Passivity and nothingness: On the artistic creation of medieval Christian the Madonna in art

Jiahui Tian*

School of art, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

*813306474@qq.com

Abstract: The image of the Virgin Mary, as the main pattern in Christian art, has left a strong mark in the Art of Europe, but it is opposite to the passive and nihilistic phenomenon in the image of the Virgin Mary in the works, it reflects the tendency of feudal thought in medieval Christianity. Through the analysis of the unique forms and religious roots of the image of the Virgin Mary in medieval Christian art, this paper probes into its influence on the creation of female images and society.

Keywords: Medieval, Christian, The Madonna in art, artistic images

1   Introduction

In European medieval Christianity, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was revered as a pure and holy figure of Christ. In the history of Western art, artists were keen to depict her image. This worship of Mary originated from her idealized role as a "motherly" example, diminishing her own subjective identity as a woman. Her image was used to promote religious doctrines and emphasize Christ's status, while also reflecting the Christian doctrine's reinforcement of women's "other" identity, deeply mirroring the feudal ideology at the core of society at that time. The image of the Virgin was defined as a useful tool and symbolic representation for the patriarchal society, often being given passive and void characteristics.

2   The Virgin image in Christian Tradition

In Christianity, Mary, the mother of Jesus, can be seen in the four Gospels that record Jesus' life. The New Testament, the foundational text for shaping the image of Mary, describes her in a very brief manner, with no complete biographical information recorded. She usually appears only in Jesus' conversations with his disciples, and sometimes the reference is not very clear, which is a common way of obscuring the existence of women. The figure of the Virgin Mary in the New Testament was initially vague, but was gradually described in more detail and became a complete female image, becoming the main object of worship in Christianity by the so-called "Gospel of James

the First" and other similar texts known as "Mary Pseudepigrapha." The "Mary Pseudepigrapha" supplemented the blank spots in the life of the Virgin Mary, endowed her with many virtues, and made her image vivid and full-fledged, becoming an important basis for the worship of the Virgin and the development of related theological theories, as well as an endless source of inspiration for countless literary and artistic works[1].

Before the mid-Middle Ages, Christian artworks mostly focused on Jesus. Because of her relationship with Jesus, the Virgin Mary became the greatest female figure in the eyes of Christians, and Christianity completed the ideal image of a female role model. In this period, the image of the Virgin in artworks was a gentle and beautiful, devout and kind, and ordinary and humble mother. It can be said that the Virgin Mary combined divinity and humanity into one, representing the symbol of God's warmth and love in the world[2].

After the 5th century, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire and spared no effort to eliminate its opponents and overthrow classical religions and their culture. Despite this, the worship of goddesses was still active, and statues and temples of goddesses were seen everywhere. Some goddess images were even engraved on the coins of the empire. To cope with this situation, Christianity emphasized the purity and holiness of the Virgin Mary as a virgin, in order to elevate her status and replace the goddess worship that existed among various nations. After the 6th century, the classical religious goddess images were gradually replaced by images of the Virgin Mary[3], which occupied an important position in Christian art.

Therefore, as the mother of Jesus, the Virgin Mary was given the identity of mother, wife, and virgin by Christian doctrine, and had no real power. Christianity, as the representative of patriarchal society and its superstructure, suppressed and transformed the worship of goddesses, so that Mary could never become a goddess of Christianity. This situation led to many confusing contradictions in the depiction of the Virgin Mary in later times[1].

In summary, the Virgin Mary did not have any glorious titles or any special divine privileges. Christianity praised her purity and nobility in order to set an ideal example of a virtuous woman, so as to exert deeper ideological control over women. The most touching description of Jesus and his mother was when Jesus was crucified and his disciples fled to escape persecution, leaving only his grieving and sorrowful mother, the Virgin Mary, by his side. This moment embodied the noble and great motherly love qualities of the Virgin Mary.

3   Feudal Tendencies in Christian Doctrine

The main period for the feudal tendencies in Christian doctrine to take shape was from the 2nd to the 5th century. The negative evaluation of women in Christian doctrine can be traced back to the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament. In Genesis, God first created Adam out of dust in His own image, and entrusted him with guarding the Garden of Eden. However, God found it inconvenient for Adam to live alone, so He created Eve out of Adam's rib, and Eve was also regarded as God's feminine aspect.

The ancient fathers, based on the order in which God created male and female, and the fact that Eve was created as Adam's spouse, explained this as male superiority over female. The ancient fathers universally agreed that Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, leading to humanity's original fall. Eve was the scapegoat for humanity's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and she was regarded as the root of human misfortune. At the same time, bias against women was exacerbated, and weak willpower became a label for women. They could not resist temptation, so women were held to bear the main responsibility for men's fall. Medieval literature and art were completely subservient to religion, serving as an extension and appendage of religious thought, encompassing forms such as painting, sculpture, and architecture [4]. Many paintings from this period showcase the dominant role of religion in artistic creation. Therefore, the feudal ideology of Christianity is projected onto the depiction of the Virgin Mary, leading to the abstract treatment of the image of the Virgin Mary in art, depicted as solemnly seated, expressionless, and serious in demeanor, and existing to highlight Jesus.

The late 3rd century was an important period for asceticism, which caused great harm to women. Ancient church fathers believed that there were two worlds in the world, one was the spiritual world, and the other was the physical world. This dualism of soul and body was applied in the interpretation of gender relationships, associating men with the spiritual and soul, and women with the physical and desire. Since the spiritual and soul were considered superior to the physical and desire, men were also considered superior to women [5]. Essentially, Christian asceticism is a denial of sex. In patriarchal society, the denial of sex by asceticists is often associated with the devaluation of women, and has anti-female tendencies [6].

It is worth noting that Christianity invested considerable religious care for women in its early days, and Jesus preached the idea of gender equality, making Christianity attractive to many women. Therefore, American scholar Schmidt evaluated Jesus as "the first person to break through the male-centered world of ancient Greece and Rome."[7] The notoriously stubborn father Augustine also admitted that Mary, the mother of Jesus, should have a certain status. This idea laid the ideological foundation for the reinterpretation of the Virgin image in later times.

Fig. 1. Life *of Jesus, 5th century*, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome

Fig. 2. The Virgin and Child on the Throne,c.867,Hagia Sophi-a, Constantinople

4   The Feudal Ideological Tendencies in the Medieval Image of the Virgin Mary

The image of the Virgin Mary in medieval Christianity was shaped as a model of purity and holiness, often through the emphasis on her passivity and voidness, which limited the role and expression of women in social, religious, and cultural spheres, reflecting the complexity of gender roles and power structures in historical contexts. This feudal ideological tendency reflected in the image of the Virgin Mary in medieval Christianity is manifested in the following aspects.

4.1   Passivity of the Virgin Image

The passivity of the Virgin image is reflected in medieval Christian art, where the Virgin image is often portrayed as a gentle, virtuous, and obedient female model. The purpose is to weaken the status and autonomy of women in society at that time and strengthen the dominant position of men.

In the 5th century, the first church dedicated to the Virgin, the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, appeared in Rome, with the story of the life of the Virgin and Jesus depicted in mosaic art on the arch of the church. In the middle section of the painting, as shown in Figure 1, "The Life of Jesus - The Three Wise Men Pay Homage," Jesus, who is still a child, is depicted sitting on a throne and receiving worship. Medieval art is also known as "Christian art," whose basic feature is to give divine halos to human heads to distinguish them from God [4]. The golden halo on the head of the young Jesus symbolizes his divine status. The actions and expressions of each person in the painting are vivid, and their facial expressions are varied. However, the Virgin Mary on the left has dull eyes and a rigid posture, as if she is obeying and listening. Moreover, since the figure on the right of Jesus is a typical image of the Virgin Mary, it shows that Mary

has been elevated from a common mother to "the Mother of God." This not only emphasizes the high status of Jesus, but also reveals the passive nature of the Virgin Mary as a symbol that highlights Jesus' identity and status.

Fig. 3. Christ *and the Virgin Mary*, c.1130-1132, The Church of Santa Maria Trastevere, Rome.

After the 5th century, the influence of the Virgin Mary increased significantly, and she was honored as "the Mother of God." In Figure 2, the Virgin Mary and Christ appear here in a completely frontal pose. From the position, the Virgin Mary is more like a throne for Jesus than a mother. Unlike Jesus' lively expression, the Virgin Mary is depicted with a blank expression, emphasizing her holiness and solemnity. The eyes of the Virgin Mary were depicted as large and unfocused, with a long, narrow nose outlined in vertical lines, enhancing the solemnity. Her lips were closed to show her dignity[8]. The contrast in color between the two figures also emphasized the centrality of the Jesus image.

After a small peak in the worship of the Virgin Mary, the view of the Virgin Mary as a "mediator between God and man" began to spread throughout Europe in the 11th century. In many paintings of the time, the image of the Virgin Mary would appear alongside that of Christ, but her presence was only to emphasize the divine status of Christ. Because in these creations, the central figure on the canvas was usually Christ. For example, in Figure 3, Christ is located in the central position of the painting, looking down upon the world, with God's hand hanging above his head. The Virgin Mary on Christ's left, along with three saints, and the four saints on his right, form a symmetrical composition. The index finger and middle finger of the Virgin Mary are touching, pointing towards Christ, implying that the divine Christ is the one who should be worshipped by the world[8]. Furthermore, Christ is depicted in a completely frontal pose, while the Virgin Mary is shown in a 3/4 side profile. Although she sits alongside Jesus on the throne of wisdom, appearing to have an exalted position, the throne on her side is somewhat cramped, as if it was added later, and here she is merely a supporting figure for Christ, highlighting the passivity of the Virgin Mary's image.

Fig. 4. Christ *the Ruler of the Universe, Mother of All Peoples Mary*, c. 1150-1200, Hildegard von Bingen, Salzburg, Austria.

4.2   The Emptying of the Virgin Image

Early depictions of the Virgin were highly formulaic, usually set against a gold background, with the Virgin seated with the Child in her arms, and the human figure often disproportionate, being more of an abstract concept than a human image. The Christian depiction of the Virgin Mary, beyond her purity being highly idealized to the point of almost dehumanizing her, was actually a form of emptying the female identity. In the 7th century, Bede Venerabilis (circa 673-735), known as the "Father of English History," further intensified the emptying of the Virgin image in his theological discourse. Bede affirmed the status of the Virgin as "Mother of God," elevating Mary above all women and calling for her to be venerated as a divine messenger and by humanity, but his aim was to emphasize the doctrine of the "immaculate conception." This dehumanized purity not only transformed the Virgin image into a paradigm for disciplining women but also set an unattainable standard for women.

This emptying can also be seen in the female creations of the time. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was the most famous Catholic female saint of the 12th century and served as abbess of a convent, leader of a convent, and author of works in multiple disciplines, being one of the rare women who left works behind. She created illustrations for her own works, such as "Christ, the Ruler of the Universe, and Mary, the Mother of All Peoples," which is a typical example. In Figure 4, the Virgin Mary is depicted as a standing female figure with outstretched arms forming a semicircle, with

a symbolic circular womb below containing a male figure. Above her head is the image of Yahweh [9].

In another of her paintings, titled "The Church, the Bride and Faithful Mother of Jesus Christ," the Virgin Mary, who is painted in gold, holds a flag with the words "I will conceive and bear a child" [9]. This shows that, in Hildegard's thoughts, although the value of women has not been completely denied, it mainly manifests in their reproductive function. In the painting, the Virgin Mary does not appear as a "real person," but her reproductive function and biological sex are exaggerated, which shows Hildegard's inheritance of tradition and her understanding of her own gender as a woman.

Fig. 5. Our *Lady with a Staff*, Copo di Marcovaldo, c.1261, Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, the Commendatores of the Jena Chaplains Guild.

Therefore, in terms of Hildegard's two works, although she shows a lot of innovation and autonomy in her artistic creation, she is deeply influenced by the conservative tendencies of Christian feudal thought, and her thoughts are inevitably conservative, affecting her creation. She accepted the sacred order of social and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Despite her frequent contributions of new insights, she could not alter the course of history on her own, and she could not advance any further, making her an exception among women of her time [10].

In early Italian altarpieces, the "Virgin Hodegetria" (Virgin Directing the Way) was the earliest and most widely disseminated standard model, and a typical Byzantine stylized style. The Virgin holds the Child in one hand and points to the Child with the other, meaning "incarnation"; the Child holds a book in one hand and makes a blessing gesture with the other. Most of the time, the Virgin and Child are accompanied by angels or saints on either side[11], which is also a stylized feature of most medieval European Virgin images.

In Figure 5,"Our Lady with a Staff" by Coppo di Marcovaldo (1225-1276) is a typical example of Byzantine stylization. The Virgin holds the Child sitting on a lyre-shaped wooden throne, with angels in Byzantine court dress on either side. The Child leans to one side, held by the Virgin, who holds a book in one hand and extends the other to touch the Virgin's headscarf and make a blessing gesture. The Virgin looks out of the painting, her head tilted toward the Child, as if to meet the Child's gaze, and the entire scene forms a highly humanized interaction scene. During this period, the depictions of the Virgin Mary were extremely similar in composition, with only minor changes to Jesus' head and hands. Therefore, these paintings' Virgin Marys were more like a throne custom-made for Jesus, along with the throne-shaped chair, conveying the symbolic meaning of the "throne of wisdom." This artistic "repetition" erased the female subjectivity, individuality, and diversity, which was another form of emptiness in the shaping of female images. The Virgin Mary was defined as a holy mother who met male expectations, completely serving the male political system. This behavior limited the role of women, making them an idealized image, which was actually influenced by the male-dominated values and power structure.

5   The Impact of Feudal Ideological Tendencies on the Social Status of Medieval Women

Christianity believed that the scope of divine power was not in the hands of women, but in the hands of the gods - men. In the male-dominated society when conducting cultural depictions, men were depicted as having control, being strong and powerful, and being rational, etc. as ideal traits. In contrast, female traits, ideal female figures, were considered inferior to male traits, ideal male figures [12]. This hidden and subtle devaluation of women's thoughts was widely accepted in medieval society and reflected in the shaping of the Virgin Mary's art image, presenting passive and void characteristics. The medieval image of the Virgin Mary was given a passive and void representation, which to some extent limited the diverse roles and individual differences of women in society and emphasized their subordinate status. Social cultural ideology and symbol design also often placed women in a secondary position, which had an impact on women's self-cognition, as evidenced by the example of Hildegard's sculpting of the Virgin Mary. Women would question their own value and ability due to this representation, which would affect their role positioning and development path in society and personal life. This feudal ideological tendency had a profound impact on social ideology.

6   Conclusion

Christianity had a significant historical impact on politics, culture, and social life in medieval Europe. Mary, the mother of the Savior, is the greatest woman in the hearts of Christian believers. Her image was shaped by Western artists as the exemplar of the pure and holy Virgin Mary, representing the core values of Christian faith and culture. However, the artistic image of the Virgin Mary often contains feudal ideological tendencies, causing serious harm to women. This phenomenon, although a cultural product of a specific historical stage, reflects that medieval European male chauvinism is still deeply rooted. Therefore, based on the reinterpretation, contemporary scholars are actively exploring the historical development process of Christianity and its impact, and by studying the historical evolution and artistic representation of the Virgin Mary, they can analyze the causes and survival of feudal ideological tendencies in Western European social and historical soil, which can help the world better understand the long development trajectory of the Middle Ages in Europe, reveal the formation of feudal ideological tendencies in the historical and social-cultural development of Middle.

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