

**IMAGES OF PREGNANCY AND BIRTH
IN WESTERN PAINTING**

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Almost since the dawn of man, regardless of time, place, and culture, human beings have created art. There is an inherent need within us to create – to give visual form to our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Art can be looked upon as visually expressing who we are as human beings. The world abounds with examples of art expressing religion, politics, love, sexuality, dreams, poverty, and other aspects of the human condition. However, one category of human experience has recently piqued my curiosity. Birth, one of the most fundamental of all human experiences, has surprisingly few images in art and, even more amazing, considering the fascinating potential of the subject, is how little those images have been studied or written about.

Objects depicting pregnancy or human fertility were among the first created. Paleolithic artists sculpted small figurines of fecund female bodies; the Venus of Willendorf provides a famous example. As fertility was essential for survival, it understandably appears as a central theme in the art of early man. Beginning with these first images, fertility and birth are subjects depicted throughout art history in a multitude of cultural contexts.

Rather than a survey of the entire history of the subject, I will focus on images of pregnancy and birth from the Renaissance to modern times. My goal is to study the symbolism of images of pregnancy in western painting. Some questions I hope to answer are: Is the symbolism of such paintings always the same or do they portray different meanings? What role do the images play in society? How have such images changed (or not) over time? I believe that art reflects the views and values of the society that produces it and that art therefore can be used as a sociological or anthropological tool.

What do artist's depictions tell us of how pregnancy and birth were viewed in Renaissance society and how they are viewed in contemporary society?

During the Renaissance, painters dealt with pregnancy and birth almost exclusively in connection with the Virgin Mary (I could not find exceptions). Representations of her pregnancy and the birth of Christ involve complex Christian iconography and illustrate Christian religious doctrine.

Before 1466, Piero della Francesca painted the Virgin in pregnancy in a majestic work titled the *Madonna del Parto*.¹ In Piero's painting, heraldic angels pull back the sides of a tent revealing the Virgin who draws the viewer's attention to her womb by gently laying her hand upon it. The unlaced opening of her gown slices down her front like a wound. Indeed, according to Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, it makes reference to the wound in Christ's side. The angels drawing back the curtains of the tent provide balance and symmetry to the composition as well as signifying revelation. The sumptuous damask material of the tent is contrasted with the geometric arrangement of drab brown rectangles. According to Lavin, the materials of the tent have significance, "When God commanded Moses to make his tabernacle, he designated 'fine twined linen of blue and purple and scarlet, with eleven curtains of goats' hair for a tent.'" Piero layered the brown rectangles in exactly eleven tiers. The rectangles are no longer merely a compositional element interesting for their abstract and geometric effects in a more organic composition but, they take on the symbolic identity of goatskins such as Moses used in his tent.² Also of importance, is the pomegranate design of the brocaded outside of the tent which alludes to birth and fecundity. Due to its many seeds, the pomegranate has been considered a symbol of fertility since ancient times. For Christians,



MADONNA DEL PARTO
PIERRO DELLA FRANCESCA
c. 1466

pomegranates also symbolize rebirth and resurrection and the Christ child is often depicted holding the fruit.³

The tent provides more than a setting for the Madonna. It places her in a certain symbolic context. As Bruce Cole notes, the Madonna was called the Tabernacle of the Lord throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In Latin, *tabernaculum* means tent.⁴ Lavin concludes that “the figure of Mary within the tent fulfills [a] Marian epithet: the *Foedris Arca*, that is, Mary as the Arc guarded by cherubim, bearing the precious treasure of Christ, representative of the New Covenant.”⁵ The tent is a tabernacle or house of worship and as such represents the church. The circular shape of the tent calls to mind the ciborium which is a cupola hung with curtains erected over the high altar in the church. The curtains were drawn around the altar at various points during the mass. Beneath the curtained cupola the high altar holds the sacrament. The circular shape has some significance as it represents “the Godhead, the alpha and omega who is without beginning or end.” There are additional symbolic associations between the circle and the church which is “never ending, containing the sacraments and the hope of future life.” Therefore in Piero’s *Madonna del Parto*, we find Mary standing in the church while simultaneously personifying it by “containing the sacraments and the hope of future life.”⁶

Another Renaissance masterpiece, the *Portinari Altarpiece*, combines both Mary’s pregnancy and the holy birth. In her insightful article, Julia Miller discusses how the theme of Mary’s miraculous experience of childbirth functions in the context of the painting’s location within a hospital chapel. The Portinari family commissioned the

painting, from Flemish artist Hugo Vander Goes, in 1474-75 to adorn the chapel of Florence's largest hospital.

The central panel of the altarpiece depicts the Nativity and Adoration of the Shepherds with the Annunciation to the Shepherds illustrated in the background. Almost every detail in this painting carries symbolic significance creating a complex work with many different levels of meaning. Eucharistic devotion appears in the liturgical dress of angels and a foreground sheaf of wheat that echoes the body of the infant Christ as he lies in the straw. The somber expressions of the figures, on what should be a joyous occasion of birth, anticipate Christ's passion. The scarlet lily, white and purple irises, and carnations in the foreground also are symbols of the passion.

In the two side panels of the altarpiece, the members of the Portinari family are separated into male and female groups and are accompanied by their patron saints. In the background of the left panel one sees Mary and Joseph's Journey to Bethlehem, a scene uncommon in Flemish painting. The image of Joseph attentively aiding a conspicuously pregnant Mary draws attention to her physical state and the imminent birth. Julia Miller proposes that "the emphasis on the parturition itself may be seen as a unifying idea between the central panel and the altarpiece wings." On the right panel, the theme of parturition continues in St. Margaret (standing on the left), the patron saint of childbirth. In addition, the large column to the Virgin's left in the central panel may "be read as a specific reference to the birth itself, as the column against which the Virgin stood during the delivery, according to such sources as the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*."⁷

Through her act of childbirth Mary introduces salvation to the world and reverses Eve's role in original sin, making her the Co-Redemptrix of mankind.⁸ Because she ate

of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, Eve and all female descendants give birth in sorrow. Christ's miraculous delivery preserved Mary's Virginity and was exempt from the pain, fear, and danger usually accompanying birth. Mary's painless delivery reinforced her role as the New Eve for she did not bring forth her child in sorrow as Eve had doomed womankind to do.

The Fall of Adam and Eve introduced sickness and death to the world. The birth and Passion of Christ and his resurrection embody ultimate healing both spiritually and physically. In the painting, flowers representing the Passion rest in a jar used for apothecary purposes. These flowers in addition to the columbines in the glass and the violets on the ground were used for medicinal purposes in the Renaissance. The subtle symbolism of the flowers and their container reiterate the powerful message of physical and spiritual healing surrounding the birth of Christ.

Association of the complex iconography of birth with salvation, redemption, and eternal life in Christian theology appears in a sermon of St. Bernard as cited by Julian Miller:

O truly unheard-of marvel! He was conceived without shame, born without pain. Our curse from Eve is transformed in the Virgin, for she bore a child without suffering. Transformed, I say, is a curse into a blessing, as was proclaimed by the angel Gabriel: "Blessed art thou among women." O happy one alone blessed and not cursed among women, alone exempt from the universal curse, and set free from the pains of childbirth! Nor is it surprising, brother, if he who bore the torments of the whole world did not inflict pain on his mother, as according to Isaiah "surely he has borne our sorrows." Shame and pain are the two things feared by human weakness. He came to remove both, and so he also endured both when, to say nothing of his other sufferings, he was condemned to death, and a death most foul by his enemies. And in order that he might give us confidence that he will take away shame and pain from us, he first made his mother free from both, so that neither was there any shame in conception, nor any pain in birth.⁹



THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS
CENTER PANEL, PORTINARI ALTARPIECE
HUGO VAN DER GOES
1474-75



SIDE PANELS, PORTINARI ALTARPIECE
 HUGO VAN DER GOES
 1474-75

Mary's conception and delivery being free from shame and pain represents Christ's promise to take away shame and pain from humanity, and therefore a promise of physical and spiritual healing appropriate for a hospital chapel.

Renaissance artists also represented parturition in scenes of the Visitation. During the Visitation, the gravid Virgin Mary visits her cousin, Elizabeth, who has become miraculously pregnant in her old age.¹⁰ Mary's Immaculate Conception and Elizabeth's pregnancy in old age demonstrate God's power, that all is possible under him.¹¹ As Elizabeth was greeted by Mary, the child in her womb leapt for joy and filled her with the Holy Spirit.¹² Aware of the divine nature of the child within Mary's womb, Elizabeth cries unto Mary, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb."¹³ Mary was not referred to as blessed because of the future implications of giving birth to the savior. Rather, she was blessed for her faith which allowed her to accept the Holy Ghost in the Annunciation and therefore conceive the son of God.¹⁴ As Elizabeth proclaimed, "And blessed is she that believed . . ."¹⁵ Elizabeth praises Mary in a prefiguration of how her son, John the Baptist, will praise Mary's son, Christ.¹⁶

In renderings of the Visitation, Mary and Elizabeth are depicted embracing or conversing. In his 1303-5 Padua frescos, Giotto painted them grasping arms as Elizabeth leans toward Mary with an "air of motherly knowingness."¹⁷

Representations of the Visitation were especially prominent in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. From the fifteenth century onward, the Visitation occurred as an independent image. Previously, it was always rendered in conjunction with other scenes from Christ's infancy. Particularly, it was a conformation and therefore completion of the Annunciation.¹⁸ Flemish artist Dieric Bouts includes a Visitation scene as a part of his

Infancy of Christ Altarpiece of 1445. Bouts' *Visitation* belongs to a group of four panels. The *Annunciation* precedes the *Visitation* panel while depictions of the *Nativity* and *Adoration of the Magi* follow it.

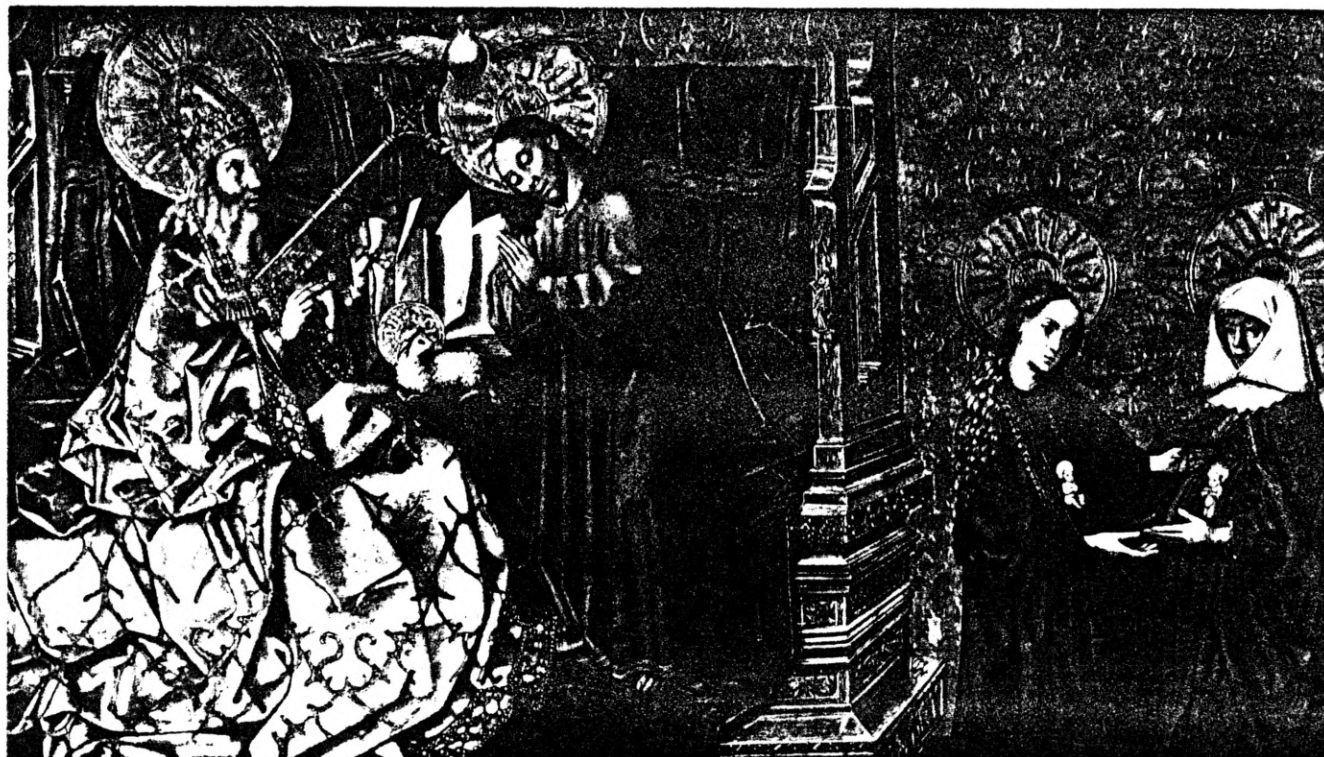
A type of Visitation painting, mainly employed by German artists, shows the infants Christ and John the Baptist visible in their mothers' wombs. *God Sending Out the Son and Visitation*, painted by a follower of Konrad Witz in 1445-50, exemplifies this type of painting. The two infants in their mothers' wombs are aware of each other; John kneels in adoration while Christ blesses him.¹⁹ This illustration underscores the prefiguration of the connection between Christ and St. John the Baptist.

As in other depictions of the Virgin in pregnancy, Mary personifies the new Ark of the Covenant in the Visitation. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* draws direct parallels between the Ark's arrival in Jerusalem and Mary's arrival at her cousin's house:

As David [who brought the Ark to Jerusalem] and his people rejoiced in the presence of the ark, so did Elizabeth and her unborn child in the presence of Mary. As David leapt for joy before the ark, so [did] John in his mother's womb.²⁰

There exists a strange paradox involved in the relationship of birth and religion. As Irene Herner de Larrea mentions, birth is the "source [or result] of the original sin of Christian mythology, and of its redemption. Locus of the sacred and of lust."²¹ According to Christian doctrine, sickness, sin, and death came to the world through Eve and the Fall but, hope, salvation, and life came through Mary because she gave birth to Christ, the savior of humanity.

In Julia Kristeva's opinion, "Christianity is no doubt the most sophisticated symbolic construct in which femininity, . . . is confined within the limits of the



GOD SENDING OUT THE SON AND ANNUNCIATION
FOLLOWER OF KONRAD WITZ.

1445-50

Maternal.”²² Christianity appealed to women through the Virgin Mary, by recognizing her important roles as mother of God, Queen of Heaven, and intercessor on behalf of humanity. Mary’s stature is based on childbirth and her role of mother.

In her pregnancy, Mary serves as the *Foedras Arca* or the Tabernacle of Christ. In giving birth, Mary is the New Eve. Because she was a flesh and blood woman, by giving birth to Christ, Mary also guarantees Christ’s humanity. Margaret Miles cites Tertullian who wrote that, “Christ received his flesh from the Virgin . . . certain proof that his flesh was human,” and Augustine wrote, “Despise not yourselves, men, the son of God became a man; despise not yourselves, women, the son of God was born of a woman.”²³ Additionally, Mary serves as metaphor for the Holy Ghost.²⁴ She is the link between God the Father and his son Christ. Through her humanity, she provided Christ with his humanity and therefore serves as a link between God and humankind. Furthermore, as a maternal figure, she ideally represents the love embodied in the Holy Ghost.

In essence, the Virgin Mary is the human beginning of Christianity. Therefore, her pregnancy and the subsequent birth function in the most profound and complex symbolic terms. In her act of childbirth, Mary gives birth to the Christian religion.

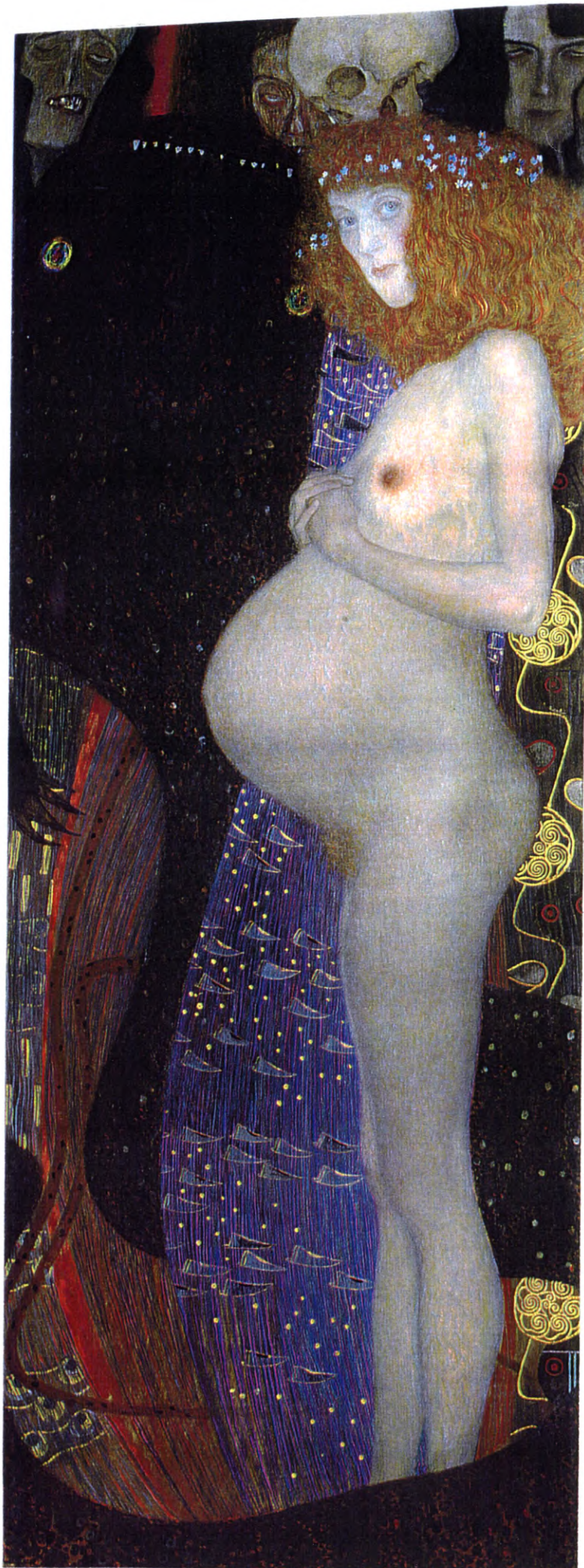
After the Renaissance, no major works depicting pregnancy appear in Western painting until the subject’s rebirth in the 20th century. Why does this imagery disappear for roughly three hundred years? One answer may be found in the Counter Reformation of the late sixteenth century, which outlawed depictions of the Madonna del Parto.²⁵ The subject seems never to have been rendered in secular paintings during this time. Perhaps

this indicates that the subject matter was unacceptable outside of a religious context in which pregnancy was asexual due to the Immaculate Conception.

The artist who first took up imagery of pregnancy again in the 20th century was Gustave Klimt. However, the context and meaning concerning images of pregnancy in the 20th century differ dramatically from the Renaissance.

Klimt entitled his 1903 work, which shows a full-length nude, pregnant woman, *Hope I*. In *Hope I*, the woman's luxuriant red hair and shapely slender body (if one disregards the distended stomach) imply the *femme fatale*. Such imagery provides an interesting juxtaposition with pregnancy. A length of blue and gold cloth falls behind the woman and symbolizes hope, according to Susana Partsch. Three threatening, morbid visages and a skull haunt the top of the painting. Partsch identifies two as representing sickness and death, and the other two as misery and crime, or madness and grief.²⁶ Frank Whitford interprets the pregnancy of the figure as "evidence of woman's sexual triumph over the man and the child she will bear will perpetuate man's suffering."²⁷ For Whitford, the disturbing faces no doubt connote man's suffering. Do the figures at the top threaten and corrupt life, or imply the ever-present shadows of sickness and death? If so, the woman symbolizes life. Or perhaps the woman is associated with the menacing faces, in which case she symbolizes perpetual suffering in the guise of beauty.²⁸ Klimt's *Hope I* is not about an individual woman or women in general. The female figure carries meaning as a body imbued with Klimt's message that "... at the very moment of birth, all the sorrows of life and, finally, death are waiting."²⁹

In 1906, Paula Modersohn-Becker painted herself as a pregnant half nude in a piece entitled *Self-portrait on Sixth Wedding Day*. This work differs from Klimt's

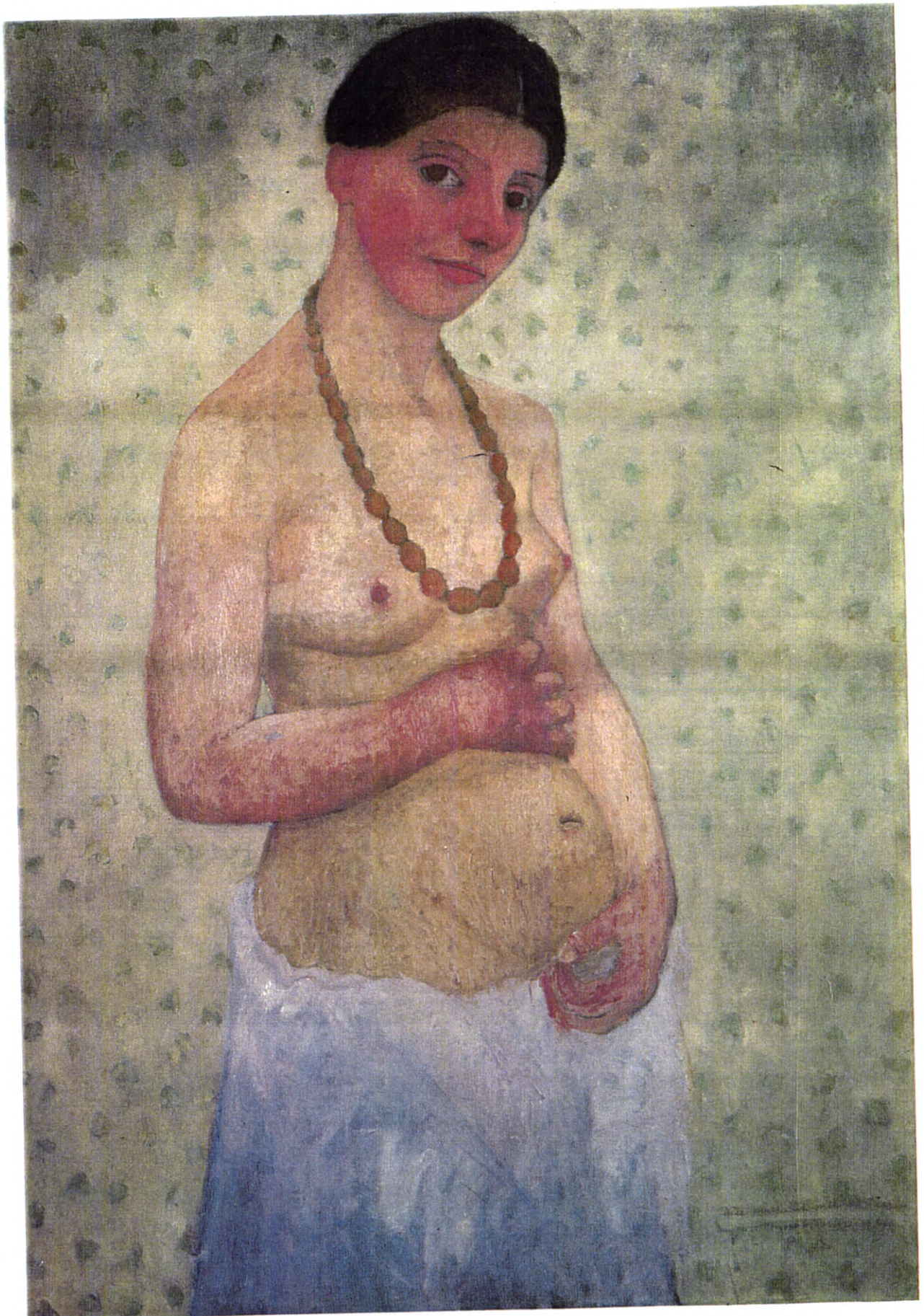


GUSTAV KLIMT
HOPE I 1903

rendition of pregnancy and the Renaissance depictions, in that the woman does not function solely as an allegorical symbol. Rather, the pregnant figure explores personal experience and womanhood.

The fact that Paula Modersohn-Becker was not pregnant at the time of the painting can be read as the artist's personal exploration of self-image, sexuality, artifice, and the female reproductive role. The intimacy of a self-portrait and the condition of pregnancy contrasts with the very public display of nudity. The figure's arms circle protectively around her womb recalling images of the *mater gravida* or pregnant Virgin Mary seen in medieval and Renaissance art.³⁰ The pose moves the image toward that of an icon. However, the confrontational, intelligent gaze and the non-generalized features of a self-portrait prevent the work from being an icon of fertility.

Self-portrait on Sixth Wedding Day can be interpreted as a pictorial representation of Paula Modersohn-Becker's identity struggle as a woman between the roles of mother or artist. Modersohn-Becker depicts herself as a feminine icon, a symbol of the female role as child-bearer and mother. Yet, the painting is not merely a symbolic pregnant body but a self-portrait of an artist.³¹ The fact that she was not pregnant at the time she painted this portrait emphasizes her manipulation of reality and her role as artistic creator. However, she examines her feelings on motherhood by placing herself in the role. The image seems a positive one if somewhat tenuous and, seems to say that a woman can be both a wife and mother, and a professional artist. The image's tenuity derives from the figure's emergence from the patterned wall behind it which lends insubstantiality to the form.³² In reality, tenuity derives from the dual role of professional artist and mother as



PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER

SELF-PORTRAIT ON SIXTH
WEDDING DAY 1906

being for the most part untried and socially unaccepted in Modersohn-Becker's generation.

Modersohn-Becker also states with *Self-portrait on Sixth Wedding Day* that women are not so alien to creative roles as male artists would care to think. Male artists long held that women lacked the intelligence and energetic drive necessary to produce great works of art. Creativity has long been linked to male sexual energy.³³ In her pregnant self-portrait, Paula Modersohn-Becker depicts herself as a woman very naturally and intimately associated with creation. She is also an artist who constructed the concept and then the physical presence of the painting, giving birth to the idea and the finished work.

After Paula Modersohn-Becker, Frida Kahlo was the next artist to tackle pregnancy in her painting. Frida Kahlo was the first artist to continuously return to the subjects of pregnancy and birth in her painting. For Kahlo, the subject was of a very personal nature.

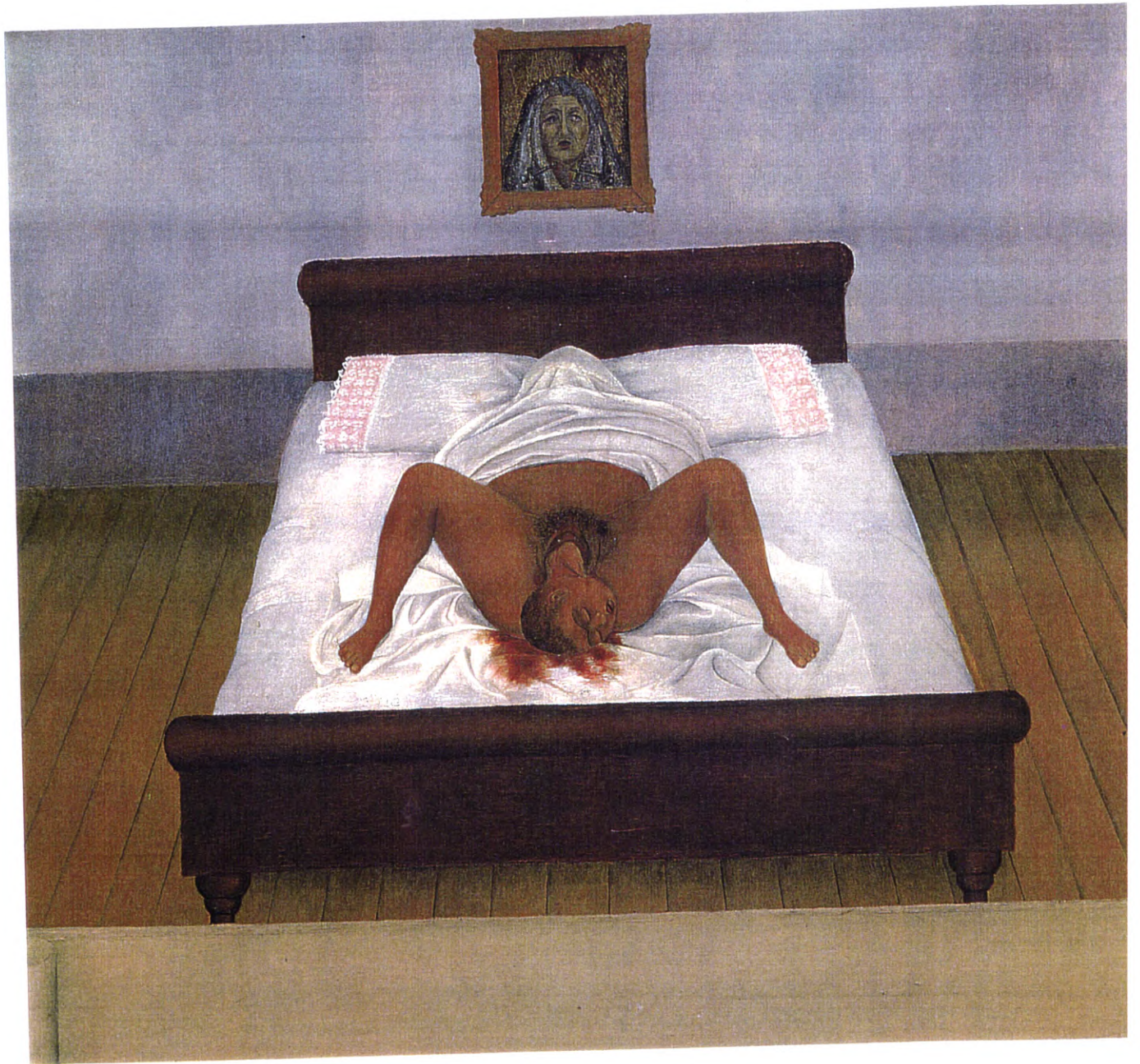
Painted in 1932, *My Birth* was the most unprecedented and graphic depiction of childbirth to date and is arguably still so today. On a large bed, in the middle of a stark and barren room, a shrouded woman is giving birth. The head of the baby, bearing the recognizable features of Frida Kahlo, emerges in a pool of blood, alive or stillborn we cannot tell. Above the scene hangs a picture of the weeping Madonna pierced with daggers.

Unlike most of her other work (especially *Henry Ford Hospital* which will subsequently be discussed), in *My Birth* Frida Kahlo does not use objects as symbols; rather, the act of childbirth is symbolic.³⁴ The significance of the shrouded woman should be examined to

discover what this moment of childbirth symbolizes. Irene Herner De Larrea argues that the mother is faceless because she archetypally represents all mothers.³⁵ Covered with a sheet, the woman appears to be dead. Frida Kahlo says of the figure, "My head is covered because, coincidentally with the painting of the picture my mother died."³⁶ "My head" indicates that the shrouded figure represents not only Frida's mother but Frida herself. Therefore, Frida gives birth to herself in this painting. According to Dina Comisarenco, *My Birth*, painted just after the death of her mother, depicts Frida's separation from the maternal figure begun at birth and completed with the death of her mother.³⁷ In Kahlo's work, "childbirth rather than the Surrealist act of love forms the connecting link in an eternal cycle of love and death."³⁸ Frida Kahlo was unable to bear children a fact that gave her much sorrow. In *My Birth* Kahlo places herself at the center of the "cyclical relationship between fertile eroticism and death."³⁹ As Kahlo places herself at the center of this cycle introducing death into a painting of birth, the dead mother may also symbolize the death of cultural and personal expectations of motherhood for Kahlo.⁴⁰

My Birth is painted in an ex-voto or retablo format. Ex-votos or retablos are traditional Mexican paintings that represent supernatural events. The format "mixes fact and fantasy" to illustrate divine intervention, usually by a patron saint, and to commemorate and give thanks for recovery from illness or injury. As is traditional for ex-votos, Kahlo painted her picture on a thin sheet of metal.⁴¹

Ex-votos depict the patron saint, representative of the divine, floating above the scene. In *My Birth*, a picture of the Mater Dolorosa, or Mother of Sorrows, takes the place of a patron saint. The Mexican artistic invention of showing the Virgin pierced by daggers is meant to guard against sorrow and pain. It was invoked at the hour of death



My Birth, 1932.

FRIDA KAHLO

which introduces death into this moment of birth.⁴² Is the shrouded mother dead or the child stillborn? Perhaps both. Traditionally on the bottom of ex-votos there is an inscription recording the time, date, place, and participants of the event.⁴³ Here Kahlo has left the space blank.

The bed is the actual bed in which Frida was born. The pillows delicately trimmed in pink lace contrast oddly with the harshness and bareness of the rest of the room.⁴⁴ The barrenness of the room disassociates the birth from fertility, as does the shrouded figure and possible still born condition of the infant. The painting likely alludes to Frida's barrenness and inability to continue her family line. The three heads of child, mother, and Madonna align along a central vertical axis.⁴⁵ The strong horizontals of the bed and the lines of the floorboards create a rigid, still composition emphasizing the "horrific stasis" of the event. Hayden Herrera describes the psychological effect of viewpoint and composition on the viewer:

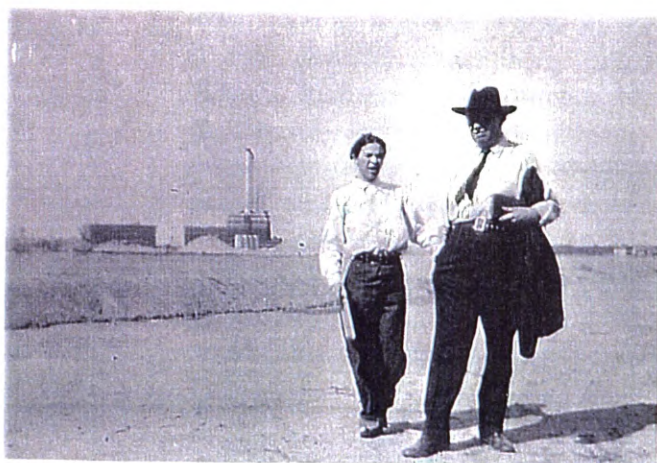
Forced to bear witness from the obstetrician's vantage point, the viewer feels immobilized, for the bed's legs reach down to the top of a scroll unfurled across the sheet-metal panel's lower edge, leaving no place to step. No words no salvation."⁴⁶

Probably the next most famous and controversial of Kahlo's works is her shocking depiction of miscarriage in *Henry Ford Hospital*. Kahlo painted this painting in 1932 after suffering a miscarriage in Detroit, Michigan, where she was staying with her husband Diego Rivera who was painting his Detroit auto industry murals.⁴⁷

Like *My Birth*, *Henry Ford Hospital* follows the style of an ex-voto, reduced in size and painted on metal. Also like an ex-voto, space and representation are simplified. Frida Kahlo skillfully used a simplified visual language, designed for readability and

emotional immediacy, to convey complex ideas. By using an ex-voto format, Frida gave her personal tragedy a sacred dimension. However unlike an ex-voto, no supernatural being intervenes with a miracle, no saint comes to the aid of the isolated Frida.⁴⁸

In *Henry Ford Hospital*, a diminutive Frida Kahlo lays on a large, cold, metal hospital bed in a pool of blood. A fetus floats in space attached to Kahlo by a vein-like or umbilical-cord-like red ribbon. To the left of the fetus, floats a medical model, "sciences idea of what is inside a woman, [and] an image of what she [Kahlo] lacks."⁴⁹ In the lower right of the painting appears a pelvis. Kahlo's pelvis was broken as a result of a bus accident when she was young. The broken pelvis prevented Kahlo from ever having a successful pregnancy. According to Lowe, the snail represents abortion, which in Kahlo's own words was "soft, covered and at the same time, open."⁵⁰ Perhaps she also draws on incorporations of stylized snail forms in Mexican folk-art depictions of the Nativity. The snail is the Aztec symbol of parturition.⁵¹ Sarah Lowe believes Kahlo intends the "bruise-colored" orchid, bottom center, to be a sexual metaphor. For Hayden Herrera, the orchid reminds one of an extracted uterus.⁵² She includes the machine, bottom left, "to explain the mechanical part of the whole business."⁵³ Presumably she means her operation and experience in the hospital. The machine has been identified as an autoclave used to sterilize surgical instruments.⁵⁴ The autoclave may refer to human sterility and Kahlo's inability to bear a child.⁵⁵ The bird's eye view of Frida on the hospital bed contrasts with the level view of the Detroit skyline. Frida and the objects around her float in an unreal and desolate space representative of the emotional wasteland resulting from her experience which she very personally shares with viewers in this painting.⁵⁶



ABOVE: Henry Ford Hospital, 1932.

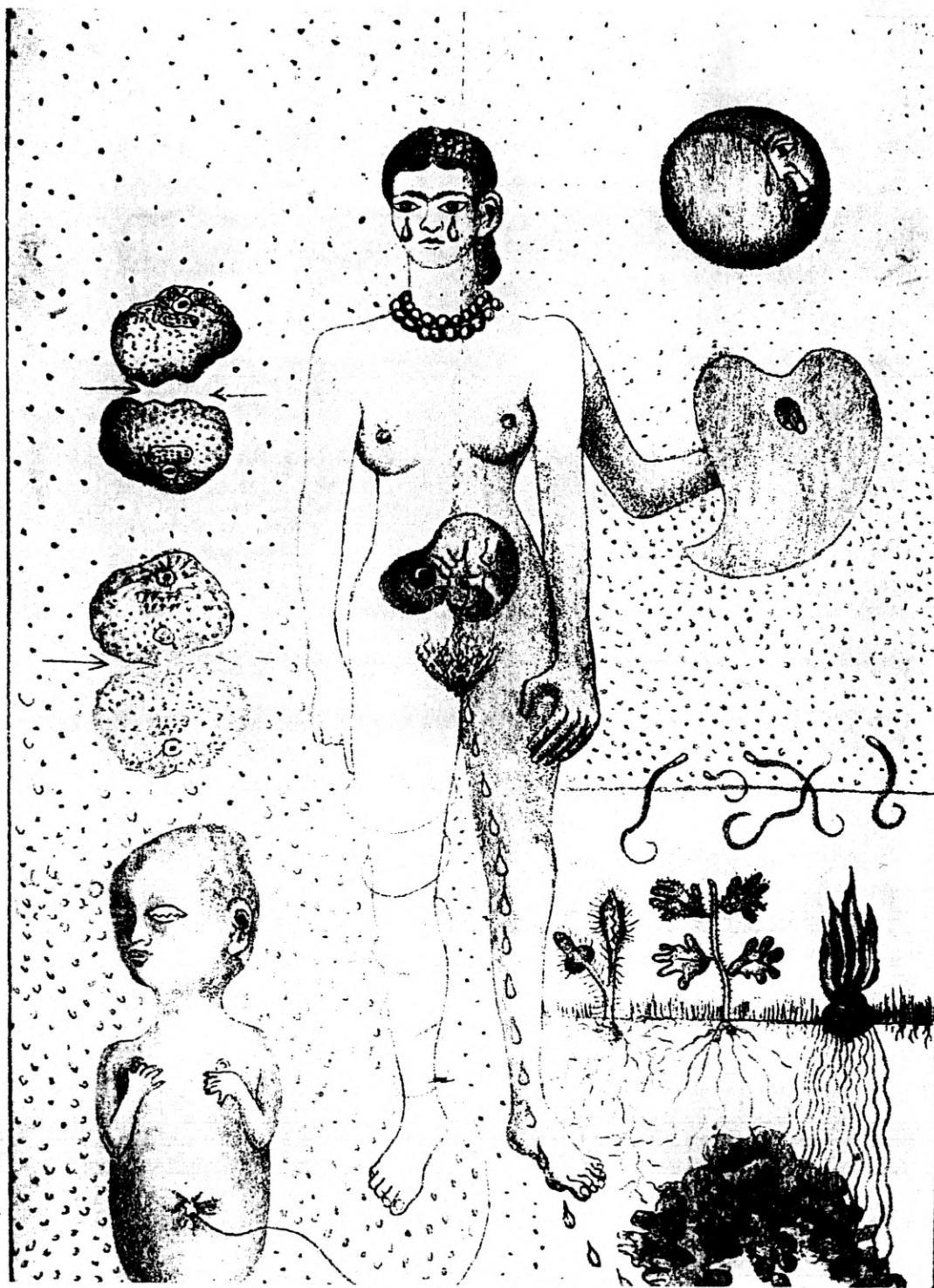
LEFT: Frida and Diego at the Ford Motor Company's Rouge Plant, Detroit, 1932. When Frida was in the Henry Ford Hospital after her miscarriage, Rivera was making studies at the Rouge for his Detroit Industry murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Frida Kahlo had a remarkable ability to transform feeling, sensation, and experience into tangible objects that serve as simple symbols for such complex and abstract emotions and ideas.⁵⁷ Through the objects in *Henry Ford Hospital*, Kahlo gives tangible expression to the desolation and trauma of her experience. Kahlo's representation of miscarriage "is a powerful antidote to the fantasy of boundless fecundity" often associated with women.⁵⁸

Frida Kahlo represented miscarriage again in a 1932 lithograph by that title. A full-length nude self-portrait confronts the viewer in *Miscarriage*. A vein wraps around Kahlo's healthy leg attaching a fetus to her and to the less developed fetus in her womb. Drops of blood from Frida's womb fall to the ground and give life to exotic plant forms. Above the plants are shapes reminiscent of sperm. Dividing cells are seen to the left of the figure and a moon weeps to the right.

Kahlo has shaded half of her body. Perhaps the shading indicates her injured half, the side responsible for her suffering and miscarriages. Rafael Vázquez Bayod finds the shading representative of the duality of life- joy/pain, dark/light, life/death, etc. With this lithograph, Frida shows us that birth and death are not mutually exclusive and that pain can come when one expects joy.

Perhaps the lithograph also indicates that Kahlo substituted her art for maternity. From behind Frida's limp left arm extends another arm holding a pallet. The artist depicts herself between the fetus of the child she lost and the pallet. For Frida Kahlo, her inability to create life was somewhat consoled in her ability to create art.⁵⁹ "Painting completed my life," Frida once said, "I lost three children. . . Painting substituted for all of this."⁶⁰



MISCARRIAGE
LITHOGRAPH
FRIDA KAHLO 1932

In *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* 1936, Frida Kahlo explores where she comes from through family bloodlines and heritage and through biological processes of reproduction. Frida depicts herself in the form of a fetus in her mother's womb. Below the curled up fetus is a rendering of the fertilization process - Frida at the moment of her conception.⁶¹ Frida's parents dominate the scene while a blood red ribbon ties the child Frida to her grandparents. Frida was of Mexican and Austro-Hungarian descent and proud of both heritages.

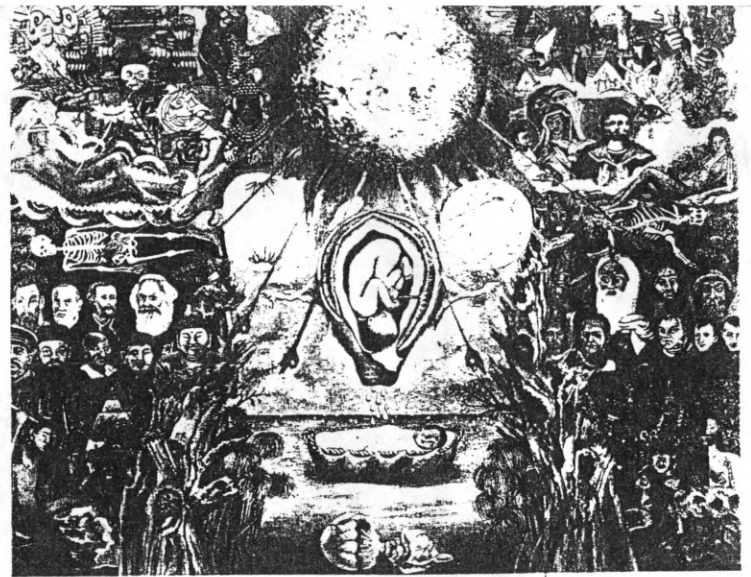
Frida Kahlo rejoiced in the fecundity of nature, a subject featured often in her paintings. Yet, it also caused her great sorrow due to her inability to bear children. Her painting *Sun and Life* of 1947 expresses the sorrow Frida sometimes associated with fertility. Fertile plant forms grow in abundance the male and female plant parts suggestive of human genitalia. The life giving sun cries from his third eye. Behind the sun, cradled in a seedpod womb a fetus also cries.⁶² Perhaps this painting draws its inspiration from the "Aztec belief in a limbo of child-souls with 'its Tree of Life whence the souls of babes draw nourishment, biding the day of their rebirth.'⁶³ Such a sentiment certainly recalls the vegetal womb holding the weeping embryo.

Kahlo's procreative imagery takes on epic proportions in *Moses - The Birth of the Hero*, 1945. The painting is Frida's reaction to her reading of Freud's analysis of Moses. In Frida's own words her objective in this painting was to bring out "that pure fear that pushes people to invent and imagine heroes and gods. Fear of life and fear of death."

Frida depicted Moses in a basket floating on the river as the story tells. The basket is covered with an animal skin as Frida desired it to appear womb-like. Her symbolism is consistent with Freud's interpretation that saw the basket as the womb and

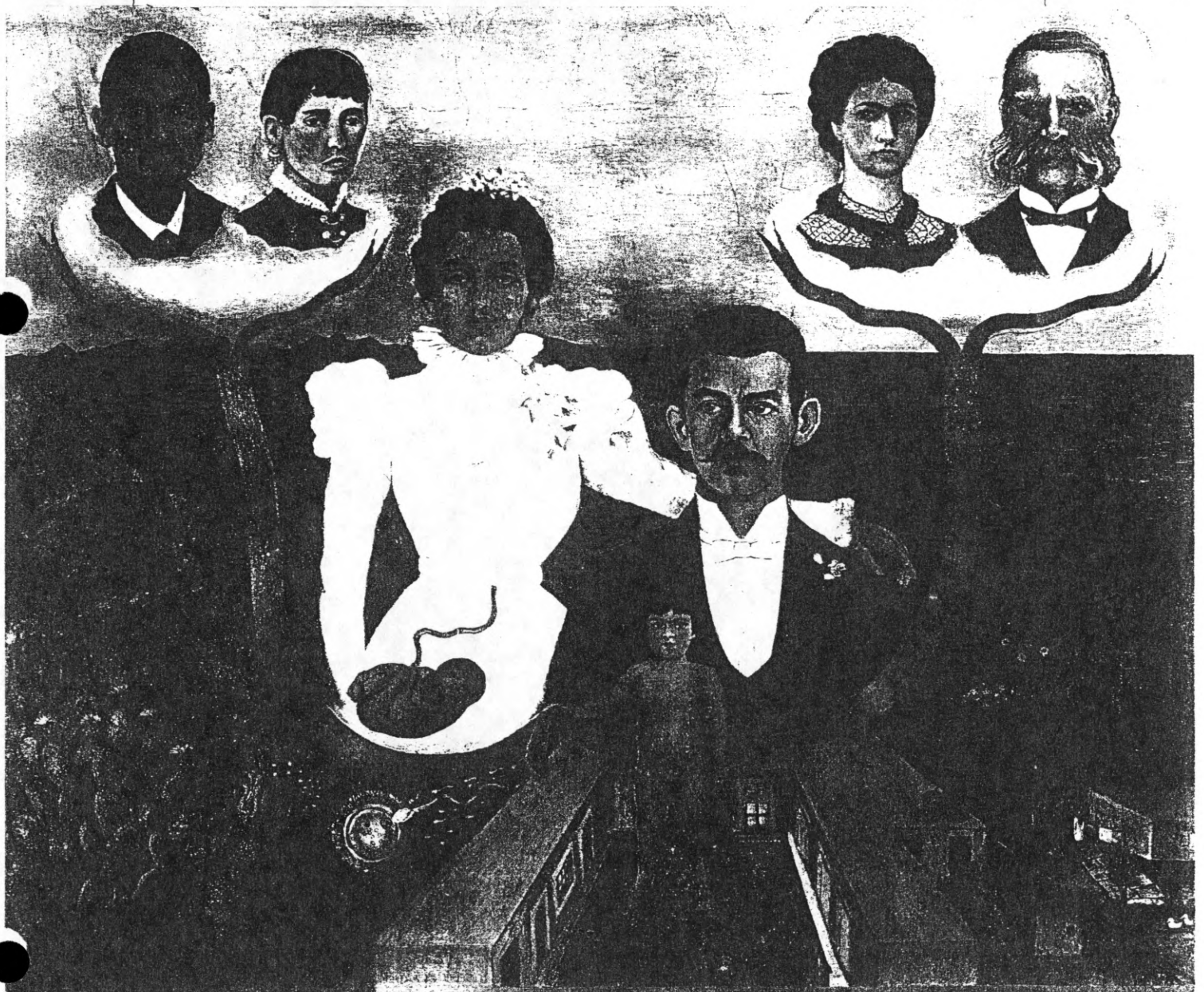


Sun and Life, 1947.



Moses, 1945.

FRIDA KAHLO



My Grandparents, My Parents, and I, 1936.

FRIDA KAHLO

the water as “the motherly sources during birth.”⁶⁴ Droplets raining from the womb reinforce the birth-water association. Frida stated that the oviducts on the central depiction of the womb were like hands outstretched to the world.⁶⁵ Elements of the child’s creation, a fertilized egg and cell division, appear flanking the womb. A pantheon of gods, heroes, and, antiheroes from different cultures and times surround the infant Moses and the central womb. Comisarenco quotes Hayden Herrera who “points out that the bilateral symmetry of the painting recalls ‘the anatomy of the pelvic region. Moses’ birth is situated quite appropriately, in the middle.”⁶⁶

For Kahlo, the real hero, or rather heroine, is the mother who gives birth to the hero, “. . .the mother capable of creating the life that can become the origin of cultural change.” Early feminist Gabriela Mistral said, “The hero is like a red fruit and you [women] are the branch which raised it.”⁶⁷ These statements describe women’s value and function in society as integrally tied to their reproductive abilities. Men are heroes. The great deed that makes a woman a heroine is producing a male hero.

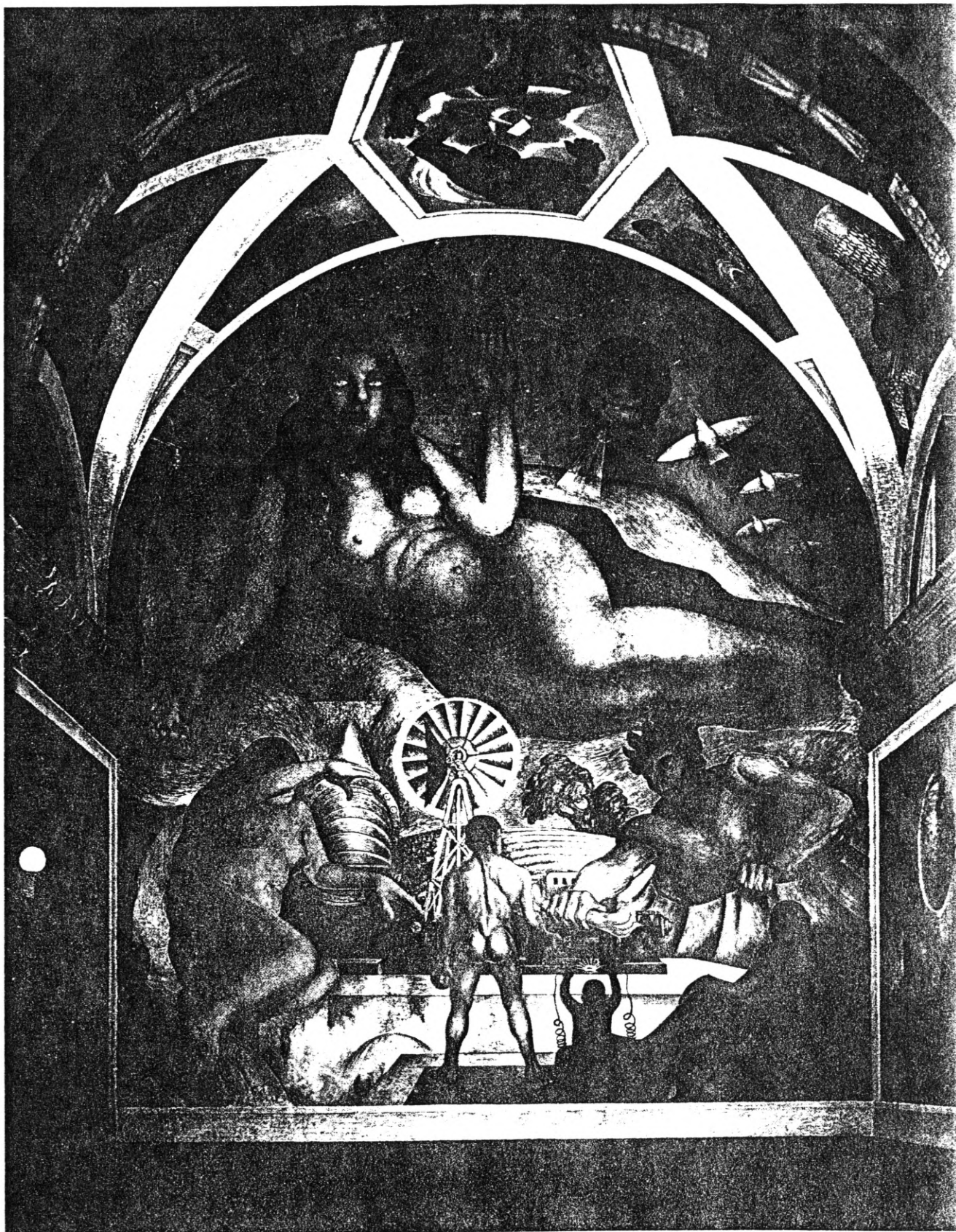
Kahlo returned to the subject of birth again and again in her paintings as an exploration of her inability to create life. If she could not bear children, who was she as a woman and what was her role? Kahlo redefined herself, and her role as a woman, through her art.

With the exception of Klimt, the 20th century artists examined so far have been women. Another example of male perspective on and creation of parturient imagery is found in Frida Kahlo’s husband Diego Rivera.

Diego Rivera used a pregnant woman as part of his iconographic program for murals in the chapel of the Universidad Autonoma de Chapingo, Mexico’s national

school of agriculture. In the chapel murals, painted in 1926-7, social revolution portrayed on the left wall parallels natural evolution on the right wall. The murals establish “a dialectic between natural and social forces in the domestication of the land, from initial chaos to successful human control.”⁶⁸ The theme of the side-walls culminates in the altar mural entitled *The Liberated Earth*. A pregnant, reclining woman dominates the altar space. Her bright blue eyes and altar location connect her to the sky and hence the spiritual realm. The woman’s skin glows with rich earth tones and her curvaceous thighs, expanding abdomen, and voluptuous breasts form a contoured landscape. Her pregnancy and the suspiciously phallic appearance of the budding plant she holds in her right hand designate the figure as an allegory of the fertilized earth.⁶⁹ *Hope I* serves as an allegory of life and embodies Klimt’s message, Rivera’s pregnant figure also functions allegorically. She represents the Liberated earth and embodies Rivera’s message as summarized by Comisarenco, “Earth Mother, fertile and liberated as a result of the combat and work of the people, has replaced divine intervention in modern Mexico.”⁷⁰

Diego Rivera used the theme of gestation independent from the female body in depicting embryos in his 1932-33 *Detroit Auto Industry* murals, located in the Detroit Institute of Arts. On the East wall of the Detroit institute Rivera placed the image of a child curled within the bulb of a plant. The roots of the bulb reach into the soil nourishing the child. Indeed the soil nourishes all human life. As the embryo, entitled *Germ Cell*, represents life and rebirth, its placement in the East bears significance. The sun rises in the East bringing with it each day the promise of life.⁷¹ The theme for the East wall is the origins of human life and technology. Clearly the origin of human life is symbolized by the germ cell but, how does that tie into the origin of technology? The



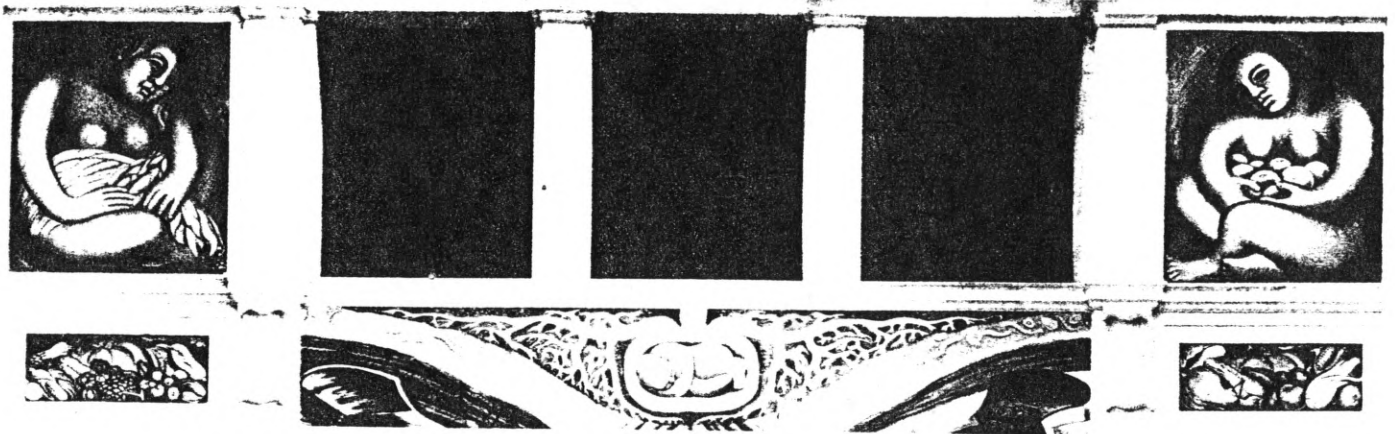
LIBERATED EARTH
DIEGO RIVERA

1926-1927
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child in the bulb of a plant and the rich soil in which it feeds represent human dependence on the land. Plows on either side represent agriculture the first form of technology. The layer of fossilized ancient sea creatures lying under the soil is interpretable as the evolutionary beginnings of human life. Rivera uses *Germ Cell* to connect humans to agriculture and to the earth from which we get our sustenance.

Also in the Detroit murals, Rivera contrasts the beneficial and destructive aspects of science in two small panels, one entitled *Healthy Human Embryo*. Of the composition of *Healthy Human Embryo* Diego said, "I chose the plastic expression of the undulating movement which one finds in water currents, electric waves, stratification's of the different layers . . . of the earth and, in a general way, throughout the continuous development of life."⁷² Opposite *Healthy Human Embryo*, a depiction of cells suffocated by poison gas illustrates destructive applications of science. *Healthy Human Embryo*, on the other hand, symbolizes the life saving and life improving benefits of science as it is situated above a scene of a nurse and doctor vaccinating a child.⁷³

Scenes of birth appear in Rivera's Hospital de la Raza mural *The History of Medicine in Mexico: The People's Demand for Better Health* 1953. The mural is a visual celebration of medical science depicting ancient Aztec practices in one half of the fresco and modern medicine in the other. Tlazolteotl, the Aztec goddess of birth, appears in the center of the composition. She unites the peoples of ancient and modern Mexico suggesting the continuity of the Mexican people. Tlazolteotl presides over the medical practices occurring around her in the painting, invoking the life preserving and enhancing qualities of medicine. Tlazolteotl appears again in the lower right of the Pre-Columbian part of the mural, "swinging from a phallic branch of the tree of life, she suggests the



Detroit Industry, east wall. Panels represent: upper left and right, female figures (257.8×213.4 cm); lower left and right, fruits, grains and vegetables (68.3×185.4 cm); lower center, an embryo 'rooted' in the soil, or 'germ cell' to Rivera (133.4×796.3 cm).

Industria de Detroit/pared este. Paneles representan: superior izquierda y derecha, figuras femeninas (257.8×213.4 cms); inferior izquierda y derecha, fruta, granos y vegetales (68.3×185.4 cms); centro inferior, un embrio "enraizado" en la tierra o para Rivera "Célula del germen" (133.4×796.3 cm).



"Healthy Human Embryo"

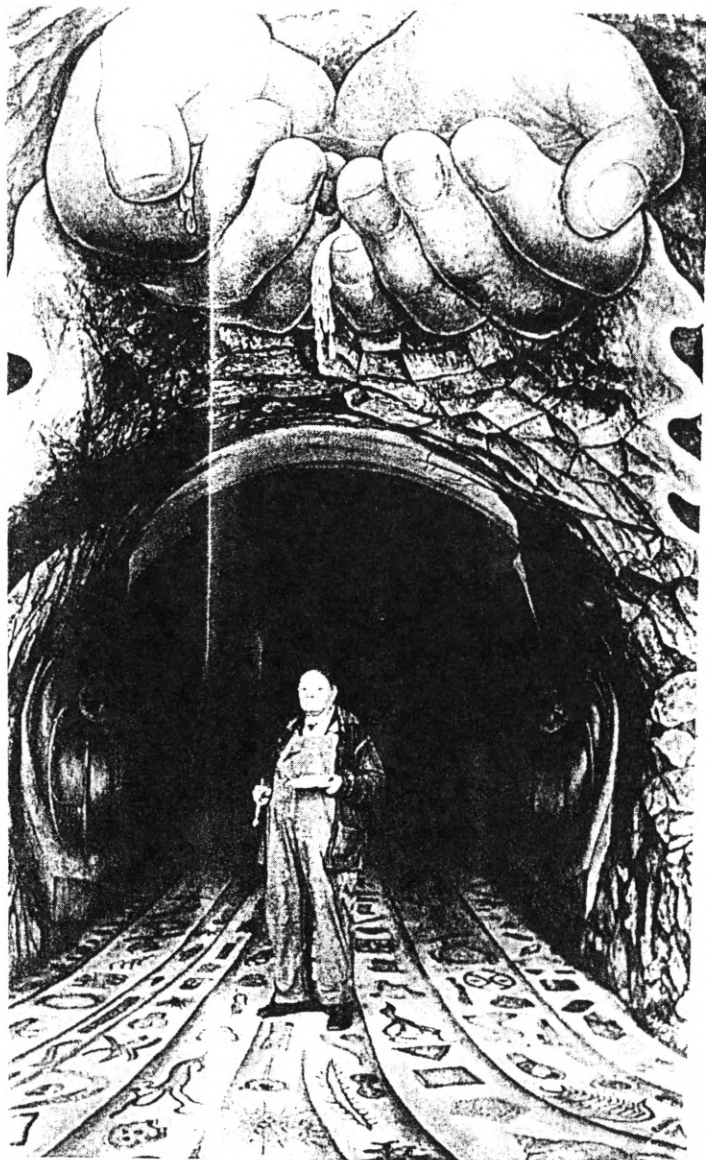
DETROIT INDUSTRY MURALS DIEGO RIVERA 1932-33

precariousness of childbirth.” In the modern part of the mural, a baby is delivered by Caesarian section. On the ancient side, a woman has given birth aided by three attendants; smiling, she extends her arm towards her newborn.⁷⁴ The mural commemorates the changeover from private to public medicine in Mexico that gave poorer and darker colored citizens better access to health care.⁷⁵

In 1951, Diego Rivera finished his commission for the Carcamo del Rio Lerma Reservoir, the main water supplier for Mexico City. In the Rio Lerma Reservoir murals, Rivera glorifies water as the origin of all life. Amoebae, mollusks, and amphibians decorate the floor and walls of the distribution chamber. A human couple rises out of the teaming sea. In the adjoining exterior water basin one finds a sculpture of Tlaloc, the Aztec rain God. In the cistern, Rivera painted portraits of workers involved in the project. According to Comisarenco, the composition of the murals suggests “metaphorically that the benevolent power of the ancient rain god has been resurrected in the modern water work through the labor of the technicians and workers.”⁷⁶

Rivera’s female figure in the mural is depicted with an x-ray view of the fetus growing within her, proof of her fertility.⁷⁷ She like water is a source of life. Scenes of the fertilized egg and its subsequent division and growth are incorporated into the abundant water life around her. Two eels frame the goddess’s womb like fallopian tubes.

Diego adds to his symbolism in a sophisticated use of the space he is decorating. By placing two giant hands on the entrance to the cistern, Diego enhances “the birthing metaphor of the tunnel, which ‘becomes a physical vulva leading to the wonderful womb, where the phenomenon of the ‘creation’ of new beings is performed.’”⁷⁸



CARCAMO DEL RIO LERMA
MURALS

DIEGO RIVERA
1951.



Diego's wife Frida Kahlo suffered a miscarriage while Diego was working on the Detroit Institute murals. However, instead of representing personal pain and loss as Frida did in *Henry Ford Hospital*, Diego's pregnant figures and embryos are allegories of fertility and life.

Rather than personal themes, Alice Neel painted portraits. Yet, like Frida Kahlo's work, Neel's pregnant nudes reflect her personal feelings concerning pregnancy. Neel's work also questions the implications of pregnancy for liberated women of the 1970s.⁷⁹

When Alice Neel painted *Pregnant Maria* in 1964, the birth control pill had just become available. The pill disconnected sex and reproduction; in *Pregnant Maria* Neel reconnects them. The sensuous curves of this nude are heightened in the round pregnant belly and the fullness of the breasts. For *Pregnant Maria*, Neel borrows the frank stare of Manet's *Olympia*. Maria unabashedly confronts the viewer not only with her nakedness but also with her pregnancy. As Pamela Allara elaborates, "Even in the era of the pill, after all, pregnancy remained a "basic fact of life" resulting from the sexual act, a causal relationship suppressed in the history of erotic imagery."⁸⁰

In the 1971 portrait of Alice Neel's pregnant daughter-in-law, entitled *Pregnant Woman*, the figure displays none of the ease and confidence of *Pregnant Maria*. The placement of the pregnant woman's arms and the dark strand of hair falling across her neck sever her head from her body. Her facial expression is strained. The woman's arm and a pillow separate her from male presence that appears in the form of a picture hanging on the wall. The picture is identifiable as Richard, the woman's husband and Neel's son. The compositional elements of the picture isolate the woman's body from her head and the man's head. Alice Neel has captured the woman's alienation from her



PREGNANT MARIA 1964



PREGNANT WOMAN 1971

ALICE NEEL

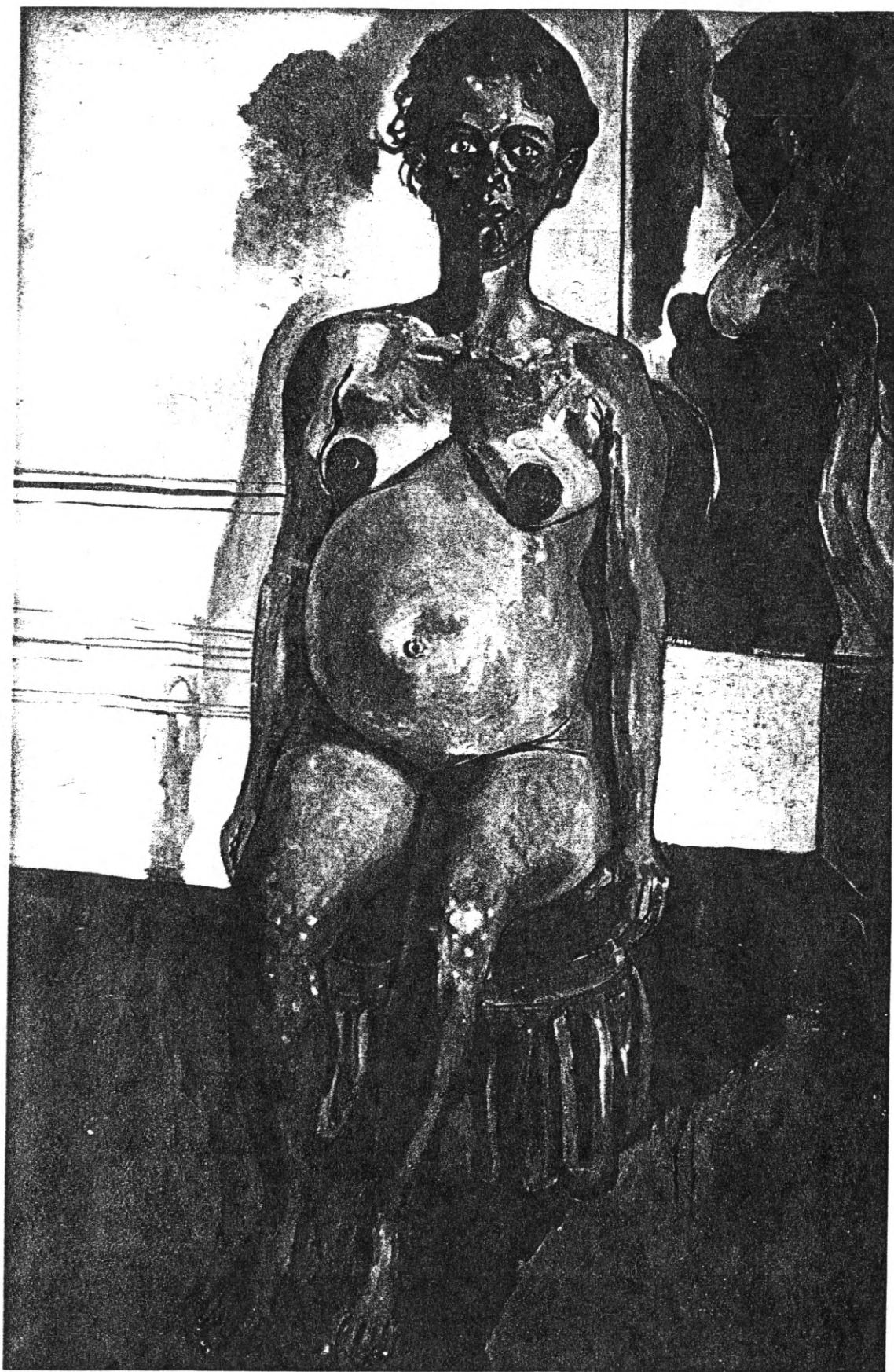
body and from male experience, represented by the man's picture, due to her condition of gravidity. Feminists of the 1970s saw pregnancy as limiting female freedom and as being the defining factor of a woman's identity, in other words the "badge of her slavery."⁸¹

How did women of the 1970s deal with their desire for careers, independence, individual identity, and desires to have a family? The heavy weight of the woman's pregnant belly that almost threatens to break her in two seems representative of the conflicting issues surrounding motherhood in the 1970s.

Margaret Evans Pregnant of 1978 is another portrait reflecting the conflict of issues and identity surrounding pregnancy. Alice Neel perched her very pregnant subject on a diminutive chair to paint her. The chair seems inadequate to support Mrs. Evans, making her position unstable. The womb and nourishing breasts of Margaret Evans have taken over her body. A corner mirror reflects her image.

The artist uses the mirror as a device to depict the disjunction between the woman's individual identity and her social identity as pregnant woman or mother. The mirror cuts off the woman's distended belly. She is therefore seen as herself in the absence of her condition. In addition, she appears as an older woman in the mirror. It is a reflection of her mother as well as her new role as mother. Pamela Allara uses Anne Sexton's 1960 poem "The Double Image" to help explain the sentiment behind Neel's painting:

And this was the cave of the mirror
That double woman who stares
At herself, as if she were petrified
In time – two ladies sitting in umber chairs . . .
I, who was never quite sure
About being a girl, needed another
Life, another image to remind me
And this was my worst guilt. . .



MARGARET EVANS PREGNANT
ALICE NEEL 163
1978

I made you to find me.⁸²

The poem is about a woman's dual roles as mother and daughter and about how her identity is related to those roles. The woman in the poem says she was never quite sure about being a girl. It seems she is looking for her purpose, trying to define her role. So the woman in the poem makes another life to find herself and her purpose in the role of motherhood and complete the mother-daughter-mother cycle. Allara cites French feminist Luce Irigaray who states, "You look at yourself in the mirror. And your mother is already there. And soon your daughter. . . Between the two what are you? . . Just a scansion: the time when one becomes the other."⁸³

Neel's ambivalent feelings about bearing children show up particularly well in *Pregnant Betty Homitsky* 1968. Tension and apprehension fill the painting as opposed to joy which one usually expects to be associated with pregnancy. Tension is certainly apparent in the woman's strained facial expression and stiff posture. A sparse and unfinished background contributes to the feelings of uneasiness and isolation.⁸⁴

Alice Neel was torn between her art and her family. As Allara explains, "For the artist who had children, personal identity was completely subsumed by her role as maternal caretaker; neither family nor social institutions could conceive of a woman needing anything other than her child."⁸⁵ Neel's first pregnancy was unplanned and unwanted. She wished that she had had birth control because while other women wanted children she just wanted to paint them. In a particularly revealing statement Neel wonders "how that woman could be so happy, with that little bit of hamburger she's fixing the diaper for."⁸⁶ Neel went on to have children and love them, but she had to face the dual demands of family and career.⁸⁷



PREGNANT BETTY HOMITSKY!
ALICE NEEL
1968

N
68

Neel enjoyed painting pregnancy for the subject's intrinsic contradictions. As a rule Neel only painted female nudes if they were pregnant or nursing mothers. Neel says, "I don't paint pregnant women especially, but I think it's part of the human experience. Something the primitives did, but modern painters have shied away from because women were always done as sex objects. A pregnant woman has a claim staked out; she's not for sale."⁸⁸

One of the most recent artists to deal with parturition, Judy Chicago created her work entitled *The Birth Project* from 1980-1985. For *The Birth Project*, Judy Chicago envisioned using birth as a metaphor for creation of the universe. She started work by going to the library to research images of birth. She was amazed to find none; birth is a universal and fundamental experience of life how could there be no images? Due to a lack of images, Judy Chicago went directly to women for her research and interviewed them about their birth experiences. In addition, due to lack of precedence for the most part in the history of art, she had to create "a form language from scratch."⁸⁹

The Birth Project is a large series of works that apply needle working or textile techniques in combination with painting on fabric. The pieces may be displayed in entirety or in small groups. The entire work is designed for easy shipping and hanging making it extremely accessible to the public and displayable in women's centers and birthing centers as well as museums.⁹⁰

Chicago began with a *Creation of the Universe* tapestry. She intended to use the physical process of birth as a metaphor for the birth of the universe and the creation of life itself. She also desired to make the creation of the universe intimately feminine.



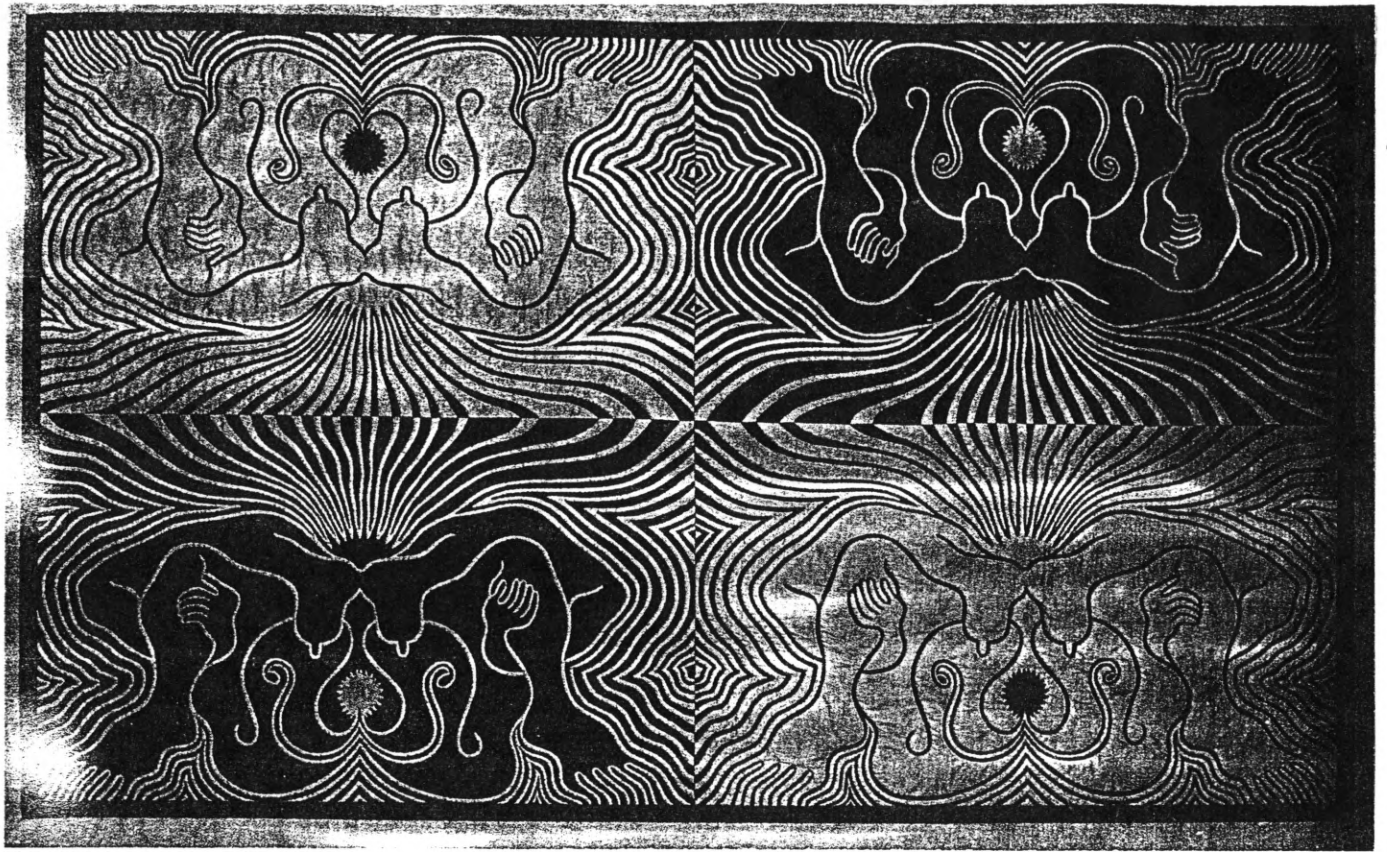
on of the Universe, ©Judy Chicago, 1984. Woven by Audrey Cowan. Wool and silk, 42" x 14".

Compositionally form had to be at once human female and universal and it must affect viewers on a “cellular level.”⁹¹

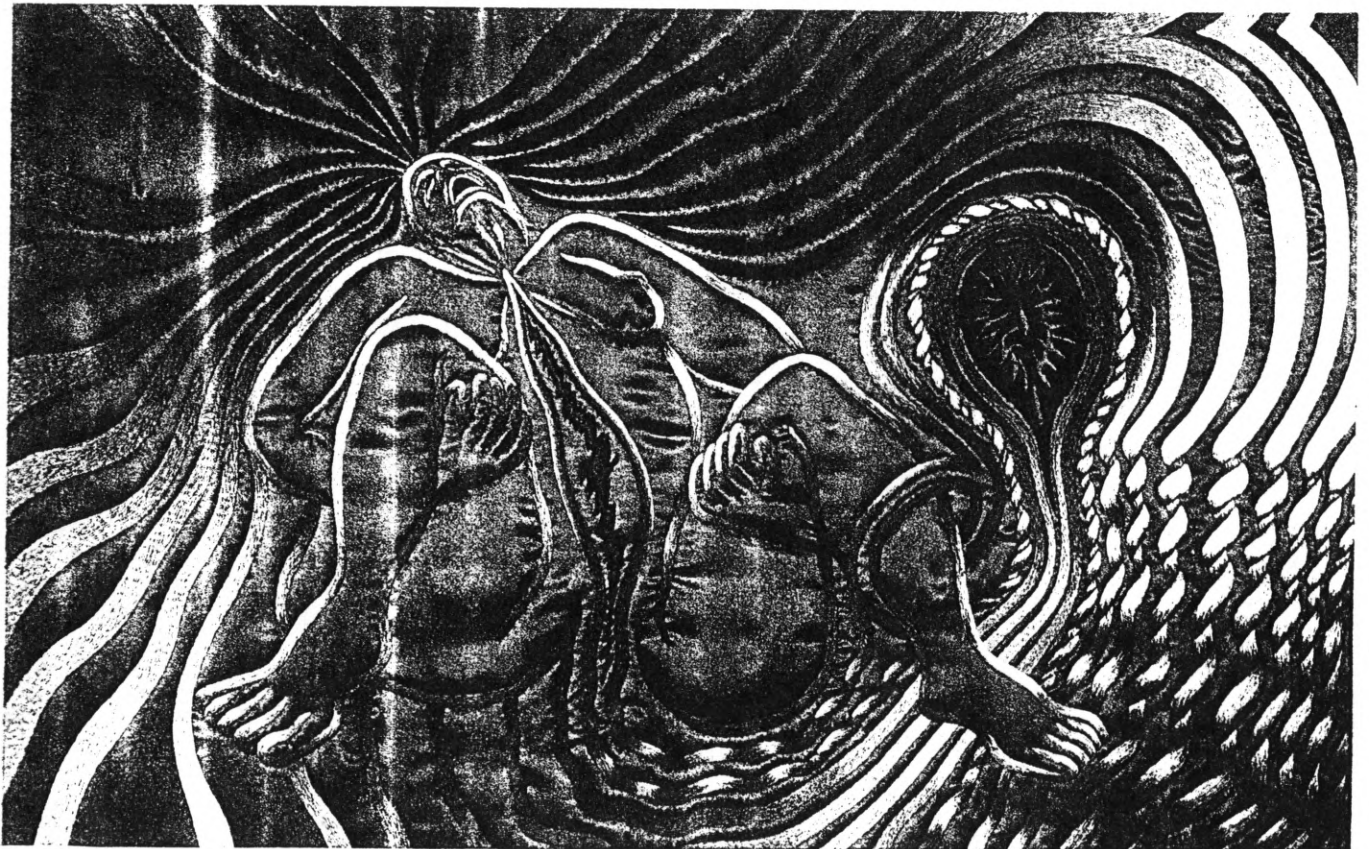
In the center of the composition, a nebulous form is contained within a womb-like enclosure. A series of lines curve around this form and join it with another enclosure that contains a fetus. To the left, the undulating lines form abstract pattern and then fade into blackness. To the right emerges the form of a leg crawling with primitive life. Breast-like mountains appear in the background and the female figure’s arm reaches out holding the sun. Further to the right a sea of life flows filled with birds, fish, and animals. The waves of the sea merge into another abstraction of the female figure. *Creation of the Universe* presents an undulating picture of female creative and procreative power.

The various works in *The Birth Project* are meant to represent different aspects and experiences of giving birth. *The Crowning*, for instance, depicts the incredible moment when the baby’s head first appears. The birthing woman’s head is down; she focuses completely on her task. In the words of needleworker Gloria Van Lydegraf, “Her hair flows over her head like the branches of a tree. Her toes are spread and extended like roots connecting her to the earth.” The focal point of the composition is an emerging starburst pattern representative of the baby’s head. The work is highly symmetrical and is abstracted as well as figural. The woman’s hair forms abstract pattern and the forms of her breasts and balanced rendering of her fallopian tubes are highly decorative.⁹²

In *Birth Tear*, Judy Chicago presents the pain and violence of birth. The image depicts “a woman in the throes of labor.”⁹³ Her head is thrown back her face lined in pain. The birth canal continues as a long, jagged, red tear splitting her body. The waves of the woman’s hair form vibrations of pain that cover the deep red surface of the fabric.



The Crowning Q 5, ©Judy Chicago, 1982. Reverse appliqué and quilting by Jacquelyn Moore, Mendon, Massachusetts. 56½" x 89".



Birth Tear E 2, ©Judy Chicago, 1982. Executed by Jane Gaddie Thompson, Houston, Texas. DMC floss on silk, 15" x 22".

The woman's womb appears outside of her body yet connected to her by a long twisted cord. Stitcher Jane Thompson says, "The wavy line looping up over the uterus reminded me of an umbilical cord, round and gently twisted, full of magic and life. I decided to carry this idea through to the other lines on the right side of the image, with Judy's excited approval."⁹⁴

Approximately eighty-five images meant as archetypal representations of the birth experience comprise Judy Chicago's *Birth Project*. Josephine Whithers feels that the voluminous series falls short of conveying a truly comprehensive and convincing picture of the birth experience. Whithers' primary criticism is that instead of exploring the complicated social views surrounding birth or birth imagery, *The Birth Project* simply offers heroic images of birthing women. Whithers also feels that the experience of birth is not rendered emphatically or immediately enough. She is childless and wishes that Chicago's images would give her "a deeper insight into what birthing mothers do experience." While the images themselves are raw, Whithers finds the construction and fabric medium too perfect and sumptuous for a violent physical process dominated by convulsive spasms and the forces of nature and ending in the emergence of life.⁹⁵

Whithers does acknowledge that *The Birth Project* very successfully opens up a new frontier for representation and dialogue. Judy Chicago's images are bold, raw, and unprecedented. They dare to broach a subject considered taboo and represent it monumentally.⁹⁶ Indeed the main message of *The Birth Project* seems simply to be that birth is a heroic and monumental experience worthy of representation.

Images of parturition are powerful in their representation of new life. Sometimes they remind humanity (women particularly as the primary caregivers) of the tremendous

responsibility and sacrifice involved in bearing children. Sometimes, as in Kahlo's work, they remind us of the inescapable connection between life and death. Images of parturition also show us the miracle of new life, the promise of future generations and serve as symbols of hope and rebirth.

Perhaps such imagery has been disregarded as a feminist art outside of its limited use as allegory. As Judy Chicago jokes, "If men had babies, there would be thousands of images of the crowning [the moment when the baby's head first appears]." However, even if only women, and not all women at that, give birth, we are all born. In addition it is not necessary to paint from experience. Michaelangelo never experienced the creation of Adam, for example, yet he painted it. The beginning of new life and birth presents a subject of incredible universal, archetypal, metaphorical, and symbolic richness. Whatever the reason, the potential of such multifaceted imagery has barely been tapped in Western painting.

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- ³ Cole, Bruce. *Piero Della Francesca* (New York, 1991), 77.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Lavin, 104.
- ⁶ Feudale, Caroline. "The Iconography of the Madonna Del Parto," *Marsyas* (1957), 23.
- ⁷ Miller, Julia I. "Miraculous Childbirth and the Portinari Altarpiece," *Art Bulletin* (v. 77, June 1995), 249-256.
- ⁸ Feudale, 9.
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- ¹¹ Harmon, Nolan B., ed. *The Interpreter's Bible Vol. VIII* (New York, 1952), 40-41.
- ¹² *New Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. XIV* (London: 1967), 721.
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- ¹⁴ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 721.
- ¹⁵ Harmon, 40-41.
- ¹⁶ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 721.
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- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 721.
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- ²⁷ Whitford, Frank. *Klimt* (New York, 1990), 168.
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- ²⁹ Gill, D. M. *Klimt* (London, 1996), 77.
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- ³¹ Betterton, Rosemary. "Mother Figures: the maternal nude in the work of Kathe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker," *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London, 1996), 166-167.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Duncan, Carol. "Virility and Domination in Early 20th-Century Vanguard Painting," *Artforum* (December, 1973).
- ³⁴ Herner de Larrea, 67.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 67-68.
- ³⁶ Herrera, Hayden. *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings* (New York, 1991), 9.
- ³⁷ Comisarenco, Dina. "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Tlazolteotl," *Women's Art Journal* (v. 17, spr/sum 1996), 16.
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- ⁴⁸ Pernoud, Emanuel. "Une Autobiographie Mystique: La Peinture de Frida Kahlo," *Gazette Des Beaux Arts* (v. 101, Jan 1983), 46.
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- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
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- ⁶³ Comisarenco, 15.
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- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Comisarenco, 18.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., 15.
- ⁶⁹ O'Connor, Francis V. "An Iconographic Interpretation of Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry Murals in Terms of Their Orientation to the Cardinal Points of the Compass," *Diego Rivera* (New York, 1986), 287.
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- ⁷² McMeekin, Dorothy. *Diego Rivera* (Michigan, 1985), 24.
- ⁷³ Catlin, 289.
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- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
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- ⁸¹ Ibid., 236.
- ⁸² Ibid., 241.
- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ Johnson, Ken. "Alice Neel," *Art in America* (v. 84, April 1996), 119.
- ⁸⁵ Allara, 56.
- ⁸⁶ Hirsch, Faye "Alice Neel," *Artforum* (v. 34, April 1996), 100.
- ⁸⁷ Allara, 53.
- ⁸⁸ Halasz, Piri. "Alice Neel: 'I have this obsession with life,'" *Art News* (Jan 1974), 49.
- ⁸⁹ Chicago, Judy. *The Birth Project* (New York, 1985), 4-7, 18-19.
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- ⁹¹ Ibid., 13.
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- ⁹³ Ibid., 84-85.
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- ⁹⁵ Whithers, Josephine. "Judy Chicago's 'Birth Project': a feminist muddle?" *New Art Examiner* (v. 13, Jan 1986), 28-29.
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