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Seductive Sacrality: Questioning the Nature of Seduction through Golden Age Spanish Paintings of the Virgin Mary

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Seductive Sacrality: Applying the Magnetic Qualities of the Western Female Nude to the Virgin Mary in Spanish Golden Age Painting

Nicole Jozwik

This thesis will bring into focus the relationship between Mary as the Virgin and Mary as a woman. Specifically targeting Spanish depictions from the 16th and 17th Centuries, the investigation will analyze Mary under the same lens as one would the traditional female nude. Although it is rare that one sees the flesh of the Virgin beyond her single breast, she emits much of the same magnetic force as the female nude. Both seek to bring the viewer to her through their body language, yet the Virgin Mary accomplishes this same feat without the use of carnal sexuality. The Blessed Mother even trumps the level of earthly desire, for she takes the earthly desire of the viewer and transforms it into spiritual aspiration. Utilizing the analyses and methodologies of John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* and Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," I will examine how both Mary and depictions of the female nude in 16th century Spanish art create an electric relationship with the viewer.

Mary is probably the most ubiquitously seductive female figure in the world of Catholic art. Like the female nude, she is surveyed by the spectator in a charged manner. However, unique to her persona is her position of power, and her compassionate, spiritual qualities raise her above the mundane female. Unlike Eve, for example, Mary is never naked to the audience: her breast is often exposed in reference to lactation, but this trope is in connection with the comforting qualities of motherhood and spiritual, as well as literal fertility.

Nonetheless, as with images of the female nude, desire is critical to the relationship of Mary and the viewer. Images of Mary are often intended to create a longing in the viewer and, although not sexual, it is the greatest longing in the Catholic faith, that of salvation. I will take into account the differing relationships Mary has with female and male viewers, for the female audience will have a different connection to the Virgin simply due to their sharing of sex and body. The ultimate accomplishment Mary achieves is maintaining her powerful and influential role as both Mother to God and Mother to her earthly Catholic children, and calling more to her through her seductive spirituality.

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