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The Web of Marian Symbolism: The Iconography of Jan van Eyck's "Lucca Madonna"

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Abstract

The paintings of Jan van Eyck are characterized by the complexity and erudition of the iconographic program. Among them, the "Lucca Madonna," through an intricate weaving of symbolic allusion, manifests some distinctive aspects of Marian piety nurtured in the spiritual milieu in which the religious symbolism reveals both theological truths and human values. In examining the symbolic presence of the Virgin mother of God, who embodies the most intimate relationship between divinity and humanity, this paper focuses on three aspects of the Virgin Mary rendered in the "Lucca Madonna:" the Virgin as the nursing Mother of the Infant Christ; the Virgin as the Bearer of God; and the Virgin as the Bride of Christ. The examination demonstrates how van Eyck creates the world of intricate symbolism, elaborates the mystical and many-leveled identity of the Virgin Mother and illuminates the themes of Redemption and the eternal union of the human soul with God.

Late medieval visual art created in the Low Countries is characterized by a combination of convincing visual reality, emotional intensity and erudite religious symbolism. The devotional paintings that encouraged the devout to practice empathetic meditation satisfied the spiritual demand of an increasingly anxious urban laity, and they eventually cultivated the affective piety and mystical spirituality of the devout.

The paintings of Jan van Eyck (c. 1370–1441) impress us with their iconographic complexity; they are woven with the symbolical and typological conventions of late medieval art. The innumerable details in the panels — plants, fruits, animals, objects of daily and liturgical use — are impregnated with multivalent symbolism. They convey a "disguised" message to his contemporaries. In his art, van Eyck attained a perfect harmony between the real and the supernatural, i.e., *spiritualia sub metaphoris corporalium*.

Of the fifteen non-portrait religious panels that have come down to us as the works of van Eyck, eight focus on the Virgin Mary. In fact, the cult of the Virgin, which had its own mystical connotations, was one of the most disseminated and dynamic aspects of late medieval spirituality. Her relationship with God and his Son gained increasing attention during the twelfth century. Greater emphasis was placed on her role as the Queen of Heaven and the Bride of Christ through the popular iconographical statement of her Coronation by the Trinity.

By the time van Eyck entered upon his career as an artist in the fifteenth century, many

centuries of both literary and visual images of the Virgin had conditioned and shaped the Marian piety of his contemporaries. This study of van Eyck's Marian paintings, then, deals with their symbolic content in light of the religious tradition and sentiments conceived by his contemporary Flemings. The scholarship of late medieval spirituality confirms that Eucharistic devotion with its liturgical concerns and Bride mysticism are distinct devotional strains in late medieval northern Europe. In this respect, among the works of van Eyck, the "Lucca Madonna" (figure 1), through an intricate weaving of symbolic allusions, manifests some distinctive aspects of Marian piety nurtured in the spiritual milieu in which the religious symbolism reveals both theological truths and human values.

By investigating the complex and erudite iconographic program of the "Lucca Madonna," this paper discusses the symbolic presence of the Virgin Mother of God, who had inspired the religious image-making of Jan van Eyck. In the course of this argument, I discuss three aspects of the Virgin rendered in the "Lucca Madonna:" the Virgin as the nursing Mother of the Infant Christ; the Virgin as the Bearer of God; and the Virgin as the Bride of Christ.

Compared with the naturalistic domesticity of the Master of Flémalle's "The Virgin and Child before a Fire Screen" in the National Gallery, London, van Eyck's "Lucca Madonna" lacks the qualities of simplicity, familiarity or homeliness, all of which are major characteristics of the increasingly humanized sacred figures in the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, the nursing Madonna and the Infant Christ create an intimate and emotional mother-child relationship; they stare at each other, preoccupied with the tender act of nursing. The increasing humanization of the holy Mother and the Child clearly reflects the sentiments around the emergence of the "Madonna of Humility" which was predominant in fourteenth century Italy.¹

Throughout the earlier centuries of Christian art, the Virgin had been represented enthroned, or majestically standing. In Gothic art she was crowned as the Queen of Heaven, and she was robed like a Byzantine empress in Italo-Byzantine art. The emergence of St. Francis of Assisi and the mendicant movement, however, changed the whole direction of western spirituality. Franciscan spirituality, which emphasized the humanity and the sufferings of Christ, transformed holy figures into emotionally and physically accessible figures. It stimulated the rapid increase of popular devotion to the sacred figures and accelerated the new movement of naturalism and emotionalism in visual art.

Mendicant spirituality also influenced the growing cult of the Virgin and created new images of the Virgin and the Child. New themes appeared, such as the "Madonna of Humility" and the "Holy Family." In fourteenth century Italy and France, "the Virgin left her starry throne in the heavens and laid aside her robes and insignia and diadem to sit cross-legged on the bare earth like a peasant mother with her child."² In these paintings the Virgin is depicted as an ordinary woman whose simplicity and humility are emphasized over her majestic authority.

With the popularity of Humility Madonna in visual art, the cult of *Maria lactans* was widespread in the fourteenth century. The nursing Madonna of van Eyck's panel is sitting on

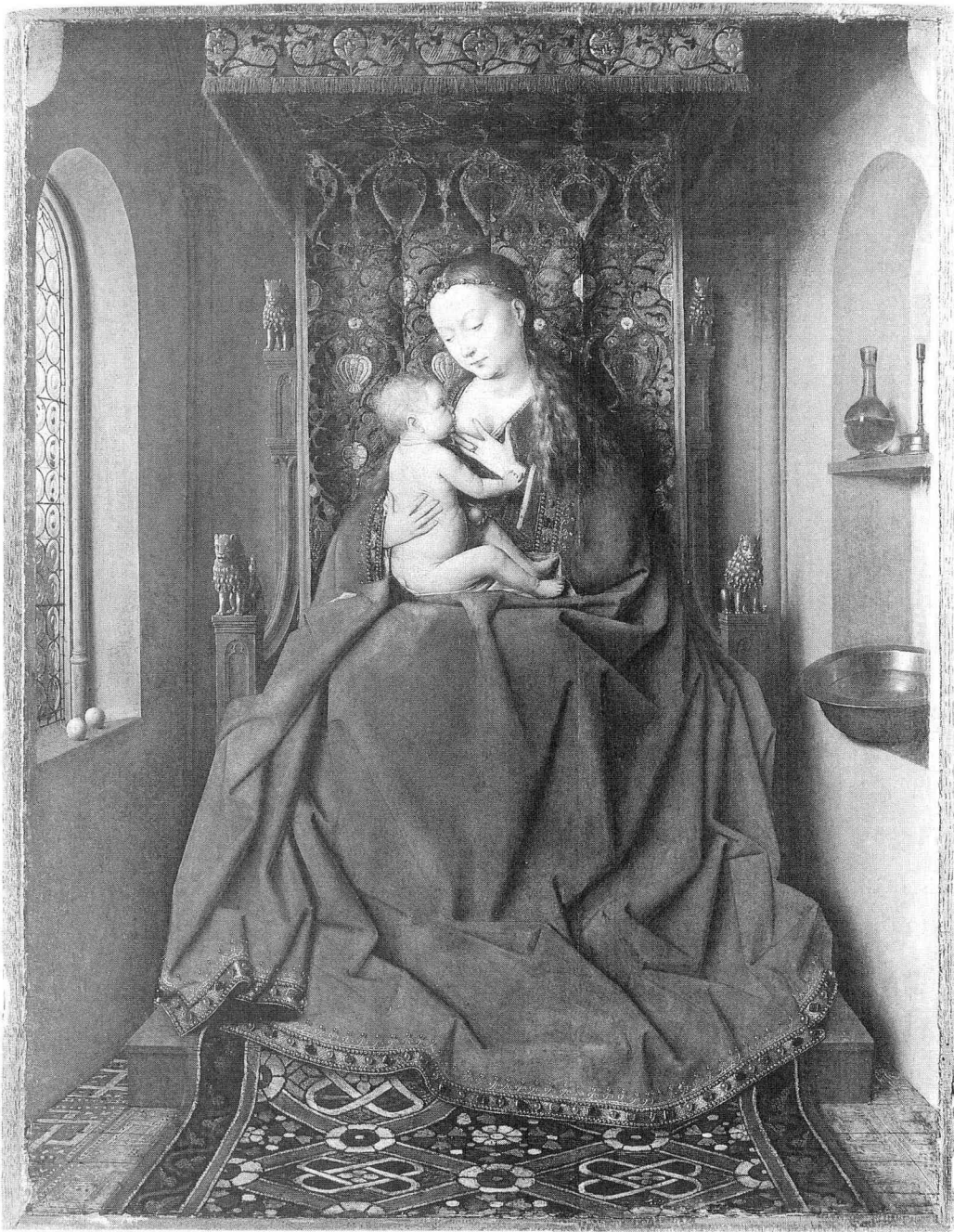


figure 1. Jan van Eyck, *Madonna in an Interior* (Lucca Madonna). By permission of the Städelches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt-am-Main.

the regal throne of the Queen of Heaven. But the Mother and the Child convey affectionate feelings rather than austere and hieratic qualities. Without sacrificing the formality, refinement and intellectuality that were promoted by the patronage of the court he served, van Eyck



figure 2. The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin. By permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters Collection, New York.

succeeds in representing the nursing Mother and the Child and “admit [s] the viewer to a scene of unparalleled intimacy that underlines the relationship of physical and emotional conditions.”³

The act of suckling enhances a nurturing image of the Virgin’s motherhood and the virtues of charity and mercy traditionally attributed to her. Still more importantly, the act of suckling the Child links to the idea of the Virgin as a protectress and intercessor for human salvation. The Virgin, who is most concretely and intimately the mother of Christ, could plead for the salvation of humanity by virtue of the breast with which she nursed Christ. The

nursing Madonna "set forth that character and power which arose from her motherhood, i.e. her role as *Maria mediatrix*, compassionate intercessor for humanity before the impartial justice of Christ or God the Father."⁴

The theological concept of the Virgin as the mediatrix is well articulated in the Speculum Humanae Salvationis, a popular devotional treatise in fifteenth century Europe. In chapter 39, when Christ intercedes before God by showing his wounds, the Virgin intercedes for God's mercy by exhibiting her breasts (figure 2).

After þat with gloriouse triumphe vntil heven he ascendid,
And to his Fadere praying for vs his cicatrices he ostendid.
Tharefore no wight disespaire for his synnes innoumbrable
Bot trist in this aduokat allemgyhty and mercyable,
For in the Fadere or the Haly Gast thogh we nevre so synne,
Crist may vs recounseil and pardoun haboundant wyne.
And if we synne in the Son, þat is in Crist Jhesu,
We have, to pray til hym, on aduocat fulle trewe.
Crist to his Fadere shewes his cicatrices for mercy,
And til hyre son hire bristes shewes for vs swete Marie.
And Crist "Antipatere" may be callid resonably,
So "Antefilia" men may calle Marie semblably. (4165-76)⁵

The popularity of the Speculum Humanae Salvationis in the fifteenth century is attested by the fact that "it was among the earliest books to be printed from moveable type."⁶ It became "more widely distributed in northern Europe than in the south"⁷ as a popular devotional treatise. Just as the Meditations on the Life of Christ and the Golden Legend influenced the pictorial narrative of Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel, the Speculum presumably had a significant impact on van Eyck's iconography.

Apart from the intercessory aspect of the nursing Mother, the "Lucca Madonna" delineates the theological doctrine and liturgical function of Eucharistic symbols. The panel's eucharistic overtone is not so explicit as it is in the "Triptych of the Enthroned Madonna" in Dresden, in which the Child holds the grapes as if to "elaborate the inscription of Mary 'as the vine' by showing that he is the eucharistic fruit of the Virgin-vine."⁸ The "Lucca Madonna," however, enacts the liturgical moment of the Transubstantiation through the intricate use of disguised symbols.

The eucharistic association is first evoked by "a regal chair à la Throne of Solomon."⁹ The Madonna and the Child sit on a throne, adorned by four lions on the four corner posts. The golden lions signify the twelve lions on Solomon's majestic throne and serve as "'abbreviated symbols' for the theme of the Virgin as the Throne of Solomon."¹⁰ The Speculum Humanae Salvationis again reinforces the parallel: "The throne of Salomon verray is the blissid mayden

Marye, / In whilk satt Jhesus Crist, eterne verray Sophie (1157-58).” Ennobled by the massive robe, the jeweled head-band and the canopy, the Madonna, as the throne of Solomon, contains the Christ Child and illuminates her role as the bearer of the Saviour.

The statuesque, monumental solidity of the figures further reveals the liturgical function of the Virgin as an altar. The Virgin’s geometric horizontal lap clearly resembles the altar table which bears the Body and Blood of Christ: the sacrifice for the redemption. Van Eyck’s mastery fused the Virgin’s body and altar into one image so that she can be identified with the altar of the Church.

The parallel between the Virgin and the altar is related in the *Golden Legend*, which states that the Tiburtine Sibyl, being asked for consultation, revealed to Emperor Augustus a vision of the Virgin and the Child on the day of Christ’s birth:

The emperor Octavian (as Pope Innocent says) had brought the whole world under Roman rule, and the Senate was so well pleased that they wished to worship him as a god. The prudent emperor, however, knowing full well that he was mortal, refused to usurp the title of immortality. The senators insisted that he summon the sibylline prophetess and find out. . . . When, therefore, on the day of Christ’s birth, the council was convoked to study this matter and the Sibyl, alone in a room with the emperor, consulted her oracles, at midday a golden circle appeared around the sun, and in the middle of the circle a most beautiful virgin holding a child in her lap. The Sibyl showed this to Caesar, and while the Smperor marveled at the vision, he heard a voice saying to him: “This is the altar of Heaven.”¹¹

The Annunciation to Augustus and the motif of “*Ara Coeli*” appear in the left wing of “Nativity Altarpiece of Pieter Bladelin” by Rogier van der Weyden in Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

The *Speculum* further elaborates the Virgin-altar analogy by paralleling the eucharistic idea of the Virgin as the altar of the Bread of life; Chapter V of the *Speculum* describes the parallel between the presentation of Mary at the temple and the golden table that some fishermen found in the sea. According to the episode, “the fishermen built a temple on the shore where they had found the table and dedicated both the temple and the table to their god.”¹³ But in the middle of the narrative, the topic suddenly leaps to Mary’s offering of her Son. The sudden shift emphasizes her role as the bearer of Christ and as the altar that carries the Eucharist:

Be this table of the sonne was prefigured Marye
To Godde the verray sonne offred full preciouselye.

The forsaid table was offred vnto to the sonne materialle:
Oure Ladye vnto the Temple of the sonne eternalle.
To se the sonne table fulle many a man list hadde,
And for Oure Ladies birth both aungels & men were gladde.
Of a full pure matere was made the sonnes table:
Marie was body and sawle to Godd perfutely placable;
And be the table of the sonne Marye was takenyd faire,
For to the table of hevene be hire have we repaire,
For God Son Jhesu Crist bare vs þat mayden gude,
Pat fedes vs preciously with his fleshe and his blude.
Blissed be pat joyouse table in heven and in erth here,
Be wham is vs this mete gyven Gods salutare. (723-36)

Van Eyck's Virgin-altar analogy also elaborates the timeless theological truths in terms of the worshippers' liturgical experiences. The painting explains the meaning of the Transubstantiation through liturgical symbols. The Madonna holds the Child who is sitting on a piece of cloth. The white cloth signifies a white corporal.¹⁴ The Child is, then, sitting on the Mother's lap "as the wafer of the Host rests on the white coporal, on the altar, during Mass."¹⁵ In the same way, a glass vial and the bronze basin in the niche are symbolically liturgical objects: "the ewer and basin are used for washing of the celebrant's hands at the Eucharist, and at certain special offices of the Church."¹⁶ The act of washing hands is symbolic of innocence and purity. Throughout the Middle Ages, "it was customary for the priest to wash his hands before and after Mass at a niche, or *piscina*,"¹⁷ which contained lavers and basins. Furthermore, the candlestick beside a glass vial symbolizes the Virgin as Christ-bearer and as the carrier of the light of Eucharistic candles which signify Christ's coming in Communion. Van Eyck's Eucharistic symbols thus enhance the sacramental themes of the Catholic liturgy and bring to life the miracles of church doctrine in a convincingly concrete way.

Besides the Eucharistic symbolism, the garden-symbols taken from the Song of Songs are mystically infused in the panel. The red and white roses in the golden urns decorate the canopy and the cloth of honour in a backdrop. All of them are Marian symbols often found in the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs. As the "Virgin of the Fountain" in Antwerp typifies, van Eyck's Marian paintings frequently reflect the artist's fondness for imagery drawn from the Song of Songs. In the "Lucca Madonna," the mystical garden imagery also elucidates the many-leveled identity of the Virgin Mary.

The Song of Songs has abundant images of the Virgin. She is often identified with "the Shulamite maiden who, in the Song, was compared with the flowers of the field, the asphodel, a lily among thorns, a fountain, a spring of running water, a garden close locked and much else beside."¹⁸ Ever since the Church Fathers interpreted the Song as an allegory, the Bridegroom was identified with Christ and the Bride with the Church who, in turn, was mystically equated

with the Virgin.

With the cult of the Virgin in the late Middle Ages, the new totally Marian interpretation became common in the second half of the twelfth century. Commentators on the Song of Songs, such as Rupert of Deutz and Honorius of Autun, self-consciously interpreted the whole poem as an epithalamium for the nuptials between Christ and the Beloved. Honorius expounds that “everything that is said of the Church can also be understood as being the Virgin herself, the bride and mother of the Bridegroom.”¹⁹ “Thou art all fair, O my love, and there is not a spot in thee” (Song 4.7)²⁰ — these words were taken “to prefigure the Virgin Mary, the Immaculate, as the garden prefigures the rose-garden or the Garden Enclosed in which she is enthroned.”²¹

Christian art found no difficulty in adopting this interpretation of the Song of Songs. The mosaic of the apse of S. Maria in Trastevere in Rome conveys the increasing popularity of identifying Christ and the Virgin as the Bride and Bridegroom. The two figures are seated on a throne, and the bridegroom has his right hand around the shoulders of his bride, who holds a scroll inscribed: “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me” (Song 2.6).

In view of the mystical marriage between Christ and the Virgin, “the fundamental betrothal between Christ and the Virgin would have taken place when God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus.”²² The “Annunciation” panel in Washington D.C. depicts the Holy Ghost overshadowing the Virgin and the Child conceived in her womb, and signals the moment of “the consummation of her marriage to God.”²³ The mystical Incarnation marks “the moment when the Old Dispensation became the New.”²⁴ The layer of matrimonial allusion highlights the eternal bond between divinity and humanity.

The eternal garden of the “Lucca Madonna” explains more fully the symbolism of divine-human espousal. The red and white roses imply respectively spotless virginity and perfect consummate love. In the context of the incarnational-espousal, the enclosed garden symbolizes the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary: “My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up” (Song 4.12). On an earthly level of espousal, the “spring sealed” fits in with the image of the woman as bride destined to be faithful to one lover.

The candlestick is also an allusion to a marriage candle which typically appears in “Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride.” The candle in the double portrait has been interpreted as an indication of the presence of Christ blessing the newlyweds. But it also alludes to “the ‘marriage candle’ that was carried in the bridal procession and then placed in the nuptial chamber of the couple to burn until the consummation of the marriage.”²⁵ The glass vial of water and the bronze basin are secular items used for “the bridal purification bath”²⁶ that takes place in the pre-wedding rite of purification. But as a Marian symbol, the glass vial of water that reflects the light signifies the virginity of Mary as it is established in a passage of the *Revelationes* by St. Bridget of Sweden: “For as the sonne enterying the glasse hurtyth it not, so be madened of the virgine bode incorrupte and vnsowled in takynge of my man-hod.”²⁷ Van

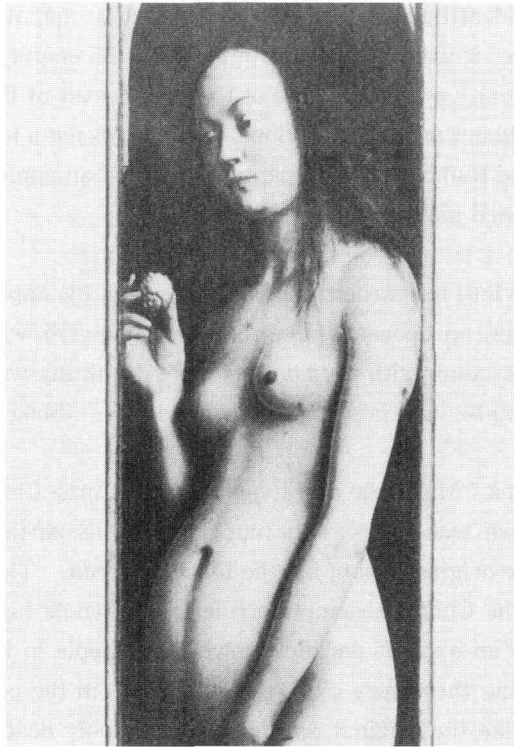


figure 3. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, Detail of Adam and Eve, Ghent Altarpiece (interior); Ghent, Church of St. Bavo.

Eyck's matrimonial symbols thus "portray an essentially spiritual union by means of the objects connected with the marriage ritual in his own time."²⁸

The basic theme of divine-human union is explored on the mystical level in which each of us is united to God through the Redemption of Christ. The theme of union evoked by the love-poem of the Old Testament relates to the enigmatic nature of the apple which the Child clutches in his hand just below the breast of his Mother. In the act of taking his nourishment from his Mother, the Child holds the freshly plucked intact fruit. Where does this apple come from? We instantaneously associate it with the original garden, where Eve offered an apple to Adam and plunged humanity forever into damnation: "the identification of the forbidden fruit as an apple follows a fairly consistent pattern in the Latin West, although its etymological backgrounds are complex."²⁹ But I contend that van Eyck did not depict the apple as a reference to the Fall of humanity in this panel, for the panel of the nursing Mother and Child radiates serenity and beatitude and anticipates rather the coming of the new era of life and joy than the ominous damnation.

Eve holds a fruit in the "Ghent Altarpiece" (figure 3). But the apple in the "Lucca Madonna" is not the same fruit depicted in the "Ghent Altarpiece." In other words, the fruit held by Eve clearly is no apple. It is yellow, with a rough thick skin, and resembles a lemon.

This curious fruit can be identified as “a distinct citrus variety, and although the original name is no longer a familiar one, it was well known in the fifteenth century and would have been a most appropriate example in van Eyck’s time of the exotic fruit of Paradise that Eve offered her husband.”³⁰ The Child in the “Lucca Madonna” then holds not a forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil but a red apple plucked from an apple tree in another Biblical garden, namely, the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs:

Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat the fruit of his apple trees. I am come into my garden, O my sister, *my* spouse, I have gathered my myrrh, with my aromatical spices: I have eaten the honeycomb with my honey, I have drunk my wine with my milk: eat, O friends, and drink, and be inebriated, my dearly beloved. (Song 5.1)

In the “Lucca Madonna,” Mary, the new Eve, offers the Christ Child not the forbidden fruit but the apple that his own tree bears. The nursing Child is partaking of the fruit of the enclosed garden, while the original Adam ate the forbidden fruit. The new Adam accepts the apple, which prefigures the Child’s redemptive role in the whole history of salvation. Van Eyck intentionally draws an explicit parallel between the apple in the Child’s hand and the Virgin’s breast by depicting them very close to each other in the center of the panel. The parallel reveals that “unlike the original Adam, who drew only death from partaking of the nourishment Eve offered him in the first garden, the new Adam is shown drawing life from the actual nourishment provided by the new Eve.”³¹ The nursing Child accepted the fruit of the enclosed garden, as he accepted his role as the new Adam and the Redeemer of the human race through the Incarnation.

Thus, the apple in the “Lucca Madonna” symbolizes Redemption rather than damnation. The parallel between the apple and the breast emphasizes the Child’s role as the Redeemer of humanity. The Virgin’s milk mystically signifies the Eucharistic wine and enhances the theme of Redemption through love as depicted in the Song of Songs: “I have drunk my wine with my milk” (Song 5.1). Being aroused by the initial espousals surrounding the Incarnation, the imagery of the Song of Songs develops into the crucial theme of Redemption, which is obtained *only through the mediation of the Virgin and the fruit of her body*. By taking his nourishment from his Mother and by accepting the apple, the Christ Child is fully united with the human condition through Mary, the new Eve.

The symbolic presence of the Virgin Mother of God, who embodies the most intimate relationship between divinity and humanity, is thus rendered in the luminous panel accentuated by its nuptial imagery. In a work of a serene perfect mastery, van Eyck creates the world of intricate symbolism, elaborates the mystical and many-leveled identity of the Virgin Mother, and illuminates the themes of Redemption and the eternal union of the human soul with God.

Notes

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- 1 Among the many studies, see Millard Meiss, Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1951), esp. 132-56.
- 2 Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Vintage, 1976) 182.
- 3 Margaret R. Miles, Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture (Boston: Beacon P, 1985) 78.
- 4 Meiss 151.
- 5 Avril Henry, trans. The Mirour of Mans Saluacioun: A Middle English translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis (Aldershot: Scolar P, 1986), hereafter Speculum. All citations to Speculum are from this edition and will be followed by the line number in parentheses.
- 6 Henry, "Introduction" 10.
- 7 Henry, "Introduction" 10 n4.
- 8 Carol J. Purtle, The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 131.
- 9 Erwin Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Characters (1953; New York: Harper & Row, 1971), I, 185.
- 10 Purtle 113.
- 11 Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints, trans. William G. Ryan, I (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 40. This modern translation in English is based on the Latin text: Legenda aurea vulgo historia lombardica dicta, recensuit Dr. Th. Graesse, editio secunda (Leipzig, 1850).
- 12 Shirley Neilsen Blum, Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969) 17-28.
- 13 Barbara G. Lane, The Altar and the Altarpiece (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 21.
- 14 The corporal is the small linen cloth, about 20 inches square, upon which both the chalice and sacred host are placed during the Mass. By the 8th century the cloth came to be called "corporal" since it held the Body (Corpus) of Christ. See "corporal," The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1976 ed. and "altar," New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 ed.
- 15 Lane 16.
- 16 George Ferguson, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art (New York: Oxford UP, 1955) 299.
- 17 Lane 16.
- 18 James Hall, A History of Ideas and Images in Italian Art (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) 320.
- 19 Panofsky 145.
- 20 The Douay Rheims Version of the *Bible* has been used throughout.
- 21 Eithne Wilkins, The Rose-Garden Game: A Tradition of Beads and Flowers (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 132.
- 22 Purtle 109.
- 23 James Snyder, Northern Renaissance Art (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985) 104.
- 24 Snyder 104.

- 25 Snyder 112.
- 26 Purtle 121.
- 27 The Revelations of Saint Birgitta ed. William Patterson Cumming EETS OS 178 (London: Oxford UP, 1929; rpt. 1987) 36.
- 28 Purtle 117.
- 29 James Snyder, "Jan van Eyck and Adam's Apple," Art Bulletin 58 (1976): 511.
- 30 Snyder, "Jan van Eyck and Adam's Apple" 513.
- 31 Purtle 104.