

BrainStream:
The Brain in the Mainstream

Reflections on Stephan Lochner's "Madonna of the Rose Bower"

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Jeff usually writes about interpersonal neurobiology and the brain making their way into mainstream consciousness via print media and the web. For this issue, our editor asked if he would let his mind wander over the topic of spirituality, one of his most cherished domains. He invites us to muse upon this image's deeply personal impact and meaning for us as he wanders—at leisure, meditatively—through the ways the colors and forms play in his mind.

It is said that the entire vocabulary of God consists of a single word: “Love.” That this is patently true stems from the fact that every “thing” that a God could desire to say, or express is contained in the message and meaning of Love. We human creatures also know this word “Love” and we also express it in our thoughts, in our words, and in our actions. Yet we human creatures, humanoids, as John O’Donohue, of recent fond memory described us, are perpetually driven to elaborate and exhumate all the different and differentiated significances which can be teased out of this core message of the one divine “Love.”

My favorite poetic love provocation comes (essentially) from e.e. cummings:

“What yes is to if, Love is to yes.” And you might rightly say, “Well, what does that mean?” To which I might like to say: “Well, let’s talk about it.”

I would like to approach the topic of spirituality obliquely, and do so by attempting a symbolic amplification of Stephan Lochner’s painting, completed in the middle of the 15th century, which is titled, “Madonna of the Rose Bower.”

First, I suggest that you ignore everything I might say and merely contemplate the image; let the image have its way with you. Let the image, in its fullness, take you where it will take you. Hold on to nothing. Allow the spirit alive in the artist’s mind and materials seize you and comfort you.

Nothing I could express would be more valuable or meaningful than those moments alone in the solitude of *that* rose garden.

With a playful attitude of respect and contemplation, we can notice indications, [implications] that “that which appears” is not “all that there is.” Something is alive and messaging us from some “other” frame of reference.

Notice that the painting is in the shape of a square. [Actually, I’ve never seen the actual painting so I don’t know whether the image shown is the entire image painted, but for our current purposes, let us agree to limit ourselves to that which is currently “here with us.”] Squares and rectangles are ancient symbols of the original paradise, the garden. Prayer rugs, the carpets of our homes are shaped in the archetypal shape of the original garden of Eden. Ancient maps of Jerusalem show it in the form a square city. Fourness, the shaped space of contained spirit; the union of heaven and earth.

What do we see, in all its diversity? A community of heaven and earth, of divinity and humanity, and of ordinary splendors, sitting on the grass, shielded, nay, illuminated by a radiant golden, garment screen. Between the Madonna and the screen, a rose arbor, climbing roses, red and white, fragile superstructure assisting the reaching up toward...? Roses, symbols of continuously unfolding perfection and beauty, there is no point at which a rose ceases to be beautiful. Even at the end of its existence, we can drink rose hip tea and place sachets of rose petals in our drawers to remind us of what has been and what shall be in the future.

What is the feeling tone of this depicted moment? I see casual comfort, “being-at-ease at the center.” But where do you place the center? Where is the center of this image? Is the center of your attention static or is it dynamic, moving, dancing, fiddling, humming, thumping your fingertips, wondering what does “all this” mean?

The little ones, who, what are they? We can see they all seem to have wings, but they seem to have no interest in flying anywhere. Clearly, to me, these are “grounded angels” whose purpose is served merely by the fact of their presence—the power of presence. Technically the term “angel” connotes “messenger”—angels carry messages.

Messages are being transmitted in this painting; can you decode your message?

See Claude E. Shannon, 1948, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication"

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entropy_%28information_theory%29

As we stay with our little winged creatures, stay focused on their wings. These wings seem very technically communicative. What are wings for? And why put them on the backs of child-like creatures? If you had to put these wings on any bird you recognize, what kind of bird would it be? For me, it would be an Osprey eagle, or a Peregrine falcon, diving bird, meat-eating, fish-eating wind riders.

The spiritual journey of early Christian monastics was referred to as the "peregrinatio," and it takes its name from the twisting, turning and diving flight paths of the Peregrine falcon.

Look closely at the wings, look at the color schemes of the wings. Is there any significance for these kaleidoscopic colors? Well, there might be. I am not in the mind of the artist, but notice that some of the angelic wings are "clothed" in peacock feathers, which were recognized as symbols of "transformation." "Behold I make all things new." "I have come that they might have life in abundance."

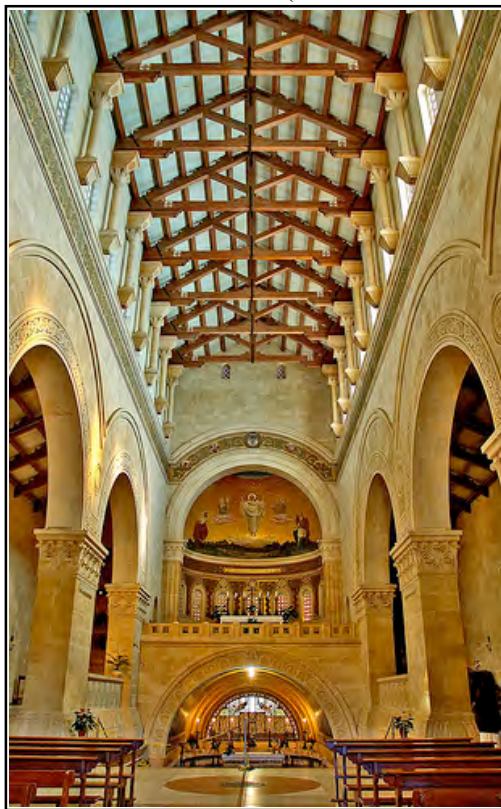
If you visit the Mount of Transfiguration in Palestine (Mount Tabor) and enter into the sacred space of this ancient Christian site, you will find it entirely decorated in peacock feather motifs.

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mount_of_transfiguration_is.JPG

<http://www.bibleplaces.com/mounttabor.htm>

Yet not all the wings are the colors of peacocks,

some are blue, beautiful blue. Notice, how could you fail to notice, that the Madonna is clothed in a generous flowing robe of blue fabric, which flows from her shoulder and her neck like a great blue river, which ends resting upon the earth, which actually is containing the small figure of the Christ child. Mary has her hands upon the child, but the garment is literally holding the baby Jesus (interface issues here) in conjunction with physical mother Mary. The love of God (blue) is the sandwich of this setting, a good meal. Ah ...



Blue was nearly unobtainable by artists of this period. This color blue was created by powdering the stone Lapis Lazuli, which in turn came only from the mines of Afghanistan. Lapis Blue was many times more valuable than gold in the 15th century economy. The color blue, throughout the entire Gothic period of Christianity, symbolized, ie personified, ie manifestly WAS the love of God himself. When you see blue in this and paintings like this, think "God." In this painting what we are experiencing is the fullness of

the Triune Godhead.

Yet having said that, and knowing that Ultimate Reality is always and continuously a mystery, "this" blue ceases instantly to be as effective in evoking the calm sense of contented containment, unless we are able cooperate—"Come stay a while with me here."

Notice the color palette selected for this painting: Black, White, Blue, Yellow, Red-Gold, Green [veriditas, the greening of new life].

These are alchemic colors, the colors of the alchemic sequence, [the great wheel of fortune]. All transformative change begins in Blackness, from which there emerges a quality of whiteness or

blueness, which is enlivened and spiritualized with the yellowing dawning of the sun, which is heated and purified with the fires of passionate connections between man and God, the outgrowth of which is Green and Golden.

Notice that the Madonna is garbed in blue and seated on a red cushion holding a very Very white child. What we may be sensing is theological Hope. Ultimate Reality as our only hope in the Long Run. Even baby Jesus is holding the “apple”; something is going to change. And everyone in the picture seems quite content with the prospects.

Notice that there are 11 angelic creatures + Jesus = 12; 12 + Madonna = 13. 13 is the number of the Godhead when God was our mother rather than our father. The calendar for the year was 13 periods of 28 days, with one left over as a slack function.

Notice that there are four angelic creatures at the bottom who are active musicians: Harpist, Lutenist, 2nd Lutenist, and an Organist. The ancients believed that God was a poetic musician who sang the world/universe into existence. With string instruments, it is common for the melody to be played out on one or two strings and the remainder of the strings “resonate” with the sound that is set up in the body of the instrument. Remember we are 90% salt water, and when we are impacted by sound, our entire system accommodates to these impacts—resonates—we respond musically with the sound of our environments. The little girl in the corner—her name is Cecilia, and notice that her instrument is an organ. Now what is an organ and what does it symbolize? Organs are instruments of many pipes; yet when the many pipes are played, there is only one sound in the room.

Notice that only two pairs of eyes are looking beyond the central focus of painting; two angels are looking at You! One is playing a lute—music has charms that can sooth a savage beast. And the other—can you find her?

Notice the apparent dominance of the golden sheet behind the Madonna. Yet it really isn't entirely

shiny gold Gold. It, to my eyes, contains lots of red. This is a depiction of a barrier of fiery gold in the last transient moments of the alchemical sequences—God of the hot windy fiery blessings just beyond the limits of our understanding.

But never forget the blackness lurking behind the golden veil, the dark abyss, like the mystery of Ultimate Reality, is also present and in no way is amenable to any sense of complete understanding or manipulation.

The seven upper angelic creatures seem content to gaze and draw close, with two small eyes saying to us, “Come hither. We have so much to talk about.”

Jewelry and adornments: Where do you go with this? What is that on the Madonna's chest? What do you say about the crown upon her head? Why is the halo on Madonna's head different from the halo on baby Jesus' head?

Now I don't claim to be ultimately correct, but if this were my “dream,” I would notice the shape of Madonna's brooch, that it actually has a single point to it, yet it is curiously similar to the



Mandorla shape that symbolizes the presentation of Jesus, the opening of God into the world through the body of Jesus. Notice that the location is directly upon her inner heart space, which in turn rests upon the blue, which is the penultimate symbol of the Love, which is God's essential nature.

<http://www.kyrie.com/symbols/mandorla.htm>

The brooch is an assembly of the colors of the alchemic sequence, of transformation through

contemplation and purification—black, white, red and gold. And it points somewhere, her crown, which is a crown of roses fabricated from the jewels of the earth. Yet it doesn't end there. There is a pointer coming out of the crown of her head pointing to an egg-shaped blue stone, lapis (the philosopher's stone), The Love of God, at the top and at the bottom. The whole scene is nearly shot through with blue, with the love that comes to all who choose to be present to the moment.

One last word—I just realized that the green of the grassy herbs upon which the Madonna is resting seems to be “bleeding up” into her beautiful blue garment. Sweet—I've just now seen that! Very sweet! The greening of the Godhead. I can live with that...for the moment.

Love and Light to you all,

Jeff

Jeff says: “I'm a poet, a good pastry chef, a supervising spiritual director at Mount Saint Mary's College Spirituality Center in Los Angeles, a Registered Nurse with a Masters degree in Comprehensive Health Planning from UCLA, and Bachelors degree in History from UC Berkeley, an ex-Peace Corps Volunteer in the Marshall Islands (public health), and a ex-Army Medic who served two years in a surgical intensive care unit, US Army Hospital, Camp Zama, Japan. I love photography, dream work, choral music, the Enneagram, travel, and adult transformational spirituality.”

It is strange to be here. The
mystery never leaves you
alone. Behind your image,
below your words, above
your thoughts, the silence of
another world waits. A world
lives within you. No one else
can bring you news of this
inner world.

- John O'Donohue
Anam Cara

