**Readers’ Notes**

*The Madonna and Child by Marianne Stokes*

It has always been a challenge for the Catholic Church as to how to depict and define Mary in art. How do we make her relevant in any age and in any part of the world?

Mary is the most painted woman in the world because she is like no other. As mother of God made-man - her role is unique. Now traditionally, portraying any religious figure had to follow certain rules, and conveying reverence and holiness were absolute criteria for how Mary was to be painted. Since the earliest depictions of Mary as mother of Jesus and mother of the Church, there have been thousands of different interpretations of her visual features and the various aspects of her life.

While very little is recorded about Mary in the Bible, the Catholic Church expanded upon these Scriptural references in its development of Marian theology. This led to a phenomenal output of reflection, spiritual devotion and doctrinal teaching from the earliest church writers, theologians and mystics until today. Since there is so little information about Mary in the Bible it was inevitable to imbue her with characteristics through a particular context or lens.   
Yet anyone who could sing the *Magnificat* is surely not weak and subservient as she has often been portrayed - since this rallying song reminds us of God’s power to raise up the poor and oppressed against the wealthy and corrupt.

Throughout the last two centuries, the cult of Mary has flourished across the world. Devotions to her through prayer, especially in the use of the Rosary, in meditation and many hymns is very popular; but it has been her apparitions to different people in different countries that have added to her power and presence at the heart of the Catholic faith. These apparitions have raised further questions about how Mary has been seen, heard and witnessed to, in different cultures. And this includes painting Mary as black or culturally specific to her own Jewish origins, or as related to the countries in which she has appeared.

These appearances of Mary include England, Ireland, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Brazil, China and Russia. And they have created a following that no other woman has yet achieved.

Many symbols have been associated with Mary’s character and faithfulness. Some of these include a vast array of flowers and plants. The two most significant flowers associated with Our Lady are the white lily and the red rose. But there are nearly 500 original names for plants and herbs referring to the mother of Jesus. Mary’s own womb was itself described as an ‘enclosed garden’, wherein the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary. This long tradition of honouring Mary with flowers and perceiving her nature to be at one with the natural order was already evident from the 7th century onwards, and it helped to develop further, the idea of the Mary Garden which we can find within the enclosures of many churches and monasteries.

Mary’s flower symbols are not just aesthetic or deployed to emphasise her role as a person to be revered. The use of botanical imagery flourished in Europe from the 12th century onwards, with the rise in new painting techniques and colours, observation of the natural world, and the growing importance of realism and scientific discovery. Botanical devices also provided secret codes for a range of meanings in both the secular and sacred realms. Just as in classical mythology, plants represented virtues and vices, Christianity adopted the Biblical motif of flowers, plants and trees used in many parables to signify a further spiritual meaning. In Mary’s case, the lily represents purity and virginity, the rose represents blood, sacrifice and beauty.

So we’re in Wolverhampton Art Gallery looking at a modern and exquisite painting of the Madonna and Child by the female artist Marianne Stokes. Painted between 1907-1908, this Madonna is unusual in several respects.

Marianne Stokes was an admirer of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and she knows how to paint a baby better than any great master. Stokes painted this scene on the Dalmatian coast in Italy, and interestingly, the model for the Virgin Mary was a local village girl. In Renaissance art, the idea of modelling Mary or any key religious figure on a peasant or ordinary person could be condemned as blasphemous. But by the time of the 17th century onwards – artistic realism enabled the expression of greater devotion and faith through connecting the believer more immediately to God, and making the divine more accessible.

In the background, Marianne Stokes surrounds the Holy mother and child with thorny stems referring to the future crucifixion of Christ. As they appear to crown her in sorrow so later, they will crown her son in death. Notice that in this painting there are no flowers at all, only the thorns themselves. Yet Mary’s creamy headdress is painted like layers of petals. She herself is the flower.

So here we have a unique perspective in this tempera on panel painting where the normal elements are absent. Mary’s clothing is representative of a traditional Dalmatian costume. And it provides a bright focus for Stokes to express her style as a Colourist. This painting is striking in its simplicity – there is no landscape, no inner room or stable, Joseph and the shepherds are not here, nor are any of the traditional animals or symbols that we so often see in other Nativity paintings.

Here Marianne Stokes focuses entirely on a very tender Mary gently lifting the swaddling around Jesus to reveal him to us. This delicate veil is translucent - allowing us to see Jesus in all his childlike vulnerability. Usually, artists paint the baby Jesus as far too adult and unreal. Perhaps this is because in the history of religious art, Mary and Christ were predominantly painted by men who had not actually seen many babies themselves.

Mary’s revelation of her son is exquisitely realised in the delicacy of her fingers and the sorrowful nature of her gaze towards us. It is clear that this woman artist has not only understood the features of a baby but has captured them perfectly in this rosy face of Jesus – he is probably teething! And just look at his tiny nose and inquisitive eyes. Notice how Jesus’ head is turned slightly in his curiosity towards us the viewers. He is focused on us, but also beyond us, as he stares out of the canvas and onto the world.

Jesus’ little hands signal different desires – his left hand is open and ready to grab some thing or some one. His right hand is resting and waiting.

This is one of the most tender modern paintings of Mary and Jesus and which allows us to focus entirely on this unique revelation alone.Essay And the painting became famous when the Royal Mail chose it as its first class stamp for Christmas in 2005. As such it deserves its wider exposition, and as one of the most realistic paintings of a baby painted by any artist.

Hail, Mary, full of grace,  
the Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou amongst women  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners,  
now and at the hour of our death.   
Amen