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# What You Look At, You Make: Menstruation and Fertility in Italian Renaissance Art

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*WHAT YOU LOOK AT, YOU MAKE:*  
MENSTRUATION AND FERTILITY IN  
ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ART

RACHAEL NUTT

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## INTRODUCTION

During the Summer 2016 Olympics, Chinese swimmer Fu Yuanhi shocked the world by telling a reporter that she had started her period the night before the race. Digital media company BuzzFeed was quick to translate the story into one of its characteristic image-heavy articles, known as “listicles,” punctuated by photographs of Fu’s characteristic facial expressions and screenshots of supportive tweets in various languages. Author Casey Gueren lauds Fu in the article’s subtitle: “Fu Yuanhi is basically all of us when we’re PMSing.”<sup>1</sup> The interview that sparked such reactions and statements of solidarity is only about thirty seconds long; Fu’s remark on starting her period is literally one sentence. Why, then, did this comment garner so much attention?

Another offhand remark on menstruation about a year before Fu Yuanhui’s brief interview created a similar, albeit intensely more negative, buzz online. Donald Trump, in response to his reactions to difficult questions asked by reporter Megyn Kelly during a 2015 Presidential GOP debate, stated: “You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever.”<sup>2</sup> This comment ignited massive controversy,

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<sup>1</sup> Beiming Fu and Casey Gueren, “Chinese Olympic Swimmer Fu Yuanhui Shocked Fans by Talking About Her Period,” *Buzzfeed.com*, August 16, 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/caseygueren/olympic-athletes-have-periods-too?utm\\_term=.ponmeNJNE#.irOkBEDEq](https://www.buzzfeed.com/caseygueren/olympic-athletes-have-periods-too?utm_term=.ponmeNJNE#.irOkBEDEq)

<sup>2</sup> Danika Fears and Beckle Strum, “Trump: Megyn Kelly had ‘Blood Coming Out of Her Wherever,’” *Nypost.com*, August 8, 2015, <http://nypost.com/2015/08/08/trump-megyn-kelly-had-blood-coming-out-of-her-wherever/>

leading many to state their support for Megyn Kelly on Twitter and other social media platforms.<sup>3</sup> Here, menstruation is not viewed as a normal function of the body, but as a pejorative marker of femininity and incompetence.

Gender equality and reproductive rights have made strides in Western cultures, but natural, bodily functions typically associated with womanhood carry negative connotations. However, a reluctance to openly discuss menstruation does not mean that it lacks representation in public. There are ways to recognize its presence in public imagery, although it is not stated as directly. The image of a smiling woman in an all-white outfit, for example, could easily be understood as promoting menstrual sanitary products when viewed within the context of an advertisement. Menstruation is not invisible or absent from our public visual culture; it is encrypted. Art produced in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy functioned very differently from today in both the private and public spheres, but menstruation<sup>4</sup> is similarly encoded. Uncovering its representation is a matter of framework--asking the right questions and looking at the right type of imagery. Context, then, is crucial: how was menstruation (as we understand it today) viewed in Italy during the Renaissance, scientifically and socially?

Renaissance Italians adapted most of their theories on menstruation from older authorities, chief among them Aristotle and Galen. The former believed menstrual blood was a sort of formless substance that became a fetus when the seed of a man pressed into

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<sup>3</sup> Fears and Strum.

<sup>4</sup> When I reference menstruation in regards to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, I am referring to the twenty-first century's conception of menstruation: shedding blood and mucosal tissue (uterine lining and at least one unfertilized ovum) through the vagina.

it. Without this reaction, the formless matter exited the body through menstruation.<sup>5</sup> Galen instead believed that women provided their own semen (called *menstruum*) in menstrual blood that was crucial to forming a fetus.<sup>6</sup> Michele Savonarola, who penned a popular advice book for the people of Ferrara in the fifteenth century, wrote from a Galenic point of view in his book, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses de regimine pregnantium et noviter natorum usque ad septenium*.<sup>7</sup> He stated that semen did little for the formation of a fetus and that menstrual blood was the true main ingredient--just as necessary as dough in the creation of bread.<sup>8</sup> He is not alone in supporting this opinion. Giovanni Marinello copies and spreads this idea in his own publication, *Delle medicine partendenti all' infermità delle donne* (1574).<sup>9</sup> However, Lorenzo Gioberti (Laurence Joubert, ), a French doctor-author who was also popular in Italy at this time, believed that menstrual blood was instead just excess blood that women generated and then expelled, as women were the more humid of the sexes.<sup>10</sup>

Breastmilk also involved menstruation. According to Marinello (and Galen), menstrual blood split into five levels which formed and nourished a fetus. The whitish, first level turned into the baby's organs, the second level turned into fleshier parts of the baby,

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<sup>5</sup> Charles T. Wood, "The Doctor's Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought," *Speculum* 56, no. 4 (1981): 715.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolph M. Bell, *How to Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 66.

<sup>7</sup> "To Ferrara Women on Care during Pregnancy and of Newborns to their Seventh Year." Though the title is in Latin, the rest of the writing is in a Padovan dialect. Bell 24.

<sup>8</sup> Bell 66.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 67.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that medical science of this age believed the body operated out of four categories called humors, each corresponding to a specific bodily fluid, organ, and element. Wet went with black bile, the spleen, and water; dry corresponded with blood, the heart, and earth; hot was associated with bile, the liver, and fire; and cold went with phlegm, the brain, and air. Bell 17, 67 .

the third level fed the fetus, the fourth turned into breast milk, and the fifth part (judged the most impure) left the body.<sup>11</sup> It would have been common knowledge in that era, then, that lactation was a part of menstruation.

As necessary as menstrual blood may or may not be for conceiving and raising a child, the neutral and positive writings and opinions on it were few and far between. Andrea Mattioli, a Sienese pharmacologist, describes the signs of being poisoned with menstrual blood as well as the cures for this poisoning in his famous *Discorsi* (1544).<sup>12</sup> Marinello, whose scientific take on menstruation in the womb does not hint at a negative view of menstrual blood, warns of the life-sapping effects that intercourse during menstruation would have on a man and of the potential miscarriage that this unfortunately-timed conception would yield.<sup>13</sup> In the late sixteenth century, doctor Girolamo Mercuriale states that menstruating women could tarnish mirrors and “corrupt” infants just by looking at them intently.<sup>14</sup> The Church had similar vitriolic views of menstrual blood, which mostly stem from Leviticus. Pope Innocent III wrote a scathing diatribe against menstrual blood in the twelfth century within his work *De miseria humanae conditionis*, claiming that it could wither plants and sicken dogs, that held fast in Italian minds centuries later.<sup>15</sup> In addition, menstruating women were technically barred

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<sup>11</sup> Bell 66-67.

<sup>12</sup> Bell 68.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

<sup>14</sup> Piero Camporesi. *Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood*. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 116-117.

<sup>15</sup> Camporesi 113.

from entering churches by rules laid out in Leviticus, as menstruating women were seen as unclean and therefore unfit to receive the Eucharist.<sup>16</sup>

The scientific and social understandings of menstruation, negative though they may be, equate menstruation with fertility and procreation. Artworks concerned with fertility and procreation are therefore logical places to begin conducting research, and much of this imagery exists within the material culture of marriage and childbirth. Having children was the principal duty of a wife in this society, and so it makes sense that domestic art and furniture reflected this duty. However, the production of male heirs during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy would have been especially important. Renaissance Italians lived in a patriarchal culture that traced family lineage through male members of the family. In order to ensure the continuation of a line, a couple would need to produce and raise a male, who would take on the patronymic of the family.

In this marital and familial context, art had many practical purposes. Historic scenes and biblical stories in particular could be used as visual examples of virtuous people, and the viewers could learn the moral qualities of these people by studying their depicted stories.<sup>17</sup> Art could also be used as a way to help mothers conceive, birth, and raise their children. Jacqueline Musacchio, who writes on the art and rituals of Italian Renaissance marriage, childbirth, and family life, speaks to this in several of her writings. One of the visual trends to which she pays special attention is that of sympathetic magic, or the belief

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<sup>16</sup> Adrian Randolph, "Regarding Women in Sacred Spaces" in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* ed. Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 18.

<sup>17</sup> Paola Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997): 22-24.



that what one sees influences one's body and wellbeing.<sup>18</sup> Pregnant women are especially susceptible to images, according to this belief, as what they saw could influence their unborn children. As an old Venetian saying goes, "quel che se fissa, se fa" ("what you look at, you make").<sup>19</sup> Musacchio calls this phenomenon "imaginative conception:" the imagination of the mother affects how the child forms at any stage of the child's unborn development, from conception to birth.<sup>20</sup> Several biblical and literary sources influenced this line of thinking. In the book of Genesis (Gen. 30), Jacob lays spotted sticks in front of his white sheep as they mated, resulting in spotted lambs.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in St. Augustine's *The City of God* (c. 426), Jacob lays white reeds in front of his grey sheep as they drink, which causes the grey sheep to produce white offspring. Girolamo Mercurio, a Venetian Dominican friar and "self-appointed public health officer," cites this story in his 1596 guide for midwives, *La Commare*.<sup>22</sup> Marinello also suggests that couples trying to conceive use art to assist in this process, as Bell paraphrases:

There should be masculine paintings on the walls, causing the couple's minds to be imprinted with virility. Gaze at pictures of the valorous men while having sex, and that is what you will conceive. This explains why bastards often look like the adulterous wife's husband. She has been so afraid of him while doing it with someone else that her husband's likeness finds its way to the illegitimate offspring.<sup>23</sup>

Visual art had another use as talismanic imagery, providing protection as well as

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<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in the Italian Renaissance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999): 125.

<sup>19</sup> Musacchio "Imaginative Conceptions" 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 48.

<sup>21</sup> Musacchio, *Art and Ritual* 128.

<sup>22</sup> This book was also written in local vernacular rather than Latin. Bell 14, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Bell 39.

inspiration. Chief among potential threats to the expectant mother and her baby was the evil eye (*malocchio*), or “the belief that certain individuals... may, by virtue of their gaze, cause another person, animal, plant, or other property to become ill, die, or otherwise suffer grievous harm.”<sup>24</sup> Certain birth objects would ward this off, like pieces of coral, which could be worn as a necklace or carried about the person in some way. Gifts for a newborn almost always included coral branches or charms.<sup>25</sup> Other methods of apotropaic work surface in marriage painting as well, such as grotesque facial expressions. These expressions stem from ancient Roman sculpture, which would have been available to Renaissance Italians. Sandro Botticelli would have seen them in his 1481-1482 travels to Rome, for example, and we see its influence in his painting, *Venus and Mars* (which I will discuss later).<sup>26</sup> These images would also ward off the evil eye, which could affect a couple’s health and ability to conceive.

Why this emphasis on protection? On a broad scale, Italians (Tuscany in particular) placed a special focus on successful childbirth during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries because of the plague. This epidemic killed an extraordinary number of Florentines; the population dropped about 72 percent between 1347 and 1480.<sup>27</sup> The low infant survival rates during this time period would have also encouraged such talismanic and inspiring imagery. A healthy baby boy meant dynastic security and legacy, but of course, he would need to survive childhood. However, the death of a child would not solely equate to the loss

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<sup>24</sup> Allan S. Berger, “The Evil Eye--An Ancient Superstition,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 54 no. 2, (December 2012): 1099.

<sup>25</sup> Klapisch-Zuber 149-150.

<sup>26</sup> David Clark, “Botticelli's Venus and Mars and other apotropaic art for Tuscan bedrooms,” *Aurora, The Journal of the History of Art* 7 (2006): 6.

<sup>27</sup> Klapisch-Zuber 25-26.

of an heir or familial asset, as contemporary stereotypes are wont to suggest. Rudolph Bell notes that contemporary understandings of Medieval and Early Modern times may overemphasize parental apathy towards children.<sup>28</sup> While the death of an infant or child would not be unexpected, we also cannot assume that it would have no emotional toll on the parents, and so talismanic imagery could be seen to assist in this field as well.

This reliance on talismanic images on a social and scientific scale communicates their importance within the culture. From a historic standpoint, there is also an intense desire to influence the female body through visual culture (more specifically, fertility imagery in visual culture). Following the scientific theories of the time, then, fertility imagery meant to assist women in producing healthy children would have been meant to directly influence menstruation. The fertility imagery referenced in this paper most likely would not have immediately reminded the viewers of menstruation. However, menstruation would be connected to the artworks because of this link to fertility. By better understanding the fertility imagery of this region and time period, we can better understand how menstruation may be represented in art. What aspects of visual culture portray this? Where do we see these theories and desires come into play in regards to art?

Finding answers may help to deepen our understandings of this period's culture, but my questions regarding menstruation in Italian Renaissance art go beyond curiosity. Menstruation is a biological and social benchmark in a person's life. In both contemporary society and Italian Renaissance society, it denotes the shift from childhood to

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<sup>28</sup> Bell 136-137.

adulthood--typically, the shift from girlhood to womanhood.<sup>29</sup> It is a biological phenomenon that changes a person's body, self perceptions, and perceptions in social settings. The absolute lack of such an important function in visual culture is highly improbable, and it would be academically irresponsible to approach menstruation in Italian Renaissance culture the same way we approach it in our culture. Research on the representations of menstruation in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian art is not viable in an exclusively scholarly sense. Gender equity and reproductive rights' command of the social foreground today affects how we view art. While the canon of Western art should undergo appropriate changes as our society changes, we may not need a complete overhaul of the monuments and works currently in the canon. Rather, we can seek to better understand how identity groups who are oppressed today can find representation through canonical works of the past, like those of the Italian Renaissance.

Fu Yuanhui's direct statement about her menstruation resonated with so many people because it brought a normal bodily function out of the strange silence that we as a culture have placed it under. Similarly, Donald Trump met consternation over his remark because of his attempt to vilify a woman by stating that she was menstruating. Renaissance Italians largely did not have pleasant connotations with menstruation, but by better understanding how we can find its representation in their artwork, we can work to break menstruation's status as a shameful subject within our own society.

This study has three main sections: "Menstruation and Gems," exploring the

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<sup>29</sup> While reproductive organs do not define a person's identity today, they did in Renaissance Italy. Therefore, when I mention a man or a woman in Renaissance Italy, the reader can assume that the man has male reproductive organs and that the woman has female reproductive organs.

prophylactic and iconographic uses of jewelry; “Nuptial Furnishings as Instruction, Inspiration, and Talisman,” exploring the roles of marital art in Renaissance homes; and “Picturing Mary: The Virgin as a Model,” exploring the conceptions of fertility and the female body in regards to Marian art. The purpose of this organization is to group the representations together in a way that makes thematic sense, although there is plenty of intersection between these categories.

## MENSTRUATION AND GEMS

### MENSTRUATION AND ANCIENT ENGRAVED GEMS

Menstruation found rather direct representation through engraved gems. As with most collections of art, gem collections of the Italian elite sought to promote their owners' status as rich and well-educated members of society. The Medici, with their extensive, expensive collection of both ancient and newly commissioned gems, communicated political prowess as well as wealth and education.<sup>30</sup>

Greco-Roman engraved gems were especially valuable due to their Classical origins, and Renaissance scholars paid these gems more attention than subsequent scholars have.<sup>31</sup> Although many ancient engraved gems are cameos, several are actually amulets with medical purposes, meant to protect the wearer or owner from certain ailments through a

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<sup>30</sup> Martha McCrory, “The Symbolism of Stones: Engraved Gems at the Medici Grand-Ducal Court (1537-1609),” *Studies in the History of Art*, 54 (1997): 174.

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets and Their Tradition,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993): 25.

combination of incised incantations and images. Greco-Roman uterine amulets, for example, surface in Renaissance collections. Incised in the typical uterine amulet would be a variation of the *hystera* incantation. This text, usually in Coptic or Greek, compared the womb to several animals and their actions before beseeching the uterus to be still: “Womb, black, blackening, as a snake you coil and as a serpent you hiss and as a lion you roar, and as a lamb, lie down!”<sup>32</sup> One or more of the following images would accompany the text: a bell-uterus image, the angel Michael, the Virgin, a saint slaying a female demon, an octopus, or a face with seven snakes radiating from it.<sup>33</sup> Although this serpent-ringed face may resemble a Gorgon at first glance, gem scholar Jeffrey Spier states that it is actually a specific demon, called Abzou or Glou, known for plaguing new or expecting mothers and their children.<sup>34</sup> In terms of menstruation, certain Greco-Egyptian uterine gems’ express purposes were to either start or stop menstruation.<sup>35</sup>

Italian antiquarian and architect Pirro Ligorio (1513-1548), for example, included a Byzantine uterine amulet (fig. 1) in one of his “libri dell’Antichità,” which largely catalogued ancient Roman theaters, circuses, and various engravings.<sup>36</sup> This particular “volumetto” of jasper amulet descriptions and sketches, although unpublished, was popular in Ferrara, as evidenced by the book’s provenance listed at the volume’s beginning.<sup>37</sup> As one of the more

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<sup>32</sup> Spier 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>35</sup> Robert K. Ritner, “A Uterine Amulet in the Oriental Institute Collection,” *Journal of Near-Eastern Studies* 43, no. 3 (July 1984): 12-13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 25.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Il presente manoscritto “libro 49 delle celebri antichità romane di Pirro Ligorio” offerto in vendita a questa direzione dal Sig. Giacinto Sibilla, venne ceduto alla medesima in data 14 gennaio 1929 per la somma di lire mille dal Cav. Gennaro d’Oro di Comacchio (Ferrara) al quale era pervenuto per successione dal cognato Mario Samaritani di Comacchio.’ Ginette

popular antiquarians of the sixteenth century, Ligorio's inclusion of this amulet communicates the value that these links to antiquity held for Renaissance scholars as well as the interest scholars had in these gems. Additionally, although it has since been lost, records indicate that the amulet Ligorio sketched entered the ducal collection of Gotha later.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 1: Pirro Ligorio, gem drawing and cast

It is unclear if Renaissance scholars could have understood every piece of the incantations and visual imagery, but they could decipher part of the *hystera*; a variation of it appears in a fourteenth-century Italian document by an unknown author.<sup>39</sup> The word for

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Vagenheim, "Some Newly-Discovered Works by Pirro Ligorio," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988): 243.

<sup>38</sup> Spier 25.

<sup>39</sup> Spier 49.

uterus has been replaced by the term “madrone,” which is most likely a variation of spelling of the word “matrone.” Although parts of this version of the incantation have been altered, it clearly stems from earlier forms of the *hystera* through its references to the womb as various animals. Spier does not explain the exact shift from Abzou to St. Francis, but he suggests that amulet-makers would insert references to their own cultures as these spells passed from their Greco-Egyptian origins into amulets and documents throughout Europe and parts of Asia:

E nel nome di Francesco, il quale si liberato da ogni male di madrone e di fianco, il qual male ha molte radici di malizie: principalmente dal muggia come bue, salta come cerbio, morde come lupo, abbaia come cane, ruggia come leone, nuota come pesce, torcesi come serpio, piange nel corpo. (And in the name of Francis, who is freed from all [ailments of the womb], that evil has many roots of malice: mainly low like a cow, spring like a deer, bite like a wolf, bark like a dog, roar like a lion, swim like a fish, writhe like a snake, cry in the body.)<sup>40</sup>

Although this incantation now appeals to Saint Francis rather than the demon Abzou in keeping with the contemporary religious practices, it follows almost the exact same patterns as Coptic instances of the *hystera*.

## PROPHYLACTIC USE OF GEMS

One of the main stones used in uterine amulets was heliotrope, which is known today as “bloodstone” for its red jasper flecks.<sup>41</sup> The blood like appearance of the stone was not lost on Renaissance artists and connoisseurs. Lorenzo “il Magnifico” de’ Medici had

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<sup>40</sup> Spier 36-49.

<sup>41</sup> McCrory 159.



several pieces of heliotrope which were carved so that the jasper emulated blood.<sup>42</sup>

Lorenzo was no stranger to the prophylactic interpretations of engraved stones, either; in addition to his collection of engraved gems, his fascination with astral magic brought talismanic stones back in vogue.<sup>43</sup> The inclusion of heliotrope in the Medici lapidary, Lorenzo de' Medici's belief in the healing powers of jasper and heliotrope, and the presence of a a uterine amulet in the scholarship and collections of antiquarians raise questions about what other uterine amulets or stones may have been present in the collections of the Italian Renaissance elite.

By no means was there a gap in the use of talismanic gemstones between late antiquity and the Renaissance, and by no means was Lorenzo de' Medici the only one to continue this tradition. Stones meant to ease childbirth were of particular value, although records do not always state the type of stone or gem used for this purpose. Diamonds, however, seem to be more popular than other gems and stones in this regard, and the eaglestone, or aetite, also enjoyed special popularity. This stone is a geode with a small rock or crystal bit loose inside it, which would be reminiscent of a womb and a fetus.<sup>44</sup> Isabella

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<sup>42</sup> McCrory 159.

<sup>43</sup> Heliotrope, in fact, was thought to have contributed to his death; his doctor pressed heliotrope to his forehead in an effort to reduce his fever. When this failed and Lorenzo died, one of the doctor's colleagues criticized him, stating that as a calorific stone of the sun, heliotrope probably made the fever worse, and refrigerative, lunar gems, like pearls, would have been more appropriate (Aakhus 191).

Not everybody could afford to have an extensive lapidary, but there were some amulets and gems that would have been more available. Several popular guides recommended pearls as cures for various ailments, due to pearls' alleged cooling properties. This included cooling a womb thought to be too hot for conception and relieving the symptoms of a man thought to be poisoned with menstrual blood, as Bell notes on page 66.

<sup>44</sup> Musachio, *Art and Ritual* 140.

D'Este, for example, lauds these stones in a 1494 letter;<sup>45</sup> Marsilio Ficino (d. 1499), a Florentine priest, philosopher, and translator, connects the aetite's power to Venus and the moon in his 1489 publication on astral magic and gems, *De Vita Coelitus Comparanda--On Receiving Life from the Heavens*.<sup>46</sup>

## GEMS AS SIGNIFIERS OF MARITAL DEBT

In addition to talismanic purposes, gemstones play an iconographic role through jewelry, as seen in marriage portraits (fig.2, 3). One of the more common wedding accessories was a gemstone pendant or brooch, usually square, surrounded by pearls on each side. The bride received these gems from her husband and his family as part of the

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<sup>45</sup> "Il 2 febbraio 1494 la Marchesa rimanda a Ferrara una *pietra de Aquila* e scribendo al Properi dice che sebbene quella pietra la si vanti 'molto a proposito a facilitare il parto,' non ha punto mostrato per lei 'la virtù sua,' perchè 'nui seza grandissima difficoltà non se scaricassimo.' Ciononpertanto non intepidì la fede di Isabella in quel genere di pietre, dacchè sul principio della seconda gravidanza partecipava al marito: 'De le due petre da l'Aquila che ho, una ne porto de continuo adosso, l'altra mando a la Ex. V. secondo che la me recercha.'" Alessandro Luizo and Rodolpho Reiner, *Mantova e Urbino: Isabella d'este ed Elisabetta Gonzaga nelle Relazioni Familiari e nelle Vicende Politiche; Narrazione Storica Documentata di Alessandro Luzio e Rodolfo Renier*, (Nineteenth Century Collections Online: Torino: L. Roux, 1893): 70fn1; Musacchio, *Art and Ritual* 140.

<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that invoking the powers of gems and stones was not viewed particularly favorably by the Catholic Church during the Renaissance, but the use of gems could be rationalized without questioning the power of God. Talismanic gems would have been permissible because they assisted in purifying a soul for God rather than taking a soul from God. Ficino avoids mention of worship or other religious terms in his 1489 publication on astral magic and gems. Ficino strongly believed that Platonism and Christianity were quite compatible, and his ideas on beauty and love as reflections of and connections to God influenced famous Renaissance artists and writers, such as Michelangelo. Both Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici sponsored his studies of Platonism. Aakjus 187, 199; Jill Kraye, "Ficino, Marsilio," *Oxford Art Online*, updated and revised March 31, 2000, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T02816>

counter-dowry, which was a response to receiving the dowry.<sup>47</sup> Instead of gifts pertaining to both the new husband and wife, the counter-dowry concerned the bride more exclusively. Typical counter-dowry items included sewing needles, clothing, and jewelry. There was no required response to these gifts, but brides would have been expected to repay her husband's family by putting these gifts to use in household and wifely duties.<sup>48</sup> In the case of bodily adornment such as jewelry, there is a sexual connotation. While jewelry communicated the husband's family's wealth, its primary purpose was still physical adornment.<sup>49</sup> These distinctive marital gems especially marked a new bride, reminding her (and those who saw her) of her new status and roles as a wife.<sup>50</sup> In this way, jewelry functioned as a reminder of debt that must be repaid with the body.<sup>51</sup>

The bride did not owe her husband sex, however, but procreation. Sex without intent to reproduce was considered sinful by medieval religious figures and neo-platonic

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<sup>47</sup> The dowry, given to the groom's family by the bride's family, included gifts meant to help the new couple begin their life together. Cash formed one part of the dowry and material goods, such as wedding chests, birth objects, linens, and money, formed the other part. The counter-dowry was an unofficial set of gifts, usually material items, that symbolically repaid the bride's family for the dowry. Adrian W.B. Randolph, "Performing the Bridal Body in Fifteenth-Century Florence," *Art History* 21, no. 2 (June 1988): 184.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 185-189

<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, sumptuary laws limited the amount of jewelry a bride could wear and how long she could wear it for. This proves that this was not an exceptional type of adornment and was actually expected within wedding customs and the corresponding attire. A Florentine sumptuary law of 1472, for example, states that three years after her marriage, the bride could wear necklaces, veils, a head brooch, and a shoulder brooch; three years after that, just one brooch and one necklace; three years after that, nothing beyond her regular clothes. Laws like this may account for the fact that, in a few portraits (such as the Tornabuoni portrait, fig. 3), the pendant is prominently included in the painting's background, but is not worn. *Ibid.* 189, 196.

<sup>50</sup> Randolph, "Bridal Body" 189.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 195.

thinkers alike.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, bridal jewelry served as a reminder of the bride's physical duty: acting as a vessel for her husband's seed, surrendering her body and its functions to produce children.<sup>53</sup> In fulfilling her role as a mother and providing heirs to continue the family line, she would have paid her new family back for her costly counter-dowry goods. We see this represented in Botticelli's *Primavera* through the three Graces and Flora. The two Graces facing the viewers, notably the one on the right, wear pendants remarkably similar (if not identical) to the pendants depicted in marriage portraits (fig. 2, 3). As the *Primavera* was likely meant to commemorate the marriage of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici and Semiramide Appiano, and because it originally hung in Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco's bedchamber, we can infer references to marriage in the work.<sup>54</sup> One of the figures of the painting, Flora, Zephyr's wife who stands to the right of Venus, does not wear any jewelry. While we could read her lack of adornment as an observation of sumptuary laws, context clues within the painting indicate that Flora may be pregnant (which I explain in the section on *cornici* and *spalliere*). She does not need to wear marriage gems because she has paid her bodily debt.

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<sup>52</sup> Lilian Zirpolo, "Botticelli's *Primavera*: a Lesson for the Bride," *Woman's Art Journal* 12, no.2 (Autumn 1991-Winter 1992): 26-27.

<sup>53</sup> Randolph, "Bridal Body" 190.

<sup>54</sup> Zirpolo 24.



Figure 2: Fra Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement*. Tempera on panel, c. 1440



Figure 3: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*. Tempera on panel, c. 1488.



Figure 4: Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera* (detail). Tempera on panel, c. 1480.

## NUPTIAL FURNISHINGS AS INSTRUCTION, INSPIRATION, AND TALISMAN

While the bride received jewelry, it was the husband's duty to furnish their rooms through items either purchased or received as gifts. Chief among these objects were *forzieri*, twin marriage chests known today as *cassoni*; *deschi da parto* and *tafferie da parto*, or birthing trays and bowls (respectively); and *cornici*, or large panel paintings hung high up on the wall. Each of these items had practical and decorative purposes, but their subject matter, intended audiences, and methods of being viewed support that they were also used to influence menstruation.

## DESCHI AND TAFFERIE DA PARTO AS TALISMANS

Birth trays (in the early fifteenth century) and bowls (in the late fifteenth century and onward) were used to bring food to women during their confinement periods.<sup>55</sup>

However, households found uses for them after births—some could be sold or given away, and some had board games painted on their undersides, which gave them another use.<sup>56</sup>

Apart from the occasional game board, however, these pieces were painted with various scenes and figures (much like *cornici* or *cassoni*) whose purposes went beyond decoration. Some of the most popular imagery on these trays and bowls pertained to childbirth.

Robust male infants frequently occur on these *deschi* and *tafferie da parto*. Few examples of birthing trays and bowls survive, but on the examples that we do have, we see muscular baby boys in various poses, scenes, and situations. The reason behind this proliferation of babies is similar to that of the *cornici*: they provided apotropaic and instructional imagery. As we have seen before, charms, herbs, and images held great power for Renaissance Italians. However, the babies on these trays and bowls would not have warded off spirits or instructed the bride to influence her body in the same ways as the panel paintings did. Rather, the healthy infants were meant to aid in “imaginative conception,” the belief that what the mother-to-be sees during her pregnancy influences her baby’s appearance.<sup>57</sup>

Although there are quite a few *deschi* and *tafferie* that illustrate this concept, two

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<sup>55</sup> Deborah L. Krohn, “Nuptial Furnishings in the Italian Renaissance,” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, November 2008, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nupt/hd\\_nupt.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nupt/hd_nupt.htm)

<sup>56</sup> Musacchio “Imaginative Conceptions,” 45.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 48.



trays from 1405 and 1428 by Bartolomeo di Fruosino stand out as examples of talismanic birth objects. One side (*verso*, fig. 5) of each features a robust male infant sitting in a woodland clearing, holding toys, and wearing coral charm necklaces. On the opposite sides (*recto*, fig. 6) are heavily populated confinement scenes taking place directly after the births, which we can infer by the babies being held in the foregrounds. The 1428 tray is especially laden with fertility imagery. The baby sits in the middle of a flourishing, natural scene much like the 1405 *desco*, but this baby is urinating. In Italian poetry from this era, urine was seen as the symbolic equivalent of ejaculation, and so images of cherubic boys urinating were considered decidedly masculine and, therefore, talismanic.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the inscription around the tray references urination: “MAY GOD GRANT HEALTH TO EVERY WOMAN WHO GIVES BIRTH AND TO THEIR FATHER... MAY [THE CHILD] BE BORN WITHOUT FATIGUE OR PERIL. I AM AN INFANT WHO LIVES ON [AN ISLAND?] AND MAKES URINE OF SILVER AND GOLD.”<sup>59</sup>

The inscription adds to the talismanic power of this piece. Words held special significance for Renaissance Italians, and charms made from inscribed texts were called *brevi*. Certain monasteries’ incomes included profit from selling *brevi* made from sacred texts to expecting mothers, such as Montecassino.<sup>60</sup> We see this reverence for written words on birth objects, too. Incantation-like inscriptions such as the one around the 1405 *desco* were not uncommon. One birth tray (c. 1530) simply states the word “MASCHIO” (“male”) within a decorative border instead of showcasing infants or postpartum

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<sup>58</sup> Patricia Simmons, “Manliness and the Visual Semiotics of Bodily Fluids in Early Modern Culture,” *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies* 39, no. 2 (2009): 332.

<sup>59</sup> Musacchio “Imaginative Conceptions,” 130.

<sup>60</sup> Musacchio *Art and Ritual* 141.

confinement rooms.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, a maiolica bowl has the name “SILVIA” on its inside and the word “PIENA” (“pregnant”) hidden on the underside of the bowl in the middle of the bowl’s foot ring.<sup>62</sup>



<sup>61</sup> Musacchio *Art and Ritual* 142.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 142.

Figure 5: Bartolomeo di Fruosino, c.1428 (verso)



Figure 6: Bartolomeo di Fruosino, c. 1428 (recto)

The fertility imagery would not only include male infants and text. Some scenes held a more sexual charge, such as the so-called Master of 1416's tray with two scenes from the

1342 *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* by Giovanni Boccaccio (fig. 7).<sup>63</sup> Now split into two panels, the tray had protagonist Ameto discovering nymphs hunting and singing on one side and a musical competition between shepherds (judged by Ameto and the nymph Lia) on the other. Although this does not directly pertain to birth imagery, it does refer to procreation through its iconography and literary reference. The combination of flowers, hunting, and a fountain on this tray contributes to *voluptas*, the Latin word for desire, which was associated with women and femininity during the fifteenth century.<sup>64</sup> The fountain, which appears on other nuptial artworks such as Titian's *The Sacred and Profane Love*, discussed below, may have been a symbol of fertility as well as a reference to tranquil love. Flowing water holds erotic power in such paintings, and its presence contributes to the representations of beautiful, youthful figures who may have helped the mother-to-be imprint their features onto her child.

The vegetal aspects of the *deschi* discussed above also contribute to the talismanic nature of these nuptial objects. Depictions of flourishing plants, of *verdure*, translated from tapestries hung in the homes of the Renaissance elite, formed a key part of early 15th century paintings. This subject matter added to the pastoral element of *voluptas*, and it was also very in vogue for interior decor--wall hangings were in high demand among Italian Renaissance households.<sup>65</sup> One hangs in the background of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *The Birth of John the Baptist* (fig. 8), and the back of a *desco da parto* (c. 1410) is similarly filled

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<sup>63</sup> "Ameto's Discovery of the Nymphs," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436988>

<sup>64</sup> Graham Hughes, *Renaissance Cassoni*, (London: Starcity Publishing, 1997): 94-96.

<sup>65</sup> Musacchio *Art, Marriage, and Family* 118-121.

with floral decoration.<sup>66</sup> The other side of the tray features a garden with lovers exchanging glances. Musacchio states that this figured side would have been flipped once the encouraging imagery was no longer needed, but while human figures were the most potent pieces of apotropaic imagery, lush gardens also played a role.<sup>67</sup> Surrounding the inspirational figures with floral fecundity would have amplified their power both aesthetically and talismanically.



<sup>66</sup> Musacchio *Art, Marriage, and Family* 119-120.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 118-121.

Figure 7: Master of 1416. *Ameto's Discovery of the Nymphs*. Tempera on wood, c. 1410.



Figure 8: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Birth of John the Baptist*. Fresco, c. 1486-1490.

## CASSONI AND THEIR HIDDEN MEANINGS

We find similar imagery on *cassoni*, or twin marriage chests. Originally called *forzieri*, these chests were used to store dresses, linens, and other household goods associated with domesticity and the bride's dowry (fig. 9). Traditionally, the chests contained the bride's dowry items, and they were carried behind the bride in her procession to the groom. In the house, they served as decoration and as seating or tables in

addition to storage in the bedchamber. The outer decoration of these chests switched from painting to carving in the late fifteenth century, but painted figures remained a vital part of the imagery on the undersides of the lids.

Talismanic imagery found its way onto *cassoni* in some similar ways to that of *deschi da parto*; male infants appear on marriage chests with the same inspirational intention. On one *cassone* side panel by Apollonio di Giovanni, for instance, a baby boy plays with a weasel. The weasel had long been a phallic icon of fertility, and its inclusion alongside a healthy male baby would have reinforced its power.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, two babies, with their male genitalia clearly visible, play trumpets while riding on dolphins on the inside of a *cassone* lid.<sup>69</sup>

The lids of *cassoni* are worth noting due to their capacity for providing discretion. While there were plenty of scenes on *cassoni* that would not need hiding, other images may have required more demure placement. The underside of a hinged lid would be ideal for this. The intended audience, then, would have been the wife, as she was the one who used the chests and would have seen this hidden imagery most often as she took linens and other household goods out of the chests. One of the more popular images for *cassoni* lids were nude or scantily clad reclining figures, which fit nicely into the long, horizontal format of the chest lids (fig. 10). These sensually displayed men and women would have served as inspiration for the wife, and their idealized beauty would have contributed to imaginative conception.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Musacchio *Art and Ritual* 131.

<sup>69</sup> Musacchio *Art, Marriage, and Family* 151-153.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 151-153.



Figure 9: The Morelli Chest, c. 1472





Figure 10: Cassone by Lo Scheggia, mid-15th c.

## CORNICI AND SPALLIERE AS LESSON AND TALISMAN

*Cornici*, paintings meant to be hung in bedchambers above eye level,<sup>71</sup> contained Classical, biblical, and mythological imagery. *Spalliere* were the painted panels originally attached to the backs of furniture (typically *cassoni*), but they were often removed and used as wall paintings much like cornici. Usually, size and medium are indications of whether or

<sup>71</sup> Deborah L. Krohn, "Nuptial Furnishings in the Italian Renaissance," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, November 2008, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nupt/hd\\_nupt.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nupt/hd_nupt.htm)

not a work would have been attached to furniture or painted as a work on its own.<sup>72</sup> In addition to being visually rich, these artworks had apotropaic and instructional purposes—especially for the bride in regards to her primary duty: producing male heirs. Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Lorenzo Lotto's *Venus and Cupid*, Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, and Botticelli's *Primavera* exemplify *cornici* meant to hold sway over the bride's body.



Figure 11: Titian, *Venus of Urbino*. Oil on canvas, 1538.

The *Venus of Urbino* is especially compelling as an instructional painting, but scholars have often questioned its association with marriage (fig. 11). Iconography plays an important role in determining the painting's purpose. The nude woman, whom I will call

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<sup>72</sup> Krohn.

“Venus,”<sup>73</sup> holds a posy of roses and myrtle, which were (and are) plants associated with love and marriage.<sup>74</sup> In the background, two maids take linens out of *cassoni*. At Venus’s feet lies a sleeping dog, a symbol of fidelity.<sup>75</sup> Venus’s intent gaze is also directed at the viewer in an intense manner that would suggest reciprocation.<sup>76</sup> The combination of the posy, the *cassoni*, the dog, and Venus’s gaze leads the audience to assume that the person Venus addresses with her eyes would be her husband.

Historic context is also key to understanding the purpose of the *Venus of Urbino*. Duke Guidobaldo della Rovere wrote to Titian twice within three months, expressing his interest in owning the work.<sup>77</sup> Although there are no records that indicate the painting’s commission, della Rovere’s writings to Titian would lead one to surmise that he was the commissioner.<sup>78</sup> In addition, della Rovere sent these letters four years after his marriage to

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<sup>73</sup> While we call the woman in this painting “Venus” today, it is unclear whether or not she would have been read as Venus by her Renaissance viewers. In his letters to Titian, della Rovere simply calls her “la donna nuda,” or “the nude woman” (Rosand 50). Her placement in a domestic setting and the associated iconography is all fairly worldly; nothing overtly places her in the realm of the divine. This is most likely not, however, meant to be a portrait of Giulia Varano. Marriage paintings, especially *cornici*, often did not represent the bride in a literal sense. Idiosyncrasies may lead the viewer to read the subject as a specific individual rather than a generalized beauty, but whether or not viewers could identify that individual remains a topic of heated debate in the art historical community. This is true even of portraits that include the name of the sitter in their titles; artists sometimes used a different model than the actual bride. Indeed, unless we had several named portraits recognizable as the same woman, it would be very difficult to identify a specific woman through one portrait. These models in marriage paintings served as placeholders: representations of ideal beauty rather than a record of a real person, functioning as inspirations and talismans.

<sup>74</sup> Rona Goffen, “Sex, Space, and Social History in Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*” in *Titian’s Venus of Urbino* ed. Rona Goffen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 68.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 85.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 79-80.

Giulia Varano in 1534.<sup>79</sup> While it may seem strange to wait four years to purchase a wedding painting, the timeline of della Rovere and Titian's correspondence makes sense when one considers Giulia Varano's age upon marriage. She was only ten in 1534, and it is highly unlikely that she had begun menstruating at that point in time. Couples traditionally waited until physical maturity to consummate their marriages.<sup>80</sup> The average age of menarche at that time was fourteen—Varano's age in 1538<sup>81</sup>—and so it would make sense that the groom would wait for the marriage to be officially consummated before acquiring a painting meant to commemorate that marriage.

This brings one of the other salient elements of the *Venus of Urbino* to light: Venus's left hand, which curls into her genitalia in a manner that suggests autoerotic stimulation. The viewer's eyes are naturally drawn to it, as it is on the central vertical axis of the painting and it is also where the dark curtain and the lighter space of the room meet. Because of this gesture, the *Venus of Urbino* has been read as a crude and overindulgent work of art in the past by distinguished intellectual figures in the Western canon (such as Mark Twain).<sup>82</sup> These viewpoints do not keep the marital aspects of the piece in mind, and

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<sup>79</sup> Goffen, "Sex, Space, and Social History," 81.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>82</sup> "...You enter, and proceed to that most-visited little gallery that exists in the world—the Tribune—and there, against the wall, without obstructing rag or leaf, you may look your fill upon the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses—Titian's Venus...There are pictures of nude women which suggest no impure thought—I am well aware of that. I am not railing at such. What I am trying to emphasize is the fact that Titian's Venus is very far from being one of that sort. Without any question it was painted for a bagnio and it was probably refused because it was a trifle too strong. In truth, it is too strong for any place but a public Art Gallery. Titian has two Venuses in the Tribune; persons who have seen them will easily remember which one I am referring to." Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad* (2004), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/119/119-h/119-h.htm> (It is worth noting that Twain often wrote from a satyric point of view in order to spur

they disregard the medical reasoning behind Venus's hand. Rather than being pornographic, this painting was meant to inspire and instruct. Renaissance Italians subscribed to the Aristotelian theory that conception was impossible without orgasm from both partners, as women would release their "seed" (*menstruum*, built-up menstrual blood) during orgasm much like men did.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, paintings like Titian's *Venus of Urbino* served a productive (or, rather, reproductive) purpose. Titian's Venus' left hand serves as a visual for the sort of stimulation required to achieve orgasm and thus encourage the release of *menstruum*, completely appropriate for a young woman who had recently begun menstruation.<sup>84</sup>

If Titian's Venus was not read as a goddess, this does not mean that other examples of women on *cornici* weren't Venuses. One particular example is Lorenzo Lotto's *Venus and Cupid* (fig. 12). The presence of Cupid, with his wings and bow, is the main indicator that the woman is indeed Venus and not a worldly beauty. The setting is also far from ordinary, being half-natural (a tree with a vine on it, the grass-covered ground) and half-artificial (red drapery strung up as a backdrop, the blue fabric bunched under Venus). Subject identification aside, this painting is similar to the *Venus of Urbino* in its use of marital imagery. This Venus wears a bridal veil, holds a myrtle wreath, has roses by her hip and her shin (respectively), and has rose petals strewn over her—symbols of love and marriage. In addition, we find references to ancient poetry by the Roman author Catullus through the

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conversation, and this instigation could be one of those instances.) David Rosand, "So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch" in *Titian's Venus of Urbino* ed. Rona Goffen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 38-40.

<sup>83</sup> Bell 52; Wood 716-17.

<sup>84</sup> Goffen "Sex, Space, and Social History," 77, 81.

vine, climbing up the tree trunk in the background, emulating the “clinging nature of love.”

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Figure 12: Lorenzo Lotto, *Venus and Cupid*. Oil on canvas, mid-1520s.

Fertility iconography is likewise prevalent in this painting. The conch, for example, whose vaginal form dangles above Venus’s head, is both an attribute to Venus and a carnal image. The placement of the rose petals along Venus’s thighs and pubic area also brings

<sup>85</sup> Andrea Bayer, “Venus and Cupid,” in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Andrea Bayer, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008): 321.

procreation to mind. One of the most salient elements of the painting, however, is the leering Cupid either urinating or ejaculating through the wreath and onto Venus. Like the *Venus of Urbino*, this may be absurd and obscene to the contemporary viewer, but it is a gesture of fecundity rather than a lewd scene. The fact that the urine (or ejaculation) goes through a myrtle wreath and lands on Venus's supine body invokes marital imagery as well as Aristotelian medical theory—woman's contribution to procreation is form while man's is matter, and so it is the man who is playing a more active role in creation.<sup>86</sup> (This is why the *menstruum*, when not used towards procreation, is formless blood when expelled through menstruation.)<sup>87</sup>

Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* is similarly laden with iconography through its baby satyrs, despite their largely comical role in the painting (fig. 13).<sup>88</sup> The satyr on the bottom right, under Mars's arm, is especially relevant to fertility because he holds a gourd. This hearkens to imagery from *Leucippe and Clitophon*, a fourth-century romance novel popular in Medieval and Renaissance times which mentions a garden full of plants that resemble human genitalia.<sup>89</sup> (It should be known that reading Greek novels was considered a remedy for physical ailments in and of itself.)<sup>90</sup> Among these plants is a gourd, whose seediness and shape resembles a scrotum. Keeping the popular Aristotelian theory of the period in mind, this could also symbolize a uterus full of *menstruum*. The satyr's strange expression was meant to mirror the apotropaic facial expressions of Roman satyrs, which

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<sup>86</sup> Wood 716.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 716.

<sup>88</sup> Paul Barolsky, *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978): 42.

<sup>89</sup> Clark 5.

<sup>90</sup> Clark 5.

adds to the significance of the gourd.<sup>91</sup> The satyr's grasp on Mars's sword hilt should not be ignored either, as the sword was (as it is today) a phallic symbol. The lance that mirrors the strong horizontal line of Venus and Mars' bodies, too, is phallic, and the fact that the satyrs shove it towards a vulvar cleft in a tree (and another vaginal-shaped conch) is also worth noting. The wasps spilling out of the tree may be seen at first to symbolize the dangers of adultery with which Mars must contend. However, it is more likely that they actually refer to the Vespucci family (Vespucci is similar to *vespa*, or wasp), as their coat of arms includes wasps. This may also further indicate that this is a marriage painting, as other marriage paintings for the Vespucci also have wasps in them.<sup>92</sup>



Figure 13: Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*. Tempera and oil on panel, c. 1483.

Another contemporarily famous Botticelli piece, *Primavera*, would have served as an instructional and apotropaic painting (fig. 14). Lilian Zirpolo states that this painting, along

<sup>91</sup> Clark 5.

<sup>92</sup> Barolsky 44.



with the other furniture in this room, was an example of submission and procreation for the bride.<sup>93</sup> Thanks to the work of Webster Smith, we know that this painting belonged to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici and it adorned the wall above a *lettuccio* in a room next to the nuptial chamber.<sup>94</sup> The imagery solidifies this painting's role as an artwork meant to commemorate marriage—Mercury contemplates the abundance of oranges in the trees above (symbols of the Medici). The three graces bedecked in marriage gems<sup>95</sup> dance while Cupid aims a flaming arrow at the dancer closest to the audience, symbolizing her departure from virginity.<sup>96</sup> Myrtle frames the central Venus, who looks at the viewer and raises her hand; a potentially pregnant Flora likewise addresses the viewer with her eyes while roses cascade from the folds of her gown; Zephyr grabs Chloris, whom he will later force into submission, marry, and rename Flora as a reward for her compliance.<sup>97</sup> All stand on a rich carpet of blossoms.

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<sup>93</sup> Lilian Zirpolo, "Botticelli's *Primavera*: a Lesson for the Bride," *Woman's Art Journal* 12, no.2 (Autumn 1991-Winter 1992): 24

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 24

<sup>95</sup> Randolph "Performing the Bridal Body," 189

<sup>96</sup> Zirpolo 25

<sup>97</sup> Zirpolo 26

Figure 14: Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*. Tempera on panel, 1482.

The floral fecundity of the scene, much like that of Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, would serve an apotropaic purpose as much as an aesthetic one. Flora, the female figure to Venus's left, is an example of how vegetal fertility meets human fertility. She supports a bunch of roses with her left arm as she dips her right hand into them. She is entirely surrounded by flowers. They grow up from her collar, circle her ribs, surround her feet, adorn her hair, and decorate her gown. Her arms and the roses that lie along them call attention to her swelling abdomen, which may indicate pregnancy. Although the other female figures in the painting are quite full-figured, none of their abdominal regions portray as much of a curve as Flora's. The Grace on the far left of the painting, for example, may have a curve in her abdomen similar to that of Flora, but her spine is also more curved due to her dancing. Flora, on the other hand, most likely does not have the same curved spine; if she did, her shoulders and chest would be angled backwards. We see this backwards angle through the leftmost Grace's shoulders and chest. Botticelli also emphasizes the swell of Flora's abdomen through the highlights on her gown. Her brightest points are at the most curved parts of her body—her left thigh, her left upper arm, and the top of her abdomen. None of the other female figures (with the exception of the dancing Graces, as explained previously) exhibit this rounding of the upper abdomen. Flora's story, too, supports her pregnancy. Zephyr married her and named her Flora to reward her for submitting to rape. Although the narrative does not include her pregnancy, Zirpolo states that religious authorities that Renaissance Italians followed viewed sex sans procreation as

a grave sin on par with adultery.<sup>98</sup> In an instructional painting for a new bride, therefore, it would be counterintuitive (and perhaps sinful) to include an example of fruitless marital sex.

Flora's narrative plays out directly to the right and slightly in front of her. The blue-grey Zephyr flies in and grabs the startled Chloris. Zirpolo likens Chloris to an animal with her flailing arms and wild gaze.<sup>99</sup> However, after marriage, she is transformed into Flora, the smiling, flower-bedecked woman who meets the viewer's gaze. This story of submission, implied rape, and pregnancy, though depicted in reverse, would resonate with the bride because of its relevance to her life. Although she may not have been as crudely abducted as Chloris, she would have recently undergone a sudden and drastic change in her life by moving into her husband's house to live with her husband's family. Having the foundation of the bride's own narrative laid out in paint, Flora would represent what the bride's new position in life required next: breeding. Botticelli understandably renders pregnancy with many positive symbols. Flora, the smiling new bride with a new name courtesy of her husband Zephyr, holds a wealth of roses against her swelling abdomen. Her costume, too, is sumptuous; of all the figures present, only Venus's gown and mantle can match Flora's in the use of elaborate patterns, rich colors, and gold.

Perhaps the most compelling details describing the elevation of Flora's status are her smile and her gaze. The viewers must contend with her expression because she engages them directly. Again, the only other figure who can claim the same interaction is Venus, and even she lacks a smile as overt as that of Flora. The gaze, however, is the true

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<sup>98</sup> Zirpolo 26-27.

<sup>99</sup> Zirpolo 26.

source of power in Flora's composition. Goffen writes about the effect of painted subjects' gazes in an essay on Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* and an essay on Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. In both essays, she cites Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* as an example of the female subject's gaze traditionally being turned to the beloved, supporting her stances on Titian's paintings as sexually charged marital works.<sup>100</sup> In the case of Titian's painted women, the direct nature of the subjects' gazes would demand to be returned by the viewer, which gives them sexual power and implies their sexual consent.<sup>101</sup> Flora and Venus are not looking out to their intended audience in order to seduce them in the same manner, but like Titian's subjects, their gaze is meant to communicate a message. Flora wordlessly tells a success story of marriage and abundance, but this story also communicates that the bride must submit her body and its functions to procreation. Her chief role in marriage is pregnancy, which cannot take place without the build-up and subsequent release of



<sup>100</sup> Rona Goffen, "Sex, Space, and Social History: 83-85; Rona Goffen, "Titian's Sacred and Profane Love: Individuality and Sexuality in a Renaissance Marriage Picture," *Studies in the History of Art* 45 (1993): 121, 131.

<sup>101</sup> Goffen "Sacred and Profane Love" 121, 131.

*menstruum*.

Figure 15: Titian, *Sacred and Profane Love*. Oil on canvas, 1514.

Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514), another marital painting, may contain menstrual imagery (fig. 15). This painting, set in a pastoral landscape, centers on two versions of the same woman, thought to be Laura Bagarotto because it was commissioned for her marriage to Niccoló Aurelio, seated on either side of a Roman sarcophagus that has been converted into a fountain.<sup>102</sup> The woman on the left is fully clothed, seated on the edge of the sarcophagus fountain, and looking at the viewer. Her right hand holds a small bunch of myrtle, part of the traditional marriage bouquet, and her left hand rests on a silver jug, a typical dowry item.<sup>103</sup> The woman on the right has only a white cloth draped over her groin and right thigh, and a red cloth is draped over her left upper arm. She leans on the edge of the sarcophagus but isn't fully seated, her right hand resting on the sarcophagus lid and her left hand holding up a brazier.

Fertility imagery abounds in this painting through the hares in the backgrounds behind both women, the shepherding and hunting scenes, the lush vegetation, and the fountain. Cupid, a little off-center but still the figure closest to the painting's central line, may work as a talismanic figure much as the infants on the *deschi* did. He plays with the water of the sarcophagus and it is through the diagonal of this arm (which connects to the myrtle plant in front of the sarcophagus) that we find the sarcophagus's spout. Gushing

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<sup>102</sup> Goffen "Sacred and Profane Love" 123.

<sup>103</sup> Andrea Bayer, "Art and Love in the Italian Renaissance," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, November 2008, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/arlo/hd\\_arlo.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/arlo/hd_arlo.htm)

water was a symbol of male virility in much of the art and literature of the era, as we have already seen.<sup>104</sup> The proximity of a coat of arms to the spout may communicate Aurelio's potency or attach his name to this talismanic symbol. In this way, the spout could function similarly to the satyr holding the gourd in the bottom right corner of Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*.

Recent research on the iconography of the Haemorrhissa, the woman with an "issue of the blood" in the Gospel of Mark, may point to potential for additional readings of this antique fountain in Titian's painting.<sup>105</sup> In this biblical story, a woman who had been suffering some medical issue related to blood touches Jesus' robes in an effort to get him to heal her. Jesus turns and asks who touched him, and when she comes forward to confess that it was her, he lays his hands on her head and heals her.<sup>106</sup> The Bible is not explicit in labeling exactly what this issue is, but a pathology related to menstruation has been a common interpretation.<sup>107</sup> Images of the Haemorrhissa are not uncommon in Early and Late Christian art. It may be difficult to identify this scene due to the lack of attributes that are typically included in scenes of miraculous healing, but we can identify the scene as a miraculous healing due to the presence of the Apostles and the positions of Jesus' hands over the woman's head.<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, when it appears in certain frescoes and sarcophagi, there is a visual connection between the Haemorrhissa and flowing water. It

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<sup>104</sup> Simons 348.

<sup>105</sup> Barbara Baert, Liesbet Kusters, and Emma Sidgwick, "An Issue of Blood: The Healing of the Woman with the Haemorrhage ( Mark 5.24B–34; Luke 8.42B–48; Matthew 9.19–22) in Early Medieval Visual Culture," *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 3, (2012): 644.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 645.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* 666.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* 669.

appears five times in the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus (fig. 16), for example, and in two instances, it is right next to biblical scenes involving water: Moses striking water from a rock and the Samaritan woman at the well, respectively.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, the Haemorrhissa appears alongside water imagery on sarcophagi. The sarcophagus of Celsus in Milan (4th c. CE), for example, features her healing moment with Christ along with Peter turning the prison wall into water.<sup>110</sup> We see this moment again on the Brescia casket, to the right of a fish and directly under a depiction of Jonah being swallowed by the whale (fig. 17). This connection likely stems from the wording surrounding the epicenter of the Haemorrhissa's condition, "*fons sanguinis*," or fountain or source of blood, which has ties to the laws regarding menstruation in Leviticus.<sup>111</sup>

It is uncertain what access Renaissance Italians had to these specific monuments and objects, but they may have known of the Brescia casket, and they certainly had knowledge of the Bible. Additionally, as most fifteenth- and sixteenth-century doctors viewed female seed (*menses* or *menstruum*) as similar to male seed in its buildup and release upon orgasm, it would not be difficult for the viewer to apply this typically male reading of fertility iconography to a female subject. The subject in question, rendered twice, is also physically on this centrally located sarcophagus-turned-fountain. Currently, I have found no sources to indicate that educated people living in Italy during the Renaissance knew the potential Early Christian links between menstrual imagery and water imagery. However, the people of the Renaissance had access to these biblical stories and the Brescia

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<sup>109</sup> Baert et al. 670.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 670.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 666.

casket. I find it highly unlikely that the presence of this sarcophagus fountain in juxtaposition with the other elements of female fertility imagery is purely a coincidence. If educated Renaissance Italians could make the same connections between sarcophagi, fountains, and the Haemorrhissa as Early Christians in the same geographical location did, then we may be able to identify the fountain in this painting as a menstrual reference. Even without this religious context, however, the associations between flowing water and fertility could apply to these images of Laura Bagarotto due to their direct contact with the fountain.





Figure 16: *Jesus Healing the Bleeding Woman*, detail from Catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.

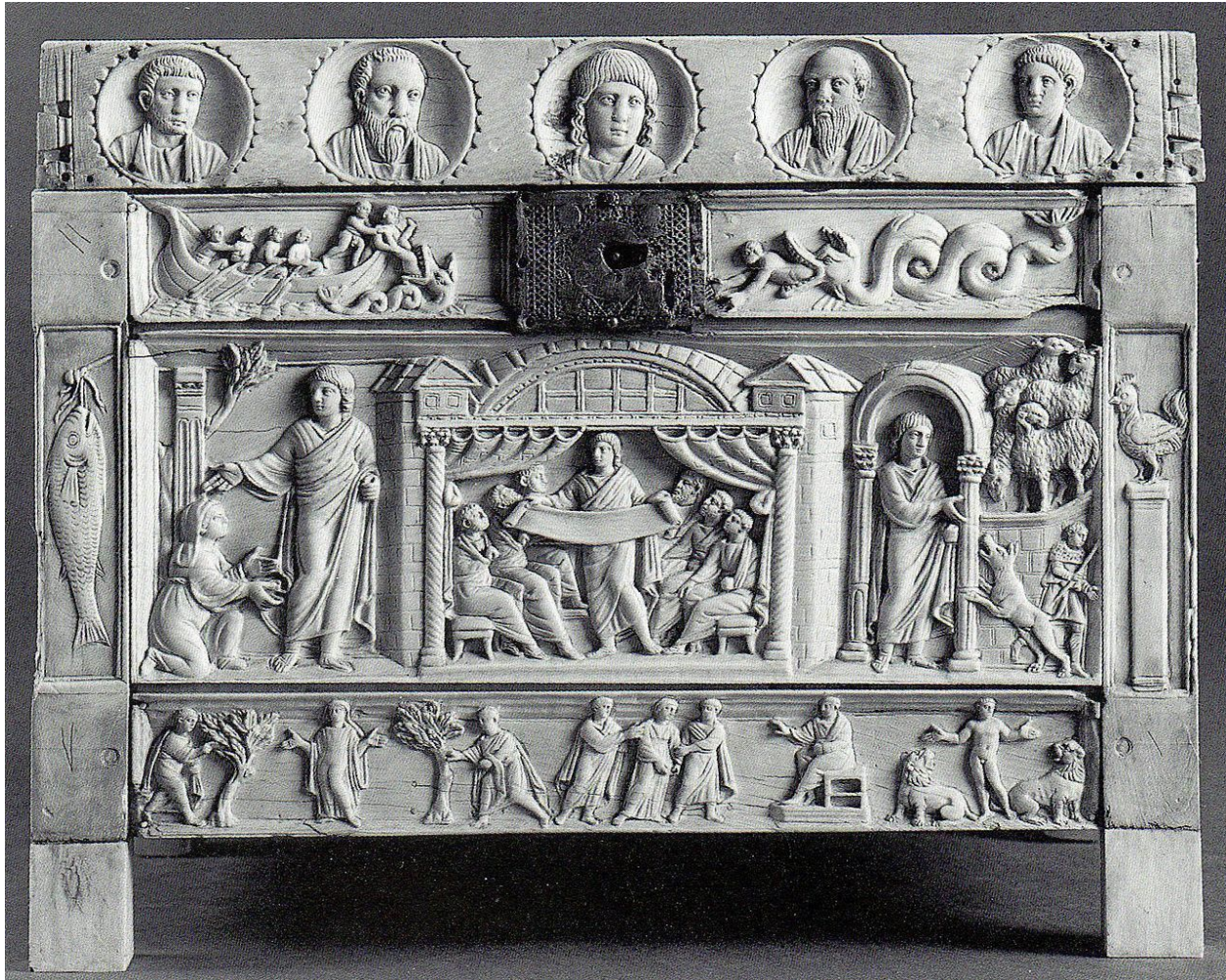


Figure 17: *Brescia casket (front)*. Ivory panels, walnut frame, silver lock, late 4th c. CE.

## PICTURING MARY: THE VIRGIN AS A MODEL

### SOCIAL AND ARTISTIC CONCEPTIONS OF THE VIRGIN MARY

The Virgin Mary has traditionally functioned as a model for Catholic women during the Italian Renaissance. Her piety, chastity, and industriousness reflected the virtues that women were supposed to have, according to authors who wrote about the public conduct of women, such as Paolo da Certaldo:

“She did not spend time outside her house, chatting here, there and everywhere, nor listening to men nor looking at them, not doing other vain things, on the contrary, she was shut away in a hidden and honest place... And so all faithful Christian women should learn from her and follow her, so that they would be acceptable to God and to their husbands and to everybody else they know.”<sup>112</sup>

With the idea that images could be used as examples within the home, it would make sense that this central female figure in Christianity features prominently in domestic art. However, the influx of naturalism in art during the fifteenth century made the creation of her visual depictions difficult; upon the removal of her iconographic attributes, Mary becomes an ordinary woman. To make matters more challenging and possibly problematic, Mary is often described as beautiful. Francesco della Rovere (as he was called before becoming Pope Sixtus IV) invokes images from Song of Songs in a sermon about Mary, calling her an “incredibly beautiful girl (*haec est illa puella decora nimis a prophetis decantata*) and very lovely daughter (*filia vaga*).”<sup>113</sup> Bernardino de’ Busti, a prolific Franciscan monk, also comments on Mary’s physicality in his writing on Mary, the *Mariale* (1492): “God chose this most holy girl (*puella*) as his spouse before the ages, and made her most splendid in her beauty.”<sup>114</sup> This “splendid beauty” could be troublesome within the framework of naturalistic art. She could be subjected to the same erotic gaze as other works of art, should the viewer misinterpret or ignore the signifiers of her divine identity. Indeed, Mary’s image occasionally suffered eroticism. Leonardo da Vinci wrote of a man so enamored with his painting of the Virgin that he asked Leonardo to remove the attributions in order to kiss the painting without fear of falling into sin. Leonardo refused, and the man

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<sup>112</sup> Tinagli 158.

<sup>113</sup> Kim Butler-Wingfield, “The Immaculate Body in the Sistine Ceiling,” *Art History* 32, no. 2, (2009): 262.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 262.

eventually eliminated the risk of temptation by giving away the painting.<sup>115</sup> Artists had to be quite cautious in their depictions of the Virgin, should her beauty cross from the realm of the spiritual into something more sensual.

Although there were risks of sensualizing the Virgin, her beauty could act to communicate other aspects of her life and her function in Christianity. Youthful beauty, for example, could have been meant to signal Mary's creation in a state of grace, or the belief that she was conceived free of all sin. This would follow the period's Neo-Platonic theories that beauty represented virtue in a person, and that seeking and viewing beauty would bring one closer to divinity.<sup>116</sup> Renaissance scholars debated when Mary began her sinlessness in life. Some believed she was absolved of sin upon Jesus's conception, while others thought she entered this state of grace in the moments of Creation.<sup>117</sup> Although Mary could not technically have sinned in utero or before her body was formed, her identity as a woman would have otherwise condemned her as a sinner from the beginning of time. Doctrine almost ubiquitously stated that all women, as descendants of Eve, lived with reminders of Eve's transgressions in the Garden of Eden. One of the primary reminders of the original sin was menstruation. God had condemned humanity to mortality but did not want human extinction, so he created pregnancy and carnality as a way to remind humans of their sin while carrying on their species (according to the *Malleus malleficarum*). Mary did not carry the taint of the original sin, but she *did* give birth to Christ. Therefore, she

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<sup>115</sup> Megan Holmes, "Disrobing the Virgin: The *Madonna Lactans* in Fifteenth-century Florentine Art" in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* ed. Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997):182.

<sup>116</sup> Krays.

<sup>117</sup> Mirella Levi D'Ancona, "The Doni Tondo by Michelangelo: An Iconographic Study," *The Art Bulletin* 50, no. 8 (1968): 43.

would have had to have been physically fertile in order to conceive Christ (and breastfeed Him, which I will expand upon in the next section). Italian women experienced these bodily functions as well, and so Mary would have been relatable to most women in this basic respect.

This is not to say that Mary's narrative in Catholicism always follows a scientific trajectory--indeed, two other major events in her life are nothing short of miraculous. Mary conceives through the Holy Spirit. There is no intercourse involved in Christ's conception whatsoever (hence her virginal identity). The circumstances around her death are also spectacular, although vague. Mary also does not die as an ordinary person would, being incorruptible by death. Both conception and death are quintessential human experiences. Christ's own death as a sacrifice for all humanity is the foundation of Christianity, but Christ is the son of God, simultaneously fully human and fully divine. It is strange, then, that Mary, who is strictly human, does not have the two human experiences of physical death and conception via intercourse. Stripping Christ's mother and source of earthly ties of her humanity, however, would strip Christ of his own humanity, which would invalidate Christ's role as a paragon of humanity. In order to retain Mary as the human element responsible for Christ's creation, she had to have gone through other typical human experiences. These experiences would also be crucial for cementing her status as a role model for Catholic women of the Italian Renaissance.

## MADONNA LACTANS



Figure 18: Leonardo da Vinci, *Madonna Litta*. Tempera on canvas (transferred from panel), c. 1490.

Menstruation was one of these necessary experiences, and we find quite direct representations of it through *Madonna lactans* paintings, or portraiture of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding.<sup>118</sup> In church settings, these paintings could be read as allegories of faith, i.e. nourishing people through faith the way Mary nourished Jesus through lactation.<sup>119</sup> They had long been common subjects in religious paintings even before the Renaissance, and

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<sup>118</sup> Wood 725.

<sup>119</sup> Holmes 171.

they continued to enjoy popularity during this era. In addition to serving as inspiration or instruction for the mother, Megan Holmes suggests that *Madonna lactans* pieces in domestic settings may have functioned as psychological ties between biological parents and the wet nurse (“blood parents” and “milk parents”) if the nurse took the child to live with her during the nursing period.<sup>120</sup> In this way, parents of the child would still be able to witness a sort of lactation and feel a sense of control through this gaze.<sup>121</sup> While many of the examples Holmes cites within her essay could easily be altarpieces due to their large scale, one artwork stands out. Leonardo da Vinci’s *Madonna Litta*, measuring at 42x33cm,<sup>122</sup> is the proper size for a domestic work (figure 18). In addition, Leonardo da Vinci has written about painting portraits of Mary for domestic settings, which further supports that this painting could have been used in such a personal manner.<sup>123</sup> These portraits were actually major sources of commissions for artists in fourteenth-century Florence, and their popularity is present in the inventories of certain Florentine elites; Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici lists six paintings of the Virgin in his 1417 *ricordanza*.<sup>124</sup> Religious images such as these were thought to influence the people that saw them in an educational manner. Giovanni Dominici (c. 1356-1419), a Dominican friar and leading author in familial advice books, encourages families to keep pictures of the Virgin and other such virtuous figures in

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<sup>120</sup> Holmes 191

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* 191

<sup>122</sup> “Madonna and Child (The Litta Madonna),” *The State Heritage Museum*, <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.+Paintings/29633/?lng=en>

<sup>123</sup> Holmes 182

<sup>124</sup> “Images of the Virgin and Child at Home,” *Oxford University Press*, <http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/units/unit-1/essays/images-of-the-virgin-and-child-at-home/>

the home so that children would grow to take after those figures. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), who also wrote treatises on family life (and art), supported these ideas as well.

## THE BODY OF THE VIRGIN

Despite Mary's role as the most perfect example for women in Catholicism, her primary role concerns flesh--chiefly, the creation of Jesus'. As his father is technically God, Jesus' physical body stems only from Mary. In line with the medical theories of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Mary's menstrual blood is the sole secular element that forms Christ's body. Very few writings speak to Mary's menstrual blood forming the body and nourishment of Christ Himself, Bernardino de Busti's *Mariale* being one of the exceptions which state this directly, saying that Mary's body alone formed Christ's body.<sup>125</sup> This information would have been available for the literate upper and middle classes of Italy at this age through popular guidebooks by figures like Michele Savonarola and Lorenzo Gioberti. Whether or not the Church would have recognized this is a different question, however, and one that still requires an answer. However, this paper would be lacking if it did not mention Michelangelo's treatment of the Virgin's body in two of his most famous works, the Sistine Chapel ceiling and the *Doni Tondo*.

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<sup>125</sup> "...see de'Busti, II, iv, 3: '...sanctissima genetrix fuit super omnes humanas creatoras speciossima. Hanc enim corporalem pulchritudinem recepit non a patre... illa corporalem pulchritudinem quam alii filli recipiunt ab utrisque parentibus totam habuit christus a sola matre sua benedicta... de suis purissimus sanguinibus ipsum generavit.'" Butler-Wingfield 252, 282fn22.



Kim Butler-Wingfield writes that we must look closer at the figurative language of Pope Sixtus IV's 1448 Marian sermon in order to discover more about Renaissance conceptions of Mary in the Sistine ceiling. He does not describe her outright, but speaks of her in metaphors, likening her to biblical creation and heroines.<sup>126</sup> Butler-Wingfield proposes that we see these metaphors translated into visual images through Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling through elements such as the thematic contrapposto of its scenes and the emphasis on muscular flesh. Viewers could read both of these aspects of the ceiling with other interpretations in addition to Immaculist ideology (the belief that Mary attained purity upon her conception or upon Creation). However, Michelangelo's choices of image placement and figural representation may function as a visual translation of the abstract metaphors included in Marian writings like Pope Sixtus IV's sermon.<sup>127</sup>

Scholars like John O'Malley have also argued that the Sistine ceiling carries an Immaculist theme through its focus on the body. This emphasis, which ultimately dominates the ceiling, reflects the sermons given in the papal court at the time.<sup>128</sup> We see a similar emphasis on Mary's body in Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo* (c. 1500-1510), which may also reference what Butler-Wingfield calls "fleshly generation," or Mary's role in creating the body of Christ (fig. 20). Iconography specialist Mirella Levi D'Ancona identified the tondo as a reference to Michelangelo's support for the largely Dominican-affiliated Maculist theory, the idea that Mary became pure upon the conception or possibly birth of Christ, rather than Immaculist theory.<sup>129</sup> D'Ancona argues that Jesus' position in regard to Mary

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<sup>126</sup> Butler-Wingfield 251.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* 253, 255; D'Ancona 43.

<sup>128</sup> Butler-Wingfield 255.

<sup>129</sup> D'Ancona 43.

showcase this: although it may seem as though Mary is holding Jesus up, her hands only barely touch him.<sup>130</sup> Jesus, on the other hand, places his hands on Mary's head as both a gesture of blessing and as a means to push himself up.<sup>131</sup> Additionally, his right foot is stepping up on Mary's bicep.

The focus on bodies and their positioning is important, but what this depiction of the Holy Family also communicates regardless of Michelangelo's belief in either Maculist or Immaculist theory is the close physical relationship between Mary and Jesus. As the palest, centermost figure, Mary commands the viewer's attention immediately. The viewer then follows the diagonals laid in place by the angle of her neck, her arms, and her gaze up to the nude Christ child, whose position directs the gaze to Joseph and then the figures in the background. Mary's presence is not just a vehicle for the viewer to notice Jesus, however; Michelangelo treats her body differently from all the other figures. Although Mary wears her traditional pink and blue garments, the blue mantle has fallen off of her shoulders and her sleeves have slid down. Both of these suggest the upward movement of Mary's arms and torso in reaching for Jesus. Her left sleeve, however, is bunched up too much to simply have fallen back. Michelangelo leaves the viewer to wonder whether or not the sleeve has been pushed up. Regardless of the action behind its placement, the sleeve's position offers the viewer a gratuitous view of Mary's muscular left arm and a piece of her torso. While the right arm is not as exposed, there is still clearly a bulging bicep, which the viewer can intuit through the intense highlighting on that part of her gown. The musculature is not just on her arms; the highlighting and shading of the gown over Mary's abdomen also suggests

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<sup>130</sup> D'Ancona 43.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

well-defined abdominal muscles. One of the artistic tendencies that Michelangelo is known for in popular culture today is his depictions of brawny women, although there are several works of his which display women with a reasonable amount of muscle. His treatment of Mary's body in the *Doni Tondo* does not have the same extreme muscular definition as his etching of *Leda and the Swan* (fig. 21), but it also does not have the same streamlined appearance as his rendition of *Dawn* in the tomb of Lorenzo "il Magnifico" de' Medici (fig. 22). Michelangelo made a conscious effort to draw attention to Mary's body and emphasize her flesh, which therefore emphasizes her role as the source of Jesus' humanity at a basic, bodily level.



Figure 19: Michelangelo Buonarotti, *Sistine ceiling*. Fresco, 1508-1512.



Figure 20: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Doni Tondo*. Oil and tempera on panel, c. 1507.



Figure 21: Cornelis Bos, *Leda and the Swan* (after the lost work by Michelangelo Buonarroti). Engraving, c. 1544-1566



Figure 22: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Dawn*. Medici Chapel, San Lorenzo, Florence. Marble, c. 1520-1534.

## CONCLUSION

Menstruation in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian art is a coded reference in the talismanic fertility imagery of *deschi da parto*, *cassoni*, *cornici*, *spalliere*, and other marriage-related art objects. Images that included lush nature, animal life known for its frequent reproduction, voluptuous nude women, or women dressed in jewels related to their marital responsibilities, and even urinating boys were frequently used symbols that the reader understood as references to fertility. Indeed, beyond just serving as symbolic reminders, Renaissance Italians believed they were interactive, visual catalysts for fertility. Just by seeing the images, women's menstrual blood was believed to be activated, which, according to contemporary medical authorities, was essential for the formation of a fetus. Viewing and wearing certain gems could work in the same way. Prevailing beliefs about symbolic, medicinal and/or talismanic stones and gems resulted in their continued functions as medical aids for fertility, among other bodily functions or ailments. Gems were also worn for adornment to show not only social status (because of the wearer's--or the wearer's husband or family's ability to own them) but as a means of ensuring the hoped-for effects of visual and tactile contact with the stones. In addition, certain images placed in bedrooms of the marital couple (such as the *Venus of Urbino*) were instructive for both husband and wife. They reminded wives of their duties and provided visual instruction to assist in the completion of these duties, while also stimulating the husbands' sexual desires. Other objects intended for the female's visual consumption were objects that were meant to help the woman either conceive, or specifically, to conceive a beautiful, healthy male

child. Menstruation and its connection to female fertility may also have been inferred in veiled symbolism in images related to the Christian faith. *Madonna lactans* paintings would rather directly serve as a model of piety and maternity for mothers. Even as the elite of Florence were reluctant to breastfeed their own children, images of the *Madonna lactans* were meant to instruct them on the benefits of breastfeeding for the health and spirituality of their children, and emphasize the important role of the mother in the bodily and spiritual formation of their children. Because lactation was thought to be a form of menstrual blood, we see menstruation represented in this way. Women during this time period could relate to this physical fertility, especially those who would have had to nurse their children themselves, but women whose husbands could afford wet nurses still may have related to *Madonna lactans* paintings in a more psychological sense. In other cases, such as the *Doni Tondo* by Michelangelo, our view is commanded by Mary's body, and therefore we cannot ignore its role in creating Christ's body. Her physical fertility is emphasized through the attention paid to her body and her proximity to the Christ child. These types of religious images were made visible to women in the sites of devotion in homes and in the chapels they frequented.

In summary, in this study, I have explored the intersections of Italian Renaissance science, superstition, and art. Although the writing on Marian imagery in this project is a very brief overview of a much larger field, its inclusion is meant to stimulate discussions on the comparisons of religious doctrines and scientific writings of the era. This study is also a step in further understanding talismanic and apotropaic imagery in more popularly known works of art (such as the *Primavera*). While there are contemporary writings on

superstition in the Italian Renaissance, few address how this aspect of the culture impacts works of art beyond material culture and fewer still have explored the connections between these objects, their viewership, and their impact on women and their bodies. As I have argued here, menstruation was a key part of fertility and reproduction and understood as such during the Renaissance. Images that references menstruation and fertility were incorporated into many different types of artistic and material objects. Their audience was, if not solely for women, meant to be read by women, as referencing their roles in their families and, more broadly, in Renaissance society. While bodily functions have regularly been shunned as inappropriate to discuss in art historical scholarship, Renaissance people were curious about how those functions could be ameliorated or, at least, better understood, as a means by which fertility and quality of life could be improved. Menstruation is a key part of a woman's reproductive health and in Renaissance images, gems, and maiolica, and through our knowledge of their talismanic beliefs, and writings in medicine and other areas of the time about women's bodies, it is evident that ideas about menstruation and its connection to fertility were being actively explored and discussed. Contemporary scholars recognize fertility imagery within visual culture, but menstruation is very rarely mentioned directly outside of texts that focus on references in the Bible or medical history. I argue that this approach is anachronistic and fails to address contemporary beliefs and, especially critical to the field of art historical studies, this approach fails to fully take into consideration Renaissance beliefs about the perceived power of art and its impact on women's bodies.



Changes in healthcare and reproductive rights legislation is renewing our focus on bodies, our expectations of our bodies, and our bodily functions, and we see this reflected in how we treat the canon of Western art. We have kept these artworks with us because we find value in them. Because we see ourselves in artworks, it is crucial for us to better understand the contexts within which they were created. Italian Renaissance art, which is so iconic within our visual culture, needs further discussion on the treatment of bodies and procreation. We should especially focus on elements of human nature that normally do not feature in quotidian conversation, such as menstruation. By discussing these bodily functions and learning more about how they manifest in Italian Renaissance art, we allow people to find deeper connections with the artworks, and we help in spurring conversations outside of academia about taboo subjects. I recognize that this project is not a final result in any sense of the word, but it is a first step into further study and discussion of such controversial topics.

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