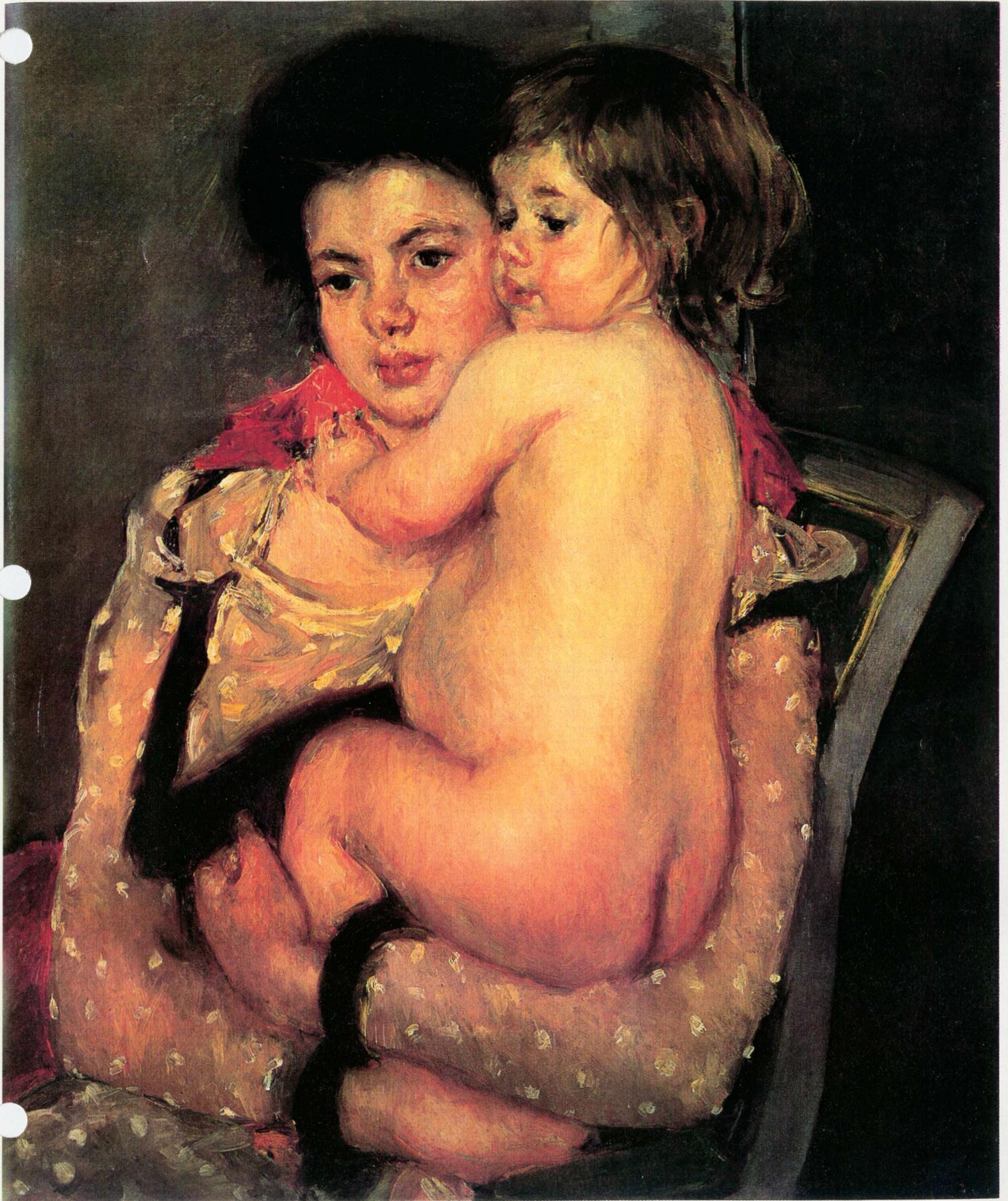


Mother and Child
A Study in Symbolic Imagery

Cynthia Mott
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Cover Mary Cassatt, Reine Lefebvre Holding a Nude Baby, 1902. Oil, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.

"The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world."

William Ross Wallace (Agress, p. 78)

The image of mother and child summons up many feelings of warmth, love and protection. The mother and child image has been a strong symbolic motif of fecundity, maternity and creativity throughout the history of art. From the fertility goddess figures of the Paleolithic period to the twentieth century, the mother and child theme has recurringly emerged as an empowering, symbolic theme.

The Venus of Willendorf, a small rough stone sculpture found in the Paleolithic period, comes to us with rounded thighs and belly (Fig. 1). Her large, swollen breasts and curvaceous figure imposes an abstract concept of fertility on the viewer. The civilization's survival depended on their homage to this votive figure (Kerner, p. 222) As society changed from a hunter-gatherer to a more settled agrarian civilization, the role the female played increased in importance. In the Neolithic period the mother goddess images, found at Catal Huyuk, become the focus of their life. This ancient culture interpreted the maternal power of creativity as a powerful force that created the universe as well as all of its life forms (van Buren,p. 127).

With organized Christianity came the initiation of a new type of womanly perfection. This patriarchal culture transformed the creative power of fertility of the mother goddesses to an "idealized motherhood" illustrated through the Madonna

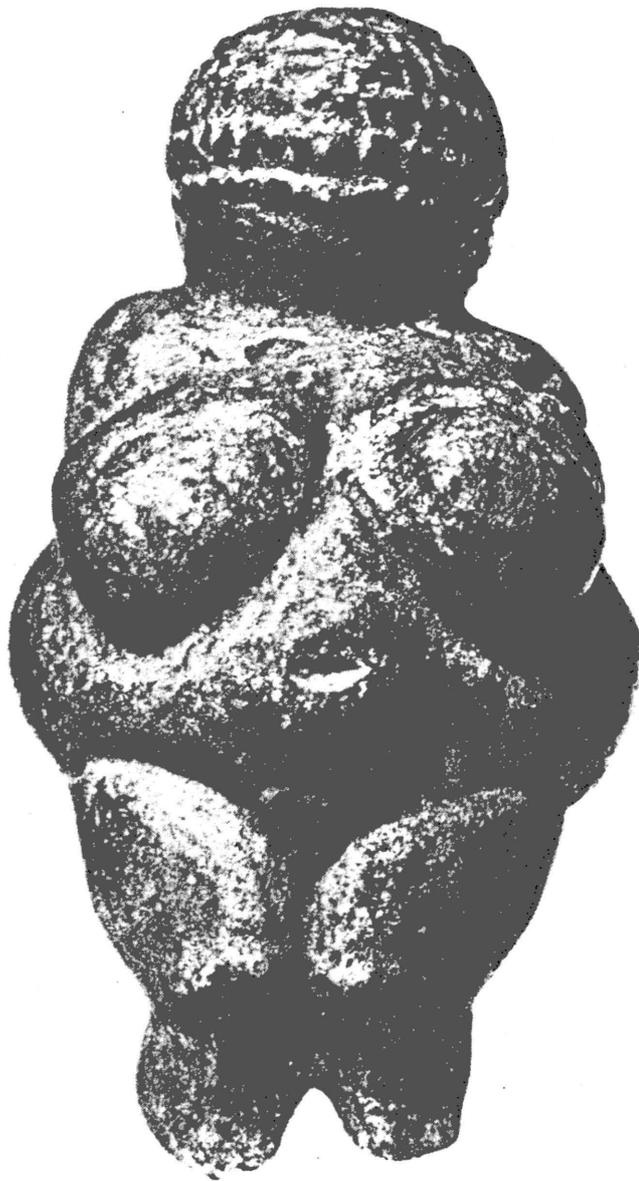


Figure 1 Venus of Willendorf, Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna.

and Child (van Buren, p.128). In Mary, the mother of Jesus, one finds the link between procreative capacity and salvation. Mary becomes the symbol for humanity. She provides divine protection, redemption and forgiveness. This Christian devotion to the Mother of God became a symbolic display in the statuary and paintings of the Madonna and Child. The drama of human survival and the incarnation of God into flesh and blood was worked out in these figures.

For the first four centuries, the sacred imagery of Mary was depicted without the holy child (Jameson, p. 25). As the Christian faith grew in size and importance, Mary was raised to the pinnacle of Queen of Heaven. Mary, untainted by original sin, had conceived her son, Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. These became the reasons for her status. The pair were then included in groupings in paintings and sculpture (Fitzpatrick, P. 20). The Madonna and Child image evolved into the expression of the orthodox faith. At first, the image of the child was of a small adult, a midget, a disproportionate figure. Mary became generalized, an idealized symbol of divine grace and queenly, maternal characteristics. At first, they were not true representations but a theological symbol set up in the church and adapted by other Christians (Fig. 2).

In Byzantine times, Mary emerges as a maternal figure whose love of mankind is as a mother to her child. In the 13th century painting, Madonna Enthroned by Giotto (Fig. 3), the Madonna directs a melancholy gaze to the small adult she is holding. Jesus looks outward to humanity, ignoring her gaze, with hand raised to bless. Giotto's painting marks a change in the painting styles of his time. It



Figure 3 Giotto, Madonna Enthroned, tempera on wood, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. c. 1310.

Figure 2 Giovanni Cimabue, Madonna Enthroned with Angels and Prophets, tempera on wood, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. c. 1280-1290.

shows a move away from the Byzantium abstract symbols toward a true observation of the world around us to understand and gain knowledge. Giotto's Madonna is full bodied and queenly yet solidly seated in a throne that could bear her weight, quite unlike previous images.

By the 14th and 15th centuries, there was a resurging interest in Classical Greek art, poetry and mythology. This resulted in further study of anatomy and proportion and for the first time the infant is displayed in its childlike quality. There was an added grace and dignity to these free and correct drawings. The Renaissance was a time of self-awareness. The discovery of the self became a dominant theme. Realism, Classical beauty and grandeur combined to increase the humanization of figures. Donatello, Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael took up the subject and began to analyze the infant anatomy more closely (Fig. 4). The Madonna and child theme became a high point of Renaissance art. Many artists embraced the subject whether religious or secular. The stiff hieratic figures were replaced by appealing children and beautiful facial expressions. Rigid forms and poses disappeared, we begin to see nestling, cuddling, and nursing in these images.

In the late 15th century came the demand for devotional images in private chapels and shrines. The Madonna and child were rendered as gentle, pretty, and sweet, thus increasing the secularization of this traditionally religious subject. Madonna and child were now within the reach of people with modest means. The decreased distance between the observed and the observer allowed young mothers to easily identify with the Madonna.



Figure 4 Leonardo da Vinci, cartoon for the Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John, c. 1498. Charcoal on brown paper, National Gallery, London.

In the next century, the popularity of the mother and child theme led to its demise. The craving for beauty and fashionability took over this once majestic and symbolic image. It became trite, commonplace and sentimental when the well known faces of the public were placed as Mary's, her body clothed in gorgeous apparel with her head unveiled (Jameson, p. 38). This deviation from a symbolic image of the Madonna and child, led to the demoralizing of Christian art. Attempts were made by some artists to restore the divine grace and dignity to the image of the Madonna. However, the influence of the church and the religious conviction among the people was declining. Increasing religious controversy over the years ensured the spiritual emphasis of the Madonna and child to become obsolete (Jameson, 39).

In the 17th century, the Madonna appeals most strongly to human nature and feelings. The subject was no longer the Madonna and Child but the Madonna alone. The union of the divine and human nature in Christ, with Mary as parent to both, was no longer of importance at this time. Mary was seen without maternal ties as an absolute and complete person within herself which reflected the theology of the time (Jameson, p. 44). As society moved away from religious interest toward a more secular one, so did the mother and child theme.

From the 18th to mid-19th century, women and children were quite removed from adult society. It was also a time of new interest in personal relations, concepts of the individual and discovery of the inner life. A transformation of new concepts in politics, work and lifestyles was starting to emerge. There became an extreme

focus on the ideal woman for the family. The quest for control and purity was staged within the family around a cult of the domestic madonna due to anxieties of a changing lifestyle (van Buren, p. 156).

In the 18th century, marriages were arranged and seen as a legal contract or a means to further the line of descendants. A very severe paternal authority governed all familial situations. Women were viewed as deceptive and restricted to the demeaning job of child-rearing. Children were sent away to school or raised by wet nurses in well-to-do families. For the bourgeois women, marriage was a means of independence. Once she produced the token heirs, she was free to pursue her own interests. Paintings of the lover became quite common in France at this time, since adultery was common among both sexes.

Later in the 18th century, a new view of the family was starting to take shape. Marriage was starting to be seen as a blissful, productive stage of life. With the influence of John Locke and other English philosophers, child rearing began to take on more importance as an influential stage of life. It was said that the environment makes the child and the child makes the man (Duncan, p. 210). The wife became the link between husband and child. Alluring yet virtuous, the wife serves both husband and child. According to Rousseau, the goal of a woman's education was to find personal and emotional fulfillment through her duties as wife and mother. She was still subjected to the will of men but now she wants to serve. This was seen as her natural domain. In Greuze's The Beloved Mother (Fig. 5), we find the content, happy mother surrounded by her children and the outstretched arms of the



Figure 5 Jean Baptiste Greuze, The Beloved Mother, 1765. Paris, De Laborde Collection.

husband waiting to be welcomed home, as pure testimony that this is a blissful state.

In the beginning of the 19th century, society was changing at an increasing rate. The mother and child theme became very popular among Impressionist artists of all nationalities painting in Paris around 1890 (Matthews p. 72). But this popularity often degraded into a sentimental portraiture of one's family or friends. Any underlying symbolic meaning was missing, therefore, this imagery was nothing more than a genre depiction. The mother and child theme lacked the intensity and meaning it had once produced.

When Mary Cassatt's fellow artists, such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, or Carriere, were treating the mother and child theme as an updated version of the Madonna and child, Cassatt used it to resolve the conflict between the past and the present in a new way. She dealt with the mother and child image in its symbolic sense. Cassatt's dealer, Paul Durand Ruel, forced the comparison to earlier Madonna and child groupings by calling her the painter of "la saint famille moderne" (Matthews, p. 76). But, she portrays the mother and child relationship as a significant part of every day life and experience thus delivering that relationship from its role as a sterile icon of redemption and fertility to a relationship significant in its social importance.

Mary Cassatt was born in 1844 and lived to 1926. During her lifetime there were major shifts in social practice. Preceding her were the Victorian myths of male- and female-roles, where Victorian mothers were seen as weak, defective, abounding with moral goodness and saintliness. On the other hand, men were domineering and overbearing, and children were greedy, demanding creatures (van Buren, p.

145). The women's movement in the U.S. and Europe was just starting to emerge. The roles of women and men were slowly changing. Cassatt rewrites these mythologies of the mother and child relationship in the social world. Cassatt, like the Cubists and the Surrealists, saw artistic images as filled with internal life but free from the given external realities (van Buren, p. 130). In her images, she restores a genuine existence of emotional reciprocity and independence of the individual to both mother and child.

Cassatt transforms the earlier idealized icon of mother and child into a flesh and blood mother and a living, feeling infant. Cassatt deals with the language of the baby through images that have skin to skin contact or events that surround the baby's daily life such as bathing, dressing or playing. She presents the emotions between mother and child as mutually beneficial and open.

Cassatt's main focus is on the attachment phase as a critical point in the child's development. Mother is seen as a reliable and constant presence which protects the infant's emerging being. Cassatt's mothers are capable, intelligent beings who have considered motherhood an important period of development. They are not without the luxuries of bourgeois life in their plentiful Paris surroundings but have chosen the task of motherhood as a beneficial option. Cassatt's new idea is the realization of the infant's own development and understanding of life and the potential direction that he or she may choose. This idea of baby attaining knowledge of the world is exemplified in Cassatt's painting Baby Reaching for an Apple (Fig. 6). Mother is assisting the baby in picking the apple. The plucking of fruit as the symbol



Figure 6 Mary Cassatt, Baby Reaching for an Apple, 1893. Oil, Virginia Museum, Richmond, Virginia.

of gaining knowledge is a recurring symbol in Cassatt's work. This image is giving permission for women and children to realize their mental ability and reach for that apple of knowledge (van Buren, p. 148).

Cassatt had a firm conviction that women were the civilizing force in society and that they could have broader impact only if they were given a voice. (Matthews p. 76). Cassatt felt that being a mother was the highest achievement a woman could attain for she lived at a time when babies and childcare were seen as essential parts of "feminism" (Getlein, p. 8). She remained an unmarried artist, saying in her old age that her greatest mistake was to choose painting over motherhood (Getlein, p. 36).

Although Kathe Kollwitz was born in Europe and lived at essentially the same point in time as Mary Cassatt, their experience of life was quite different. Kollwitz was born in 1867 and died in 1945 in war torn Germany. Living through this period of high anxiety and anguish had a profound emotional affect on her and her work. Just as Cassatt drew on the world that surrounded her and reinterpreted their meaning, so did Kollwitz. She was married to a physician who worked with the poor, lived through two world wars, and suffered the loss of a son and grandson in each war, events which greatly influenced her. Her desire to protect her own children from the tragic existence around her manifested itself in the protective mother that pervades her work (Draper p. 12). Her works strength, derived from personal tragedy, evokes a commonality of human suffering.

Within Kollwitz's art of social content lives the mother and child enveloped

in death. She has recast the iconographic mother of sorrows and the sacrificial death of the savior bringing the biblical and religious symbol of the Pieta to the realm of the commoner. She has made real, in this world, a pain that is rich in its universality. Many of her images deal with the mother and the loss of her child as in the etching Mother with Dead Child (Fig. 7). In a letter to Arthur Bonus, she recalls a story related to the making of this image:

“When Peter was seven years old and I was working on the etching Mother with Dead Child, I made sketches in the mirror of myself holding him in my arms. It was very exhausting and I let out a groan. Then his childish voice piped up to comfort me: “never mind, mother, it will be beautiful.”(Zigrosser, p. xxv).

She has lead us to a “mother viewpoint” of life to experience the drama of emotional tensions. In her woodblock series entitled War, she represents the reactions of woman as mother and wife to war. Mother becomes a self-sacrificer of her children to war, a weeping widow, mourning her loss. Mothers shows the huddled women trying to comfort eachother in the aftermath. The last image in the series, The People, was an affirmation of faith, symbolized by a mother shielding her child plagued by phantoms of hate, poverty and ignorance (Zigrosser, p. xiv).

In the person of the mother, the artist voiced her faith that people will carry on. Woman is seen as creator, begetter of the human race, the link between the past

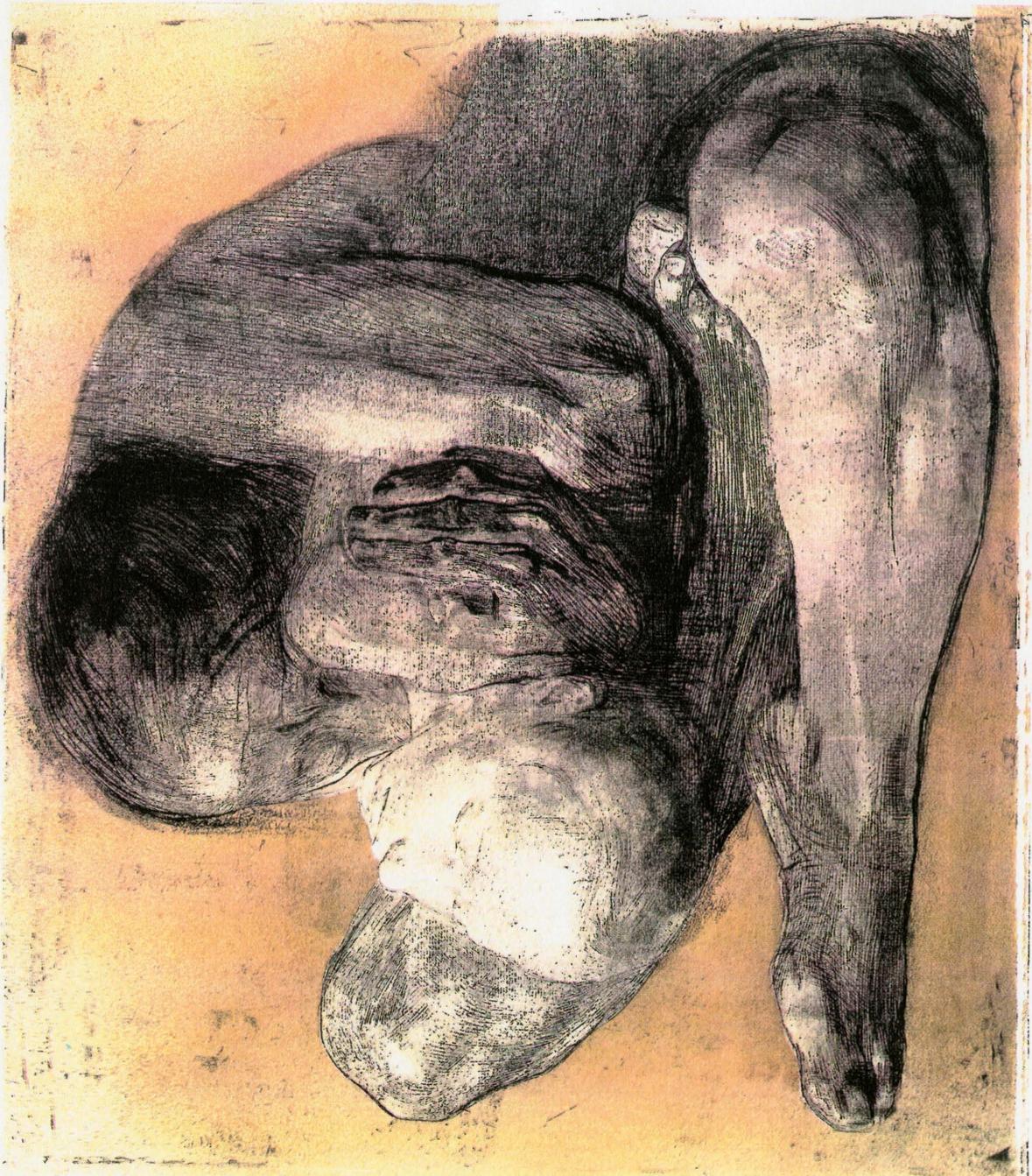


Figure 7 Kathe Kollwitz, Mother with Dead Child, 1903. Etching, Library of Congress, Washington.

and the future. Kollwitz's work stems from her reactions as a mother in an unsure and unjust world. Her work dwells in the dark and somber sphere that remained her creative ambience. Kollwitz's work stands out as one of the most universal symbols of human suffering within the voice of motherhood.

The work of Henry Moore brings us to the full cycle of life. Moore dealt with the simplest of man's drives: procreation, procedure and continuation (Gelburd and Rosenberg, p. 12). For Moore, the theme of mother and child, of the mother giving birth, the child struggling to escape from the maternal womb, is like the stone giving birth to the form, the form struggling to emerge from the block of stone (Gelburd and Rosenberg, p. 27). Mother and Child 1922 (Fig. 8), is one of Moore's earliest surviving independent carvings and also marks the beginning of his obsession with the mother and child theme. This sculpture truly exemplifies the maternal struggle of giving birth.

Mother and child, for Moore, signify the continuance of the human race and at the same time expresses the tenderness and care felt by one human being for another. Moore's mothers are physically involved with their offspring. The intimate bond between mother and child is illustrated by the nestling, cuddling, and suckling we see in his sculptures. The child is the focus of attention of the mother as she holds the baby up in the air, tucked in her arm, resting on her lap, or playfully handling the child (Fig. 9).

Moore was commissioned to create a Madonna and Child for St. Matthew's church in New Haven. In this piece, we see the clear distinction between his

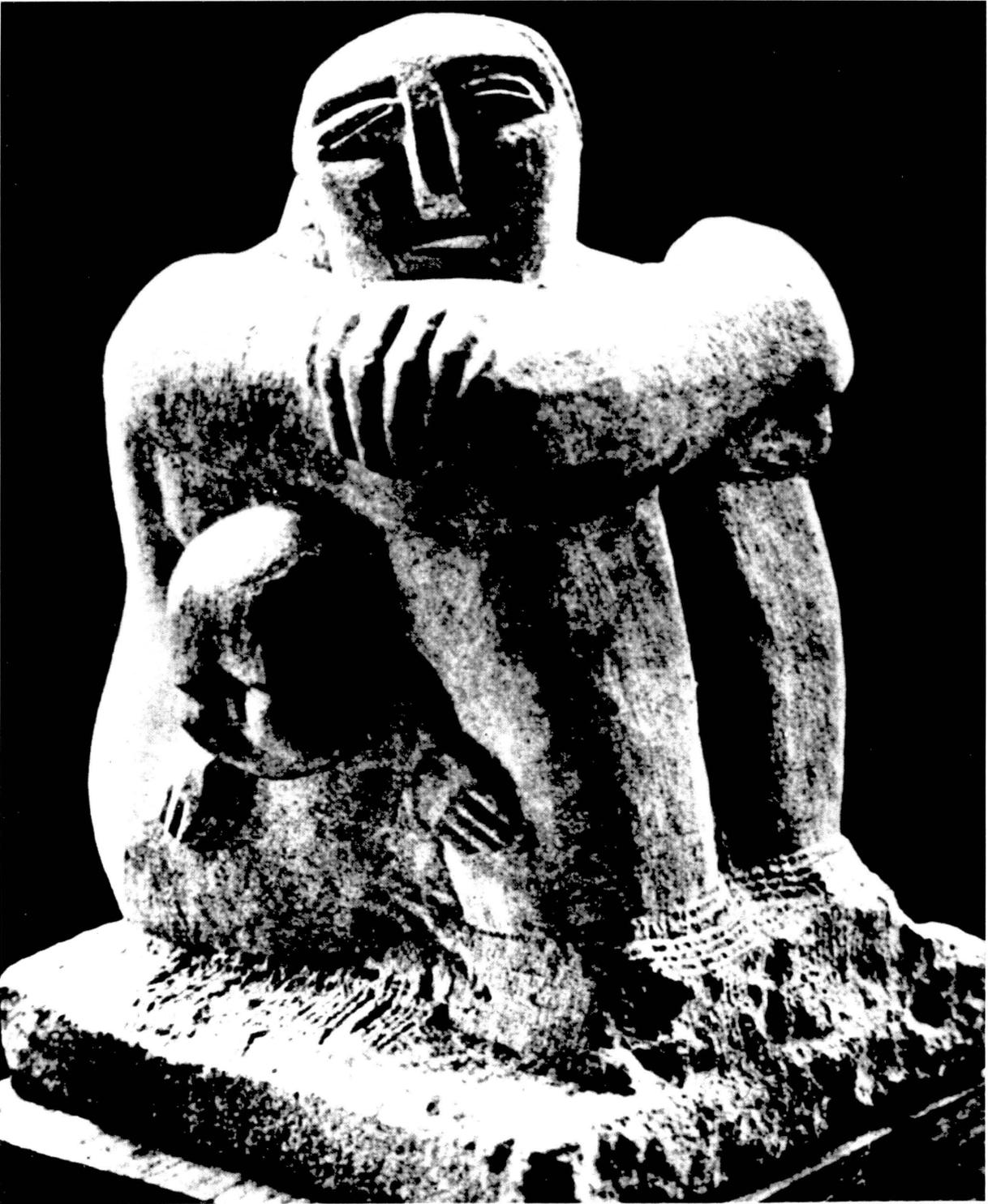


Figure 8 Henry Moore, Mother and Child, 1922. Portland Stone.



Figure 9 Henry Moore, Half Figure Mother and Child, 1983. Yale Center for British Art.

Madonna and child and other mother and child images. Much thought and consideration were given to the symbol of the Madonna and child and how it should be portrayed. Moore came to his own distinction between these two, stating that Madonna and child should carry a certain "austerity, nobility, and touch of grandeur even hieratic aloofness which is missing in (the) every day mother and child idea" (Gelburd and Rosenberg, p. 29). He wanted to create a figure that looked as if she could sit through eternity in the stone. But Moore's Madonna and child, although representative of divine maternity, still remains accessible and human, a universal figure in her monumental broad and simple forms.

After sixteen years of marriage, the birth of a child to Moore stimulated the addition of the male figure into his work. Moore embarked on a series known as The Family Group, where the artist was inserted as father. His work became complicated by formal problems of arrangement due to the additional adult and sometimes child figure. As Moore once noted, "In my work, women outnumber men by at least fifty to one. Men get brought in when they are essential to the subject, for example in a family group" (Gelburd and Rosenberg, p. 30).

During the 1950's and 1960's, Moore did not do many mother and child figures but pushed to a more abstract series entitled Internal/External (Fig. 10). This symbolic image portrays the unborn child within the mother's womb. Moore describes it as "an embryo protected by an outer..., something young and growing protected by an outer shell" (Gelburd and Rosenberg, p. 33). These were fully rounded womblike structures with holes that pierced the outer form to allow us to

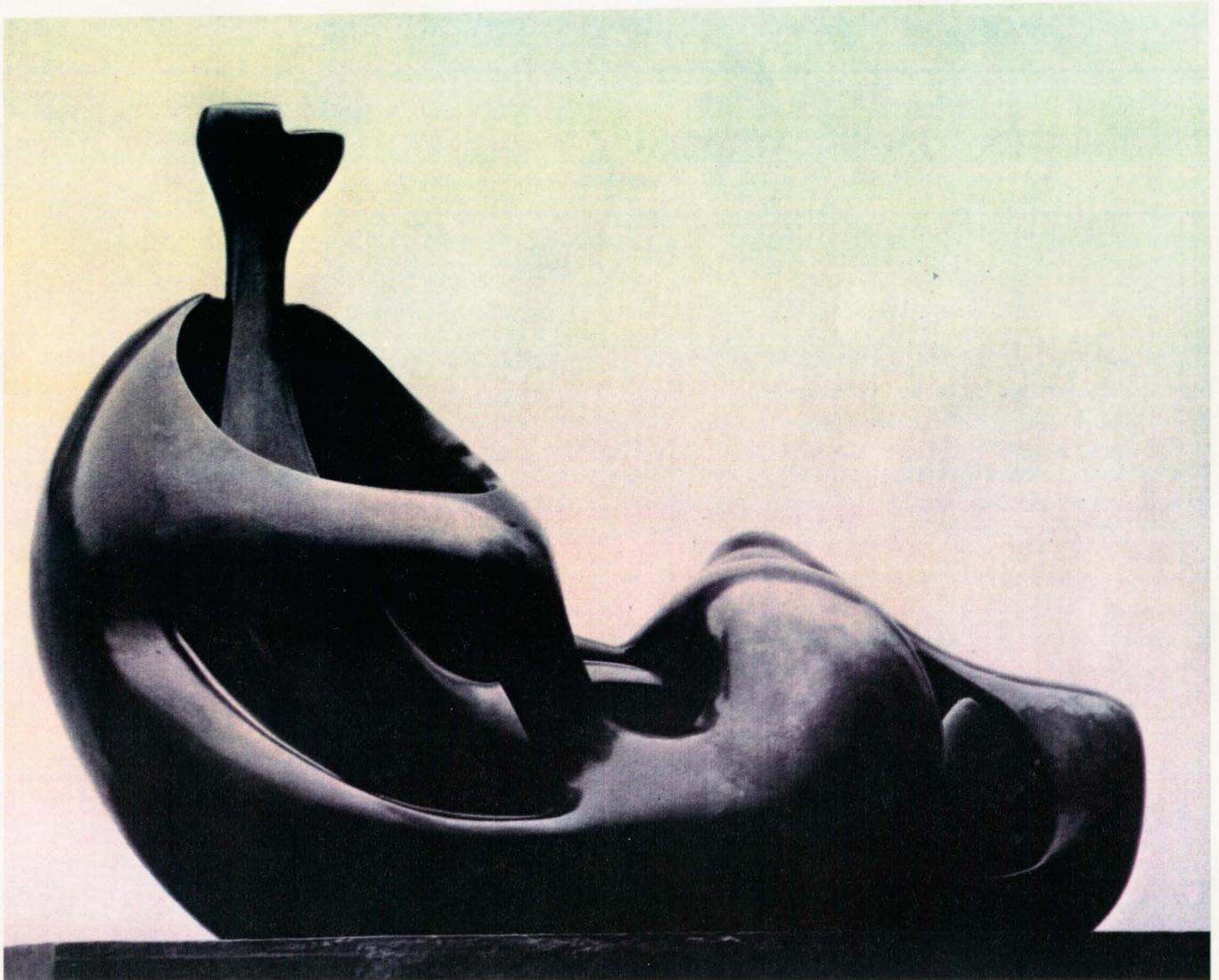


Figure 10 Henry Moore, Working Model for Reclining Figure: Internal/External, 1951.
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

view the internal form.

Henry Moore then returned to the mother and child image with fervor. From 1975-1983, this theme dominated his work more than any other period. For Moore, the mother and child theme has gone beyond the primal cycle of life and birth; it has become creativity itself. Moore identifies with what he creates, becoming the mother and life-giver of the form (Gelburd and Rosenberg, p. 39). Moore states that "he is trying to convey universal shapes to which everybody is sub-consciously conditioned and to which they can respond" (James, p. 64). His work is not only about paternal relationship but universal ideas of fertility, maternity, and growth. It is sculpture with a life of its own, revealing an inner spirit (Gelburd and Rosenberg, p. 39). "When you attack a block of stone from the outside, it should have a presence, a tension, and inner energy which is trying to make it have its complete existence" (Jianou, p. 15). Moore explored the unity of art and mankind symbolized through the mother and child image.

The mother and child image has prevailed as a strong symbolic theme throughout art history. Images of fertility, redemption, humanity, and creativity have all been depicted through the mother and child theme. Susanne Langer, in Feeling and Form, describes the artistic symbol as an important tool to define a subject's inner reality while presenting it in a new form that illuminates new meanings (Langer, p. 24). One can see the reflection of society and how it has changed through the mother and child image. Mother and child moved from the fertility goddess of ancient culture to the symbol of Christianity as Madonna and

Child. With the decline of religious influence on society, the mother and child became a conception of secular importance. Mary Cassatt's paintings reflected these changes as the mother and child became a symbol of importance and influence in society. Kathe Kollwitz explored the horrors of human existence through the voice of motherhood. Henry Moore sees the mother and child as the epitome of creativity and allied himself with the mother as a creative force in bringing about form.

Anna Jameson, referring to the Madonna and child motif, states in her book, The Legends of the Madonna, "(a) subject so consecrated by its antiquity, so hallowed by its profound significance, so endeared by its associations with the softest and deepest of our human sympathies, that our mind has never wearied of its repetition, nor the eye become saturated with its beauty." The maternal metaphor woven into the fabric of mother and child, serves to uphold the expectations placed on such a universal theme.

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