The Virgin's Milk, Oil, Sweat, and Tears in Global Perspective

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The Virgin's Milk, Oil, Sweat, and Tears in Global Perspective: On the Fluidity of Images and the Politics of Divine Presence

In 1441, Fəre ʾəyon, an Ethiopian monk, painted a life-size panel painting of the Nursing Virgin, flanked by Archangels Gabriel and Michael; its lower register depicts Saints Peter, Paul and Stephen Martyr. This huge icon marked the introduction of the cult of the Virgin Mary by Emperor Zär'a Yaʾəqob (r. 1434-68) into Ethiopia [Heldman, 1994: 78]. It was revolutionary in several ways: it marked the adaptation of a Byzantine medium of worship – the wooden icon; it featured a beloved Egyptian motif – the Nursing Virgin; it renewed Ethiopian pictorial style by aiming for life--likeness and strong pictorial address; and it reflected the contemporary literary output devoted to praising the – often nursing – Virgin Mary and her miracles in religious poetry and story collections.

In the wake of Zär'a Yaʾəqob's religious reform, many wooden icons were produced in Ethiopia all throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Stylistically, they refer back to Fəre ʾəyon's innovative painting of the Nursing Virgin, although important – abstract and geometric – variations also occurred [Gnisci 2019: 80-81]. The proliferation of these depictions in illuminated manuscripts and on wooden icons promoted an affectionate, intimate, and emotional form of devotion to the Mother of God in Ethiopian religious culture, which prior to the fifteenth century was heavily book- and scripture-oriented.

The life-likeness of the Virgin's depiction and the belief in her miraculous presence led some devout viewers to expect Marian icons to issue forth fluids. The Acts of Giyorgis of Sägla (1476) record how, while "praying before an image of Our Lady Mary like usual," the saint "ran up to the image, kissed it, and with faith suckled the image's breasts. And there flowed from these a marvelous tasting milk for him. [Mary] nourished and nursed him. Anointed with her milk, his face glowed. In that moment of rejoicing in the Holy Spirit, he wrote for her the text called 'Door of Light'" [Oldjira 2018; Kaplan 2002: 415].

This brief introduction to aspects of fifteenth-century Ethiopian Marian devotion is meant to set the scene for our volume's exploration of the depiction and/or miraculous appearance of the Madonna's body fluids in different religious, temporal, geographical, and political contexts. At the center of our investigation is the border-crossing, transformative, and possibly subversive issuance of the Virgin's body fluids for and toward the believing Christian – and sometimes Muslim – beholder, which has the capacity to work miracles and provide proof of her living, divine pres-

ence in an inclusive manner [Remensnyder 2014: 147-48]. Sometimes, the Virgin Mary is represented in the act of crying and lactating, soliciting her beholder's empathy and harboring the promise of her miraculous appearance, respectively [Olson 2012, 2014]; at other occasions, her likeness, depicted on a wooden icon, issues forth salvific sweat or oil for the devout onlooker in an immediate, i.e. unmediated, or better: trans-medial, manner [Baraz 1995; Andree 2005; Gómez 2019; Barriga Calle 2019; Dean 2007].

Recent historical scholarship on Mary's body fluids in European contexts – starting with Caroline Walker Bynum's path-breaking book Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women – has emphasized the sensorial, material, and body-centered aspects of medieval European forms of devotion, highlighting the contribution of female mystics to a religious discourse that conceives of the "union with Christ" as constituted by mutual devouring. Christ's and the Virgin Mary's sharing of their blood and milk with worshippers can be understood to produce a radical, boundary-dissolving presence that collapses temporality and questions the need for signs and media, including the Eucharist [Bynum 1987; Olson 2017; Meyer 2009, 2012; D-Vasilescu 2018; Penniman 2017; Pentcheva 2006; Herrin 2012].

Acknowledging the central role of artworks – in particular, the painted wooden icon – for the production of sensorial immediacy and divine presence, Hans Belting, W.J.T. Mitchell, and Georges Didi-Huberman have proposed to distinguish images from their material embodiments to highlight the independent "lives" and "wants" of pictures [Belting 2005; Didi-Huberman 2018; Mitchell 2004]. Their work helps us to understand the Nursing Virgin's inclusive and emotional address to a diverse audience, and to see any "sweating" or "lactating" icon that bears her likeness in reference to Marian – or other goddesses' – lactation imagery [Mathews/Muller 2016; Bolman 2016]. It emphasizes the prolific, tenacious, and potentially subversive afterlife of images even when faced with iconoclasts' attacks on their media [Sperling 2021], and opens a path for the investigation of the global spread of images.

In "Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America," Dana Leibsohn and Carolyn Dean, also, insist on the fluidity and mobility of images. In addition, they emphasize the politics involved in tracing different stylistic "influences" and "origins" in so-called "hybrid" art [Leibsohn/Dean 2003]. Their approach helps us to rethink the various adaptations, recursions, variations, and proliferations of the lactating, crying, or sweating Madonna, but also their repudiations and suppressions in different iconoclastic contexts [Davis 2011]. If all art is shaped by the fluidity with which images move in between their media and material re-instantiations, the depiction of the Virgin's body fluids as they issue forth and out of their artistic medium emerges as a prototypical motif in the arts. Leibsohn's and Dean's emphasis on the suppleness of indigenous American notions of the sacred, the polymorphous "survivals" of accompanying images and their unexpected re-instantiations, illustrates and exemplifies the popularity of divine "fluids" in religious art [Leibsohn/Dean 2017].

Perhaps, similar questions might be posed concerning the proliferation of Nursing Power Figures in Sub-Saharan Africa since the twelfth century, images that can be viewed as parallel – but not causally related – to representations of the Virgin Mary [Lagamma 2015]. In Monique Roelofs's theoretical paradigm regarding the aesthetics of address, the aesthetic of the Nursing Virgin might be said to result in, or be the result of, a variety of "micro- and macrolevel identifications

and differentiations" of global reach harboring a "cultural promise" whose "relationality and flexibility ... lends itself to theorizing a network of mobile, intermeshing systems of aesthetic affiliation and disaffiliation, appropriation and disowning" [Roelofs 2014: 204].

Literary historians have contributed to our topic by analyzing the politics of "immediacy" as a mediated effect. Martin Andree outlines five strategies that help to create the reader's or viewer's seemingly unmediated experience of the depicted object's presence: the employment of likeness, which, in its extreme application, not only produces a re-presentation of its object, but its doubling; the construction of truth as a secret to be unveiled that attempts but ultimately fails to communicate the unsayable, and which structures all hermeneutic quest as a reading for depth; the suggestion of immediacy through a sensorial, and often food-related, language; the construction of origins as authentic, pure, and unadulterated beginnings, and the structuring of plot lines or pictorial representations as forms of return that defy temporality; and the eroticization of the real as both original and authentic that elicits, again, a sensorial response [Andree 2005: 69, 317, 172, 343, 409, 443]. These literary constructions can be brought to bear on the analysis of art (and cult) objects and the politics involved in deploying their viewers' response as one of immediacy.

A political analysis of the Virgin's body fluids might take into account the specificity of the imperial and colonial contexts within which they flourished. Bissera Pentcheva has shown how in post-iconoclast Byzantium, Marian icons of the Hodegetria variety demonstrated their divine and living essence by miraculously abandoning their otherwise hieratic, frozen poses. During her weekly Tuesday processions, the Virgin Mary, embodied by an icon from the Hodegon monastery, managed to bend toward and make eye contact with her son, however briefly [Pentcheva 2006: 135-36]. But in a convent near Damascus, in Islamic Syria, a famous Saint Luke icon of the Virgin and Child demonstrated her divine presence and life-likeness by issuing forth holy oil after assuming fleshly form [Bacci 2006]. Likewise, the Conquistadoras that Hernán Cortés (1485-1547) and Francisco Pizarro (1478-1541) used in their invasion of the Aztec and Inca empires, respectively, were stern- and static-looking, buttoned-up wooden statues of the Virgin and Child [Remensnyder 2014]. In Latin America, images of the Nursing Virgin or miraculously "sweating" icons became popular a century later, when late medieval Flemish images of the Nursing Virgin were adapted by criollo and indigenous artists in colonial Lima. In Peru, these images met with ancient believes surrounding the power of breast milk [Gómez 2019; Dean 2007; Llosa Bueno 2010]. Perhaps, Julia Kristeva's notion of the "abject," and her explanation of the sacralization of otherwise polluting body fluids can add to our understanding of the Virgin's border-crossings and miraculous bodily transgressions [Kristeva 1982: 17].

The present volume will build on this and related literature to examine the visual manifestations of the Virgin's fluids across times in different political, religious, and cultural settings (be they imperial, colonial, syncretistic, hybrid, indigenous, Christian, Islamic, and other). Among the questions it asks is what political, cultural, or religious aims were served by the production of divine and eroticized immediacy? How exactly did depictions of the Virgin Mary in the process of shedding her miraculous body fluids, as well as the display of "living" icons that bore her presence and issued forth salvific liquids, achieve their strong emotional address to multiple and diverse audiences? How did these representations work in their respective cultural contexts, and how can we parse their complex and hybrid entanglements? How did specific artworks participate in a global circuit such as Robert Campin's much-copied Nursing Virgin, which re-appeared in sixteenth-centu-

ry Japan, seventeenth-century Peru, and eighteenth-century Ethiopia? How come that medieval Muslims in Al-Andalus and Mughal artists of the late sixteenth century were attracted to the imagery [Weis 2012; Beach 1965]?

We invite contributions of ca. 8000 words in length, centering around one or several images and/or icons of the Nursing Virgin and affiliated imagery that produce the above-mentioned immediacy and sensorial effects, and which participate in the shared “cultural promise” of “evolving webs of [global] relationality and address” [Roelofs 2014: 204]. Proposals are due by October 31, 2021. At that point, we will work to secure a contract for publication. In late February of 2022, we will hold a hybrid conference for all contributors at the Renaissance Center in Amherst, Massachusetts to present and discuss their paper proposals and works in progress. International and otherwise distant contributors might have to participate via zoom given budgetary restraints. This conference will facilitate a conversation across the various disciplines, and ensure greater cross-referencing and interpretative and analytical coherence. By December 31, 2022, all contributions should be delivered. Please send all inquiries and communications to jsperling@amherst.edu.

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