

Art in time of Crisis - Raphael's 'Healing' Madonna

'the gaze (that) penetrates as through a veil through the living quality these Madonnas portray, and beholds the spiritual behind it ... will unite in his soul science or wisdom with art ...'



Rudolf Steiner spoke these words in Berlin almost 121 years ago. Though Steiner's lectures are not usually linked directly to the practice of Waldorf education (indeed most of them were given long before the first Waldorf school opened in Stuttgart in 1919) the general theme of his lectures - how the spirit informs our daily, material lives - is at the core of what makes a Waldorf education so remarkable.

Having taught and shared the humanities as a High School teacher for many years, I have often heard parents ask (when they felt bold enough), 'Why is ART is so important in a Waldorf school?' In fact, people may dismissively remark, 'Oh, Waldorf - that's the arty education, isn't it?'. Well, in fact, yes it is! Though, because we don't want to be labelled as wishy-washy, non-sciency, and not good at maths, we may laugh in reply and say rather uncomfortably, 'Yes, but it's not just arty, there's so much more'. And, of course, we can do the sciences very well too.

I find it interesting to reflect why it is that after completing many years of rational, academic and scientific study Rudolf Steiner increasingly turned his attention to the ARTS. For Steiner art meant a wide range of cultural activities; including, but not limited to: Eurythmy (a movement discipline which he co-created), speech, drama, music, painting, sculpture, and architecture (devoting more than 10 years to the realisation of two huge buildings for his recently formed anthroposophical society).

Raphael's Sistine Madonna c.1513

Gemaldegalerie, Dresden

'In the Sistine Madonna we have a picture of the human soul born of the spiritual universe, and springing from this soul the highest that a human being can bring forth — man's own spiritual birth ... within him is a new begetting of cosmic creative activity.'

(Rudolf Steiner - Berlin 28 April 1909)

Why was Steiner so concerned with the artistic element in life? Answers to this question can be found in a painting that Steiner often returned to in his lectures, and which has for centuries been regarded as one of the masterpieces of Italian Renaissance art - Raphael's 'Sistine Madonna' (so called, because it includes the figure of St Sixtus and was made for altar of the Church of St Sixtus, Piacenza). Raphael

painted it for the notoriously pugnacious Pope Julius II, who gave it to the city of Piacenza during a period of martial conflict - so that they would remember his largesse (Raphael obligingly gave St Sixtus, the male figure on the left, Julius' likeness.



Steiner explained in his Berlin lecture that like his much more famous forebear, the German Romantic poet, scientist and philosophical thinker J.W. Goethe, he believed that ART reveals the spiritual secrets of the cosmos, and that this was understood by seers from the earth's earliest ancient civilizations - from Egypt to India and China. For Steiner, Raphael's painting can be read as a visual metaphor in which the angelic 'human child souls' at the bottom of the picture contemplate a spiritual birth (above), reminding them of our highest purpose in life: to enact our second birth, and to consciously awaken our spiritual selves, transcending our material bodies and offering our soul as a creative gift to the cosmos. In so doing, we will affirm that it really matters how we live each day - not just for ourselves, our families, and our communities, but for all creation.

Though Steiner earnestly explored the mysteries of Christianity, it is misleading to conclude that what he spoke about in Raphael's painting depended on religion. For Steiner, the holiness of the Madonna image was something quite apart from religion and its dogmas. He believed the Madonna to reflect a spiritual archetype - something true for all time, and for all peoples. In the same lecture Steiner referred with equal earnestness to the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Indian god Krishna.

WHAT MAKES THIS A HEALING IMAGE ?

In 1908, during a conversation between Dr Felix Peipers and Rudolf Steiner an idea arose that led to the development of a sequence of fifteen Madonna images, mostly by Raphael, which the doctor subsequently used therapeutically with his patients. It would take an experienced medical psychotherapist to explain how exactly art can work on us therapeutically. As an teacher and lover of art, to me the image's potential for healing is bound up in its beauty.

There is TENDERNESS in the loving embrace of a mother towards her child; warmth in the intimate sense of touch as the baby rests his head against the mother's neck and cheek, and as his foot nuzzles gently into her richly textured clothing. If we look at each hand gesture in turn, we can see that they are all tenderly poised on skin or cloth, except the one hand of Sixtus which reaches out imploringly towards us.

STILLNESS resonates as the figures emerge from the heavens and their movement is arrested and suspended in a moment. This may remind us that when we are at peace in our own lives (how rare and privileged those moments are, especially this time of crisis) we are unconscious to our physicality - our weight and movement. It is as if we too are suspended in a continuous moment - rhythmically breathing and yet profoundly still.

Raphael's painting also offers us an archetype of PURITY in the form of an innocent and vulnerable child - a being not caught up in worldly desire, ambition, gluttony, or acquisition. Raphael encourages us to pay homage to this child, and to remember the most precious gift that is brought to humanity each and every day. Indeed, though thousands of people die each day, some in desperate circumstances, many more are born and received as miraculous gifts to humanity.

And lastly, the **Sistine Madonna** is an image of DEVOTION - the meditation of something centrally important in our lives. We are offered two saints (St Sixtus and St Barbara) and two angelic children (putti) in the presence of the miraculous. Their devotion may call us to do the same - whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist or agnostic - to give ourselves up to what really matters in our lives.