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In Praise of Motherhood: The Promise and Failure of Painting for Social Reform in Late-Nineteenth-Century Italy

by Judith Meighan

In 1891 two acclaimed artists, Giovanni Segantini (1858–1899) and Gaetano Previati (1852–1920), entered major works in the first Triennale Exposition of the Fine Arts, held at the Brera Academy, the premier art institution in Milan.^[1] For this important exhibition, both artists decided to showcase the new Divisionist technique in large-scale paintings; significantly, both works had the same theme: motherhood.^[2] Segantini, who had a secure international reputation, submitted a well-received Divisionist painting he had shown two years earlier in Turin, *Le due madri* (The Two Mothers; 1889) (fig. 1), which depicts a sleeping mother and baby next to a cow and calf in a lamplit barn. For Previati, who was considered a very promising talent,^[3] the Triennale offered a much-needed opportunity to establish his reputation and to gain the economic support of paying patrons. He entered a painting of a mother nursing her baby under a tree with six angels kneeling in adoration. Previati devoted two years to the making of this painting, used four meters of canvas, and pursued an intense study of the Divisionist technique. The Brera show was the *début* for his *Maternità* (Motherhood; 1890–91) (fig. 2), and the painting entered the competition for the prestigious Fumagalli prize (four thousand lire).^[4]



Fig. 1, Giovanni Segantini, *Le due madri*, 1889. Oil on canvas. Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Gaetano Previati, *Maternità*, 1890-91. Oil on canvas. Banca Popolare di Novara [\[larger image\]](#)

The Triennale Exposition, designed to be more ambitious than the traditional academic juried shows held each year that dominated the nineteenth century, offered both artists the opportunity to present the latest innovations in their work. The Brera Academy had reopened its halls after three years of "meditation, maturation, [and] thought"^[5] for this *fiesta d'arte* in an enthusiastic attempt to revive the failing Italian art market, victim of an

economic decline that began in the 1880s. The year 1890–91 was the worst of the recession, [6] however, and the Triennale failed to have the desired result. At the end of the exhibition, the organizers lamented in print the paucity of actual sales. Nevertheless, with great optimism and a bit of bravado two floors of the Brera palazzo were given over to the exhibition, which ran from May through July. The jury, chosen by the Academic Council of the Brera, selected works by 225 painters and 78 sculptors to fill the halls and salons.[7] Determined to reinvigorate the visual arts, the organizers also arranged a venture new to Milan, the *Esposizione libera di belle arti*, in the Foro Bonaparte. Inspired by the Parisian Salons des Refusés, the organizers chose a 730-square-meter space to house the large number of works not accepted for display in the Triennale.[8]

The organizers also launched a biweekly, *La cronaca dell'esposizione di belle arti*, to serve as catalogue and forum. In a truly contemporary manner, *La cronaca dell'esposizione* set out its mission in the first issue: To be a guide for the visitor; to facilitate the viewing and the enjoyment of the paintings and sculptures in the show; and to supply a vehicle for easy and immediate contact between the artist and the public.[9]

Though the Triennale fell short of its economic expectations, the exhibition did succeed exceptionally well in igniting invigorating debates on the nature of art, with *Cronaca dell'esposizione* adding to the discussion by existing art publications, critics, artists, and even the public about the established taste for *verismo* (realism) and the challenges presented by vanguard art. The critic and painter Vittore Grubicy, champion of the new, alone wrote over a dozen articles in which he made a clear and elegant case for abstraction. Indeed, it was his encouragement and advice that inspired both Segantini and Previati to investigate Divisionism in the late 1880s, and the 1891 Milan Triennale now stands as the formal introduction of Divisionism to Italian art viewers and, in histories of Italian art, as the turning point of modernism.

With so much in common, we might expect *Le due madri* and *Maternità* to be evidence of a shared approach to Divisionism, or at least characteristic of a late-nineteenth-century consensus on the role of motherhood, but we would be wrong. Segantini's painting received nothing but adulation and, according to the critic Alberto Sormani, was the "true *Maternità*" in the exhibition.[10] Previati's work, on the other hand, brought forth waves of outrage and was the "most violently attacked"[11] in the exhibition.

The failure of *Maternità* exploded the [day after the opening of the Triennale] in a way so sensational and extraordinary, that to find an example of such irritation against a work of painting one has to think of the example of that of Paris against Manet. In Italy nothing similar had ever happened.[12]

Maternità became the *successo dello scandalo* and the most debated work of the whole exhibition, filling the pages of critical journals. Even the most sophisticated viewers demanded to know "what it was," and critic Andrea Sperelli exclaimed, "Even artists . . . avert their gaze." [13] To our eyes, both paintings may seem to be sentimental, even saccharine, looks at maternal tenderness. Kate Flint, in her 1993 essay "Blood and Milk," could only describe *Maternità* as having "conventional subject matter" that "excited a great deal of comment as a result of its bold Divisionist technique." [14]

Maternità did more than just excite a great deal of commentary, however. It represents a turning point in the development of modern art in Italy. The pivotal role of this painting has been acknowledged by scholars of modern art in Italy who consistently cite it as the beginning of major stylistic and conceptual changes.[15] It has been attributed as the first Symbolist painting in Italy[16] as well as playing the principal role in the formal debut of Italian Divisionism. Some historians herald the work as the harbinger of the curvilinear Liberty Style (the Italian name for Art Nouveau)[17] and as the first sign of the modern expressionist idiom.

Why was one maternal image admired and the other disparaged? We must not assume that images of motherhood in the second half of the nineteenth century shared a sentimental, uniform idea of motherhood. Motherhood was contested territory in a society that for hundreds of years had denied many women the right to be mothers. Why was one form of Divisionism, *Le due madri*, received so warmly while the other, *Maternità*, created confusion and provoked anger? How is it that a work that today seems so conventional was considered such a watershed and so unconventional in its day? To answer these questions we must examine how a fundamental shift in the way a painting was not only made but conceived intertwined with volatile and political issues. In this essay I combine sociological history with previously unpublished information about Previati's life to examine the complexity and difficulties of motherhood in the modern era.

The Divisionist Technique

In both his formal and informal writings, Previati emphasized that he chose the Divisionist technique, a radical new system based on optical science and perceptual psychology, as a way to jolt viewers out of the traditional role of distanced observers.[18] He considered the technique a means of painting with light rather than the diminished colors of blended pigments.

A more brilliant color was one advantage of painting with the divided brushstroke, but for Previati and supporters like Sperelli the optical effects of Divisionism excited the retina and actively stimulated the viewer's perceptual mechanisms.[19] They understood that perception was not mere biomechanics—that we record visual images not merely as a camera does, but involving the complexities of human psychology. This Divisionist "excitation of the retina" provides a direct route to engaging human emotions. Previati also knew that what we perceive is more or less made active according to our specific state of mind—*stato d'animo*. [20] Visual perception still depends, in his words, on a quality extraneous to the eye: "memory, a quite intellectual function"[21] that can modify the impressions of reality from one individual to another.

By painting with light and more vividly engaging the eye, Previati thought he could awaken in the viewer an emotional resonance unavailable in traditional painting.[22] Divisionism, a technical term also used by Seurat for his post-1884 paintings, usually is understood—inadequately—as merely a means of optically mixing paint to create more brilliant color. Many try to explain the technique by saying small dots of blue interspersed with small dots of yellow fuse to make green. As was proven by James Clerk Maxwell in 1852, however, this does not occur—blue dots and yellow dots optically mix to make gray.

Divisionist artists vary in their degree of awareness of the contemporary optical science which formed the basis for the technique. Previati, who wrote the only scholarly work on Divisionism at the time,[23] had a high level of understanding of the science and thus was able to put into practice a very sophisticated form of Divisionism. As he explained to his biographer, the Divisionist painter

- employs a palette of a red, an orange, a yellow, a green, a blue, a violet to imitate the solar spectrum and—as subsidiary materials—black and white.
- never blends[24] pigments but uses pure pigment or creates new colors with strictly divided strokes of different colors. [For example, thin strokes of red interspersed with thin strokes of white will be perceived at the proper distance as pink.]
- creates brushstrokes that can have the form of commas, points, or lines according to the effects the artist wants to achieve and according to his feeling.[25]

Moreover, in order to "illuminate the painting and to increase the luminous effect," the Divisionist painter "composes the painting by juxtaposing large areas of complementary color and exploits in every way the phenomenon of the contrast of complementaries." [26]

Divisionism and the Genesis of Previati's *Maternità*

When Previati first tried this technique in 1889 in a small painting called *Peace* (fig. 3), which shows "a mother and two babies in a meadow glazed by orchard freshness,"[27] he said the new technique inspired in him a *stato d'animo* of panicky fear and a religious agitation of apprehension and hope.[28]



Fig. 3, Gaetano Previati, *Pace*, 1889-90. Oil on canvas. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Florence [\[larger image\]](#)

Toward the end of that year, he decided to return to a large sketch of motherhood he had begun four years earlier that represented "angels adoring the divine mother nursing her child." [29] In a letter he wrote in December to his older brother Giuseppe, Previati stated that he wished to treat this theme without dependence on anything other than his own feelings.[30] And his feelings were running high. According to his biographer, Nino Barbantini, the artist was unable to begin the canvas, due to lack of funds, until September 1890, when Giuseppe offered financial help. Yet there is more to this nine-month delay than

financial stress. A close examination of the sequence of events sheds considerable light on the importance this painting held for Previati and explains his passionate ambitions for the work.

Previati kept from his biographer letters with little artistic interest[31] and made sure few details of his family life entered his biography. The published reminiscences of his youngest son, Alberto, however, reveal the family circumstances which most likely encouraged Giuseppe, the financially more secure hydraulic engineer, to come to Previati's aid. Previati, at age 38, and his beloved Leonilda Baldassini, a student of music, had just given birth to their first child, affectionately called Carletto, on 31 August 1890,[32] although the two, it seems, were not yet married due to Previati's poverty. Previati's experience as a new parent, unmarried and thus compromised by the laws and traditions of the day, has escaped notice in any of the literature on *Maternità*. It does, however, bring out the immediate personal dimension to the intensity of feeling the artist expressed about his theme of motherhood.

For many reasons, among them protecting the reputation of his family, Previati never framed *Maternità* as a biographical work in any of his writings. As was customary in his day, he maintained throughout his career a separation between his artistic vocation and his private life. And, as was customary in his middle-class milieu, Previati wanted to keep the prevailing disapproval of illegitimacy out of his family history.

The artist did, however, hope to capture the intense feelings the subject of motherhood brought forth in him. On 18 February 1890, when Nilda was probably about twelve weeks pregnant, he wrote to his brother about his passionate, ambitious plan for his painting of motherhood:

. . . to render in the principal figure of the painting all the intensity of maternal love [which has been] spoiled by the rubbish that has served for a thousand paintings—and rendering [the figure as] taking part in the movement of the other figures to produce a total homogeneity of form to impede any other interpretation by the observer's eye—but what difficulty, my God . . . to obtain from the canvas a voice that crushes your taste, your temperament, your education and . . . [then] would burst out from your heart and mind the cry that the universe, the earth, life is nothing . . . if there is not motherhood?!!! Also, on the canvas there mustn't be either color or form, neither heaven nor earth, neither figures of men nor of women but a fiat that says adore the mother. . . .[33]

Maternità was to be Previati's fiat, his decree, to adore the mother. From this initial point of passion, his struggle, whether he realized it or not, mimicked gestational anticipation and the excitement of birth. For seven months, he recalled,[34] he worked with a great deal of frustration at not producing the results he wanted. Then one evening he suddenly "saw" the work entirely repainted—with the new technique, Divisionism. "I have never again seen a period of such fervor and hope equal to that. I began to show on the canvas completely the ideas that passed through my mind." [35]

On 13 December 1890 Previati fired his model and the next day announced this breakthrough to his brother: "Now I feel stimulated to take up again the labor with great

energy. I have re-entered perfectly the ideas that moved me to this work."^[36] Previati also made a crucial decision for the final image. The existing oil bozzetto for *Maternità*, done in his earlier, Scapigliato style, shows the mother lifting the child as if to plant a kiss on his cheek. In the monumental Divisionist painting, Previati replaced this particular vision of maternal affection with the more intimate and more vital image of breast-feeding the baby. On 9 April 1891, as the painting was on its way to the Brera for the exhibition, Previati wrote his brother, "Now I am ashamed for having used only four meters for my subject—it really calls for one hundred thousand."^[37] Previati's impassioned argument must be understood in the context of nineteenth-century Italy, where motherhood was actually a troubled institution.

Realities of Motherhood

The legal, social, and cultural constraints on motherhood in Italy produced a crisis of infant abandonment in the middle years of the nineteenth century. The level in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, not only surged and outpaced the general increase in population, a phenomenon studied by sociologist David I. Kertzer,^[38] but also occurred in many areas—Milan, for example—where the standard of living was improving.^[39] Record numbers of babies were received at Italy's extensive system of foundling homes, and nowhere in Europe was infant abandonment as prevalent as in Milan. The rate in the 1860s, which reached the fearsome level of 5,500 babies a year,^[40] alarmed even those who viewed infant abandonment as a "natural, Malthusian response."^[41]

The foundling home, a long-standing tradition in Catholic countries, was created for the children who at birth were taken from their unwed mothers. These homes correspond to what we today more generally call an orphanage, with one striking difference: most of the children in a foundling home had healthy, living parents.

The laws and customs of nineteenth-century Italy were so strict that an unwed mother was seen, first and foremost, as imperiling the honor of her family and herself. Second, she had committed a sin which could be expiated only by bearing and birthing the child in secret and immediately giving it to a good Catholic institution, the foundling home. The secrecy of unwed mothers was maintained in several ways, the best known being "the wheel," a turntable in the wall of the foundling home on which someone outside the wall could place an infant and which could be turned, moving the infant to the interior while maintaining the anonymity of the person who placed it there. Gioacchino Toma's 1877 painting *La ruota dell'Annunziata di Napoli* (The Wheel of the Annunziata in Naples) (fig. 4) shows the wheel with its two points of light from the inside. The guardians on duty have fallen asleep, ignoring a tiny infant crying on the bed. Toma painted this condemnation after the notorious Naples wheel had closed in the mid-1870s.



Fig. 4, Gioacchino Toma, *La ruota dell'Annunziata*, 1877. Oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome [\[larger image\]](#)

Surprisingly, the children of unwed mothers accounted for only about 40 percent of 5,500 babies that entered the Milan foundling home in the 1860s; the other 60 percent came from living couples in legal Catholic marriages. This means that one-third of all legitimate babies born in Milan in the 1860s were given over to the foundling home.[\[42\]](#)

In Milan in 1875 about 16 percent of all births were considered illegitimate—i.e., the mothers were not married—and 91 percent of these children went to the foundling home. Yet even in 1900, after more than twenty years of reforms, more than 75 percent of the so-called "illegitimate" babies were abandoned to the foundling home.[\[43\]](#)

Despite the wide use of foundling homes, they were hardly model institutions. Over half the children left in foundling homes died by age three, twice the general infant mortality rate. In Milan in the 1860s the foundling home mortality had "improved"—to only 40 percent of the infants dying in the first year.[\[44\]](#)

Survival rates at home were better in all cases. Upper class families, such as the Guidini (fig. 5) family depicted in 1873 by Giacomo Favretto, had the means to adequately care for their children. Very few of these infants died and only about 5 percent did not reach age five. In a sharecropper family, 14 percent of the infants died and 20 percent died before they turned five. In the poorest families, such as the day laborers painted by Teofilo Pattini in his 1883 work *Vanga e latte* (Spade and Milk) (fig. 6), 17 percent of the babies died in the first year and 34 percent by age five, yet even in these circumstances a child was more likely to survive if at home, albeit marginally so.



Fig. 5, Giacomo Favretto, *La famiglia Guidini*, 1873. Oil on canvas. Galleria d'Arte Moderna Ca' Pesaro, Venice [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, Teofilo Patini, *Vanga e latte*, 1883. Oil on canvas. Ministero dell'Agricoltura e Foreste, Rome [\[larger image\]](#)

The practice of infant abandonment in Milan becomes even more curious in light of the fact that over half of the legitimate children who had been abandoned at a foundling home were—if they survived—later reclaimed by their parents.^[45] Kertzer found this practice was entrenched among the poorer classes in Milan.

In short, leaving newborns on the foundling home doorstep became a way of life for a large segment of the urban population of Milan. By the mid-nineteenth century, the *popolino* (the "little people," or the poor) regarded it as their right, and neither the Church nor state did much to stop them.^[46]

In the same 1891 exhibition in which Previati presented *Maternità*, the sculptor Ernesto Bazzaro placed on view a two-figure sculpture called *La trovatella* (The Foundling).^[47] The foundling, an adolescent girl, grabs hold of her devoted adoptive father. The two of them register their shock and dismay at their impending separation. Viewers would be standing in the position of the two absent but understood players in the drama—her recently reformed parents, according to the *Cronaca dell'esposizione*, who have come to tear her away from the arms of her adoptive father.^[48] Bazzaro's exaggerated drama brings home one that is

familiar to us today: Who has the right to keep and raise a child, the adoptive parents, or the birth parents who have changed their minds?

There is no simple explanation for this practice of abandonment and retrieval. Milan at this time had entered a period of industrialization which resulted in an increase in wages and therefore living standards. It is often suggested that the increase in legitimate infant abandonment was a byproduct of women entering the new factories.[49] Volker Hunecke's 1941 study of the Milan home in 1842, however, has revealed that most mothers who abandoned their legitimate offspring worked at piece work at home, as mothers in the early twentieth century would do, *specifically* to be able to care for children.[50]

Recent studies indicate a strong—even stubborn—belief, institutionally supported, that there was little control over infant survival (survival was in God's hands) and that hands-on parenting had no effect on a child's ability to thrive.[51] Hence, many parents found it easier to relieve a family of the pressure of caring for infants and toddlers by assigning the children as newborns to full-time care at the foundling home, even though there was a 40 percent chance the baby would die. After all, in poor families more than one-third would have died by age five even if cared for at home.

The horror did finally register with the educated elite. One contemporary social critic charged his country with practicing "legal infanticide,"[52] for by the mid-nineteenth century the reason for infant deaths in foundling homes had become well-known: it was simple malnutrition. Foundling homes lacked enough human breast milk to go around—successful formula milk would develop only at the very end of the century[53]—so the babies died from starvation. Reform to stop this "legal infanticide" began in the 1860s at the beginning of the new nation state which took over the legal jurisdiction of the Catholic Church and at the time of a developing literature on children's rights.

The most concrete and successful reform, closing the wheel, began in 1867 in Previati's hometown of Ferrara, to which he was still closely connected, and Milan followed the next year. A second reform, also initiated in Ferrara, allowed the unwed, "sinful" mothers to nurse their babies rather than have to give them up at birth. The Ferrara official who promoted this reform in 1861 argued against tradition by claiming moral redemption in nursing one's own child. A sacred tie, asserted the official, binds every mother to her child, and every mother has a natural love for her child. Nursing one's own child uplifted the woman spiritually in such a way that she would be saved from repeating her sin.[54]

This second reform was more controversial and ultimately less successful. The director of the Milan foundling home fought the idea as giving a reward to women who should be punished.[55] The Italian-American reformer Jessie White Mario agreed in spirit; referring to the token payment given to women who nursed foundlings, she argued that "Society should not reward the unwed mother by giving her a stipend to nurse her own child—it would be to give her a prize not awarded to married mothers. And would encourage wantonness in women and more infant abandonment." [56] Mario's prediction did not come to pass in the reformed Ferrara; nevertheless, an unwed mother nursing her own child was a very radical and decidedly unpopular idea in late-nineteenth-century Italy.

Painting Motherhood

The reality of infant abandonment contradicts a popular, nostalgic mythology of old-fashioned motherhood as well as the idea of the Italian family as big, happy, and teeming with adored babies and children. It also shakes the foundation of another prevalent twentieth-century idea, that Italians have long followed a "religion" of *mamaismo* in which grown children show unqualified adoration for their mother. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, *la mama* had a very difficult time earning respect as well as legal and social support.

Given this context, Previati made very provocative choices in his image. First of all, the woman could be seen, in Italy, as Everywoman. Nothing of her class or her occupation is revealed. Even more relevant, her marital status is unknown, as Previati has partially covered her left hand so no ring can be seen. Wed or unwed, this mother not only basks in her own joy at nursing her child, she also receives the unqualified adoration of six winged figures. She has neither chosen nor been forced to abandon her child. In the very act of life-giving *allattamento*, breast-feeding, she acquires pictorial attributes of divine status: light radiates from behind her head and angels kneel and bow in worship.

Previati, a painter of many religious images and always described as from a pious family,^[57] wrote that he deliberately drew from existing imagery of Mary as the mother of Jesus. His work embodied what he called a "civil"^[58] problem (today we would employ the phrase "social problem"). In his mind, his sociopolitical goal "did not disagree with the religious feeling from which these symbols derived."^[59] He wished to demonstrate how one could express a concept profound enough to separate a universally known^[60] symbol such as the angels and Mary from all previous work yet draw upon its evocative power.^[61] Previati's 1891 description of his intentions for *Maternità* put Symbolism in the service of social reform.

Previati adapted the Christian image of a *Madonna Lactans*, Mary nursing the infant Jesus, to evoke the powerful, transformative response of religious feeling in his mostly Roman Catholic viewers. In using this to serve his "civil" purpose, he subverted the status quo of the Roman Catholic church. Previati's angels, emissaries of a presumably Catholic god, celebrate the act of nursing at a time when the less than divine agents of Catholicism—popes, priests, nuns, and the directors and staffs of charitable institutions—worked to keep many mothers from ever having any contact with their children.

Previati left no bold manifesto of political intentions to trumpet his intended social message. Writing publicly in a manner influenced by *lo stilo bello*, the admired literary style of fulsome, beautiful language, he indicated his awareness of the sociopolitical dimensions obliquely, sliding crucial bits of information into a prolonged discourse. His letters to his brother, Giuseppe, are more passionate and sometimes more direct but suffer from being only half of a written conversation. Nevertheless, Previati's view of motherhood reveals itself in his published and personal writing as one that had much in common with feminist initiatives and turn-of-the-century social activism.

Previati's view of the sanctity of motherhood corresponded to early feminist efforts to improve the station of women by championing the vital job of being a mother.[62] (The origin of Mother's Day in the United States, to cite a familiar example, did not come from the promotional offices of Hallmark greeting cards but has its roots in women's efforts to promote the role of women as mothers and in deep religious convictions about honoring mothers that grew into a tradition of recognizing mothers in church on a particular Sunday every year.[63]) Previati was also sensitive to how the theme of nursing had been misused as an opportunity for erotic voyeurism and wanted no part of such exploitation. In his writings on *Maternità* he lambasted the "rags" hung in art shows that used nursing as "a subject always felicitous to put in evidence a little bit of nudity." [64]

In a letter to his brother dated 22 February 1891 Previati also argued that the subject of motherhood was not so poetic that it should be confined to literature. Giuseppe held the popular view that visionary ideas, poetic feelings, and reforming social zeal suited literature and music but that the domain of painting was for faithful representation. Previati vehemently disagreed, believing that a painting did have the power to help solve a problem of "ordinary principle." [65]

I have said to you that I am not preoccupied with a popularity that requires exactly that which responds to the sum of [the public's] knowledge and needs and does not see in the act that I idealize the fatal results of its instincts as here among us in Italy—or a fear of the future as in France where the Malthusian *ugliness* predominates. [66]

Expecting Giuseppe to fully understand the meaning of "Malthusian *ugliness*," Previati did not give any further explanation. When he made his ideas public in a three-part polemic defending *Maternità*, part of an ongoing debate in the *Cronaca dell'esposizione*, he again invokes Malthus, whose claim that the human population was multiplying much faster than the supply of food was well known. [67]

I understand, to judge by the various reactions to the present exhibition at the Brera, how *Maternità* did not seem a good subject even to those vain chatterboxes who can deduce from a pictorial work unending pretexts for their metaphysical, political and industrial ends. *Maternità* did not have an immediate rapport with the modern critics—it already weighs too heavily on the honest head of the family to which even Malthus gave thought . . . [68]

Thomas Robert Malthus had many interpreters and critics of his 1803 theory, but to Previati and his audience the name served as a code with clear associations. James Bonar, the leading Malthus scholar and critic writing in 1884, characterized Malthus's writings as focusing on the poorer classes having more children than they could adequately nourish. To cite the name of Malthus in 1891 was to call forth images of poverty, malnourishment, and starvation, [69] precisely the problem of Milan's abandoned infants.

Despite his passion and his efforts to utilize the latest artistic ideas for reforming the hearts and minds of Italians, Previati failed. The general public scorned his large painting of *Maternità*, and even the critics missed his "fiat" to adore the mother. They ignored the issue of Malthusian civic problems and had no reaction, neither erotic nor puritanical, to a

woman nursing her child. Indeed, they quickly dismissed his subject altogether. The leading critic of the day, who had admired Previati's previous work, harrumphed, "One finds it hard to understand what the artist wanted to represent."^[70] Alberto Sormani, a critic a bit more favorable to the artist, commented cynically that substance, "though an elevated and philosophical endeavor, annoyed everyone, public, critics and artists: and everyone agrees to find a special interest in the pure questions of form, of technique. . . ."^[71]

Yet Sormani, who had chided his fellow viewers for finding a safe haven in discussions of form, remarked that "the true *Maternità*" on view in the Triennale exhibition was the painting by Segantini.^[72]

[W]hat conquered me, other than the profound energy with which [*Le due madri*] . . . was painted, is that mother so intensely sincere, so strong with internal expression, with a melancholy, with a tenderness, with a moral grandeur in her humility, that raises her to a symbolic representation of the maternal feeling, as a madonna.^[73]

Giovanni Segantini's comparably large work of a mother holding her infant—also painted in the Divisionist technique—made everyone comfortable.

Segantini's approach to the theme of motherhood was very different from Previati's. In his image he retained the conventions of the nostalgic rural scenes on which he had built his career. He also reinforced the entrenched view of motherhood as a passive, instinctive, and natural condition. To portray his human mother, Segantini specified details to make clear her place in society. He has her in country work clothes and sitting on a handmade stool in the midst of a cow barn so that even present-day viewers have no trouble placing her among the farming class. More important, the gold wedding band on her left hand is clearly visible, a decision that certainly confirmed the status quo and gave comfort to his viewers even though it did not in the least reflect Segantini's own family circumstances—he never legally married Bice Bugatti, his lifetime companion and mother of his four children.

Segantini's image of motherhood not only conformed to his his already popular and salable style of idealizing the goodness and simplicity of rural, agricultural life but also supported the contemporary belief in the moral and physical superiority of married life in the countryside. In her discussion of Segantini's *Le due madri* and related rural maternal images, Linda Nochlin makes the point that "the rural woman-worker, the peasant-woman, . . . insofar as she was poor, passive, natural, and understood to be content with her God-given role as mother and nurturer, served as an ideal vehicle not only for ideological definitions of femininity but for those of the good worker as well."^[74]

Segantini's mother is depicted not at work but during a quiescent moment when the child sleeps and she drowns. This both enhances the viewer's role as voyeur and diminishes the demanding nature of maternal employment. This "good" mother tells us nothing about the active engagement of mother and child, not even a hint of the mother as teacher and decision maker. The calf sleeps as well; only the mother cow shows some activity, with her head bowed to the feeding trough.

As for Segantini's use of Divisionism, he did employ long, thin brushstrokes in the tapestry-like manner that would be called "the Segantini stitch," but he had not yet altered his palette to include only pigments that approximated the solar spectrum, as Previati did; rather, he retained the earth tones preferred by contemporary taste.^[75] Also, he used strong chiaroscuro—the light highlights graded into dark, almost black, shadows that defined the well-modeled, three-dimensionally illusionistic figures essential to Italian realism, *verismo*.

The tradition of observing actual light effects was so fundamental to Segantini at this time that he subtitled the image *Effect of Lantern, Interior of Stall*. In speaking of the painting, he cited as inspiration a particular lighting effect within a barn: "When I entered the stall for the first time, the lantern being posted as I then painted it, it struck me as exactly that golden luminosity which Calderini perceived in painting."^[76] Segantini explained that this desirable light derived from a piece of paper used to cover some broken glass on the lantern. He adjusted the lantern to keep the golden glow against deep shadows then painted from that arrangement. This exacting interest in reproducing an actual condition of light maintained the verist approach to painting rather than the Symbolist interpretation promoted in Previati's painting.

The contrast between Segantini's work and Previati's can be seen quite literally as night and day. In comparing woman to a cow, Segantini brought the theme down to earth and into the nighttime shadows of the barn. Previati placed motherhood outside, in brilliant daylight, and compared the act of mothering to the luminosity of the divine by using the visual metaphor of the tree of life. Unlike Previati, Segantini made no references to social problems. In his remarks on *Le due madri*, he placed his emphasis on the viewer developing affection for the bovine creatures in the work; he hoped that the painting would help the viewer to love the kindly animals, those that provide him with bed, meat, and skin.^[77] Segantini's idea of motherhood reinforces the myth of a somewhat magical biological change—the so-called maternal instinct—that makes compels all mothers, whether human or animal, to love and care for their offspring. According to Segantini, "when an animal bears its young, a possessive love of the newborn develops within it, and [that] love acquires a second level of beauty, the most beautiful of beauties": maternal love.^[78] Segantini, in his paintings, promotes the dominant view that "good" mothers are married, that marriage is the only sanctioned route to "maternal love," and that "bad" mothers in some way "choose" to abandon their babies. Nothing in his art or his published writings acknowledges the existence of well-established institutions that forced women to separate from their children.

In 1894 Segantini painted another famous image of motherhood, *Le cattive madri* (The Bad Mothers),^[79] perhaps in response to Previati's image. The painting, now in Österreichische Galerie, Vienna, made its debut at the second Milan Triennale in 1894. Segantini made several versions of this image; it is best known for its dominant image of a woman entangled in a leafless tree in a snow-covered mountainous landscape. Under her raised right arm is a baby's head; the infant has crawled up to suckle at his mother's breast.

Segantini based this image on a popular poem by Luigi Illica, who pretended the poem was a translation of an ancient epic from India by the so-called Panghiavahli.^[80] In the snowy landscape of Nirvana, mothers encounter the spirits of their abandoned children, who call out for their mothers' breasts. In an 1896–97 version of this work, Segantini expanded the

story to include a wandering mother tormented by hearing her child's cry; two mothers caught in a tree who retrieve and nurse their children; and two mothers who have been liberated by the act of nursing walking off to the mountains of Nirvana. The later version depicts the possibility of redemption. In contrast to Segantini and many other artists of his day, Previati never painted a negative image of the mother. He eschewed the good-bad dichotomy.

Critics praised Segantini; so would Previati.^[81] In 1896 the *Le due madri* won the gold medal in the state-sponsored exhibition in Vienna. None of Segantini's images on the subject of motherhood nor his use of Divisionism broke with contemporary taste. Yet critics accused Previati of madness, of eccentricity, of excessive daring; they found *Maternità* so vague and ill-defined that one could barely recognize the image.

The harsh reception of his work sadly disappointed Previati. Though his social message appeared to be lost on the important male critics of his day, he perhaps took some solace in responses from female viewers. Only one entered the public record in the 21 May 1891 issue of *La cronaca dell'esposizione*: "A very cultivated lady, though not affected mystically, took strongly to the painting's defense. / 'There is a moment,' she said, 'in which a mother can superstitiously believe in angels: it is when she nurses her child.'"^[82]

Conclusion

Though *Maternità* garnered contempt from the majority of viewers in 1891, it did inspire a fervent few. In the weeks of published debate, Previati's supporters argued for *ideismo*, being inspired by an idea rather than by examining a physical arrangement of objects;^[83] *idealismo*, the legitimacy of poetic elements and lyrical intent in painting;^[84] *sincerismo*, "the perfect concordance of a work of art with the feeling, the impression that is in the soul of the artist";^[85] and the value of the *antireale*, the mystical and the abstract.^[86] However, to judge by all the commentary in print, no one, not even Previati's advocates, recognized the work as an injunction to adore the mother. Whether referring to the themes as "divine," "eternal," or "very sweet," the critics (all male) noted "the feeling that is motherhood," but then moved on to lengthy debates over the need for the illusionistic solidity of form and the importance of recalling reality. Why?

Alberto Sormani astutely recognized one piece of the problem. The late-nineteenth-century audience for the visual arts was deeply reluctant to discuss the subject of the painting. Critics and viewers came to see paintings for comfort and reassurance; they did not expect to be challenged, harangued, persuaded, or have their worldview disrupted. It was easier to turn a blind eye to the politics of reproduction than to grapple with the thorny issue of motherhood. As Sormani noted, all preferred to find special interest in the "pure" questions of form and technique.^[87] Like Previati's brother Giuseppe, the Triennale audience could not even imagine a painting taking on the job of poetry or putting forth the kind of passionate plea they saw as confined to literature. "Painting is precisely the field of 'positive images that recall reality,'" wrote Sormani, "for the remainder there is poetry, music, even architecture. . . ."^[88]

Add to this Previati's manner of painting; technique and style truly did get in the way. Hung in an area with poor lighting, *Maternità* subjected late-nineteenth-century viewers to some

"hard work,"[89] for the contrast and color in *Maternità* do depend on the lighting. When on view in the "Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe" show in Montreal in 1995, *Maternità* was substantially paler than the other Symbolist works in the room, and appeared almost faded; but with more direct lighting, as I have seen it in its home in the Banca di Novarra and in the Previati retrospective in Milan in 1999, the greens and blues can appear saturated, strong. The "milky luminosity"[90] described by Barbantini in his biography of Previati (which suffused the work with "infinite calm and silence" in the "youngest hour of the morning"[91]) seemed to the 1891 audience as subordinating or veiling the light until the image essentially disappeared.[92] Even Sperelli, in championing Previati's work, ceded the painting required effort from the viewer but felt convinced that "he who wins this effort can give, and must, if he has a sense of art, a crown to the work." [93] Viewers of the 1890s had no interest in such a task.

Although reform in attitudes toward mothering met with a great deal of resistance at the end of the nineteenth century (almost as much resistance as *Maternità* received), attitudes and practices have changed dramatically over the past one hundred years. At the end of the twentieth century Italy had the lowest birth rate in Europe and ranked highest in a worldwide measure of maternal health.[94] Previati could not have predicted this fundamental shift that his country would make in the course of the next century. He also could not have recognized the seeds of Italian Modernism[95] that were sown as the result of his daring approach to painting, nor have anticipated his major role in the early years of Italian Futurism. The artist who poured so much passion into his image of motherhood found his expectations dashed.

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Notes

All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

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[1] This article developed from a paper originally presented at the February 1997 College Art Association meetings in New York City. I delivered the paper in the session titled "'The Golden Age Is Not in the Past, It Is in the Future': Decadence, Renewal, and Social Activism in Art at the Millennium," which was chaired by Sue Canning and Sura Levine.

[2] The subject of motherhood in nineteenth-century Italian art often showed either nurturing tenderness or sorrowful loss (orphanage, death, abandonment), a narrow range that nonetheless reflected the paradoxes of the job of mothering in Italian culture. Of the 303 artists represented in the 1891 Milan show, only sixteen showed works related to motherhood or mothering: eight in sculpture (Luigi Contratti, a sculptural group and a funerary urn relief, both of a mother nursing her baby; Domenico Ghidoni, a baby asleep on his grandmother's breast called *Finally He Sleeps*; Giuseppe Bottinelli, *The Consoler*, a young girl comforting her crying brother in her arms; Emilio Marsili, *Wait My Baby*, a mother admonishing a crying child; Domenico Ghidoni, *Emigrants*, a mother and adolescent daughter waiting to leave; Alessandro Laforêt, *Little Orphan Girl*; Ernesto Bazzaro, *The Foundling*; Andrea Malfatti, *Pietà*, the only motherhood work in the show about Mary and Jesus) and eight in painting (Previati, *Maternità*; Segantini, *The Two Mothers*; Luigi Nono, *Return*, a mother and children return from a walk; Giuseppe Di Santis, *For a Walk*, a mother and daughter out for a walk; Federico Quarenghi, *The Return of the Survivors*, mother and daughter on deck of leaving steamship; Alfredo Sasso, *Love of Country Conquers Love of the Mother*; a history painting; Il Grosso, *The Orphan Girls*; Lazzaro Pasini, *Help! Help!*, a dying mother calls out to her young son).

[3] As a student Previati had won the important Canonica prize for his diploma canvas, *The Hostages of Crema*, 1878. The following year, he submitted a large canvas, *Valentino a Capua*, to the Esposizione Nazionale in Turin. This work, about Cesare Borgia's siege of Capua, was an unqualified success. Giuseppe Verdi, among other cultural luminaries, praised the work highly and it was purchased by Count Sauli Visconti.

In his complaint about the flaws of Previati's *Maternità*, the leading critic, Luigi Chirtani, called the work "an eclipse of the fine talent of one of the most capable artists of Milan. I console myself with the idea that eclipses are ephemeral." Chirtani 1891, p. 318.

[4] The Premio Fumagalli, intended to encourage Italian artists under thirty-two years of age, was awarded in three categories: figure painting; landscape painting; and sculpture. The prize for figure painting went to Arnaldo Ferraguti of Ferrara for *Alla Vanga*, a large work depicting peasants shoveling, with the anecdotal event of a crying young boy being coaxed back to the shovel by an older man and a young woman.

[5] "La prima visita," *La cronaca dell'esposizione de belle arti* (hereafter *La cronaca dell'esposizione*), no. 1 (6 May 1891), p. 1.

[6] Lyttelton 1991, p. 226. According to Lyttelton, twice as many banks closed in 1890–91 than in the great depression of the 1930s.

[7] "Artisti di cui è parlato nella 'Cronaca,'" *La cronaca dell'esposizione* no. 1, 6 May 1891, unpaginated. About a dozen painters were women artists.

[8] The offer to artists not officially accepted to the Triennale was published as follows:

I signori Carlo cav. D'Ormeville, Alessandro Zorzi, Carlo Superti, hanno diretto agli artisti la seguente circolare: "I sottoscritti venuti a cognizione che la Commissione per l'accettazione delle opere d'arte all'Esposizione della R. Accademia di Brera, ebbe a respingere una grande quantità di lavori presentati, stabirono di offrire agli artisti non accettati, un'Esposizione suppletoria, che possa dare soddisfazione al loro amor proprio e provvedere ai loro interessi. In Tale Esposizione suppletoria saranno accolti anche quei lavori che non poterono essere ultimati all'epoca prescritta dalla Commissione di accettazione dell'accademia di Brera, e così pure quei lavori che fossero già stati esposti altre volte."

"Esposizione libera di belle arti," *La cronaca dell'esposizione* no. 1 (6 May 1891), p. 7. See also Martinelli and Pino 1979, pp. 228-29, who report that the 303 jury-accepted artists submitted so many works that the refusés space became open to all.

[9] I have paraphrased the comments of the editors. The text in the original reads:

La Cronaca dell'Esposizione-che ha per intento di essere una *guida del visitatore*, atta a facilitare il lavoro di osservazione, ed a rendere quindi più completo il godimento delle opere esposte, e nello stesso tempo di fornire un mezzo di facile ed immediato contatto fra l'artista ed il pubblico-prima di intraprendere il suo viaggio attraverso le sale.

"La prima visita," p. 1.

[10] Sormani 1891b, p. 275.

[11] The text in the original reads: "Subito nella sala L si presenta di faccia del visitatore il quadro più discusso, più violentemente attaccato e col maggior entusiasmo difeso, della Esposizione, * *Maternità* (no. 213) di Gaet. Previati." "Attraverso le sale: Guida del visitatore," *La cronaca dell'esposizione*, no. 7 (28 May 1891), p. 49.

- [12] "L'insuccesso della "Maternità" (Tavola 24) scoppiò all'indomani così clamoroso e straordinario, che per essemplio di altrettanta irritazione contro un'opera di pittura, bisogna pensare per essemplio a quella di Parigi contro Manet. In Italia non era accaduto mai niente di simile." Barbantini 1919, p. 84.
- [13] The original text reads: "Tutti si chiedono che cos'è . . . Gli artisti fatti . . . torcono il guardo anch'essi." Andrea Sperelli (pen name of Gustavo Macchi, a Previati friend), "Discussione libera: In difesa dell'opera d'arte." *La cronaca dell'esposizione*, no. 2 (10 May 1891), p. 20. Sperelli later wrote the first monograph on Previati in 1893; it sold for 25 centesimi.
- [14] Flint 1993, p. 112.
- [15] For example, Lamberti 1982, p. 79. See also *Divisionismo italiano* 1990, p. 242: "The painting by now is unanimously considered by the critics as the most complete document of the Symbolist-Divisionist poetic of Previati and at the same time one of the pivotal points in the Symbolist movement in Italy."
- [16] Damigella 1981, p. 85.
- [17] Barilli 1988, p. 73.
- [18] The nineteenth century brought a number of changes to the role of the viewer. For a discussion of this development, see Crary 1990.
- [19] Andrea Sperelli, "In difesa dell'opera...", *La cronaca dell'esposizione*, p. 20.
- [20] Previati 1906, pp. 4-5, 7.
- [21] The text in the original reads as follows, with the referenced sections in italics:
- Da quanto si è detto emerge che un organo visivo anatomicamente perfetto e fisiologicamente dotato della più squisita sensibilità non completa la visione normale, che ancora dipende da una qualità estranea all'occhio, *la memoria, funzione tutt'affatto intellitiva*, bastante di per sé a modificare le impressioni del reale da individuo a individuo, ma che in ogni modo, ammettendo pure che agisca in guisa simile per tutti, *e più o meno attiva secondo determinati stati d'animo*.
- Previati 1906, pp. 4-5. For further discussion of Previati's *stati d'animo* aesthetic and its adaptation by Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni, see Meighan 1998.
- [22] Current research supports this late-nineteenth-century understanding of perception as always carrying a subjective response. See Goleman 1995.
- [23] Previati 1906. The other period text on Divisionism is Paul Signac's *D'Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionisme* (1899), first published serially in *La revue blanche*, 1898.
- [24] The verb used in Italian is *impastare*, to mix so well that nothing shows, to blend together thoroughly to make a paste. The resulting physical mix is known as an *impasto*, a mixture, a blend, a paste or dough. When the term *impasto* is employed in English, it usually refers to the thickness and texture of a pigment on a painting, not to the nature of the blending.
- [25] See Previati's discussion (1906, pp. 247-50) of *tratteggio*, literally, brushstroking.
- [26] Barbantini 1919, p. 69, where the text reads:
- Il pittore divisionista: usa una tavolozza composta esclusivamente di un rosso di arancio di un giallo di un verde di un azzurro di un violetto più simili che sia possibile alle luci fondamentali dello spettro solare e—come materie sussidiarie—del bianco e del nero; non impasta un colore col bianco o col nero o con colore contiguo; il giallo col verde o coll'arancio, il violetto coll'azzurro o col rosso, ecc.; applica sulla tela i colori schietti, o composti di due colori contigui, o fatti più chiari col bianco, o fatti più scuri col nero, a tratti severamente divisi che, secondo l'effetto che egli vuole raggiungere e secondo il suo sentimento, potranno avere forma di virgole di punti di linee; bada che anche sulla tela i varii tratti non si sovrappongano e non si confondano così da comportarsi come nell'impasto; per illuminare la pittura e accrescerne l'effetto luminoso, la compone di grandi masse complementari e sfrutta in ogni modo il fenomeno del contrasto di complementari.
- [27] "E un piccolo quadro . . . che rappresenta una mamma con due bambini su un praticello smaltato di fresca verzura. . ." Previati to his brother Giuseppe, autumn 1889; quoted in Barbantini 1919, p. 74.
- [28] Barbantini 1919, p. 75.
- [29] The text in the original reads: "Il dipinto figurerà gli angeli che adorano intanto che la madre divina allatta il suo bambino." Previati to his brother Giuseppe, 4 December 1889; quoted in Barbantini 1919, p. 79. Please note that "the divine mother" is not capitalized; it would be if Previati were making specific reference to the Virgin Mary.

[30] Ibid.

[31] "Pare che le lettere di quei due mesi e mezzo fossero infrequenti e contenessero scarse battute d'interesse artistico." ("It seems the letters of these two months and a half used to be infrequent and used to contain little of artistic merit.") Barbantini 1919, p. 81. Barbantini noted that correspondence given to him was interrupted from 1 October to 14 December 1890.

Some evidence of the artist's personal life does surface in his correspondence. The letters to his brother published in 1946 first mention Carletto on 9 February 1891 in the closing: "A thousand embraces from Nilda and Carletto." The emphasis is Previati's (1946, p. 51). In this *Lettere al fratello* collection, the correspondence breaks at 1 October 1890 and resumes 23 January 1891. Several letters in this collection do contain some family references, all fond in tone.

[32] Previati 1993, p. 17.

[33] "Sono invischiato a rendere nella figura principale del quadro tutta l'intensità dell'amore materno spogliato delle cianfruscole che hanno servito per mille dipinti—e in un renderlo partecipare del movimento delle altre figure del quadro perchè ne risulti un tutto omogeneo che impedisca qualunque altra interpretazione all'occhio dell'osservatore—ma che difficoltà dio mio. Ti sei tu ben formato l'idea di ottenere da una tela una voce che annienti il vostro temperamento, i vostri gusti la vostra educazione e vi faccia prorompere dall'animo il grido cha l'universo, la terra, la vita è nulla. . . . non vi è che la colori ne forme-ne cielo ne prati-ne figure d'uomini ne di femine ma un fiat che dice adorate la madre. . . ." Previati 1946, p. 44.

Since presenting the original paper, I estimated that Previati's future wife, Leonilda Baldessari, was about twelve weeks pregnant with their first son when he wrote this. Due to custom and law at the time, Previati's poverty prevented him from marrying Nilda. Carletto, born on 31 August 1890, was the first of their three sons. According to existing accounts, Previati and Baldessari had a devoted marriage.

[34] In a letter to Nino Barbantini dated 19 September 1911, Previati wrote:

E fu tormentando per sette mese senza requie quella grande tela che una sera mentre al solito stavo fissandola disperatamente di venire a capo secondo un lavorio interno che non riuscivo a tradurre col pennello, mi si organizzò nella mente tutta la composizione con quella tecnica, qui da noi ancora senza esempio.

Reprinted in Quinsac 1972, p. 261.

[35] Recollection to biographer: "Non rivissi mai più un'epoca di fervore e di speranza eguale a quella . . . cominciava a mostrare interamente sulla tela le idee che gli passavano per la mente." Barbantini 1919, p. 81.

[36] "Adesso-scrivera il 14 Dicembre-mi sento stimolato a riprendere il lavoro con gran lena. Sono rientrato perfettamente nelle idee che mi mossero alla mia opera." Ibid.

[37] "Adesso sento vergogna di avere adoperato quattro metri per il mio argomento che ne vorrebbe sempre centomila-." Previati 1946, p. 61.

[38] Kertzer 1993, p. 21. I have relied on research published in his excellent book *Sacrificed for Honor* for my understanding of the sociopolitical realities of motherhood at the time of Previati's painting and the problems of illegitimacy Previati faced with the birth of his son.

[39] Ibid., p. 172. See also Bressan 1870, p. 72, and Tocci 1878, pp. 48-49.

[40] Kertzer 1993, p. 78.

[41] Ibid., p. 171.

[42] See Hunecke 1989 and also the discussion in Kertzer 1993, pp. 77-81 and notes.

[43] Statistics from *ibid.*

[44] Kertzer 1993, p. 79.

[45] Ibid. About 75 percent were reclaimed after age two and about 25 percent after age five.

[46] Ibid., p. 80.

[47] Bazzaro's *La trovatella* competed with Achille Alberti's male nude *L'Innavia* (Indolence) for the Fumagalli prize for sculpture. Alberti won with nine votes and Bazzaro received only one vote from professor Camillo Boito. *Cronaca d'arte*, no. 28 (28 June 1891), p. 236.

[48] The text in the original reads:

Il Bazzaro, secondo il suo temperamento artistico si è appligiato ad un soggetto di sentimento: La Trovatella—che i genitori, tardi ravveduti, vengono a strappare, già quasi adulta, alle braccia del padre adottivo—spira dal volto la paura dell'ignoto, il

dolore della separazione improvvisa, mentre s'abbranca in un linea graziosa al vecchio, cui lo stupore doloroso ha tolta la parola.

The translated description reads:

Bazzaro, according to his artistic temperment has applied himself to a subject of feeling: The Foundling—already almost adult, her lately reformed parents have come to tear her away from the arms of her adoptive father—she breathes from her face the fear of the unknown, the pain of the surprise separation, while catching hold in a graceful line to the old man, whose painful amazement has taken away his speech.

[49] See discussion in Kertzer 1993, p. 172.

[50] See Hunecke 1989 and Hunecke 1991. See also discussion in Kertzer 1993, pp. 171-76.

[51] Edward Shorter (1977, p. 168) makes the following argument: "Good mothering is an invention of modernization. In traditional society, mothers viewed the development and happiness of infants younger than two with indifference." Quoted in Kertzer 1993, p. 175. For critics of Shorter's argument and alternative arguments, see Kertzer 1993, pp. 175-78, who concludes:

In interpreting the abandonment of newborns by the married parents of the industrializing cities of the northern Italy, we must admit some form of parental indifference did play a role. At the least, we find a culture in which small children's welfare was not the parents' greatest priority. Large-scale abandonment of legitimate babies could only occur in a culture which—at least by today's standards—played down the mother-infant bond and invested little emotion in relations with small children. Although the married couples' motivation for abandoning children was surely economic, the fact that their decision was based on short-term economic considerations shows that the babies' welfare was not their first concern.

[52] Quoted in Kertzer 1993, p. 141.

[53] "In 1884 Dr. A. V. Meigs of Philadelphia published the chemical analyses of human and cow's milk that has served as the basis for modern infant feeding." Apple 1987, p. 7.

By the 1890s medical science had produced few clear-cut answers to the problem of infant feeding. Cow's milk was the best and most widely available substitute for mother's milk, but one had to modify it. Cow's milk often carried disease germs, but milk heated to eliminate bacterial contamination opened the door to improved nutrition, particularly scurvy. In addition, medical practitioners recommended many different cow's-milk preparations.

Ibid., p. 8. See also *ibid.*, chaps. 1-5.

For a general discussion of formula and wet-nursing see Sussman 1982, pp. 164-66.

[54] Grillenzoni 1861, cited in Kertzer 1993, p. 132.

[55] Griffini 1868a and Griffini 1868b, cited in Kertzer 1993, p. 132.

[56] Mario 1877, pp. 106-7, cited in Kertzer 1993, p. 133.

[57] Barbantini 1919, p. 5.

[58] *Civile* corresponds to the English word *civil* but has nuances of meaning about social customs in a civilized society that are lost in translation. Note that the Italian phrase *stato civile* means marital status.

[59] "Nè il concetto civile disaccorda col sentimento religioso da cui derivano questi simboli. . . ." Previati defended his painting in a three part article published in 1891 (the quote is from part 2, p. 124).

[60] A symbol well known to Previati's immediate audience, Italian Roman Catholics.

[61] Previati 1891, part 2, p. 124.

[62] See Meighan 1998, pp. 53-55, for a discussion of the image of the mother in women's periodicals and women's writing.

[63] The whole history of Mother's Day presents an informative trajectory of radical views being incrementally converted into conventional sentiment and ultimately into antifeminist rhetoric. In the United States Julia Ward Howe (1819—1910) made the first Mother's Day Proclamation in 1872 by calling for women to join together to create a worldwide, post-Civil War peace crusade. In the early twentieth century Anna M. Jarvis began a campaign that succeeded in making an official and nationally observed day of recognition in 1914. President Woodrow Wilson signed the resolution for the first of these observances to be held on 8 May 1914.

[64] The text in the original reads: "E da altro punto di vista è sempre stata un soggetto felicissimo per mettere in evidenza quel pochino di nudo che fa così bene in mezzo a tanti cenci sciorinati nelle mostre artistiche. . . ." Previati 1891, part 2, p. 124.

[65] "un problema di principio qualunque." Previati 1946, p. 55.

[66] "Ti ho detto che non mi preoccupo punto della popolarità la quale esige appunto què che risponde alla somma delle sue cognizioni e dei suoi bisogni e nell'atto che io idealizzo non vede che il risultato fatale dei suoi istinti come qua da noi in Italia-o uno spavanto per avvenire come in Francia dove predomina la *bruttura* Malthusiana." Ibid.; emphasis in original.

[67] Thomas Robert Malthus in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798; rev. ed. 1803) promoted the idea that human population increases geometrically while the means of subsistence grows only arithmetically.

[68]

Capisco, a giudicare dalle varie relazioni della presente esposizione di Brera, come la *Maternità* non sia parso argomento buono neanche a quei vani parolai che dall'opera pittorica ricavano eterno pretesto ai loro fini metafisici, politici e anche industriali. La *Maternità* non ha rapporti immediati col critico moderno-è già troppo gravosa sul bilancio dell'onesto capo di famiglia ai quali pure ha pensato il Maltus, senza dubbio commendatore e professore.

Previati 1891, part 2, p. 124.

[69] Today's studies of the era show the nineteenth-century increase in infant abandonment contradicted Malthus's simple thesis. The rise in abandonment far exceeded the rise in population growth and also coincided with an increase rather than a decrease in wages. See Kertzer 1993 and Hunecke 1989 and 1991.

[70] "Si senta a capire quello che l'artista ha voluto rappresentare." Chirtani 1891, p. 318. Luigi Chirtani was the pen name of Luigi Archinti who held the History of Art chair at the Regia Accademia di Brera, the prestigious art academy in Milan. He wrote under his pen name in the leading daily, *Corriere della sera*, and in numerous other publications. He also dismissed Previati's work in his *Corriere della sera* review of the Triennale and in a discussion in *Cronaca d'arte*.

[71] Excerpt taken from the original text as follows:

La discussione dovrebbe a mio parere essere tenuta intorno alla sostanza di un'opera d'arte. Pur troppo questo punto di vista alto e filosofico annoia tutti, pubblico, critici ed artisti: e tutti si accordano invece nel trovare un interesse speciale alle questioni pure di forma, di tecnica, in cui pare a tutti di potere dare un parere più deciso, e che si risolvono da una parte in inutili logomachie, dall'altra intiere esposizioni di opere brutte e di ingegni sciupati.

Sormani 1891a, p. 29.

Critic and political theorist Count Sormani (1866-1893) edited *L'idea liberale*, 1892-93, before his premature death. He was commemorated as an "idealist" and known for liberal and progressive political theory. However, his comments published in *La cronaca dell'esposizione* would not meet today's standards of liberalism; he was unabashedly sexist. See Croce 1954.

[72] "Per ora, la vera *Maternità* è quella del Segantini (Le due madri)." Sormani 1891b, p. 275.

[73] "Ma ciò che mi conquista , oltre energia profonda con cui tutto il quadro è dipinto, è quella madre così forte di espressioni *interna*, con una malinconia, con una tenerezza, con una grandezza morale nella sua umiltà, che la eleva a rappresentazione simbolica del sentimento materno, come una madonna." Ibid.

[74] Linda Nochlin, "The Image of the Working Woman," *Representing Women* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 84.

[75] My observations of Segantini's use of color are echoed in the entry on *Le due madri* in *Divisionismo italiano* (1990, p. 69): "I colori non sono uniformamente puri; rossi, ocra e varie terre sono stati usati uniformamente su tutta la tela, nonostante gli ibridi ottici. I toni sono stati mescolati sulla tela e non giustapposti, almeno in alcune parti del dipinto."

[76] "Quando io entrai quella stalla la prima volta, essendo la laterna posta come l'ho poi dipinta, mi colpì appunto quella luminosità dorata che il Calderini scorge nel dipinto." Quoted in *ibid.*

[77] Villari 1901, p. 67, quoted in Flint 1993, p. 117.

[78] Quoted in Flint 1993, p. 117; Budigna 1962, p. 101.

[79] It has also been translated as "The Evil Mothers" and "The Wicked Mothers."

- [80] Segantini knew of Illica's deception. See Quinsac 2001, p. 52. See also *Archivi del divisionismo*, in Fiori 1969, p. 339; for the poem, see Quinsac 1985, pp. 346-48.
- [81] Previati greatly admired Segantini and wrote a laudatory review of Segantini's art for his hometown journal, *Gazzetta Ferrarese*, 24 December 1891. Previati found Segantini entirely successful at employing light and line to profoundly touch the feelings of the viewer. The *Gazzetta Ferrarese* review (derived from a letter to his brother) was republished by Vittore Grubicy on 10 January 1892 in the *Cronaca d'arte* (no. 3, pp. 19-20).
- Segantini sent a letter of thanks to "his dear and generous friend" Previati for this heartfelt review. Quinsac 1985, pp. 271-72.
- [82] "Udii una coltissima signora, niente affatto mistica, prenderne cladamente le difese. . . V"è un moemento, ella diceva, in cui la madre può superstiziosamente credere agli angeli: è quando allatta il bambino." This story was reported by Pompeo Bettini, "Gli idealisti: Butti e Previati," *La cronaca dell'esposizione*, no. 5 (21 May 1891), p. 36.
- Among the physiological changes to a lactating mother's body is a kind of "bliss" produced when the baby suckles the breast. As all of the critics were male, it took a female viewer to report on this very real (*vero*) aspect of nursing.
- [83] These ideas of Vittore Grubicy are discussed in Damigella 1981, p. 94.
- [84] Pompeo Bettini, "Gli idealisti...," *La cronaca dell'esposizione*, p. 26.
- [85] "*sincerismo*, la concordanza perfetta dell'opera d'arte col sentimento, coll'impressione che deve essere nell'animo dell'artista." Sormani 1891a, p. 30.
- [86] Vittore Grubicy, "La Maternità di Gaetano Previati," *Cronaca d'arte*, no. 22 (17 May 1891), p. 182.
- [87] Sormani 1891a, p. 29.
- [88] "La pittura è precisamente il campo delle "immagini positive che richiamo all realtà: per il resto c'è la poesia e la musica, e magari l'architettura. . . ." Alberto Sormani, "Discussione libera: Pittura ed opera d'arte," *La cronaca dell'esposizione*, no. 11 (11 June 1891), p. 93.
- [89] Sperelli, "In difesa dell'opera...," *La cronaca dell'esposizione*, p. 20.
- [90] Bennet Schaber, a colleague in film and literature studies at SUNY-Oswego, found this phrase to be the key to the entire work. *Maternità*, he astutely pointed out, is an essay on how we learn to see and perceive through the milky haze at the mother's breast.
- [91] Excerpted from Barbantini's description (1919, pp. 95-96) of *Maternità*: "Nell'ora più giovane dell mattino, . . . Ma ora non c'è vento nella calma e nel silenzio infiniti. . . suffosa di una luminosità lattiginosa."
- [92] Sperelli, "In difesa dell'opera...," *La cronaca dell'esposizione*, p. 20.
- [93] "Chi vince questo sforzo può dare, e deve, se ha senso d'arte, una corona all'opera." Ibid.
- [94] Hilts 1995. Italy ranked first in a review of ten categories of maternal health. A woman's chance of dying from pregnancy and childbirth in Italy is now 1 in 17,361. Kertzer, in correspondence with me, has called this "the Italian paradox."
- [95] See Meighan 1998, pp. 72-87, for a discussion of the critical debate in 1891 and the promotion of *antirealismo*.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Giovanni Segantini, *Le due madri*, 1889. Oil on canvas. Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan
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Fig. 2, Gaetano Previati, *Maternità*, 1890-91. Oil on canvas. Banca Popolare di Novara [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Gaetano Previati, *Pace*, 1889-90. Oil on canvas. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Florence
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Fig. 4, Giacchino Toma, *La ruota dell'Annunziata*, 1877. Oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome
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Fig. 5, Giacomo Favretto, *La famiglia Guidini*, 1873. Oil on canvas. Galleria d'Arte Moderna Ca' Pesaro, Venice [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Teofilo Patini, *Vanga e latte*, 1883. Oil on canvas. Ministero dell'Agricoltura e Foreste, Rome [\[return to text\]](#)