not only knows what is to happen to her infant son, but she offers him up to that fate in obedience to the Father and for the salvation of mankind.⁸

The Triumph of the Innocents (Fig. 6) is the most surrealistic of Hunt's middle eastern biblical paintings, for it fuses in a curious way the real with the allegorical. Here the Holy Family flees at night into Egypt in order to escape King Herod's savage wrath. Upon hearing from the Magi that a great king had been born in Bethlehem, the jealous Herod ordered all male children two-years-old and younger to be killed. The resulting Slaughter of the Innocents is referred to in Hunt's canvas by the representation of a group of infant spirits accompanying the Holy Family. Some of them are just awakening to the spirit realm. They are festooned with flowers and wear auras of light about their heads. The Christ child alone seems to see them and be in communion with them. He offers them some shafts of wheat—a Eucharistic symbol—which resemble martyrs' palms. Indeed, the Innocents prefigure all Christian martyrs, and their reward is the martyr's reward of eternal life. Mary and Joseph do not share in the mystical vision. Joseph's face is hidden, but Mary's eyes connect to those of the viewer. They are the eyes of a Jewish woman (Hunt's model was a Jewess) and she is pleasantly engaged in a very mundane activity common

⁷The idea of Mary having a foreknowledge of her son's sacrificial fate would be debated a century later concerning the film *King of Kings* (1961). In that film, Mary (played by actress Siobhan McKenna) appears to know everything about her son's future. This caused scholars and filmmakers, at a 1998 session of the Jesus Conference called "Jesus on Film," to roundly ridicule the film as not only bad art but bad theology.

⁸For a study of the Virgin *Hodeghetria*, see *The Meaning of Icons* by Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky (Boston: Boston Book and Art Shop, 1952), 81–87.

to all mother's of young children: she is changing her child's clothing. Curiously, Ruskin thought this work was the greatest religious painting of his day, but fellow Pre-Raphaelite George Stephens felt the artist had gone too far, straying from nature and lapsing into supernatural fantasy.⁹

A more orthodox example of Protestant art is perhaps found in Rossetti's unfinished watercolor titled *The Passover of the Holy Family: Gathering the Bitter Herbs* (Fig. 7). Here the Holy Family fulfills all paradigms of the Protestant work ethic, as each member engages in some pre-Passover activity. Jesus holds a bowl of blood from which Zacharias sprinkles the post and lintel. John the Baptist fastens Christ's sandal, while Mary gathers the herbs for the ritual. And Joseph (sketched but not yet painted) brings home the lamb of sacrifice. By showing the Holy Family busily preparing for the Passover, the artist is using the Jewish ritual as a prefiguration of Christ's own salvific sacrifice on the cross. In grounding his representation of Christ and his relatives at work in an historical ritual, Rossetti conformed his art to the aesthetics of John Ruskin, who felt that most of the religious art of Christianity had been dishonest and had been rightly condemned by Calvin, Knox, and Luther.¹⁰

The quest for historicity is most fully realized in Hunt's *The Finding of the Savior in the Temple* (Fig. 8). Here the artist engaged in an enormous amount of preparatory research. He made a study of Jewish temple ritual and attended a Passover service to determine what Jewish ceremonies were still in force. He learned the Talmud, studied Islamic architecture, and read accounts of the architecture of Herod's Temple. Hunt desired to use only authentic semitic models and he had difficulty

⁹Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), 104.

¹⁰In Alicia Craig Faxon's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), the author points out (on p. 126) that an appreciation for the symbolic, gained by Rossetti's high church Anglican background, may have been lost on Ruskin who came from an Evangelical, nonsacramental background. And the Tate Gallery's exhibition catalogue, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London, Penguin Books, 1984), further states that Ruskin, in the third volume of his *Modern Painters* found most Christian art dishonest in its historicity (p. 275).

persuading rabbis to permit Jews to sit for him. Mrs. Frederic Mocatta posed as Mary (her face is seen also in *The Triumph of the Innocents*), but no Jewish male would sit for the figure of Jesus. Hunt had to finish the canvas in London with a Christian boy posing as the young Savior.¹¹ As in his other depictions of Mary, the Blessed Virgin is portrayed as a loving and protective mother, as defined and typified by the cultural images of Palestine which Hunt believed were as true for the nineteenth century as they had been for the first.

Pre-Raphaelitism had prided itself for combining naturalistic detail, historical accuracy, and sublime symbolism in a single embrace. In time, however, it disintegrated as a movement, as less-skilled followers concerned themselves more with saccharine themes of high emotionalism and little symbolic value. But as revitalizers of religious art, the Pre-Raphaelites had created a body of work which cast both Christ and his mother in seemingly accurate historical settings and made them actively engage in "doing" rather than merely "being," as was the case in more traditional Catholic art. This Protestant contribution to the history of modern Marian art was further developed in the United States of America, where the Pre-Raphaelite preference for biblical subject matter, depicted in a realistic way, was readily accepted by American artists.

Henry Ossawa Tanner was a major figure in the history of nineteenth-century American religious art and one of the nation's greatest Black painters. The son of an African Methodist Episcopal bishop who wrote a history of the A.M.E. church, Tanner's religious upbringing flowed directly into the subject matter of his art. *The Annunciation* of 1898 (Fig. 9) was compared by contemporary critics to Rossetti's own version of the same theme, and yet the American's interpretation has none of the traditional symbols which Rossetti habitually employed. Gone are the haloes, the lilies, the ritualistic stole, the dove of the Holy Spirit, and the accent on the color white. Instead, Tanner has cast his vision of the Virgin of the Annuncia-

¹¹For a fuller discussion of Hunt's problems with the Jews of Palestine and his quest for historicity and archaeological exactitude in this painting, see the Tate Gallery's *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 158-160.

tion in the warm earthen tones of middle eastern textiles, stone floors, and clay pottery. Like William Holman Hunt, Tanner traveled to the Middle East and took notes on the visual culture of Palestine, the mannerisms of the people and their habits of living. But unlike any of the Pre-Raphaelites, Tanner's work is more painterly and tactile, lacking the crystalline finish of the Pre-Raphaelite School. Here, Mary has been awakened in her humble cell by an angel who visits her, not in human form but in the form of a pillar of flame. Tanner's American's fundamentalist background may have caused him to picture the angel in this innovative way,¹² but it could also be true that the image possesses a parallel reference to the pillar of fire found in the Book of Exodus, which led the people of Israel out of Egypt toward the Promised Land.¹³ The figure of Mary sitting up in bed with her hands clasped, looks both jubilant and fearful. She is a fragile figure, called from the rumpled disarray of sleep to face a miracle of divine intervention that would render her the title, "The Mother of God."

Again and again, Tanner returned to Marian themes in his paintings, often using his wife, Jessie Olssen, as his model. Once, he was able to find a Yemenite Jewish boy to pose for the child Jesus, but more often he relied on his son to fill that role. Tanner's *Christ Learning to Read* (Fig. 10) is an example where both wife and son posed for the images of Mary and Jesus, caught in the corner of a room reading the scriptures together. It is a lovingly rendered domestic scene, devoid of all hagiographical embellishments. Exaggerated color and spirited brush strokes provide the painting with impressionistic energy, but this Madonna and Child have themselves firmly planted on the earth. They are not exalted by the artist as figures of spiritual devotion. They are merely enjoyed for the hearty realism of a scene depicting the loving bond between a mother and her son.

¹²This is suggested by Dewey F. Mosby and Darrel Sewell in *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, an exhibition catalogue of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 162.

¹³Exodus 13:21-22.

One of the most important nineteenth-century figures to attract Protestant attention to the image of the Virgin Mary in art was Mrs. Anna Brownell Jameson. This former governess to the household of the Marquis of Winchester sought relief from an unsuccessful marriage in a life of travel and exploration, as she studied Christian art, its symbolism and legends. She published a series of books that included *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848), *Legends of the Monastic Orders* (1850), and *Legends of the Madonna* (1852). Her writings helped dispel the longstanding Protestant suspicion of Catholic art, and even prompted Protestant artists to pursue what had heretofore been seen as Catholic subject matter. One artist who was greatly influenced by Jameson's writings was Julia Margaret Cameron, who attempted to bring religious themes to the recently invented art of photography. Cameron's *Study—Madonna and Child* (Fig. 11) is a perfect photographic interpretation of what Mrs. Jameson called the "Mater Amabilis."¹⁴ Here the Virgin is neither exalted nor enthroned. She is not a refuge for sinners or a dispenser of mercy. She is simply the Mother of the Redeemer and totally occupied by her infant son, upon whom she gazes as she tenderly embraces him. The contemplation of the Virgin Mother on the destiny of her divine son is the subject of another one of Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs, *The Shadow of the Cross—August 1865* (Fig. 12). Here the sleeping Christ child dreams of his passion as he clutches a tiny cross in his hand. It was noted by Mrs. Jameson that the pathetic contrast of the divine youth's innocence with his predestined fate was a religious idea stretching back into the Renaissance and found in the work of Guido Reni and Franceschini.¹⁵ Julia Cameron's effort to appropriate the theme for the modern medium of photography did not gain universal acceptance.

¹⁴See "The Mater Amabilis," in *The Legends of the Madonna*, in *The Writings of Anna Jameson* (5 vols., Boston and NY: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1895), 4:166-88. This popular edition of Mrs. Jameson's earlier work introduced her to a new generation of readers. Unfortunately, none of her works remains in print today.

¹⁵Anna Brownell Jameson, *The History of Our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art* (2 vols.; London: Longmans and Green, and Co., 1892), 2:378-81. As Mrs. Jameson

Writer and critic, Coventry Patmore, who converted to Catholicism in 1864, complained that Cameron's photographs were too real, despite her efforts to idealize them through poses reminiscent of the master painters.¹⁶ The question of whether religious art must necessarily be idealized and not presented as either too realistic or too abstract is a perennial problem concerning which even the papacy has expressed concern.¹⁷ But as the twentieth century draws to a close, photography—unlike painting, mosaic, and sculpture—has not become a common medium for the decoration of churches.

Across the Atlantic in the United States, another female photographer, this time with a Methodist background, pursued religious themes but with a more universal scope. Gertrude Käsebier only alluded to classical Christian iconography in presenting mother and child imagery, but she did not strive for the specificity of poses seen in the work of Julia Cameron. She did not look to master paintings for inspiration, nor did she use Mrs. Jameson as a guide. As a consequence of not trying to mimic great art, Käsebier's photography, while secular, looks religious, while Cameron's attempt to create overtly religious photography appears to fall short of its goal and seems inescapably secular. Käsebier's *Manger* (Fig. 13) is a haunting image of idealized motherhood and one of her most admired works of art. The soft focus, the reflection of light on the virginal white dress, the delicacy of the model's pose—all these elements give a spiritual aura to the stable scene and conceal the fact that there was no babe in those swaddling clothes, only bunched-up material. The willingness of the viewer to believe in the veracity of the photographic medium enabled Käsebier to use artifice to achieve a desired effect. In *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* (Fig. 14), Käsebier's most famous

died in 1860, her good friend, Lady Eastlake, continued and completed her work on this study of Christ in art. It was first published in 1864.

¹⁶Patmore's criticism of Cameron and the religious tenor of mid-century England is discussed in Mike Weaver's *Julia Margaret Cameron 1815-1879* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), 14-39.

¹⁷Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* (encyclical of Nov. 20, 1947), no. 195.

photograph, a picture of the Annunciation hangs on a wall behind the mother and daughter standing in the doorway. The title, drawn from scripture¹⁸ and repeated in the prayers of the rosary, quotes the Angel Gabriel's address to the Virgin Mary and elevates the domestic scene of the photograph to a new level of religiosity. The fact that the girl who modeled for the picture died shortly after the photograph was taken lends a poignancy to the scene and underscores the fragility of life and the sorrows of motherhood. The tragedy of that event led Käsebier five years later, in 1904, to again photograph the mother, Agnes Rand Lee, alone on a barren landscape in a picture titled *The Heritage of Motherhood* (Fig. 15), a work that recalls Mary's title as "Mater Dolorosa," the grieving figure of the Lamentation.¹⁹

Clearly, in the Marian art produced by Protestant artists, realism in depicting the mother of Christ was foremost. In contrast, Catholic artists were less concerned with scriptural or historical veracity and more with idealism and symbolism. In France, Joséphin Péladan, a self-styled mystic and flamboyant art theorist, founded the "Salons de la Rose + Croix catholique" in 1891. Combining occultism and Catholicism with art, the purpose of this movement was to turn dilettante artists into warriors of the Spirit by promulgating a cult of the Ideal based on Beauty and Tradition.²⁰ The artists participating in the salon exhibitions chose to abandon realism for sublime, mysterious, and ideal images based on myth or Roman Catholic religious beliefs. In this salon, the Symbolist Movement, in which art intersected with the mysterious and the supernat-

¹⁸Luke 1:28.

¹⁹The photographer went so far as to draw three crosses in the background of the picture. See Barbara L. Michaels, *Gertrude Käsebier: The Photographer and Her Photographs* (New York: Abrams, 1992), 51, 52.

²⁰A growing body of literature has developed with its focus on the Catholic aesthetics of the *fin-de-siècle*. Most notable are the following: Jean Pierrot, *the Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France, 1870-1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1986); Michael Marlais, *Conservative Echoes in Fin-de-Siècle Parisian Art Criticism* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); and Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

ural, took a flagrantly Catholic twist. Carlos Schwabe's *The Virgin of the Lilies* (Fig. 16) is a case in point in which the picture is partially an illuminated holy card and partially an exercise in uninhibited fantasy that prefigures Disney. Here, the Virgin holding the child Jesus floats on clouds high above the earth, beautiful lilies lining her celestial path. The lily had long been a symbol of purity in Christian iconography, but in the Symbolist movement it became the scepter of an aesthetic ideal with mystical and even syncretist allusions. Gustave Moreau's *Fleur Mystique* (Fig. 17) pictures the Virgin Mary, with Byzantine-style embellishment, enthroned on a gigantic lily that is vitalized by the blood of saints and martyrs. In this work, the most famous of the French Symbolists has taken an ambiguous and rather pagan approach to an idea central to Catholic imagery.²¹

The use of the imagination, of dreams, and an overlay of pictorial novelty on basic Catholic beliefs characterizes much of the French symbolist contribution to Marian imagery at the end of the nineteenth century. Odilon Redon's *Virgin with Corona* (Fig. 18) is an example of that "little door opening on mystery,"²² that the symbolists loved to portray in order to induce the viewer to probe more deeply into the images they transformed from the weightiness of historical convention.

Abstraction proved to be one of the means of artistic renewal and transformation, and Maurice Denis was one of its greatest proponents in France. He declared that a picture is essentially a two-dimensional plane covered with colors assembled in a certain order. Influenced by Gauguin earlier in his career, Denis was a co-founder and principal theorist of the Nabis (the Hebrew word for Prophet), an association of post-impressionist artists (which included Bonnard, Vuillard, Sérusier, and Maillol) who applied abstract patterns to their subject matter, a significant amount of which was religious. In

²¹Pierre-Louis Mathieu remains the foremost authority on Gustave Moreau and his work and has published *Gustave Moreau* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976) and *Le Musée Gustave Moreau* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1986).

²²See Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *The Symbolist Generation, 1870-1910* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 50.

1903, Denis and Sérusier made a trip to Beuron Abbey where the German monk and artist, Desiderius Lenz, had created a school of art based on an aesthetic geometry observed in ancient Egyptian art. Inspired to create his own school of religious art, Denis established in 1914 the *Ateliers d'art sacré* in Paris. A devout person, Denis believed that good Catholic art cannot be achieved unless the artist is a good Catholic. Whether his own art can be viewed as paradigmatic is an open question, but it certainly delved into the sublime mysteries of Catholic dogma. *Mystère catholique* (Fig. 19) is a theme Denis continually repeated. Here, the Virgin Mary, a symbol of the Church, is seated as acolytes approach with lit tapers. They are followed by a priest with an open book of the Gospels, the means by which the Good News is proclaimed. In this variation on the theme of the Annunciation, Denis has interposed Catholic ritual and ecclesiology. The belief of the Church is reflected in its liturgy, and the liturgy, in turn, is steeped in acts of worship which represent and make present sacred mysteries.

One student of the *Ateliers d'art sacré* who dared to disagree with Denis over the issue of whether Catholic art ought to be made by Catholics was the Dominican priest-artist, Alain-Marie Couturier. An advocate of bringing non-Catholic and lapsed-Catholic artists into the service of the post-World War II Church, Père Couturier believed that the Spirit blows where it wills, and he trusted genius over religious affinities. It was he who persuaded Rouault, Lipchitz, Lurçat, Léger, and Matisse to accept commissions from the Church. The result was that each contributed a new Marian image to the body of modern religious art.

The church of Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce in the Alpine village of Assy became the laboratory in which a new cooperation between the Church and modern artists was forged. Père Couturier had befriended Fernand Léger during their wartime exile in America. Their friendship was such that Léger's anti-clericalism and communist convictions were muted to the degree that he could set aside his animosity toward the Church, even recalling his mother's saintly care for him during his Catholic boyhood. Couturier had admired Léger's understand-

ing of the architectural needs of church decoration and gave him the Litany of Loretto as the subject for the artist's proposed mosaic mural of the church's western facade. The resulting polygonal design (*Fig. 20*) in pure bright colors incorporated symbolic emblems of the Virgin's titles around a massive medallion in which was contained a strongly architectonic image of Mary's face. Conservative critics condemned the work as childish, but the local congregation, especially the shepherds, found the work entirely satisfying.²³

For the inside of the church, Père Couturier invited the artist Jacques Lipchitz to construct a large-scale image of the Madonna. When the artist asked the priest, "Do you know that I am a Jew?" Couturier responded, "If it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother us."²⁴ The result of this commission was a massive bronze called *Notre-Dame-de-Liesse* (*Fig. 21*). In it the dove of the Holy Spirit flies down toward earth and intercepts a heavenly canopy in which the virgin stands with arms invitingly outstretched. Angels uphold the canopy at the base where a sacrificial lamb lies prone with its head looking up to the Virgin. In order to assert his own identity as a devout Jew, Lipchitz had inscribed on the back of the canopy the following words: "Jacob Lipchitz, Jew, faithful to the religion of his ancestors, has made this Virgin to foster understanding between men on earth that the life of the spirit may prevail."²⁵

By inviting another Jewish artist, Marc Chagall, to design the baptistery in the church of Assy, Père Couturier was quickly turning Catholic art into something catholic. But even those artists baptized into the Roman Catholic Church who worked at Assy seemed to have less than orthodox credentials. Two of them, Georges Rouault and Henri Matisse, had spent time training in the atelier of Gustave Moreau. Even though he was a sincere and devout Catholic, Rouault's art was criticized for being too melancholic, too solitary, too devoid of that communal paschal joy that was supposed to be reflected in modern

²³Williams S. Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 125.

²⁴Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art*, 126.

²⁵Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art*, 126-27.

Catholic art and liturgy.²⁶ Matisse, on the other hand, represented too much joy, the sensual and carnal joy of the Fauves.

Although long-estranged from the Church of his youth, Matisse did find that his last great commission, the decoration of the chapel for the Dominican sisters at Vence, was the culminating masterpiece of his career. Some Catholic apologists have interpreted Matisse's sentiments toward the chapel as evidence of the artist's reconversion, but that may be just wishful thinking.²⁷ What is evident in that commission is the artist's unfettered relish of pure line on white walls. His line drawing of *St. Dominic*, for which Père Couturier posed, and his *Madonna and Child* (Fig. 22) are masterpieces of minimalism, with the faces of the figures nothing more than ovals, emptied of all features. In reducing the figures of Mary and Jesus to timeless forms, Matisse won a philosophical battle with the Dominicans who suggested that he display them in modern dress. That, countered Matisse, would reduce the Virgin to nothing more than a "fashion plate," something for which he faulted many of the Renaissance madonnas.²⁸

While the French Dominicans courted the avant-garde for their church programs, in Spain Salvador Dalí broke with his agnostic and atheistic comrades in the Surrealist movement to indulge in a number of painterly mysticisms that revealed him to be unabashedly and proudly Catholic. "Nothing more subversive can happen to an ex-Surrealist in 1951," said Dalí, "than, firstly, to become mystical, and secondly, to be able to draw."²⁹ Dalí further saw his new interest in religious subject matter as part of an artistic return to things spiritual, some-

²⁶Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art*, 96-99.

²⁷Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in his book, *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1951), claims that Matisse's interest in the chapel was "artistic and not religious in any orthodox sense" (p. 281). Yet, he does admit that Matisse never had any intention of allying himself with the Communists as Léger had done. In visiting the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence today, one is liable to see proudly displayed there a copy of the artist's baptismal certificate.

²⁸Pierre Schneider, *Matisse* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 688.

²⁹Part of Dalí's *Manifeste mystique* of 1951, quoted in Robert Descharnes and Gillis Néret, *Salvador Dalí* (Cologne: Taschen, 1993), 157.

thing that characterized both the Nazarenes and Pre-Raphaelites before him: "... the decadence of modern painting was a consequence of skepticism and lack of faith, the result of mechanistic materialism. By reviving Spanish mysticism, I, Dali, shall use my work to demonstrate the unity of the universe, by showing the spirituality of all substance."³⁰ Part clown and part visionary, Dali reveled in the cult of his own personality. Yet his religious paintings often reveal an avid interest in the conjunction of mysticism and science. In his *Lapis-lazuli Corpuscular Assumption of 1952* (Fig. 23), Dali conceives protons and neutrons as angelic elements, and transports his Madonna through space by disassembling her body into a whirlwind of nuclear parts. At the center of the canvas is a reproduction of his *Christ of St. John of the Cross*, based on his sainted hero's own sketch of a mystical encounter with the crucified Christ. And for the face of Mary, Dali chose that of Gala, his wife and his muse.

If Dali represents a Surrealist's inclination toward things religious, then Max Ernst had represented the movement's disdain. Ernst's *The Virgin Spanking the Infant Jesus before Three Witnesses* (Fig. 24) was an irreverent artistic manifesto made in 1928 in protest to the wave of celebrity conversions in France, most notably those of Jean Cocteau and Jacques Maritain.

If the power of religious conversion were to be measured by the change found in the subject matter of artist's work, then the Frenchman James Tissot would be a most notable example of spiritual transformation. Born in France in 1836, he settled in England after the Franco-Prussian War. Having abandoned religion, he took a mistress and made a lucrative career in London as a society portraitist and a charming illustrator of Victorian life. But when his mistress died of consumption, Tissot left England in anguish and took up residence in Paris. One day, in 1885, he visited the Church of St. Sulpice with the intention of studying a painting inside; while there, he claimed to have experienced a vision of Christ which changed his life. That same year he decided to produce an illustrated version of the Bible.

³⁰From the artist's 1973 work, *Comment on devient Dali*, quoted in Descharnes and Néret, *Dali*, 158.

Like Hunt, Tissot travelled to the Holy Land to see exact historical locations and to absorb ethnic and period detail. In all, he made three trips to Palestine between 1885 and 1896. He worked on the New Testament first, laboring for eight years and creating 365 illustrations. Tissot's Bible became the greatest success of his career. Like Hunt, Tissot strained to be historically accurate in his illustrations, but unlike Hunt's work, Tissot's illustrations do not negate the element of supernatural fancy. At the crucifixion, prophets from the Old Testament appear in the sky above the cross holding scrolls over their heads as a sign that at this moment scripture has been fulfilled. In one innovative scene, Tissot designed a picture he titled *What Our Savior Saw from the Cross* (Fig. 25). Composed from the perspective of Christ's position high up on the cross looking down at the crowd beneath him, the work has an extraordinary ability to connect the viewer to Christ's Passion in a very empathetic way. In it, the Blessed Virgin is the central figure in the crowd. She looks up at her suffering son and clutches her aching breast as if she too were sharing in his passion. The Dominican philosopher, Father Antoine Sertillanges, praised Tissot as a theologian working in paint, and composed a spiritual treatise around this work, which, the friar claimed, seemed to skillfully connect the viewer to the sublime events that occurred on Golgotha nineteen centuries ago. The connection, by Tissot's own admission, was mystical. But it was not his own vision that inspired the art of his New Testament illustrations, it was an account of Christ's life, passion and death as experienced telepathically by a stigmatist nun, the Venerable Anna Katherine Emmerick, and recorded by the Romantic poet Clemens Brentano. The resulting *La Douleureuse Passion de Notre-Seigneur Jésus Christ* first appeared in print in 1835, and had an enormous popularity throughout the nineteenth century. Tissot used Emmerick's revelations as a guide to designing his Bible illustrations, which, in turn, had an influence upon the new medium of cinema. In 1906, Alice Guy Blaché directed the first important film about Christ in France, called *La Vie de Jésus Christ*, and credited Tissot for her stage design. So, too, did the American film epic *From the Manger to the Cross*, produced by Kalem in 1913, look to Tissot for visual in-

spiration. In that film, the actress Gene Gautier played the Virgin Mary and wrote the movie's scenario. It was the first American film to be made on location, traveling to sites in Egypt and the Holy Land. Gautier's *Dolorous Madonna* (Fig. 26) in that movie looks identical to the Virgin at the foot of the cross in Tissot's Bible illustration. Tissot was the artistic link between an early nineteenth-century mystic's account of the passion of Christ and its filmic revelation nearly a century later.

Art and mysticism have been easy companions in Catholic aesthetics and less so in the art of Protestant religious painters. Yet Protestant painters have brought to Christian iconography a renewed reverence for historical accuracy and realism that has, in turn, had a major impact on Catholic artists, whether illustrators, like James Tissot, or filmmakers, like Martin Scorsese (whose tattooed Mary, played by Verna Bloom in the 1988 production of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, took the notion of cultural realism to new heights). When the Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini cast his aged mother, Susanna, in the role of Mary in his *Gospel According to Saint Matthew* in 1964, he was praised by critics for his gutsy realism. Yet how many of those same critics were aware of the fact that, more than a century earlier, the Swedish inventor of art photography, O. G. Rejlander, had chosen an elderly woman as a model for Mary and photographed her in a work called *At the Cross* (Fig. 27). While Catholic and Protestant notions about art begin to blur by the end of the twentieth century, the question remains whether one can be true to nature and history and at the same time find a place in art for a higher symbolism. By looking at mystics like Anna Katherine Emmerick, it is possible to suspect that a graphic realism is not incompatible with mystical symbolism. This union is, perhaps, best realized in the art of film and it is in that medium that one might begin to look for the development of an ecumenical aesthetic.



Fig. 1. Friedrich Overbeck, *Triumph of Religion in the Arts*, 1840. Städelschen Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.



Fig. 2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti., *the Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1849. Tate Gallery, London.



Fig. 3. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* 1850. Tate Gallery, London.



Fig. 4. John Everett Millais, *Christ in the Carpenter Shop*, 1850. Tate Gallery, London.



Fig. 5. William Holman Hunt, *The Shadow of Death*, 1873. City of Manchester Art Galleries.



Fig. 6. William Holman Hunt, *The Triumph of the Innocents*, 1887. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.



Fig. 7. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Passover of the Holy Family: Gathering the Bitter Herbs*, 1856. Tate Gallery, London.



Fig. 8. William Holman Hunt, *The Finding of the Savior in the Temple*, 1854-60. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.



Fig. 9. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation*, 1898. Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Fig. 10. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Christ Learning to Read*, 1914. Des Moines Art Center.



Fig. 11. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Study—Madonna and Child*, 1865. The Royal Photographic Society.



Fig. 12. Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Shadow of the Cross—August 1865*, 1865. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 13. Gertrude Käsebier, *Manger*, 1899. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 14. Gertrude Käsebier, *Blessed Art Thou among Women*, 1899. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 15. Gertrude Käsebier, *The Heritage of Motherhood*, 1904. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 16. Carlos Schwabe, *The Virgin of the Lilies*, 1898. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 17. Gustave Moreau, *Fleur Mystique*, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris.



Fig. 18. Odilon Redon, *Virgin with Corona*, 1898. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

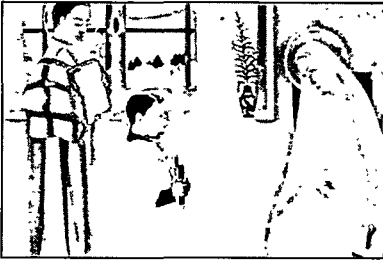


Fig. 19. Maurice Denis, *Mystère Catholique*, 1889. Musée Départemental Maurice Denis, Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

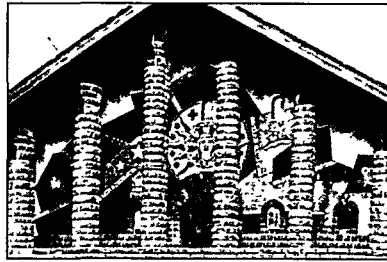


Fig. 20. Fernand Léger, *The Virgin of the Litany*, 1950. Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce, Assy.

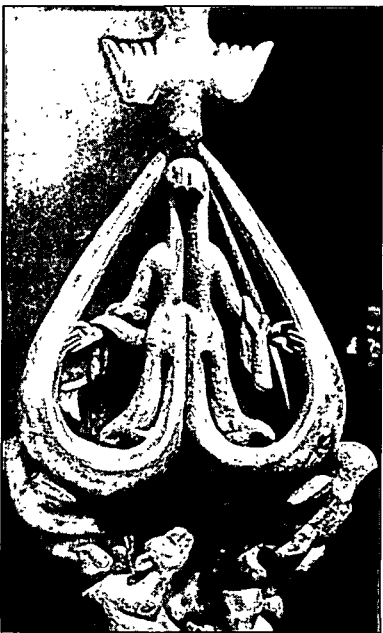


Fig. 21. Jacques Lipchitz, *Notre-Dame-de-Liesse*, 1950. Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce, Assy.



Fig. 22. Henri Matisse, *Madonna and Child*, 1950. Chapel of the Rosary, Vence.



Fig. 23. Salvador Dalí, *Lapis-Lazuli Corpuscular Assumption*, 1952. Private Collection.



Fig. 24. Max Ernst, *The Virgin Spanking the Infant Jesus before Three Witnesses*, 1928. Madame Jean Krebs Collection, Brussels.



Fig. 25. James Tissot, *What Our Savior Saw from the Cross*, 1886-94. Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Fig. 27. O. G. Rejlander, *At the Cross*, 1858. Edinburgh Photographic Society.



Fig. 26. *From the Manger to the Cross*. Gene Gauthier as Mary. Kalem Productions, 1913.