

Joachim Kahl/Marburg

The Blessed Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus

A philosophical Meditation on a painting from Max Ernst

We are looking at a world-famous work of art of Max Ernst's: „The Blessed Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus before three Witnesses”. The leading exponent of Surrealism in Germany produced the oil painting in 1926. Today it hangs in the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, not far from the cathedral, and is one of the main attractions there.



When this painting was first displayed in the Parisian „Salon des Indépendants” it provoked a scandal. It was not so much the physical punishment upon the figure of the Christian Saviour by his virginal mother that shocked the public as the loss of his halo in the process. It now lies in the corner, desecrated, and encloses – barely legible, yet undoubtedly – the name of the artist, Max Ernst. A mischievous and thoughtprovoking idea that disregards the claim to salvation by Religion over the Arts, even if at a clearly low, yet down-to-earth level.

Soon after Paris, the painting was also displayed in Cologne, where it elicited even fiercer reactions. The Archbishop not only forced the exhibition organised by the Cologne Art Society to be closed. He also excommunicated Max Ernst, who lived in the neighbouring city of Brühl, from the Catholic Church for an act of blasphemy through this picture. These remarkable occurrences during the early years of the picture's reception might spark an interest to delve into this masterpiece of classic modernism more deeply, understand its composition and colour scheme and thus uncover its conceptual content.

The picture's composition is clear and transparent. It reveals a respect for geometry that does not shy away from the use of a ruler, to which particularly the setting testifies. Wall-like partitions form the backdrop to the right and left, and in the background before these rises the picture's eponym, the Virgin Mary. The pyramidal figure closes upward to an acute angle, a classical schema for the composition of Madonna images since the Renaissance, which Max Ernst skilfully utilized.

The two long sides of the triangle are decidedly broken by the child Jesus' kicking legs and his bent left arm with its spread fingers. This fills the construct with life, it is downright dramatically charged with it, which the uncommonly raised arm and upturned open hand of the Madonna underscore. Something outrageous is happening, something thus far unseen is taking place before the eyes and ears of three hidden witnesses, whom we – upon the artist's invitation – are allowed to join.

The Mother of God, for centuries adored and glorified as the epitome of feminine meekness, placidity and forbearance – here she breaks her own spell. That she must have already delivered quite a few forceful spans is betrayed by her son's reddened buttocks, while his screams are only muffled in the blue cloth. As a rule in classic Madonna images, the mother and her naked child face the viewer frontally, with a mellow expression, hands folded in prayer or raised in blessing. On the contrary, here Mary's eyes are wide-open and rigidly focused on her son's rear part, which is, rather than his face, exposed to the viewer. The grand tradition of occidental Madonna portrayals comes to a provocative, blasphemous finale. Human, all-too-human identity takes the place that was once reserved for a divinely inspired act of sanctity of cosmic proportion.

In further breaking with tradition, Max Ernst has parodied the scene with a few more details. Apart from her halo, Mary is divested of all supernatural qualities, removed from all contexts that indicate a key role in Christian redemption. The bright Mediterranean sky above her is perhaps open, but empty, and it remains empty. It is nothing more than a meteorological entity, not a religious one. No heavenly throne in a heavenly Jerusalem awaits the Queen of Heaven, no celestial entourage, winged or un-winged, stands in royal attendance. Where once a Garden of Paradise with hedges and grassy banks, with curative plants and precious roses, with bunnies and birdies provided the illusion of an idyllic world, sterile partitions section off a scene of not exactly edifying family life. Meditative tranquillity and an attitude of devotion or even prayer cannot be inspired here.

A closer look at the backdrop reveals that, in spite of all geometry, the walls are strangely skewed and inconsistent. Something is simply not right on stage.

Perspectives, lines and angles are at odds with one another, most conspicuously in the picture's lower right corner where a line does indeed underscore the artist's signature, however continues diagonally, leading the viewer astray, and ends in nothing. This detail in the composition lends expression to the fragility of the Catholic Madonna worship.

Nevertheless, Max Ernst did not intentionally banish all references to religious belief from his painting. His figure of Mary, too, bears a halo. She too is clothed in the traditional colours of the Queen of Heaven, red and blue. And the hand conspicuously raised for spanking is at the same time a reminder of the open hand of the Orans, the praying woman, with which she begs for and receives God's mercy.

The artist even seems to allude to the widespread motif of the Virgin of Mercy's protective cloak as he has the baby Jesus bury his head in the blue cloth. He by all means delved into the iconography before he painted his picture.

Mary herself is a voluptuous beauty in a close-fitting, low-cut dress revealing her cleavage. In earlier centuries as well, Madonna figures were not always clearly differentiated from Venus figures, primarily since the ideal of the „beautiful Madonna” had become established in central Europe around 1400 and emerged from the stern byzantine ruler as „our dear Lady”. The erotic attraction of Max Ernst's figure is magnified by the central axis which runs through the picture between her breasts and over the buttocks of the child. This pleasant perspective is of course reserved for the viewer of the whole picture. For the three hidden witnesses *in* the scene, this aspect remains necessarily concealed. What role do they play?

The three men manifest the critically deprecating attitude that Max Ernst and his companions in Surrealism, Paul Éluard and André Breton, hold towards an incident they regard as offensive and of which they – rather involuntarily – have come to witness. Positioned behind a thin wall, they maintain a discernible distance. Through the opening of a window, the individual subtleties of their alienation are written in their faces. The figure on the left, probably Max Ernst himself, is wrinkling his nose and looking disdainfully over his shoulder. The figure in the middle is staring with piercing eyes at the what is happening, while the man on the right turns his back in disgust.

With the three witnesses the artist returns to another traditional motif in Madonna imagery. However, instead of setting simpleminded shepherds and wise men arriving from afar, or magi paying homage to the Queen of Heaven and her Saviour child, he sets three contemporary intellectuals into the scene who represent a modern, critical awareness,

ultimately a modern criticism of religion. To come straight to the point and put a name on the cognitive content: *Max Ernst is addressing the capacity for violence in the Christian religion.* Based on his own fictional episode out of Mary's life, Ernst allows for an intimate view of the relationship between two key figures in the Christian teachings of salvation. The scene between mother and son symbolically predicts the eventual relationship between father and son, in which case not only are the buttocks thrashed, but real blood flows. God himself sentences his son to a brutal sacrificial death on the cross at Calvary to deliver the people from their sins, as worded in the liturgy of the principal Christian sacrament. In the New Testament's approach, the Christian belief in redemption is bound to a blood-ridden act of violence in which an innocent human must die for the guilt of others.

Max Ernst grew up in a strict, catholic family of teachers. His father beat him regularly, but at the same time – on holy days – he, Max, was dressed all in white as a little angel or made-up as a sweet baby Jesus. In this sense, his Madonna painting has an autobiographical background. It documents the young artist's process of emancipating himself from the parental tradition of Roman Catholic Christianity.

Moreover, in its artistic design and broader statement it extends far beyond his private childhood experiences. We may admire a work of art of seismic quality: not an image of grace, not an idol, but an image to ponder.

Translation from the German into English: Judith Whittaker-Stemmler/Marburg