

The Study of Symbols on The Virgin and Child (Lucca Madonna)

(Painting by Jan Van Eyck in Early Renaissance)

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Symbols

Symbol derived from myth, allegory, dreams, folklore and religion can be found in all cultures at all times. The word “Symbol” came from the word “*symbolum*” (Late Latin) or from “*symbolon*” (Late Greek) meaning “token” or “sign”, originated from a sign divided into two halves and could be identified and combined together. Symbol is a language to communicate between people, to represent reality and to easy remember about the message. We first found symbols in Paleolithic cave paintings for these functions. When symbols are consciously applied in art, they speak more powerfully to represent emotions, spirit and the intelligence of the artist when the artwork implies hidden meanings to attract and stimulate viewers’ mind to imagine. It is powerful because the symbols can cross the cultures and times to express the deep wisdom. Only that one culture may not understand another and meanwhile one time may not communicate with another due to the geographical and historical distances. If the symbols are universally understood, it is easy to transmit messages and go into viewer’s mind effectively. On the contrary, if they are vague and unknown especially in those ancient artworks, they become mysterious. With the study of symbols, we can trace back the meanings of symbols appeared in the artwork or paintings in the previous centuries.

Background

Jan Van Eyck’s “Virgin and Child” – Lucca Madonna

In Early Renaissance, layers of symbols were widely used by Jan Van Eyck (who was famous for inventing new oil painting technique as well as the first Netherlandish artist to state his authorship in writing with his own pride) in expressing faith and emotions in his religious, portraits and other paintings. His symbols were presented well in a natural way due to his understanding of the world. We found there were a number of his paintings sharing the same theme, “The Virgin and Child”, sometimes with Saints, patrons or other people. “Lucca Madonna” is one of those full of symbolic metaphors which worth our study and discussions.

With a history of an ancient Ligurian settlement, a Roman colony and later becoming a commercial and industrial center at the time of Jan Van Eyck, “Lucca” is a city in the north Central of Italy (see **Picture 1**). “Madonna” means “My Lady” in Italian. The painting had once belonged to the Marquis of Lucca’s collection and is now in

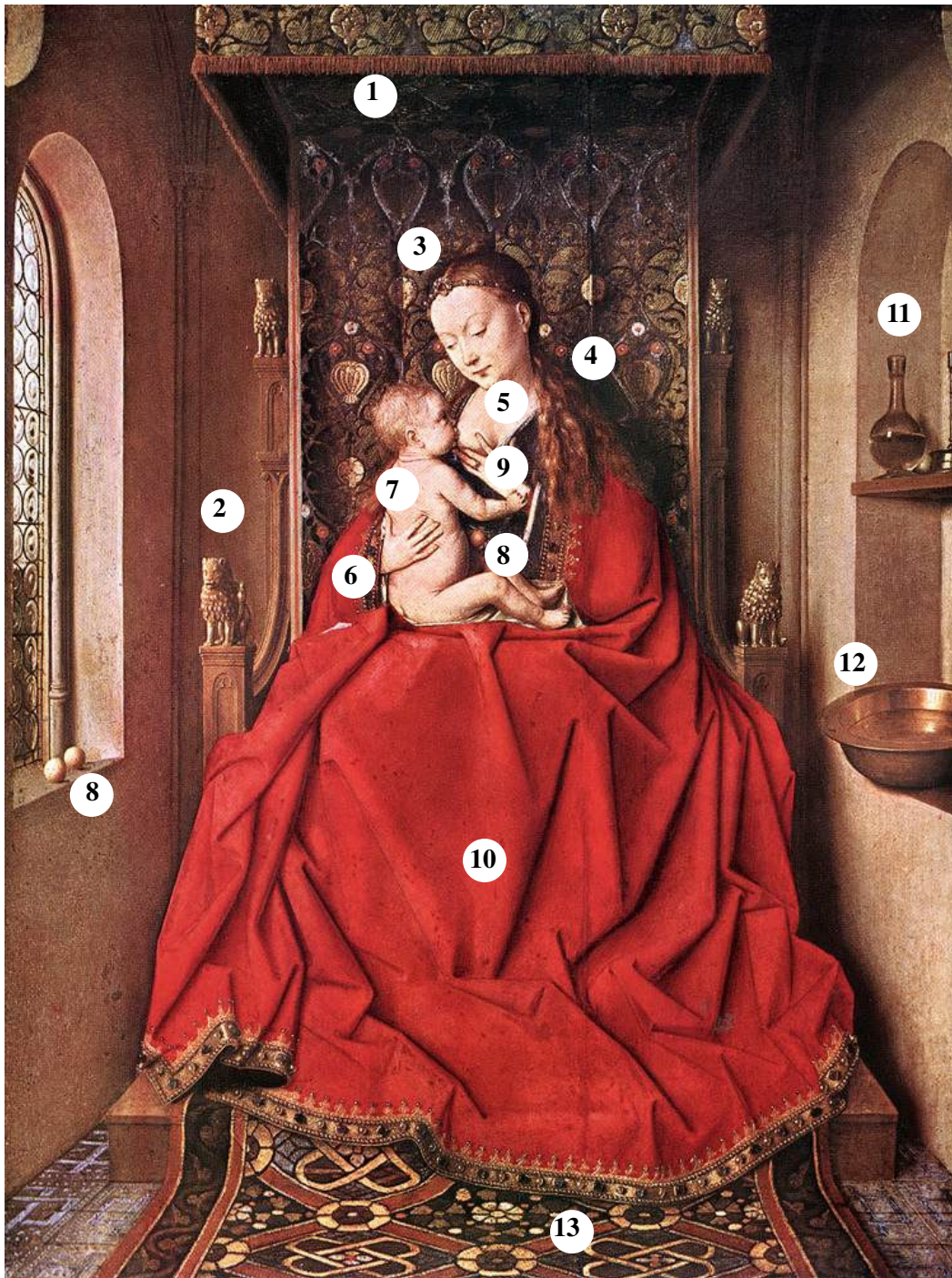
Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie in Frankfurt. "Lucca Madonna" was believed to have been painted immediately after the Ghent altarpiece, some placed it in the mid-1430, while some said it was done in the year 1435 or 1436 near the end of his life. The dating is still a controversial issue.

The Genre: Suckling the Christ Child

Jan van Eyck has created a number of paintings about the Virgin and Child. Lucca Madonna is about Virgo lactan. He is not the first one who painted this type. The earliest one referred to the fresco painting of a seated lady holding a naked infant to her breast and suckling it in the 3rd century placing in the Christian catacomb of Priscilla at Rome. The type probably came from the image of the Egyptian goddess Isis nursing her son Horus (see **Picture 2**). In the 5th century, the Nestorian's (Eastern Church) ridiculed of the idea only served to strengthen the orthodox view and encouraged its representation. In 14th century in Italy, many churches claimed to possess some of the Virgin's milk as a holy object. Again, the theme of the Virgin lactan was represented in Renaissance paintings. The first one was appeared as known as the "Madonna of Humility" which was about the Virgin sitting on the ground symbolizing simplicity and humanness. The Child takes the breast in a wholly naturalistic manner (see **Picture 3 and 4**). The divinity of this popular theme was made clear by the Latin inscription meaning "Holy Mary, the milk of God" indicating the Virgin could bear and nurture the son of God. The theme disappeared from art after the Council of Trent forbade undue nudity of figures.

Lucca Madonna

The original function of this painting is unknown. As in 14th century, Renaissance painters were aware of human feelings rather than the previous emphasis of the religious sense, there were a lot of paintings about the Virgin wearing her traditional red robe under a blue cloak, supporting the child in her arms in various postures. Lucca Madonna was one of those. As it was not big in size (65.7cm x 49.6cm) and the Virgin seemed to sit right in front of the viewer, I believe it is for private devotion as domestic worship. We can see how Jan Van Eyck consciously put so many symbols in the pictures to convey a universal knowledge of Religious glory, divinity, wisdom, virginity and God's saving plan.



- (1) The Throne
- (2) Lions
- (3) Ruby
- (4) Hair
- (5) Nursing/Breast
- (6) Arms
- (7) Nudity of Infant
- (8) Fruit
- (9) Ring
- (10) Drapery/cloak
- (11) Glass carafe with water
- (12) Wash basin
- (13) Patterns on the Cloth of Honor

Virgin and Child ('Lucca Madonna'), by Jan van Eyck

Finished in 1435 or 1436, on Panel (size: 65.7x49.6cm)

Now in Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt

First of all, **the Throne (1)** symbolizing the monarchy of God's kingdom. It revealed wisdom, divinity and the relationship between God and Men.

Secondly, there are four **lions (2)** surrounding the throne. The lions here have multiple meanings. Lion is a symbol of wisdom, royalty, protective power and energy. To reveal the Virgin's **wisdom**, it has the same effect of the Reading Madonna (see **Picture 6**). There is also an indication of **power**, The Gospel of Mark is called the Gospel of Power. Most scholars agree its primary purpose theologically to emphasize the great power of Jesus and demonstrated he was the Son of God in order to give courage and confidence to the Christians under the Roman emperors. Mark described more miracles as part of the active ministry of Jesus and the special attention to the eyes of the perfect Servant. It has even deeper meaning of **martyr**. He was martyred after the imprisonment and being dragged through the streets with a rope tying his neck. In the middle Ages, lion is also a symbol of the **resurrection** because the young lion when born would be laid dead for 3 days until their father brought them to life by breathing in their faces. It was hidden in Mark's gospel that Mark was just like a lion that he opened with the voice crying in the wilderness, just like the king of the desert in Roman mythology and a beast whose roar could wake the dead. Why there are four lions surrounding the throne? Four has been a number of completion, stability and predictability as well as the representation of all earthly things. It can refer to Mark being one of the four winged beasts mentioned in the strange vision of Ezekiel who was one of the four greater prophets besides Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel, The book of Revelation (4:6-8) describes similar creatures surrounding the throne of God. In the vision, the four winged beasts were a Man (Matthew), an Eagle (John whose vision of God was closest and distinct from others), an Ox (Luke who sacrificed) and a Lion (Mark) (see **Picture 5**). Why there are four lions instead of four beasts around the throne? I believe Jan van Eyck fully adopted the various meanings of lion attribute instead of the rest to describe the throne.

Thirdly, on the Madonna's head, we could not see a crown which symbolized the Queen of the Heaven. Instead, the artist put a **ruby (3)** onto her head. Ruby has an allusion of royalty, power, and passion (the suffering and death of Christ on the cross). as the stone is blood red.

Fourthly, the unbound long **hair (4)** indicated Madonna's virginity as it was the custom for an unmarried woman to do so.

Fifthly, the **nursing gesture (5)** as discussed above meaning the Virgin **could bear the burden** of nurturing the son of God by nature which was matching with his naturalism. The **breast** itself has also other meaning such as the **source of life** and **mercy**. The origin was from the myth about Diana of Ephesus, the goddess of **fertility** which was less likely to mean it in this picture.

Sixthly, the warm **arms (6)** surrounding an infant has a meaning of **giving birth**. It again

refers to the mother nature, the mother archetype.

Seventhly, the **nudity of the infant (7)** symbolizes martyrs or the absence of worldly possessions as poverty and humility. In Psalm 85:10, naked Truth was seen beside Mercy, meaning the later rebirth of the Jesus.

Next, we can find both **fruit (8)** placing on the windowsill and in the infant's hand. Generally, it is symbolized as fertility as the common interior decoration of many other paintings. What is the fruit? It can be pomegranates, apples, figs (more preferable by painters in southern Europe), orange (usually in Dutch paintings) and sometimes cherry referring to the Fruit of Paradise. Fruit on the windowsill can symbolize the ***passion of Christ and resurrection***, As in ancient, fruit has the attribute of Proserpine, the daughter of the corn-goddess Ceres, who renewed the earth with life every spring. It associated with the idea of immortality and the Resurrection. Why does the fruit on the windowsill and in the tiny hand looks different? Perhaps the artist tried to apply another meaning. Fruit held by the infant could mean the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, implying the fall of man and his future redemption. Its another attribute is the ***temptation***. It originated from the Golden Apple ate by Adam and Eve. God warned Adam on pain of death not to eat the fruit of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil", but the snake persuaded Eve that their eyes would be opened and knowing good and evil like God does. Eve failed in the temptation and shared the fruit with Adam. The temptation is a foreshadowing of the Virgin Mary as the "new Eve", to redeem the sin of the old one.

Furthermore, the **ring (9)** as we all know nowadays, it symbolizing the union in the marriage ceremony, the holy marriage of the Virgin and God.

Then we observed Jan van Eyck's style of **huge drapery or cloak (10)** meaning the holiness and divinity of the Virgin. Sometimes we see it in blue which represents faith in Christ, compassion, peace and the heaven in some other paintings of the Virgin. Here, we see the huge drapery is in red covering the whole body. Its symbolic meaning is life, energy and Jesus Christ's passion. Again, it is a symbolic colour of Christ's martyrdom and redemption.

Observing the surrounding daily items of the interior, they also have symbolic meanings. Look at the **glass carafe with water (11)**, it alludes to Mary's Virginity. What about the **wash-basin (12)**? It has two meanings. One of it is related to Christian religious ceremony. It has the same function of Font, the vessel for baptismal water standing at the west church. It can also means Jesus' future washing the disciples' feet. I think in this picture, it is still more logical to explain the meaning as a ceremony and the faith rather than the humility in front of his disciples.

Last but not least, on **the Cloth of Honor (13)** can also be studied. We see the rich patterns. **Circle** means divinity, the holy haloes. It can also mean the lack of beginning or

end, that means infinity, perfection and eternal. All of these are the attribute of God. So, circle is a symbol of God. In the 15th century, Renaissance architects changed the circle as the basis of the Church design as perfect shape. It was the Renaissance concept of God. **Knot** is a symbol of union, having the same meaning as the ring. The interlaced knot is also symbolized to a marriage. It can be traced back to the Myth that the tying of a knot by Cupid in a scene of Venus and Mars symbolized the ties of love. The flowers can mean here the life of man is passing over soon.

The Development of Symbolism

The Christian themes died away from European art gradually. However, the symbolism has not been dead. It continued to play an important role due to artists' creativity. Throughout the centuries, symbols have been an infinite variety enriching our mind. Cultures all over the world have developed and built an understanding of symbols to promote spiritual, bodily and intellectual well-being. Without consciousness, some of the symbolic themes in visual art may not be apparent to the artists themselves. Art began to lose some of the explicit symbolic purpose due to the rise of the artistic individualism (symbolism), remaining an expression of abstract themes and as a means of communicating private messages.

Illustrations

Picture 1



Today's Lucca (now a Republic)

Picture 2



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An Egyptian sculpture depicts the goddess Isis suckling her infant son, Horus.

Picture 3



Madonna of Humility

Caterino Veneziano (Italian)
late 1370s
1963.500

Picture 4



Madonna of Humility with adoring angels

14th century, Attributed to Gaddi, Agnolo,
Tempera, gold-leaf on panel,
Size: 69.4 cm (H) x 43 cm (W)
Acquisition: Gambier-Parry, Mark; bequest; 1966

Picture 5



Four winged Beast mentioned in Ezekiel

Piture 6



Virgin and Child ('Ince Hall Madonna')

Panel, 26.3x19.4cm, National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne

List of the Virgin and Child by Jan van Eyck or his workshop

- **The Virgin and Child with Chancellor Nicolas Rolin** (by Jan van Eyck), Musée du Louvre, Paris
- **The Virgin and Child in a Church** (by Jan van Eyck), Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie
- **The Virgin and Child with Saints Barbara and Elizabeth of Hungary and a Carthusian ('Madonna of Jan Vos')** (by Assistant of Jan van Eyck), The Frick Collection, New York
- **John the Baptist and Virgin and Child** (by Assistant of Jan van Eyck), Musée du Louvre, Paris
- **Virgin and Child ('Ince hall Madonna')** (by Assistant of Jan van Eyck), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
- **Virgin and Child ('Lucca Madonna')** (by Jan van Eyck), Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt
- **The Virgin and Child with Saints Donation and George and Canon Joris van der Paele** (by Jan van Eyck), Stedelijke Musea, Groeningemuseum, Bruges
- **The virgin and Child with Saints Catherine and Michael and a Donor ('Giustiniani triptych', open and closed)** (by Jan van Eyck), Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister
- **The Virgin and Child at the Fountain**(by Jan van Eyck), Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

References

Books

- 1) James Hall, Hall's Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art, revised edition, John Murray. (1996)
- 2) David Foutana, The Secret Language of Symbols, chronicle Books. (1993)
- 3) John Berger, Ways of Seeing, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books. (1972)
- 4) Till-Holger Borchert, The Age of Van Eyck, Thames & Hudson. (2002)
- 5) The Bible

Online Resources

- 6) The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company (2004) (access through www.answers.com)
- 7) Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (<http://www.m-w.com>)
- 8) <http://www.picturesitaly.com/photo/lucca/lucca.htm>

End of Paper

Interesting Supplementary Materials for Future Discussions

Here are some interesting pictures similar to the Virgin and Child found in Asian places that can be open for discussions.



Artist: Pacharaporn Somwang,
"Warm Love",
original in Water Colour,
Thailand



Artist: Chu Kar Kui,
"Our Lady of China",
China



Artist: Chu Kar Kui,
"Holy Mary, Empress of China",
China