

## **Maria Lactans: Mary as Nursing Mother**

"The Miraculous Lactation of St. Bernard." This painting depicts the spiritual nourishing of St. Bernard by the milk of Our Lady, based on this legendary mystical experience: Bernard prayed before a statue of the Madonna, asking her, "Show yourself a mother" ("Monstra te esse Matrem"). The statue came to life and and squirted milk from the breast onto the Saint's lips. Artist: Unknown Master, Netherlandish, 1480-85

Consider: From the Protoevangelium of S. James:

And they stood in the place of the cave: and behold a bright cloud overshadowing the cave. And [Mary's] midwife said: My soul is magnified this day, because mine eyes have seen marvellous things: for salvation is born unto Israel. And immediately the cloud withdrew itself out of the cave, and a great light appeared in the cave so that our eyes could not endure it. And by little and little that light withdrew itself until the young child appeared: and it went and took the breast of its mother Mary.

From St. Ephraem's Hymns on the Nativity:

Mary bore a mute Babe  
though in Him were hidden all our tongues.  
Joseph carried Him,  
yet hidden in Him was a silent nature older than everything.  
The Lofty One became like a little child,  
yet hidden in Him was a treasure of Wisdom that suffices for all.  
He was lofty  
but He sucked Mary's milk,  
and from His blessings all creation sucks.  
He is the Living Breast of living breath;  
by His life the dead were suckled, and they revived.  
Without the breath of air no one can live;  
without the power of the Son no one can rise.  
Upon the living breath of the One Who vivifies all  
depend the living beings above and below.  
As indeed He sucked Mary's milk,  
He has given suck -- life to the universe.  
As again He dwelt in His mother's womb,  
in His womb dwells all creation.  
Mute He was as a babe,  
yet He gave to all creation all His commands.  
For without the First-Born no one is able to approach Being,  
for He alone is capable of it.

It is amazing how female breasts can be surgically enlarged, reduced, lifted, and pierced, stuffed into "Wonder Bras," packaged, marketed and sold (or used to market and sell other things), but are rarely conceptualized in the Western world as being what they truly are: the means to feed babies.

While discretion, modesty, and politeness are *always* key virtues (for *anyone*, not just women), the way we think of the female breast is partially culturally conditioned, and I'm convinced that the modern Western view is unhealthy. Many years ago, I saw Joan Rivers on a TV show introduce a year's worth of "Playboy Playmates." Miss Rivers gushed over them, lauding them for their beauty, brains, talent, and "wisdom" in using their bodies to make a living. Then she introduced actress Connie Selleca who'd recently given birth to a child. "Oh, I *hope* you're not one of *those women* who breastfeeds in *public!*" she said. If I could've slapped Miss Rivers, I might have. What harm such attitudes cause women and their children! Breastfeeding is among the very best things a woman can do for her children, and I applaud



*Mary's Milkdrops*  
(Lungwort: *Pulmonaria officinalis*)

women who give their children that, whether in private or, given our piggish, dirty-minded culture, *discreetly* in public.

To inspire women on, below are links to some of the most famous artistic depictions of Mary as nursing mother -- "Maria Lactans." They will open in new browser windows.

## Gallery of Maria Lactans

- [view](#) One of the earliest depictions (if not *the earliest* depiction) of Mary, this is Our Lady as painted in the Priscilla Catacombs, ca. A.D. 250
- [view](#) An early Coptic nursing Mary
- [view](#) Amesbury Psalter, 13th c.
- [view](#) Artist: Lorenzetti, ca. A.D. 1330
- [view](#) Anonymous French sculpture, ca. A.D. 1335
- [view](#) Artist: Berry, 14th. c.
- [view](#) Artist: Berry, 14th. c.
- [view](#) Wall painting in a church in Belchamp Walter, Essex, ca. A.D. 1350
- [view](#) Artist: Ghissi, ca. A.D. 1350
- [view](#) Artist: Pisano, ca. A.D. 1360
- [view](#) Artist: Veneziano, ca. A.D. 1370
- [view](#) Artist: Orcagna, ca. A.D. 1370
- [view](#) Artist: Bertram, ca. A.D. 1383
- [view](#) Artist: Serra, ca. A.D. 1390
- [view](#) Artist: Gaddi, ca. A.D. 1390
- [view](#) Artist: Camerino, ca. A.D. 1400
- [view](#) Artist: Bartolo, ca. A.D. 1400
- [view](#) Artist: Robert Campin, "The Master of Flemalle," ca A.D. 1400
- [view](#) Artist: Robert Campin, "The Master of Flemalle," ca A.D. 1400
- [view](#) From "Les Très Belles Heures du Duc de Berry," ca. A.D. 1409, illustrated by the brothers Jean, Paul, and Hermann Limbourg. The brothers also later illustrated the better known "Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry" (some illustrations for this work were later added by Jean Colombe).
- [view](#) Artist: Bartolo, ca. A.D. 1415
- [view](#) Artist: Masolino, ca. A.D. 1420
- [view](#) Artist: Masolino, ca. A.D. 1420
- [view](#) Artist: di Lorenzo, ca. A.D. 1430
- [view](#) Artist: Weyden, A.D. 1435
- [view](#) Artist: Van Eyck, A.D. 1436
- [view](#) Artist: Paolo, A.D. 1445
- [view](#) Artist: Fouquet, ca. A.D. 1450
- [view](#) Artist: Gozzoli, ca. A.D. 1484
- [view](#) Artist: Memling, ca. A.D. 1478
- [view](#) Artist: Memling, ca. A.D. 1487
- [view](#) "The Miraculous Lactation of St. Bernard." This painting depicts the spiritual nourishing of St. Bernard by the milk of Our Lady, based on this legendary mystical experience: Bernard prayed before a statue of the Madonna, asking her, "Show yourself a mother" ("Monstra te esse Matrem"). The statue came to life and and squirted milk from the breast onto the Saint's lips. Artist: Unknown Master, Netherlandish, 1480-85
- [view](#) Artist: Domenico, ca. A.D. 1490
- [view](#) Artist: Gerard David, ca. A.D. 1490

- [view](#) Artist: Gerard David, A.D. 1490
- [view](#) Artist: Michelangelo, A.D. 1496
- [view](#) Anonymous Italian, 15th c.
- [view](#) Artist: da Vinci, ca. A.D. 1500
- [view](#) Artist: Solario, A.D. 1500
- [view](#) Artist: Mainardi, ca. A.D. 1500
- [view](#) Artist: Signorelli, ca. A.D. 1500
- [view](#) Artist: Romano, A.D. 1510
- [view](#) Artist: Cleve, ca. A.D. 1512
- [view](#) Artist: Durer, 1512
- [view](#) Artist: Durer, 1520
- [view](#) Artist: Cleve, ca. A.D. 1520
- [view](#) Artist: Coreggio, ca. A.D. 1520
- [view](#) Artist: Conti, ca. A.D. 1520
- [view](#) Artist: Durer, ca. A.D. 1520
- [view](#) Artist: Michelangelo, A.D. 1520
- [view](#) Artist: Orley, A.D. 1522
- [view](#) Artist: Beccafumi, A.D. 1540
- [view](#) Artist: Morales, A.D. 1520
- [view](#) Artist: Barocci, A.D. 1575
- [view](#) Artist: Coxcie, Michiel van, ca. A.D. 1580
- [view](#) Artist: Reni, Guido, A.D. 1575-1642
- [view](#) Anonymous 16th c.
- [view](#) Artist: El Greco, ca. A.D. 1600
- [view](#) Nuestra Señora de Leche y Buen Parto (Our Lady of Milk and Good Birth). This statue, ca. A.D. 1600-1620, is kept in the shrine devoted to Nuestra Señora de Leche y Buen Parto in St. Augustine, Florida -- the first Marian shrine in the United States.
- [view](#) Artist: Rembrandt, A.D. 1630s
- [view](#) Artist: Rembrandt, A.D. 1640
- [view](#) "The Miraculous Lactation of St. Bernard." This painting depicts the spiritual nourishing of St. Bernard by the milk of Our Lady, based on this legendary mystical experience: Bernard prayed before a statue of the Madonna, asking her, "Show yourself a mother" ("Monstra te esse Matrem"). The statue came to life and and squirted milk from the breast onto the Saint's lips. Artist: Alonso Cano, A.D. 1650
- [view](#) Artist: Zubaran, A.D. 1659
- [view](#) Artist: Werf, Adriaen van der, 1714

### Unsorted, Anonymous

- [view](#) Anonymous, Peruvian "Cuzco School"
- [view](#) Anonymous, Peruvian "Cuzco School"
- [view](#) Anonymous
- [view](#) Anonymous
- [view](#) Painting from Bethlehem's ancient "Milk Grotto." The chapel whence this picture comes was built around the grotto by Franciscans in 1872.