

Healing at the Confluence

Reflections on the Sculpture of the Birth of the Divine Girl

by Caroline Mackenzie

The background to this image is a meeting between three cultures or symbol systems. These are Hindu, Christian and secular art. The uniting factor is a search for healing and empowerment. Occupying a liminal space, the image challenges each of these world-views. Practically the sculpture comprises five figures. At the centre a girl child is being born or re-born from a *mandorla* (almond) shape. To the left (for the viewer) is a male figure and to the right a female. Above with wings outstretched is the Bird Man and below the Earth Woman.

The Hindu Background

For the artist the idea of a figure leaping out of a rock or pillar comes originally from the myth of Narasimha. In the story of Prahlada and the demon Hiranyakashipoo, Narasimha takes the egotistical Hiranyakashipoo by surprise. While the latter is asking everyone to worship him, the Man Lion bursts forth from the pillar and destroys him. While it is this narrative that inspired the idea of bursting out of the rock, the actual form of a figure in a mandorla shape is based on the icon of Shiva called *Lingeshvara*. There are also Christian images employing the mandorla form as will be described below. In the icon of Lingeshwara, a standing figure of Shiva appears in a mandorla at the centre of a *linga* like pillar. The figures of Brahma and Vishnu are shown searching for the top and bottom of this cosmic linga.

The idea of the standing male figure and female figures on either side is derived from Hindu images of the Divine envisioned as both male and female. In the sculpture they represent the parents of the child. At the same time the image of *Ardhnarshwara*, Shiva as the divine hermaphrodite, is present. The outstretched arms of the child touch both the male and female aspects of her inner Self. The Bird Man or *Pakshi Manasu* is derived from Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu. Below, the Earth Woman or *Bhu Devi* is reminiscent of divine female figures found on Hindu temples.

The Christian Background

It is common on Romanesque and Gothic cathedral doorways to find sculptures of a seated Christ in a mandorla shape. The mandorla is partly derived from the form of the vulva and represents birth or simply life. The Christ figure is normally shown as a teacher often with the Gospel book in one hand and the other raised in blessing. The Word of God is felt to be life giving. This is emphasized by the position of the sculpture over the doorway which itself is type of vulva. Entering the church leads to re-birth.

The outstretched arms of the child in the Birth of the Divine Girl make a cruciform shape. In the mind of the artist the child is a kind of Christ figure. According to St Athanasius, "God became a human being in order that human beings might become divine". Christ is believed to be fully human and fully divine. He is an image of the unseen God. Taken literally this means that the humanity of women just as much as that of men is representative of the divine. Thus the birth of this child represents the incarnation of Christ in female form.

The idea of the female child as both human and divine is symbolized through the heavenly and earthly figures above and below. Thus the Bird Man could be an image of God the Father or God the Holy Spirit. In an earlier series of paintings the artist created a spontaneous image that she entitled, "I am God the Father and I only want Sons". In contrast with this terrifying patriarchal image of God, here the male figure looks towards the female child in a supportive and loving way. It is as if he is saying, "Don't be scared, you can do it, you can overcome all the obstacles. I am here for you. I want you to succeed".¹

In Christian symbolism the church is normally referred to in a feminine form. In the sculpture the kneeling woman reaches up to support the process of birth and to receive the leaping child. The idea here is of new type of church where the feminine, the creative, the earth are welcomed and given a place here in the real world.

¹ I am indebted to T.N. Muniyandi the head mason for articulating this meaning in words. He is the father of four daughters and has no sons. He put the finishing touches to this figure and said that this was the meaning of it for him. Although I had only used visual means to convey the design of the sculpture, this exactly coincides with my own intention.

The Secular Background – Art

The notion of art separated from a religious context such as a temple or a church is relatively recent. In the West it developed gradually from the humanist ideas of the renaissance when the classical Greek and Roman cultures were re-discovered. From then onwards the divide has increased. Now a days it is normal for an artist to create paintings or sculptures as an act of self expression. The exhibition in an art gallery leading to purchase of the artworks by individuals or institutions has largely replaced commissions by religious bodies. In the West this has led to a noticeable difference between sacred and secular art. A particularly sensitive area is the representation of sexuality. In the work of artists like Rodin, Picasso or Paula Modersohn Becker and many other “secular” artists the nude figure is entirely acceptable. Thus in this sculpture the pose of the Earth Woman is partly based on caryatid figures created by Rodin. These in turn were based on Greek figures.

The idea of the female subject creating her own reality owes a debt to the Jewish artist Charlotte Saloman. Before the Nazis killed her, she painted more than seven hundred gouache paintings. She titled the series “Life? Or Theatre?”. These pictures were made spontaneously in a great hurry. She did not stop to censor or hide her experiences and feelings. She presented an image of the woman that contrasts with those created by male artists. The self-confidence in the posture and face of the child in the sculpture is inspired by the bold subjectivity of Charlotte Salomon.

Another important ingredient in the composition is the contemporary social situation where both parents are equally well educated and thus both are working and earning. In this situation some couples have taken a conscious decision to share both childcare and the responsibility for their livelihood. In U.K. a group of men have set up an organization called “Fathers Direct”. They have been given funding from various sources including the government under the Equal Opportunities Commission. They acknowledge that the effort to develop their nurturing capacities cannot be achieved without effort and reflection. Therefore they organize training programs and workshops to help men to develop their parenting skills in practical ways. Many of them now say that the combination of childcare and work outside is a wonderful balance. They also find that the relationship with their wives or partners is more fulfilling because the

women are no longer frustrated through being forced to sacrifice their talents for the sake of the family.

The Secular Background – Psychology

The psychological background is the struggle of “The Replacement Child” to find her own identity and to heal the traumatic aspects of her birth. The phenomenon of the Replacement Child is now fairly well documented. It refers to any child who is perceived as a replacement for a sibling who died. The composition of the sculpture was first made in a series of spontaneous watercolour paintings entitled “The Art of Grieving”. These pictures were created in 1999 after the death of the artist’s father. Through the experience of grief in the present, it was possible to enter the unrieved grief of the past. The pictures brought out an association between the sense of rejection during the funeral and the sense of rejection in an atmosphere of grief at the time of birth.

As is often the case, the trigger that constellated the events in the past was quite trivial. During the last weeks of his life the artist’s father was unable to speak. Spending time by his bedside the artist sang some of her favorite Indian Christian *bhajans* (contemplative chants). At one point he awoke from his sleep and gave an extraordinary smile. Soon after this he died. When planning the funeral the artist asked the minister and her family if she could sing one of the bhajans in the service. The minister, her brother and sister in law agreed but her mother and two younger sisters felt that it was not appropriate. This was in many ways perfectly logical and in normal circumstances would have passed without disturbance.

In fact it led to a fierce argument between the artist and her sister. In order to deal with her turbulent feelings she made a series of pictures entitled “The Art of Grieving”. To her own astonishment these pictures led from the “Argument between the Sisters” to “The Father’s Smile”, then to a reconstruction of the artist’s birth. In retrospect the connection was rejection of a gift (the bhajan song) in an atmosphere of grief. The artist was born eighteen months after the first-born son in the family died at the age of two years ten months. This sudden and tragic death led to a deep depression in the parents. Thus when the artist was born they found it difficult to welcome and bond with her as they were still preoccupied with

the earlier child's death. An added problem was that the baby was not a boy to replace the dead one.

Although very painful at the time, the discovery of this birth proved to be a breakthrough. It enabled the artist to become aware of many of her emotional patterns and blocks and to move through them. Almost at the same time as painting an imaginative reconstruction of the birth, the next-door neighbor of the artist became a grandmother. She attended at the birth of her daughter's first baby along with her son in law. Her retelling of this experience inspired the artist to imagine such a birth as her own. This picture forms the basic composition for the sculpture.

According to the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein even one positive experience of love and affection from a primary care giver can form the basis for healing wounds caused by inadequate care giving. The figure of the Earth Goddess is created from the infant's experience of the family Nanny. Although she was also involved in the tragic death she did not experience the same depth of involvement as the parents. This combined with her natural ability to be present to each child and to convey a sense of love and care contributed to a feeling of being wanted and received.

Creating the picture and then the sculpture has led to a transformation at a very deep level and it is an ongoing process. It has led to a new experience of forgiveness as taught by Christ. Obviously the parents had no intention of causing any harm to the infant. They were doing the very best under the circumstances. Drawing on Hindu, Christian and secular sources to create this art-work, the artist became conscious of her pain and found the resources to forgive and to move on. The outstretched arms of the child celebrate this new openness to life.

Conclusion – Extending the Canon²

Although the artist identifies herself as a Christian, the sculpture of The Birth of the Divine Girl belongs to no one particular tradition. Fireflies Ashram attempts to offer a space where social and religious experiments can be undertaken. This openness does not mean neutrality. There is an ongoing attempt to envision creative ways that the various cultures and traditions can interact in a way that brings more freedom and compassion into the world. Art is one way this can be done. In this sculpture the limits

² This title is borrowed from an article by Dr F.X.Clooney, "Extending the Canon: Some Implications of a Hindu Argument about Scripture." Harvard Theological Review 85:2, 1992, pp.197-215

of the symbolic language of each tradition are extended. Looking at this sculpture, a Christian might ask why a faith that believes Christ to be fully human excludes many aspects of humanity from its picture of God in the world. This question is raised when looking at a Hindu temple where men and women are depicted without embarrassment and the experience of erotic love is linked to a vision of the divine and thus to salvation.

A similar celebration or at least description of erotic love is found in the work of many secular artists. Although both Hindu temple art and Western and Indian secular art are less inhibited than in the Christian iconography, all these images assume the masculine experience of the world as normative. For the patriarchal system woman is of interest once she is mature and attractive and thus a potential mother of sons. Thus positive images of the girl child have not been made. The idea of women expressing their own subjectivity comes from Enlightenment ideas of social equality. Since most women are now educated to the same level as men, the culture is beginning to depict them in a new way.

Some people when looking at this sculpture have said that it looks as though it came from a Hindu temple. The social problem of female infanticide is well known. Could an image like this be installed in a niche on a modern Hindu temple? Or is the canon of the iconography fixed once and for all? Similarly Christians might consider whether they would be prepared to place such an image in one of their sacred spaces such as an ashram or a church. The high ideals of love expressed as agape often feel impossible to practice. Many young people express their frustration with Christianity. Especially adolescents and young adults say that their blossoming sexuality has no place in the church. At the same time the consumer culture uses women as sex objects to sell its products. If you buy the product you will also get sexual gratification.

Christian liberation theology has shown both theoretical and practical concern for Dalits, tribals and the poor. The feminist theologians are challenging the patriarchal hermeneutics. In most Protestant churches women are now ordained. Never the less many experience strong resistance to their ministries from both men and women. In the Roman Catholic Church the official position is that the matter must not even be discussed. In such a situation and in a tradition that is open to images, a sculpture such as this might help to bring some of the fears that are

hidden into the open. In the absence of the bodily representation of women in positions of authority, such an artwork could do something to support their sense of dignity and self worth. It may pave the way for women to take more responsibility for decision-making and action in society.

As an artist trained in the secular ethos of western art, the evocation of the sacred both in Hindu and Christian sacred spaces fulfills a need for mystery and transcendence that is rarely met in the secular situation. In both Hindu and Christian sacred spaces art is used to attract humanity towards the divine. Through architecture and images, a microcosm is created that describes the human divine relationship and suggests a way to attain integration, liberation and peace. Fireflies Ashram offers a space informed both by religious and secular insights. Can the results of an experiment such as this sculpture be re-absorbed into the three traditions from which it came? Perhaps these traditions can expand their language and horizons so as to facilitate a healing and liberating process for each and every person.