

Reflections on the Sistine Madonna

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The Sistine Madonna is one of the greatest and noblest works of art in human evolution.

—Rudolf Steiner, *The Mission of Raphael in the Light of Spiritual Science*

Man is the sun, his senses are the planets.

—Novalis

The Sistine Madonna has long been a loving presence in Waldorf kindergartens, acting as a gift to the children that brings them an image of an embracing archetypal heavenly mother and heavenly child. This work of art has profoundly lifted and transformed the souls of those beholding it for over five hundred years, for it reminds us of our true spiritual nature. In our classrooms around the world, it has been there to give hope, transformation, and a sense of protection to generations of children.

As our world becomes more interwoven with the wonderful diversity of people of all races and backgrounds, so too do our Waldorf schools. Some of our earnest Waldorf kindergarten colleagues, striving to be inclusive and with acquiescence to the diversity of their parent body, have made decisions not to have the Sistine Madonna in their classrooms or have removed it. Though it is far from an exclusively Christian icon, they feel that thus it will not be there to offend those who may experience it that way.

Another consideration is that sometimes the image has not been so “quietly” displayed in our classrooms. When it is given a church-like altar, this can certainly create an issue for some parents, especially if along with it comes any dogmatic attitude from the teachers. We can have empathy for the strong emotional responses to such situations that may come out of past or current religious experiences. (A number of these were published anonymously last year in *Kindling*, the British counterpart to *Gateways*.)

As modern freedom-loving individuals, we are rightly repelled by the appalling acts perpetuated throughout history in the name of institutionalized Christianity (as well as other religions). But just as

we are asked to see beyond the tantrums and ugly behavior of young children to perceive the striving of their spirit, as Waldorf teachers we are also asked to look beyond our subjective experiences and those of some parents to serve the children whose time is now. As public representatives of Waldorf education, with our tremendous debt to Rudolf Steiner for making this education possible, surely we need to earnestly engage in learning about the universal spirituality that is the heart of Anthroposophy. We need to understand why he calls it an esoteric all-embracing Christianity.

With regard to the image of the Sistine Madonna in our kindergartens, my response, and that of many other experienced teachers, is not to *remove* it but rather *add to it*. People from all backgrounds need to feel met in our schools, so we can add other warm art images to the room—Madonnas of different ethnic backgrounds and even family groups. With the Sistine Madonna, I prefer to use the top half of the painting with just the mother and child.

Anthroposophical insights

As Waldorf educators we are called to carry Anthroposophy in inclusive and exemplary ways to our communities. With that in mind, how can we live into why this image and its creator were so important to Rudolf Steiner? We find that in the last four weeks of his life, as he lay gravely ill, Rudolf Steiner spoke to a close colleague imploring that Anthroposophists strive to understand the incarnations of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist (Boardman and Newbatt, 10).

John the Baptist is the great personality who will become Raphael, the painter of the Sistine Madonna, and then later will become Novalis, the poet. Prior to the incarnation as John the Baptist, he was Elijah the prophet who foretold the coming of the Messiah, the prophet whose words carry the “will and the future,” as Evelyn Capel puts it. In all these incarnations is the golden thread of esoteric Christianity and announcement of renewal for the human soul through the spirit, the possibility of renewal for all humanity through the deed of Christ.

The Bible refers to this series of incarnations when it speaks of Elijah becoming John: “I say to you, that Elijah is come already and they knew him not. . . Then understood the disciples that he spoke to them of John the Baptist” (Matthew 17:12-13; Revised Standard Version).

As Novalis, the young poet, this powerful individuality described (esoteric) Christianity:

Christianity is of a threefold form. One is the creative element of religion, the joy in all religion. One is intercession in and of itself, faith in the universal capacity of all earthly things to be the bread and wine of eternal life. One is faith in Christ, His Mother, and the Saints. Choose which one you will. Choose all three, it makes no difference. You will thereby become . . . members of a single, eternal ineffable community (Novalis, *Hymns to the Night and Other Selected Writings*, 62).

John the Baptist

John the Baptist actually knew the holy mother in person. His elderly mother, Elizabeth was visited by her cousin, Mary, when they were both pregnant. The infant John leapt in the womb when he first felt the spiritual presence of the babe, Jesus, who would be born six months after his own birth. As John, he experienced the earthly incarnation of the pure and holy soul who was the mother of the child who would later bear the spirit of Christ. It was he who would recognize and baptize Jesus to become Christ.

In regard to further great mysteries of the spiritual interpenetrations our mortal existence, Steiner speaks of John the Baptist as the over-arching inspirer of all the disciples following his death, and of his merging with the being of Lazarus as Lazarus went through initiation by the Christ. Lazarus was the first human being resurrected from death to new life. Thereafter, he had a new identity as John, the Evangelist, the writer of the most mystical and exalted gospel and the book of the Apocalypse. Christ-initiated, he was so filled with the power of new life that he appears as youthful and beardless in Leonardo’s Last Supper as “the one whom the Lord loved.” (This picture does not represent Mary Magdalene, the sister of Lazarus.)

Raphael, the Painter



Raphael (1483-1520) was born on Good Friday, lived in tumultuous times with a calm beauty of body and soul, and died on Good Friday when he was only thirty-seven years old. In this incarnation, he painted the heavenly Sophia that rayed through the earthly being of Mary he knew in his former incarnation. The mood of this painting (known as the Sistine Madonna) he will later describe in his next incarnation as Novalis:

*If I but have him,
Is the world mine too;
Blissful as a heavenly cherub
Who the Virgin’s veil may hold.
Raptly, deeply gazing,
I can feel no dread of earthly things.*
(Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*, 35)

And further:

The veil is for the Virgin what the spirit is for the body, its indispensable organ, the folds of which are the alphabet of its sweet annunciation; the endless play of these folds is like music, for speech is too bold for the Virgin—her lips open themselves only into song . . . to me it is nothing other than a solemn call to a new archetypal assemblage, the mighty beat of wings of a passing angelic herald. They are the first pains. Let each prepare himself for birth!. . . To a brother I will lead you; he shall talk with you that your hearts

shall open, and you shall robe your withered beloved expectation in a new garment. . . This brother is the heart beat of the new age; whosoever has felt it no longer doubts its coming and steps. . . to join a new band of disciples. For this brother has made a new veil for the Holy one. . . able to wrap her more chastely than any other (Novalis, *Hymns to the Night and Other Selected Writings*, 62).

This sublime painting of the Sistine Madonna has quite a different quality than the eternal calm of Raphael's many other beautiful and benevolent Madonnas. One of his last, it reflects Raphael's experience from the spiritual world, beyond the threshold. This is shown by the green curtains being "drawn aside" to reveal a truth about the uplifting power of the archetypal eternal feminine. Rudolf Steiner writes,

*The Sistine Madonna was born out of a deep instinctive knowledge of nature and the spirit. . . Mary folds in her robe following the forces of the earth while in the region of her chest the garment is inwardly rounded. . . a feeling of inward enclosure . . . Here the sun forces can find entry and the innocent Jesus child . . . is the sun activity resting on Mary's arm with the radiance of the stars above. . . The head and eyes of Mary are as though a light were shining out from within them towards humanity. . . the Jesus child. . . as though emerging from the rounded cloud shapes, tender and loveable and inwardly sheltered (Steiner, *The Four Seasons and the Archangels*, 40).*

While earth forces are revealed in the folds of in her lower garment, the upper half with her veils is almost like a heart-shaped womb. That it speaks of spiritual birth, and not physical one, is evidenced in the child's firm, un-childlike gesture, holding his leg across the lower body. The mother's veils, that we can imagine as golden, are wafted in heavenly winds from the astral and etheric realms. Both mother and child look at us with penetrating, even challenging gazes—as though impelling us to ask, "Can we realize the spiritual birth in our own souls that this image implies?"

Novalis, the Poet



This individual's next brief life is as Novalis (pen name of Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772-1801); he dies at 29. He falls deeply in love on the first meeting with an angel-like 13-year-old girl, Sophie, who has a pure and unearthly majesty about her. As he devotedly and respectfully waits for her to grow older so they can marry, she suffers a long and painful illness that she bears with great courage and nobility, and soon dies. Novalis is utterly devastated. He visits her grave night after night wishing for death for himself. Then Sophie, now in her full spiritual dimensions and further irradiated with eternal Sophia wisdom, initiates Novalis from the spiritual world. His desperate anguish in face of her death has prepared his soul for a resurrection, an initiation from across the threshold that has been prepared by his previous lives. He describes it in tender words:

*I see you in a thousand pictures,
Maria, in loveliness portrayed.
But none is able to depict you
The way my soul beholds you. . .
(Steiner, "The Christmas Mystery")*

Never in the history of the world has a series of incarnations so profoundly revealed the importance, presence, and call to us today to honor and seek the wisdom of the Sophia being. Steiner writes that we have the Christ, the Sophia is what we must find.

I feel the following words can only resound in our souls in the deepest and most serious way when we realize these were the last words that Rudolf Steiner was able to give in a public address before he collapsed into illness at Michaelmas, 1924. He emphasizes that this great individuality who incarnated as Elijah, John the Baptist, Raphael, and Novalis will be “he who will lead you now and beyond the great crisis in which we are engaged.” He refers to the “well nigh heavenly splendor” in the magical idealism of Novalis and then he states:

And so we see in Novalis a radiant and splendid forerunner of the Michael stream which is now to lead you through the gate of death, you will find in the spiritual supersensible worlds all those others among them also the being I am speaking of today, all those with whom you are to prepare the work that shall be accomplished at the end of the century, and that shall lead mankind past the great crisis in which it is involved (Steiner, “The Last Address,” 171).

The words of Novalis come as a plea to us today to work on ourselves for the sake of world peace, a plea as powerful and relevant as when they were written about the destiny of Europe.

Blood will flow over Europe until the nations recognize their frightful insanity which drives them vainly in circles; until touched and softened by a heavenly music they step in motley coalition before olden altars. . . Only true religion can awaken Europe once more, reconcile the peoples and install [esoteric] Christianity with new splendor visibly upon earth in its ancient function of ministering peace. . . Will not [the nations] forget all enmity, when the same Divine Compassion itself speaks to them, and one and the same misfortune, one lamentation, one common feeling fills their eyes with tears? (Novalis, “Christianity or Europe,” 42)

Ursula Grahl takes it further: “While the Christian church falls apart and is split into many denominations and religious wars rage throughout Europe, while theologians dispute the doctrines of the church and set up dogmas to rob the people of freedom, Raphael’s art, transcending all denominations, conquers the world; without their even being aware of it, would are won over by

Raphael’s pictures and come to recognize the great truths that are embodied in them. The Christian impulse, which worked, and still works, through the paintings of Raphael is above all Confessions, all Nations, all Races; it is the universal cosmic Christianity” (Grahl, 13).

The Sistine Madonna Today

In light of the world that we live in today, with such deep violence, sorrow, and strife in world affairs, and insecurity about the well-being of the earth herself, I believe the painting of the Sistine Madonna is speaking to us from the threshold of the spiritual world. These mighty sublime gazes of the holy mother and child become especially powerful when we imagine they are speaking to us across the beasts of the abyss we are experiencing now. They are speaking to us with a plea to awaken our consciousness, giving us hope and an incredibly beautiful reassurance that the spiritual world is there, and very real if we can only raise our awareness. Surely this is what our children need, and what we all need?

As Waldorf teachers and parents, beholden to the inspiration and spiritual insight of Rudolf Steiner for our great work of caring for young children, may we deepen our appreciation of this timeless work of art. Let it shine before the souls of our children, so continually assaulted from every side with depraved and degraded images of the human being coming from our crassly materialistic culture.

We may surround the classroom with other heart-warming images from all backgrounds so that everyone who enters the classroom feels met and represented. Waldorf education belongs to the world. But let this sublime image be there to speak of a future when we shall, out of our own spiritual striving, give birth to our higher selves. When we can create the wise, pure, and sacred space in our own souls (the holy Sophia) to let the Sun light of our higher selves condense, take form, and come to birth to guide our lives, our thoughts, our mission on earth with one another, then we will realize we all share immortal spirituality. Thus we join the stream of light and transformation in world evolution.

Nancy Jewel Poer is a co-founder of Rudolf Steiner College, where she still teaches. Nationally known lecturer, author (*Living Into Dying* and *Mia's Apple Tree*), artist, grandmother of 14, she is the founding teacher for three Waldorf kindergartens, most recently Cedar Springs Waldorf School in Placerville, CA.

Nancy writes, "I, like my colleagues, have struggled for many years on presenting images of the Madonna for the parents. To that end I created *Mother of All*, showing all the world's ethnic Madonnas in a rainbow. While not necessarily for the classroom, it could be nearby for the parents." Available through nancyjewelpoer.com or Rudolf Steiner College.

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Madonna and the Abyss

In the course of writing this article I felt this timeless art is now very close to the threshold to inspire us to our higher selves. Yet at the same time, in this world of violence, fear, and uncertainty, we can experience the beasts of the abyss are right there as well. I created this juxtaposition of the madonna with the beasts of the abyss because Rudolf Steiner has indicated that in art for today, spiritual truths (always the purpose of true art) often need to be conveyed by the ugly and the beautiful in the same composition. It is **not** meant for the classroom, but for our thoughtful contemplation as teachers and citizens of our time. —Nancy Jewel Poer