

Mary in Composition: the Rise and Fall

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In order to understand why the predominance of Mary declined following the Renaissance period, one must assess what factors contributed to her rise in composition, and how these elements affected her fall. Mary's role as the ideal Renaissance woman made her a palpable choice when creating artwork, a role undoubtedly influenced by society's strict and unquestioned devotion to the Roman Catholic Church. It was not until the introduction of the Protestant Reformation that the Catholic Church started to lose popularity, which ultimately resulted in the decline of Mary's imagery. Furthermore, the loss of faith is ubiquitous in today's secular society, causing a recession in the religions that still honor the Virgin. Mary has lost the reverence and veneration displayed during the Italian Renaissance due to the changes in the cultural expectations of women, as well as from the emergence of several different Christian denominations as opposed to the unified Catholicism that existed during the 14th and 15th century.

The role of women in Renaissance Italy was both precise and constricted. Women were merely objects to be viewed, another extension of their husbands. Beauty, dress, even the gaze of a woman was under constant scrutiny. As women functioned merely as a representative, desiring the ideal companion was inevitable among men. Chastity, modesty, and an inherent maternal nature were standards that defined women in the eyes of male suitors. These characteristics valued by both the men and women of this era were heavily influenced by religion, as Renaissance Italy was a highly spiritual society. Christians believed Mary was born without original sin, giving her the grace that made her chastity and modesty unquestionable. It is no coincidence that Mary embodied these views to perfection as the formation of these standards revolved around her characteristics. Mary maintained the role of the leading female figure in Catholicism, and therefore set the criteria for how women should behave in accordance with these Christian sentiments. Furthermore, as Mary gave birth to the Son of God she was the personification of maternal excellence. From Jesus' infant years until His crucifixion, Mary remained reverently devoted to her Son, subscribing to a Renaissance belief in "a societally prescribed maternal role".¹ From childhood into betrothal, society conditioned young women to aspire motherhood as the ability to reproduce and nurture defined them. Mary's divine offspring and sinless motherhood allowed her to serve as a model for maternity, a so desired quality during the Renaissance. It was these confines of perfection in chastity, modesty, and motherhood that put Mary on a pedestal when forming the values for women, resulting in her compositional fame.

To say that Mary was a popular artistic subject during the Italian Renaissance is a vast understatement. Mary was featured as early as 1280 in Cimabue's *Maestà* (fig. 1). Her depictions continued throughout the Renaissance from the hands of various artists including, Giotto, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo. All of the images produced by these astonishing artists contained a sentiment of great respect and reverence in an attempt to venerate the Virgin and her Child. In addition to the parallels in subject matter, these pieces display fundamental design principles that are recognizable in most portrayals of Mary. In practice, these principles served specifically to accommodate society's perception of roles considered acceptable for women.

¹ Grieco, 1997: 59

During the 15th century, the female gaze was of great importance. To simply look a man in the eyes was seen as a significant gesture that marked a woman as unchaste. As a result, respectable women seldom held an outward gaze. In fact, a majority of portrait paintings produced during this time only portrayed women in profile as this allowed for the model to be looked at without the threat of seducing the male viewer with a sumptuous stare. These profile paintings indicate the sexist ideals during the Renaissance, as they served as a means for men to gaze at women without the dangers of seduction by the woman temptress.² The role of the temptress was inherent to all Renaissance women, which explains the lack of imagery from a frontal or three-quarter view. When these poses did occur, it is the job of the artist to ensure the portrayal of a lowered or averted gaze, which illustrated the model's modesty. Mary holds this same gaze in many of her images. While some depict Mary looking directly at her viewer, such as Raphael's *Madonna Della Seggiola* (fig. 2), Mary's status as a divine being ensured that her modesty and chastity remained unquestioned.



Figure 2
Raphael, *Madonna Della Seggiola*, 1513-1514, oil on panel, 28"x28", Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy

Italy as the entire population conformed to the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Italian people welcomed this peaceful acceptance in contrast to the civil unrest previously caused in the name of religion.



Figure 1
Cimabue, *Maestà*, 1280, tempera on panel, 167"x109", Louvre, Paris

Nevertheless, many of Mary's depictions display her with an averted stare simply because she is so attentive to her Child. Filippo Lippi's *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* (fig. 3) illustrates the format generally used in most representations. Mary displays the ideal maternal role as she rests with Jesus in her lap, fixing her gaze on the Christ Child. This gaze both illustrates her motherly devotion, and averts her eyes from the viewer. Both the practice of conforming to societal expectations and defying these restraints, are indicative of Mary's status in Renaissance culture. Depicting her with social cues to indicate her chaste and modest motherhood reminds the viewer that she embodies perfection. In contrast, looking at the viewer and defying these societal expectations instills the reality that Mary is above earthly women as her inability to sin makes her incapable of being a temptress. This devout reverence was undisputed in

² Simons, 1998: 50

Early Christianity unified throughout Europe following the conclusion of the Crusades in 1291. After experiencing constant violence, the Renaissance emerged with a congruent belief in Catholicism. As opposed to many modern Christian denominations, Catholics hold a unique respect for the Virgin Mary. This respect originates in the fundamental belief that Mary was born without sin, and maintained this status of perfection through her conception, birth, and earthly death. Mary's perfection allowed for the formation of a unique relationship between mother and child. Catholics recognize the incomparable relationship between Mary and her Son that allows her to intervene on the behalf of any individual. The belief in asking Mary to approach her Son on the behalf of the devout is a fundamental concept still practiced in the Catholic Church, commonly referred to as divine intervention. Catholics devotion to the Rosary is just one of the many prayers specifically designed for the very concept of pleading to Mary. To illustrate Mary's influence, Catholicism frequently refers to the performance of Jesus' first miracle The Wedding Feast at Cana.



Figure 3

Filippo Lippi, *Madonna with Child and Two Angels*, 1465, tempera on panel, 36"x25", Uffizi Gallery, Florence

“On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. The mother of Jesus was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited. And they ran out of wine, since the wine provided for the feast had all been used, and the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' Jesus said, 'Woman, what do you want from me? My hour has not come yet.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' There were six stone water jars standing there, meant for the ablutions that are customary among the Jews: each could hold twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill the jars with water,' and they filled them to the brim. Then he said to them, 'Draw some out now and take it to the president of the feast.' They did this; the president tasted the water, and it had turned into wine. Having no idea where it came from -- though the servants who had drawn the water knew -- the president of the feast called the bridegroom and said, 'Everyone serves good wine first and the worse wine when the guests are well wined; but you have kept the best wine till now.' This was the first of Jesus' signs: it was at Cana in Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.”³

Even in the modern church The Wedding Feast at Cana is one of the most significant Bible passages as it exemplifies the concept of divine intervention, and the influence Mary has over her Son. It is because of this maternal connection that she has remained in such high esteem among Roman Catholics from the Renaissance until now. This respect shared by Giotto, da Vinci, and many other artists explains her repeated representation in art. To identify the cause in Mary's loss of popularity, one must address the decline in Roman Catholicism, as the two are uniquely dependent on one another.

³ John, 2:1-11

The concept of separate Christian denominations was unheard of until 1517 when Martin Luther wrote *The Ninety-Five Theses*, which ultimately led to the Protestant Reformation.⁴ The Protestant Reformation was the first successful break away from the Catholic Church in regards to Christianity as a whole. Although Martin Luther was born in Germany, his ideas spread throughout all of Europe and remained influential, particularly in England.⁵ Currently there are multiple beliefs that differ between the two religions; however, the initial break was far less dramatic than the contemporary distinctions.

The papacy during Martin Luther's lifetime demanded donations for the reconstruction of St. Peter's Basilica, and to support the cause, claimed that one could almost buy his way into heaven. This left parishioners of the church poor as each pope would constantly require additional indulgences, and compliance was mandatory for those deemed as "holy". In 1517, Pope Leo X demanded another set of indulgences, and as a response, Martin Luther produced the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Although the official break from the church would not occur until years later, this marked Luther's first public challenge to papal authority. Technically speaking, the religious dogma was not what drove the two religions apart; but rather, the corruption of religious leaders caused Luther to create what he believed was a better version of the initial church. Luther claimed that the donation of money towards Rome would not buy salvation and that the Catholic Church had become corrupt by privilege and greed. Ultimately, the Protestant Reformation led to what is now Lutheranism, but to this day Lutherans and Catholics share many of the same religious beliefs except in regards to the pope and the Eucharist. Needless to say, the original Protestant Reformation more than likely still honored Mary in a way similar to Catholicism, but Martin Luther's actions did introduce the idea that any person who refuted a religious leader could simply break away and create his or her own new religion.

Martin Luther's separation from the Catholic Church was just the first of many breaks that formed the many denominations found today. According to *The World Christian Encyclopedia*, there are over 33,000 Christian denominations, 40 of which qualify as major divisions.⁶ As each break has become more distant from the original church, naturally each has acquired beliefs farther from the initial sentiments. Different interpretations of biblical scriptures eventually led Christianity to disregard divine intervention, ultimately resulting in the loss of Mary's status among most denominations. Mary's loss of recognition resulted in the decline of her portrayal in Christian art, but her predominance among Catholic artists still exists. While these separations over time undoubtedly led to distinctions currently found between Catholicism and the rest of Christianity, the creation of new denominations can hardly be responsible for the vast decline of religious portrayals in art altogether. The separation between Christianity and Catholicism might explain the loss of depictions of the Virgin in previous eras, but it can hardly hold the sole responsibility for the diminishment of her status among artists today. In order to fully understand the cause of Mary's disappearance in the art world, one must assess the loss of religion in society as a whole.

Christianity is deteriorating in favor of a non-religious society where spirituality does not influence values in any way. This lack of a religious focused society has led to an inevitable decline in compositions of Mary, as there is a decline in the religions that honor her altogether. Furthermore, the ideals that were once so prized during the Italian Renaissance would undoubtedly be considered a mockery in our modern era. Society today focuses on the liberation

⁴ Bio.com

⁵ Duffy, 2006: 720-731

⁶ Barret, 2001

of women's restrictions. Women's sexuality is now celebrated, not shamed as it was during the 14th and 15th centuries. The idea of an unchaste woman is far from undesirable, as the sexist ideologies that controlled the Renaissance have been long forgotten and replaced with equality. While a chaste and devout human being might be desirable from a Christian standpoint, the church no longer makes distinctions based on gender roles. Of course, despite society's best efforts, sexism still exists as the cultural standards for men and women still differ, but nothing close to the expectations of women in the Renaissance. Mary may still embody the ideal woman for Catholics, but she no longer embodies the ideal woman for society. Instead of religious paintings, the majority of Americans decorate their homes with pictures of celebrities or family photos. Given modern priorities there is hardly time to focus on what most would consider outdated ideals. Secularism is the backbone of many cultures, which is vastly different from the religious culture found during the Italian Renaissance.

After examination, two realities are simply irrefutable. The first being Mary's significance in art during the Italian Renaissance, and the second being her notable decline in modern composition. While various factors certainly influenced this change, some variables are impossible to ignore when assessing the situation. The culture during the Italian Renaissance was extremely religion based, and the dominant religion was incredibly reverent to the Virgin. The depth of the religious immersion was so deep that it influenced societal standards, which surfaced in artistic representations. Mary's disappearance from the art world coincides with the dissolution of a unified Christianity, and a decline in Christianity's predominance as a whole. Art is commonly referenced as a cultural indicator at any given time. Given the cultural differences, it is fitting that Mary was predominant during the Italian Renaissance, and non-existent in today's secular world.

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