

3. Watchful mother and sleeping child

The image of a mother leaning over her sleeping child goes back to well before the advent of Christianity. A votive statue (fig. 16) from the town of Santa Maria Capua Vetere in Italy, for example, is a remarkable sculpture of Etruscan origin (5th-4th century BCE). Showing, already, judicious and virtuosic foreshortening, it is a statue in tuff of a woman seated in an armchair, holding in her arms a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes.

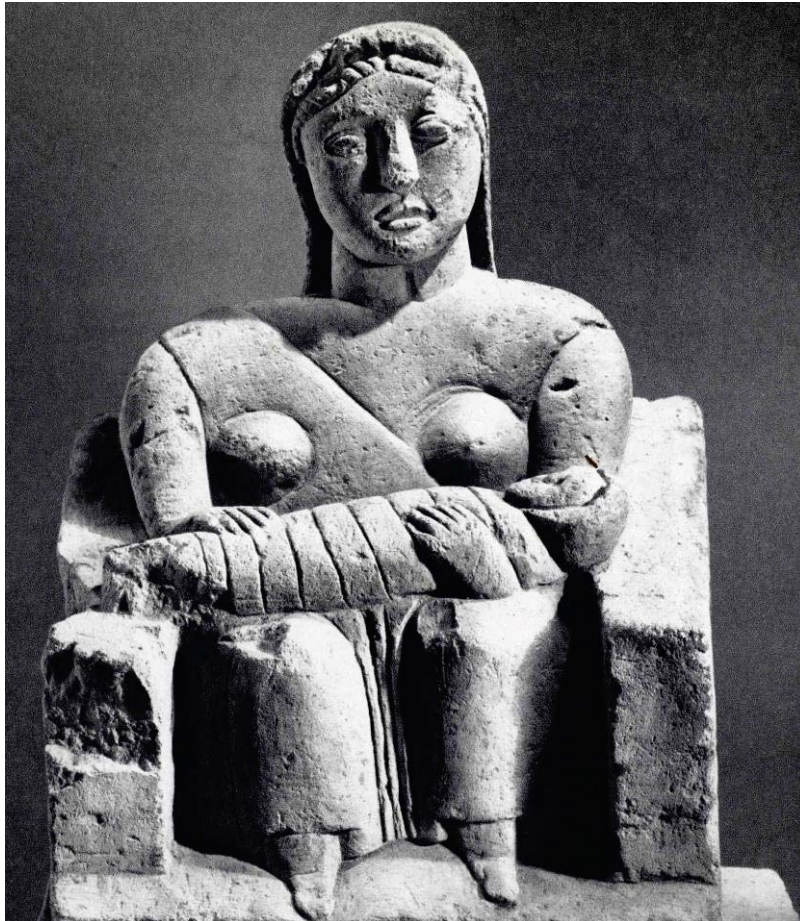


Figure 16.
Santa Maria Capua
Vetere. Votive statue of a
woman with a child,
5th-4th c. BCE.
Tuff, 60 cm.
Museo Campano,
Capua - Italy

If it were not for the expressive treatment of the relief elements, the displacement of the shoulders, and the arbitrary foreshortening of the folded legs that allow us to date the work, everything could lead one to see in it the simplified figure of a Fernand Léger sculpture.

The massive face stares impassively into space; the child does not seem to require the mother's attention. It is there, trussed up in its swaddling clothes, asleep. But, despite the supple hands around the child's body, the gaze of this mother expresses no emotion. All signs thus point to the conclusion that this is a symbol or the votive stele of ancient Capua rather than a portrait in stone. It can be seen as a pagan allegory, as rudimentary as it is magnificent, and a symbol of fecundity. The anonymous artist, showing great complicity with the matter he is working with, delights in creating an idol without any apparent model. The role of the Capua Vetere statue is thus to care for the local children, to nourish them and protect them from evil spells.

A little girl asleep with a crown still in her hands, a figure sculpted from a block of porphyry (fig. 17), is a manifestation of Hellenistic Alexandria (3rd century BCE). She is seated, cuddled up into herself, her head resting on her hands, her hands on her knees. From the in-the-round volume, extracted from gross-grained stone, radiates a gentleness that an abrupt chisel, quick and well-judged, has made familiar. The existence of the work, so realistic and intimate, could be due to a patrician who, wishing to capture one of his children in such a natural position, commissioned a sculptor to fix this evanescent instant in eternity. The sculpture is free from sentimentality; it radiates, in all simplicity, what the gaze it captures grants it.



*Figure 17. Alexandria, third century BCE. Little girl asleep with a crown.
The Louvre, Paris - France*

Another example of the sleeping child in Attic art is the stele of Ilissos, where the little child is shown sitting at the feet of a nude hunter-athlete who is being examined, not without a certain perplexity, by a bearded old man in a loose-fitting great coat (fig. 18; 4th century BCE).



Figure 18.
Greece, Attic art, 330-320 BCE.
Stele of Ilissos.
Marble, 168 x 80 cm.
National Museum,
Athens - Greece

A bronze from second-century Rhodes, Eros Asleep, his arm hanging over his makeshift bed, is a further example (fig. 19).

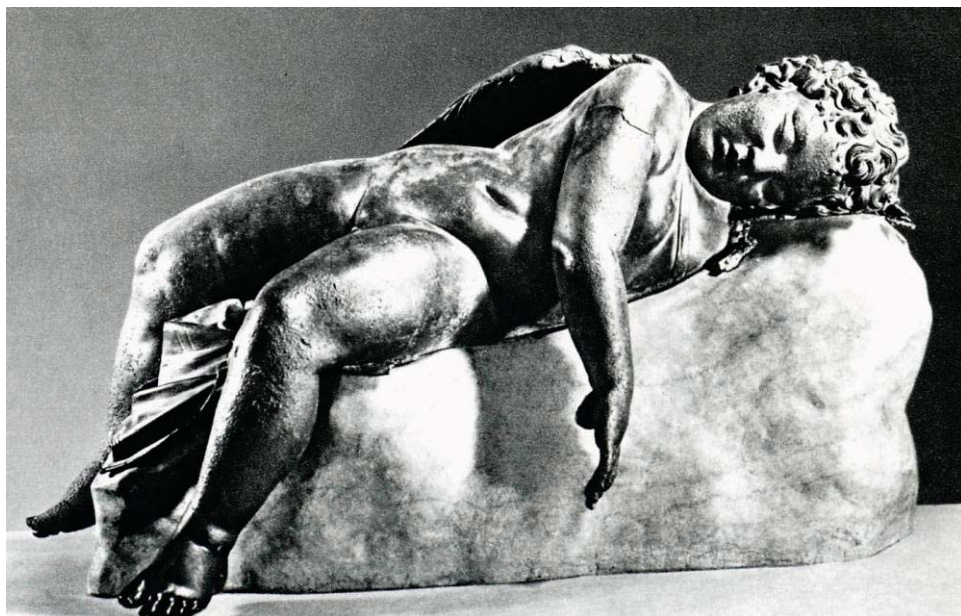
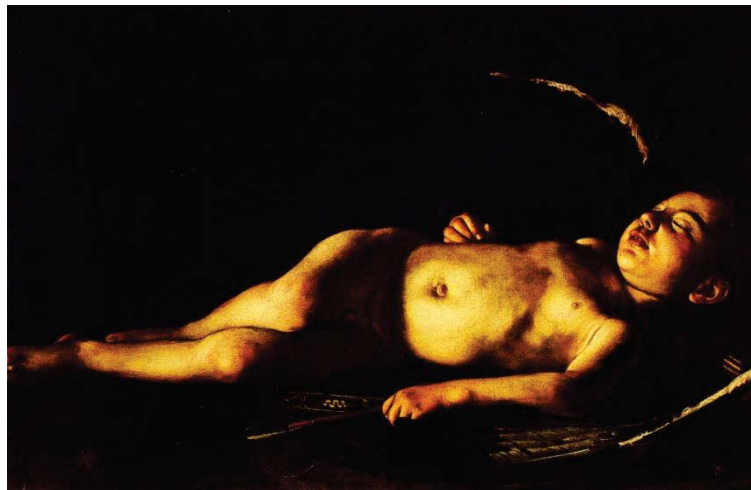


Figure 19.- *Greece, Rhodes (?), second half of the 2nd century.*
Eros sleeping. Bronze, 43.4 x 78.2 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York - USA

From a much later period, Caravaggio (1573-1610) gives his version of Cupid Asleep (fig. 20), a chubby little boy, his naked body stretched out, drawn out from nocturnal blackness by a glowing light. Lying laterally at the base of the painting, the figure is strangely contorted: The legs turn towards the spectator, one edging out over the other, while head and shoulders are turned in the opposite direction, towards the interior of the painting. This twisted, helical movement is staged with a somewhat brutal realism. It shows the “paradoxical” state of a sleep in which a dreamy restlessness takes hold of the child. The violent, almost caricatural lighting of the subject creates a dramatic chiaroscuro atmosphere. We have here a fine example of the style, so disparaged in its time, of the “Prince of Darkness”, who greatly influenced not only the Neapolitan School, but all Italian painting and beyond. The style, known as tenebrism, was a means for the painter to free himself from convention by deliberately violating the slick devices then fashionable—however worthy and ravishing one may find them—of official painting.



*Figure 20. - Carravaggio (Italy, 1573-1610). The Sleeping Cupid, 1608.
Oil on canvas. Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Florence - Italy*

Caravaggio, perhaps, was familiar with the sumptuous black marble Cupid Asleep (fig. 21) in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. It depicts an angel lying on its wings, one arm resting charmingly behind its head, the other stretched out along the length of his trumpet, its bell visible beyond the fingers.



*Figure 21. - Roman Art, copy of a Hellenistic original. Cupid asleep.
Black marble. Uffizi Gallery, Florence - Italy*

In pre-Columbian art, sleep is rarely represented. A double-neck, earthenware llama jar (fig. 22) offers one such instance. The mother—seated, her legs folded under her—has a wide, expressive face; her shoulders are inscribed with graphic elements.



The suckling baby is held snug against her body, suggesting an organic union.

*Figure 22. - Pre-Columbian art.
Jar llama double neck.
Provenance: Tomb Santa Rosa
Restrepo - Colombia. Private
Collection*

We can jump ahead to the twentieth century and find, in Ossip Zadkin's Motherhood (fig. 23), sculpted from a slab of marble and partially painted, a piece that shares something of the tenderness one derives from this pre-Columbian work. If these works do not give rise to an identification with the mother, they nevertheless express feeling of love secure in sleep.



*Figure 23.
Ossip Zadkine (Russia, 1890 - France 1967).
Motherhood, 1919.
Marble partially painted, 48.7 x 26 x 20 cm.
Zadkine Museum of the City of Paris,
Paris – France
©ADAGP, Paris, 2012*

The same can be said for a Mintade figure from the Congo, a statuette in steatite from the 19th century (fig. 24). The mother, a headdress crowning her head, sits cross-legged. Her square shoulders slightly rounded, her neck thick, she gazes blankly out of deep-set eyes while the child, its eyes closed, suckles at her breast. The arms and legs of mother and child form a harmonious complex of parallel and diagonal lines. While the child feeds, its hand on the breast, the nipple in its mouth, the mother is all patience.



*Figure 24.
Kongo (Zaire), 19th century or earlier.
Mother and child. Mintadi statuette.
Steatite, 35.56 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston – USA*

India offers another such example, a bas-relief in red sandstone from the 3rd century, showing a mother wearing an embroidered headdress, her hair falling in plaits on either side of her head (fig.25). She is squeezing her milk-laden breast while a baby sleeps in the hollow of her bangled arm. This mother, or mother-goddess, is smiling; she holds her head slightly tilted, and bears a gentle, understanding expression. She seems to be more of an earthly being than divinity revealed.

*Figure 25.
India, Mathura,
Woman and Child 2nd-3rd c.
Mottled red sandstone.
27.5 x 22.3 cm.
Museum für Indische Kunst,
Berlin - Germany*



These mother-and-child works induce reverie. They remind us of Saint Augustine's maxim, "The measure of love is to love without measure".

A set of themes celebrating the Christian Nativity occupies a central place when it comes to mother-and-child works: The Virgin with Sleeping Child, the Adoration of the Shepherds, the Flight into Egypt, and the Virgin Adoring the Child. These sacred themes expressed, and no doubt continue to express, in Europe and everywhere else where Christian values hold sway, the inexhaustible theme of the gift. Adopting singularly diverse approaches to the celebration of maternal love, they can be read as codified preludes to the Passion.

Since the High Middle Ages, the Nativity has been the theme of countless works of art. A Nativity scene (fig. 26) decorates the binding of the Lorsch Gospels, realized around 810 by the great craftsmen at the celebrated Aix-la-Chapelle court. Perfect in its form, the work, which Charlemagne himself must have held in his hands, binds together the four Gospels of the New Testament.

Figure 26.
Anonymous
(France, 9th century).
Binding of the Lorsch
Gospels (detail).
The Nativity, c. 810.
Ivory.
Victoria and Albert
Museum,
London - G.B.



In his Adoration of the Shepherds (fig. 27), Georges de la Tour (1593-1652) composes an exquisite devotional scene.



Figure 27.
Georges de La Tour
(France, 1593-1652).
Adoration of the Shepherds,
1644.
Oil on canvas, 107 x 137 cm.
The Louvre, Paris - France

The new-born child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, is the luminous focus of the painting; the other characters, enraptured, keep watch over him as he lies sleeping in his humble wicker crib. They are very gently lit, as much, it would seem, by the glowing infant they are worshipping as from the candle flame one of them cups in his hand. A lamb advances its snout to smell Jesus and, as it were, breathe in his aura. The scene is depicted up close, so much so that, for the believer, a feeling of participating in a mystical event is provoked. The infant, his arms and legs imprisoned in strips of fine cloth, is lying on his back (as he invariably is in such scenes). This convention has been codified since Antiquity: On his back, the baby can breathe freely. Indeed, sudden infant death syndrome was not a concern prior to the latter part of the 20th century when, in the West, against reason and tradition, the practice of having babies sleep on their abdomen was introduced. The technique of wrapping the whole body in a flannel blanket tied with strips of cloth is a classic one; it prevents the baby from moving about restlessly and makes for a more tranquil sleep. This practice goes back as far as, for example, the Cypriot statuette from 2000-1600 BCE (chapter 2, fig. 3), the Estrucan Santa Maria Capua Vetere statue from the 5th-4th century BCE (fig. 16), the Lorsch Gospels of 810 (fig. 26) and, finally, the fresco by Giotto in the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi (fig. 28). The body-wrapping technique remained common in Europe until the 1960s.



Figure 28.
Giotto di Bondone
(Italian, 1266/67-1337).
The Nativity (detail),
1315. Fresco.
Basilica of San
Francesco,
Assisi - Italy

Nicolas Poussin's (1594-1665) Adoration contrasts with the ones just examined in that it displays an atmosphere of greater confidence. Inserted in a strict architectural framework of verticals, horizontals and curves, the subject—a rather hackneyed one when all is said and done—here takes on an air of surprise and wonder, thanks largely to the gesture of the smiling Virgin presenting the baby, lying on a corporale (a white linen cloth that echoes the winding sheet the crucified Christ will later wear), to the tender regard of the shepherds (fig. 29).



Figure 29.
Nicolas Poussin
(France, 1594-1665).
Adoration of the Shepherds, 1633?
Canvas, 96.5 x 73.7 cm.
The Trustees of the National Gallery,
London – G.B.

For Correggio (1489 -1534), before Poussin, the Adoration is above all a scene wherein an intimate nocturnal atmosphere prevails. Here the Virgin, her face radiating happiness, holds the divine infant in her arms (fig. 30). She is depicted as a mother like any other mother.



Figure 30.
Correggio (Italian, 1498-1534).
The Night (The Adoration of the
Shepherds), detail, ca 1530.
Oil on canvas.
Gemaäldegalerie,
Dresden - Germany

The same applies to Rembrandt's (1606-1669) *Virgin Rocking the Infant Jesus* (fig. 31). Like any other watchful mother, Mary leans over the rustic cradle, lit by the flames from an invisible hearth. The fireplace, casting its glow from outside the picture frame, creates a spiralling spatial depth. Lifting the blanket that screens the sleeper from the light, the protective Virgin tenderly checks on the child, snug under its bedding.



Figure 31.
 Rembrandt (Dutch, 1606-1669).
Virgin Rocking the Infant Jesus
 (detail of the Holy Family).
 Hermitage Museum,
 Saint Petersburg – Russia

An eternal theme, mother-watching-over-child is interpreted in a “primitive” fashion by contemporary painter Georg Baselitz (b. 1938), whose saturated brush strokes of strident colors roughly depict a child in restorative sleep (fig. 32).



Figure 32.
 Georg Baselitz (German, 1938).
1897 Eighteenthundredninetyseven,
1987.
Oil on canvas, 290 x 290 cm.
 Boymans-van Beuningen,
 Rotterdam – Holland
 ©Georg Baselitz.

Four centuries before scientists described the infant's phases of sleep, they were already observed by the alert eyes of the painters of the 15th and 16th centuries. The baby, as we have seen in the various Nativity scenes and will see again in the profane works which

follow, was usually depicted at rest, passive, either naked or wrapped in swaddling clothes. In such cases, the spirit of the painting is absorbed in a circle of silence; it becomes concentrated and condenses into something durable. The child is represented in quiet, restorative sleep: It hardly moves, it is sleeping soundly.

In contrast, the child is sometimes captured in painting while it is caught in the snare of active sleep. Antoon van Dyck's (1599-1641) *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (fig. 33) offers an example of the restlessness typical of this stage of sleep.



Figure 33.
Anthony van Dyck (Flemish, 1599-1641).
Rest on the Flight into Egypt, circa 1630.
Oil on canvas, 134.7 x 114.8 cm.
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen,
Alte Pinakothek, Munich - Germany

It is drawn from a scene in the apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. The text evokes the Holy Family's miraculous rest on their journey. This was a very popular theme, supported by the theologians of the Counter-Reformation; indeed, they saw in it a model of the family they could offer for imitation. It is a devotional work in which van Dyck weaves a harmony of infinitely delicate colors within a perfectly balanced scenography. A finely nuanced relationship between the characters and the landscape comes into being. Everything, in this rest on the journey, is worthy of comment: the loveliness of the Virgin's oval face, upon which one can read both gentleness and a certain anxiety; the clinging of the child to the mother; Joseph's severe expression as his hand opens in a tentative gesture.



Figure 34.
Paolo Veronese (Italian, 1528-1588).
Holy Family with St. Barbara and the
Little St. John.
Oil on wood, 86 x 122 cm.
Uffizi Gallery, Florence - Italy

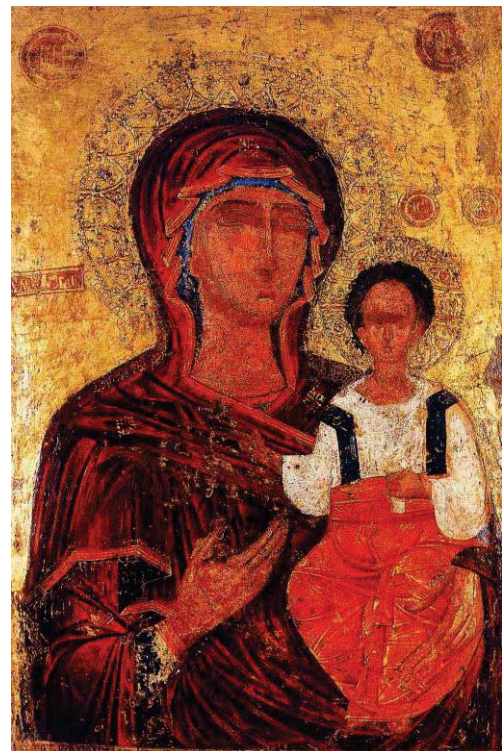
One of the most amazing representations of active sleep is Veronese's (1528-1588) Holy Family with St. Barbara and the Little St. John (fig. 34). In his disturbed naked-baby sleep, Jesus, his eyes half-closed (probably undergoing rapid eye movements), with his left hand fondles what lies between his legs while his right hand and leg seem to be moving simultaneously. All the symptomatology of active sleep is depicted here (detail, fig. 35). This stage will evolve into the paradoxical sleep of the adult, the stage where dreams occur.



Figure 35.
Paolo Veronese (Italian, 1528-1588).
Holy Family with St. Barbara and the
Little St. John (detail).
Oil on wood, 86 x 122 cm.
Uffizi Gallery, Florence - Italy

It is not everywhere in the Christian world, however, that the Infant Jesus is represented sleeping. In Greece and Russia, Bulgaria and Serbia, and other countries where the Eastern Orthodox Church is dominant and the heritage of the Byzantine Empire remains present, the Infant is always depicted in a state of wakefulness (fig. 36).

Figure 36.
Anonymous.
The Virgin Hodigitria, 1518.
Wood, tempera, 113.5 x 70 cm.
National Gallery –
Old Bulgarian Art Section,
Sofia - Bulgaria



Icons constitute the vast repertory of this tradition; Eusebius of Caesarea, in the 4th century, traced their origin to the Fayum portraits. Here, it is customary for the Infant to never be caught unawares. As in this example, he is an active being who is occasionally depicted as an older child, usually face forward in the arms of his mother who, for her part, is represented as a solemn empress. In this Madonna painting, Jesus, half-gesturing the sacramental sign of benediction, acquires the stature of a supernatural being, one placed above the human condition.



Figure 37.
Anonymous
(France, 12th-13th century).
Virgin and Child (detail).
Stone.
Cathedral of Rouen - France

This elevated portrayal contrasts with the profane image offered by the baby, naked as the day he was born, found in Rouen Cathedral, France, and dating from the 13th century (fig. 37). Here the little boy, chubby-cheeked and plump, the very picture of health, sleeps in the arms of comfort, sucking his finger.

The same contrast is seen in the podgy, golden putto with the wide forehead crowned in curls, complete unto himself, that Guido Reni (1575-1642) portrayed in fresco against an azure ground (fig. 38). This time the child is seen at an angle, half-sitting, half-lying-down, as if supported by the skillfully draped sheets, similar in structure to a rock that might have been moulded around the body of the baby, a semi-circle under the arc of his outstretched arms.



Figure 38.- Guido Reni (Italy, 1575-1642). Putto asleep, 1627. Fresco, 57 x 56 cm.
Museo Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome – Italy

Art is unalloyed joy when it delights in the dreams of innocence. Claude Monet (1840-1926), in his bold portrait of his sleeping son (fig. 39), offers us a vibrant illustration of this.

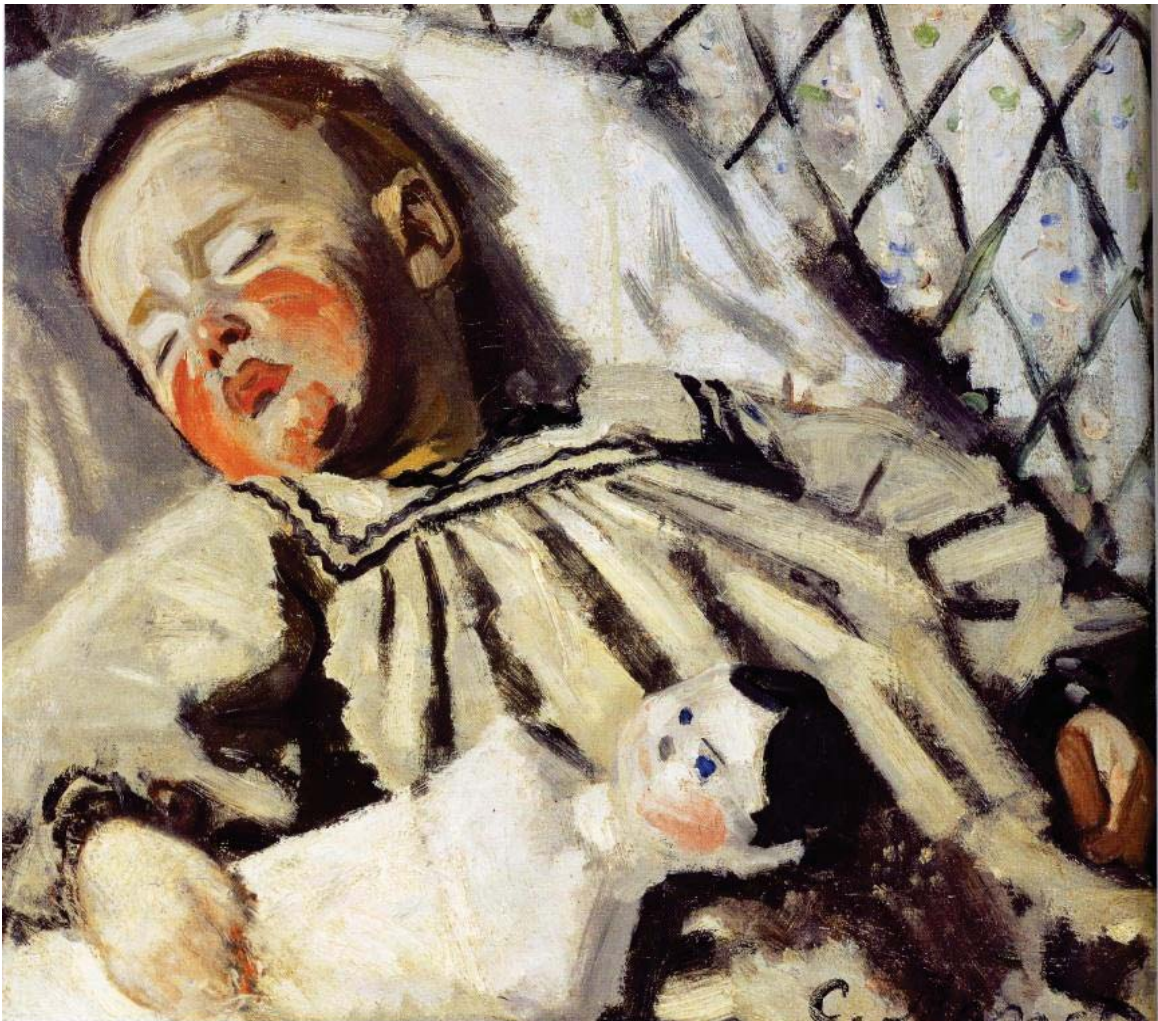


Figure 39.- Claude Monet (France, 1840-1926).

The son of the artist asleep. Oil on canvas.

Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen - Denmark

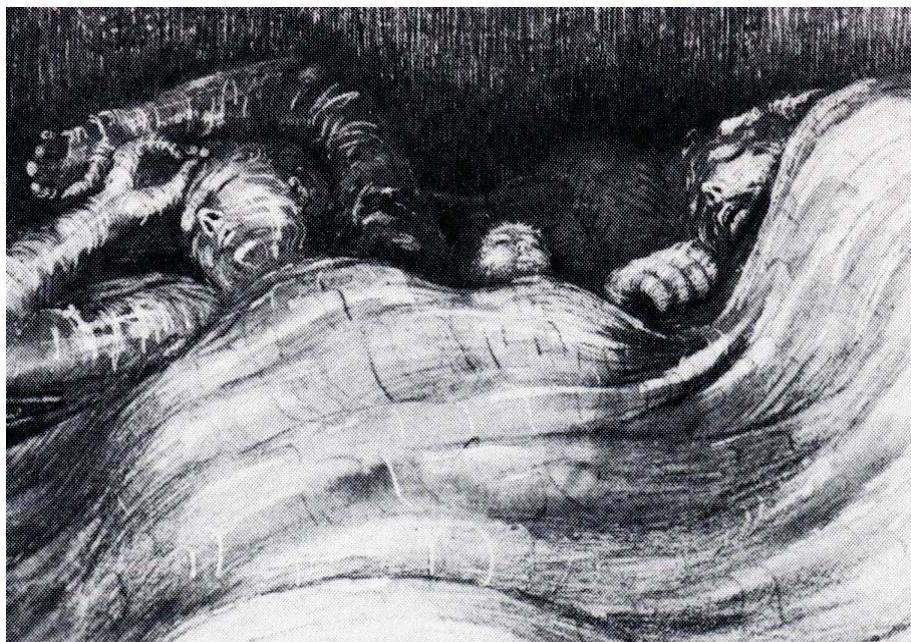
The child, lying in a cot, reflects the violent light shining in from the side that turns the shadows into powerful structures. Monet accentuates the rosy tones of the cheeks, nose and mouth and the pale, green-tinted yellows of the nightshirt, forehead and pillow. He establishes sumptuous contrasts, contrasts which the clever framing reinforces. Even the doll with its wide-open eyes seems alive and ready to sit up as soon as the hand holding it relaxes its grip. In this work of black lines and pale hues, stamped with the seal of spontaneity, everything vibrates.

The same atmosphere of happiness and serenity is found in the watercolor *Mother with her Sleeping Child* (fig. 40), with its intimidating greys and aura of empathy, by the Finnish artist Knut Magnus Enckell (1870-1925).

*Figure 40. Knut Magnus Enckell
(Finland, 1870-1925).
Mother and her Sleeping Child, after 1890.
Watercolor and gouache, 56.5 x 39.5 cm.
Hermitage Museum,
Saint Petersburg – Russia*



When the light of love is overwhelmed by the darkness of trauma, however, sleep becomes infiltrated with disturbing dreams. It then incarnates the feverishness that triggers—in brutal collages, insistent flashes and horrific visions—fear, anxiety and terror, as we see in Henry Moore's (1898-1986) electrifying Londoners Sheltering in the Underground series (1941). These drawings (fig. 41 is one from the series), showing Londoners huddled in the bowels of the Underground seeking shelter from the Nazi bombs, were sketched quickly with a dry and nervous pen. Intense electrical discharges seem to furrow the field of these ink and watercolor images, the hatched lines remaining as stigmata of the maelstrom that has passed through.



*Figure 41.-Henry Moore (British, 1898-1986). Refugees sleeping: two women and a child,
1941. Pen and watercolor, 28.1 x 46 cm. University of East Anglia at Norwich - G.B.
©The Henry Moor Foundation-All rights reserved / DACS, London / ADAGP, Paris, 2012*

In marked contrast to Henry Moore's drawing, Georges Rouault (1871-1958) conceived his colour etching *Sleep, My Love* as an image of frontal immediacy, achieved via frank, thick contours (fig. 42). Everything is in the foreground; there is nothing extraneous. It shows a young mother standing in her acrobat's make-up and costume. The slender body of this flying Madonna is seen from behind while her head, crowned in a circus headdress, is shown in profile, emphasizing its pivoting movement relative to the bust. What's going on? A moment ago she had heard the baby stirring. She rushed in on tiptoe to see if it was all right. A single look was enough to reassure her. Her protective arm reaches out. How different, and yet how similar, is this painting to those of the Virgin adoring the Child!

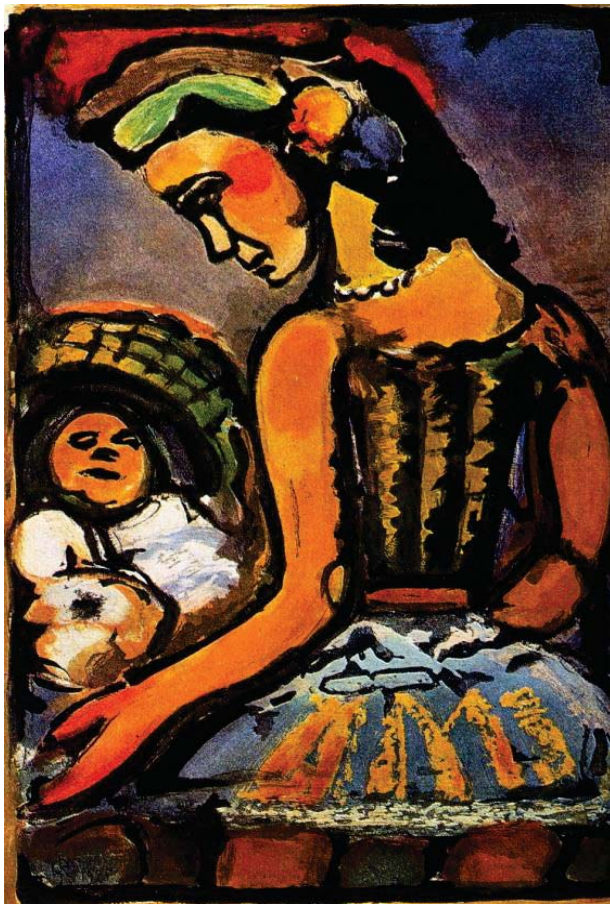


Figure 42.
 Georges Rouault (France, 1871 - 1958).
Sleep, My Love, 1938.
 Illustration of the book "Circus of the
 Shooting Star. ".
 Etching in color.
 France
 ©ADAGP, Paris, 2012

Art enables strange connivances in which different sensibilities confront each other, are attracted to each other, and join together to stage ambivalent scenes. Within its purview, art associates tradition and modernity, youth and old age, cheerfulness and melancholy, contemplation and indifference—in short, a whole panoply of humanity where contrasts and coincidences are deployed in variegated harmonies or grating hymns. From these festive celebrations and secret cross-fertilizations, these joyous weddings and doleful reminiscences, emerges consent or regret for what, sooner or later, must be abandoned. Now, what can link, across an interval of three and half centuries, Titian's (1488-1576) *The Three Ages of Man* (Fig. 43) and Klimt's (1862-1918) *The Three Ages of Woman* (fig. 44)?

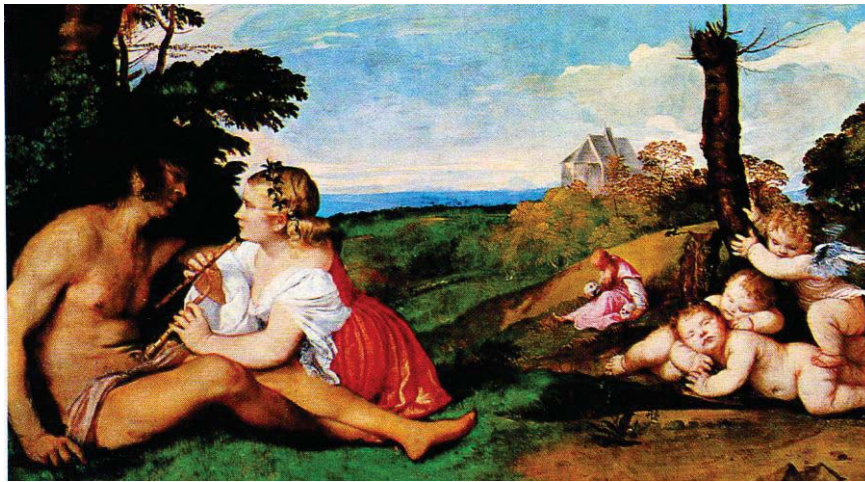


Figure 43.
Titian (Italian,
1488/89-1576).
The three ages of man.
Oil on canvas,
106 x 182 cm.
National Galleries of
Scotland,
Edinburgh - G.B.

Klimt's delicate, florid evanescence, his rose-tinted optimism, lies on one single plane, and it echoes the realism of Titian's allegorical register. In both cases, it is through the sleep of children that life seems to fortify the earthly voyage: In Titian, it is a happy languor depicting spring and winter brought together in the same countryside that fortifies; in Klimt, it is an eternal, heavenly beauty. Titian, here, evades nothing. He hurries slowly, as if he were moving to the rhythms of a madrigal. He adopts one single colour register and, with great skill, harmonizes the figures with the landscape. He composes in perspective the young, the mature and the old. If the drawing (as always with Titian, very refined in its forms), is supple and flowing, it is in the vigour of the colours that it arouses the strongest emotions.

With Klimt, the impression of freshness predominates. It seems to burst and vaporize before the viewer, who breathes it as much as he sees it, with its heady perfumes and preciousity. Klimt is immersed in a nature entirely of his own making, a nature he respects and feels in all the fibres of his being. He even strives to make himself one with it. Titian, for his part, is content to evaluate that nature.



Figure 44.
Gustav Klimt
(Austrian, 1862-1918).
The Three Ages of Woman, 1905.
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna,
Rome - Italy.

The world of dreams, so rich in childhood, is very rarely represented in painting. Pink striations on a speckled blue sky in which objects and animals fly: This is the troubled dream of a Sleeping Child (fig. 45) by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), future exile-by-choice to Tahiti and the Iles Marquises. Conceiving of the whole on one single plane, he seated the little girl, her head resting on her arm, at a table. Her hand, like a good little creature, lies still on the table, much more serene than the storm that, at this moment, is raging in her brain. The framing captures the upper body, roughly equivalent to a cinema close-up, and brings into focus the child and her dream-objects. This was the period when Gauguin was about to accompany, at least for a stretch of their journey, the Impressionists.



Figure 45. - Paul Gauguin (France, 1848-1903). Sleeping Child, 1884. Oil on canvas, 46 x 55.5 cm. Josefowitz Collection, Indianapolis Museum, USA