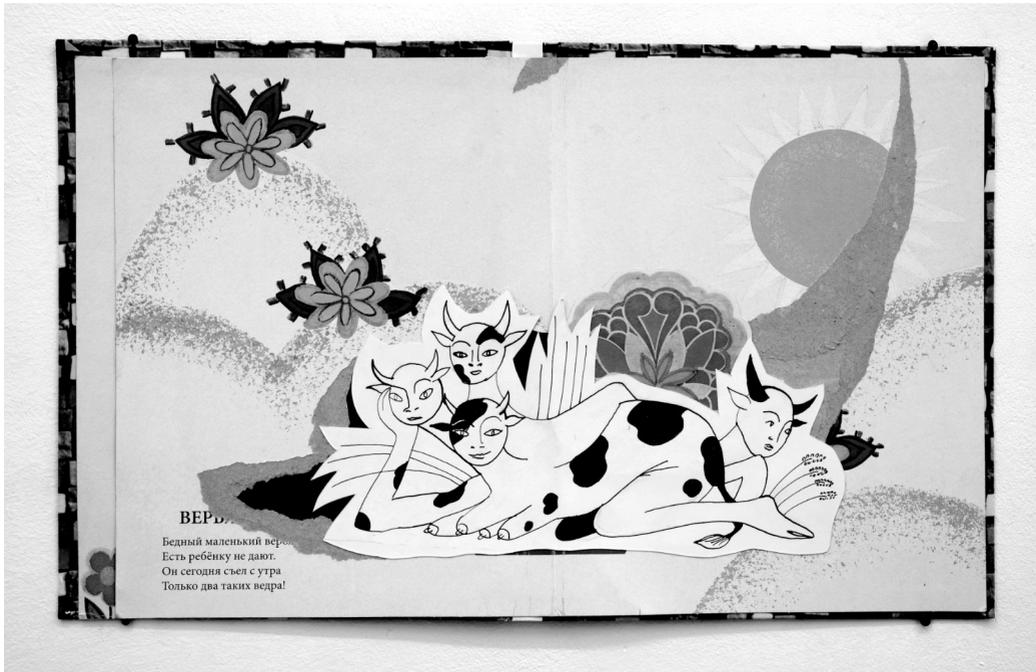


Soft Cannibalism



by Anni Puolakka, 20/12/2025

Koikeittö

The event is co-organised with
Océane Bruel / Koekeittiö

Thank you: Jessie Bullivant,
Satu Herrala, Jaakko Pietiläinen,
Sofia Palillo, Hanna Parry

Cover image: Anni Puolakka: *Yy* (2023), collage with ink
drawing and a children's book torn by its reader.

Pupukuu Puruluu Sukusuu
Song

Composition: Miša Skalskis

Performance: Tuukka Haapakorpi, Merja Kokkonen,
Heikki Nikula (bass clarinet), Anni Puolakka,
Miša Skalskis (kantele)

New Farmer
Edible bas-relief, edition of 7

Sugar, cocoa butter, almond flour, sunflower lecithin,
natural vanilla extract, human milk from four donors.*

Paired with Graham's Six Grapes Reserve Ruby Port
(20.0%), a wine coming from Douro, Portugal, not far from
the Côa Valley where wild cattle live.

*Living in the Renaissance and
Thinking about Lactation*
Text

An extract from a conversation between historian
Jutta Sperling and Anni Puolakka, part of an upcoming
publication edited by AP and Maija Timonen.

*) May contain traces of gluten, milk, soy.



Mother and Daughter, 15th or 16th century, illumination in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Famous Women*.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Caritas Romana* (Roman Charity), c. 1612–1613.

Living in the Renaissance and Thinking About Lactation: Conversation between historian Jutta Sperling and Anni Puolakka

This discussion between Jutta, in Berlin, and Anni, in Helsinki, on the historical and contemporary aspects of lactation in art was held remotely over a video call on September 25, 2024.

Anni:

I first encountered your work in 2016, when I became interested in art that involves lactation and suckling. Your book *Roman Charity: Queer Lactations in Early Modern Visual Culture* (2016) became an important companion for me as I began making my own works related to milk.

The title of your book refers to a story about a daughter visiting her aged parent who has been condemned to die by starvation in prison, and secretly breastfeeding them. The tale originates in *Memorable Acts and Sayings of the Ancient Romans* (AD 31), a volume by the ancient Roman historian Valerius Maximus. There are two versions of the story: in one, the parent is an unnamed mother; in the other, a father named Cimon. The daughter is called Pero. A third figure, a prison guard, witnesses the act and is left to wonder whether they are seeing something scandalous, incestuous, or, in fact, a profound act of charity.

Over time, many artists have produced visual artworks based on this story. In your book you investigate the iconography from the perspective of Catholic discourse, critique of patriarchy, as well as of queer, maternal and religious eroticism. The key question you pose is: Why did early modern viewers find this scene of adult nursing ‘good to think with’?

This scene – or theme – is sometimes referred to as Roman Charity and other times as Cimon and Pero. How did you come to choose *Roman Charity* as the title of your book?

Jutta:

The story is old, originally an ancient pagan motif. Initially it was

called 'Cimon and Pero', or 'Pero and Cimon', as I think the daughter needs to come first. While the theme was painted in earlier times on occasion, its popularity exploded in the 17th and 18th centuries. Really famous people, such as Caravaggio, Peter Paul Rubens and Nicolas Poussin, painted the motif over and over again, and with great purpose. That's the period when the theme was called Roman Charity. Some artists turned it into an industry, with their followers painting the motif five, six, seven times. It got me thinking, oh my, what's going on here?' That's why I chose this particular title.

Anni:

It's also during that time that the motif gets deeply entangled with Catholicism, right?

Jutta:

Yes, the story precedes Catholicism but it just so happened that the painters who started painting it were Catholic: Italians, the Flemish and the Spaniards. As I argue in my book, when Caravaggio first depicted it in an altarpiece called *The Seven Works of Mercy* (c.1607), it was an expression of Catholic dissent that was directed at the papacy at the time: with reference to his own painting *The Denial of Saint Peter* (1610), Caravaggio makes Cimon, who is being punished for a capital crime, resemble Saint Peter who denied Jesus when he was arrested, and whom Catholics consider to have been the first pope of Rome. And this parallel gets picked up by many of his followers who paint Roman Charity.

Anni:

Your book tells that although the theme was depicted by famous painters and in great numbers, many of these paintings are now hidden or lost. Even when they are part of institutional collections, they are often not put on display. Are paintings that portray adult nursing considered too raunchy?

Jutta:

Oh yeah, I think so. For example, Rubens's early painting, which is in the basement storage of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam – it's very



Caravaggio, *The Seven Works of Mercy*, c. 1607

special in how it portrays Pero dressed in red and really perked up, having both of her breasts out and enjoying herself. For a while the museum had it prominently on their website. They don't show it in exhibitions, though, which is curious because it is – I mean, I'm not an art historian, but I do know that that's a good Rubens. The reason could be that the Rijksmuseum is for Dutch art, not for Catholic or Flemish guys like Rubens. So there may be some nationalistic theme at play. Nonetheless, it was sad when I had to go to the basement to look at it. There are many other minor cases too. On a positive note – and I'm proud of this – it seems that my book moved the curator of Flemish art at the Met¹ to buy one; I like to think he bought it for me! I mean, I don't know him personally, but he wrote me an email saying, by the way, we bought a Roman Charity by Hendrick ter Brugghen, you might wanna check it out. So there is one now up on display at the Met which had been out of sight for over three hundred years before its recent resurfacing.

Anni:

I've been thinking about what exactly makes the theme so powerful – powerful enough to magnetise so many painters and viewers, but also to make people hide or even destroy the artworks. It seems capable of mediating questions about intimacy or, like you say in your book, 'riddles about kinship', in different times and contexts. And because there are so many stylistic takes on it, it really invites you to think about what kinds of interpretations each approach makes possible.

Jutta:

It's good to think with, right? How does it help you to think about certain things?

Anni:

The first things that come to my mind are the norms and politics of nursing: who's supposed to feed whom and for how long, and how these norms are sustained and naturalised through images and language, like gossip. I nursed my child longer than is common and sometimes felt social pressure to stop. But why stop if you want to continue and can? Interestingly, many other primates wean later than what's often socially acceptable for humans. So, as a toddler breastfeeder and a performance artist, I've found the paintings good for reflecting on both the awkwardness and defiance involved in using your body in unconventional ways.

What I value in many of the Roman Charity paintings is how they portray these true and very vivid needs and desires. They show the secretive act of breastfeeding sort of emerging from the shadows, towards light and public domain. I'm thinking about how they can send you to this transgressive terrain where a troubled adult can once again become a child and experience the profound acceptance that nursing might offer.

I think Early Modern lactation imagery – whether in Roman Charity or Nursing Madonna paintings – conveys how complex our relationships are, in fun and also uncomfortable ways. When we nurse, we become food, and I've thought about it as a form of soft cannibalism, or as role-

playing Jesus. Nursing, birthing, and parenthood coexist with eroticism, pain and pleasure. It was exciting to read your accounts of religious Flemish art, which didn't neutralise the Madonna's nudity but 'thrived on the display of erotic, voyeuristic, and gender-bending images of lactation for spiritual purposes.'² I think our current culture is still working hard to maintain categories that distance eroticism from many areas of life where it overlaps – art can show another way.

I've also been inspired by the paintings for my work on human-cow relations and how warped, but normalised, it is that human adults drink milk that the cow generates for the calf. In a way humans feel entitled to take the place of the cow baby, but there's often a long physical, conceptual and aesthetic distance between the udder and the consumer's mouth. I think this resonates with some of the visual-distancing styles your texts discuss. For example, there's the case of



Master I. A. M. of Zwolle, *The Lactation of Saint Bernard*, of Clairvaux, 1470–85

Saint Bernard, aka Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who reportedly drank the Virgin Mary's milk. According to early written accounts he fed directly from her breast, but in most paintings the suckling is replaced by spouting milk, as a means of distancing.³

Then there's the question of the symbolically charged quality of milk across different contexts. In parallel with historical examples, I like to think about how, in Finnish culture, cow's milk has a sacred position: there's a lot of morally and commercially motivated myth-building around it; it represents a longing to return to the countryside after urbanisation and industrialisation. I've been following public debates, and now – especially in these belligerent times – local dairy production seems to be increasingly tied to ideas of security of supply and national romanticism. When Finland was last at war, decades ago, cows were an important source of survival. It's interesting how the act of extracting or expressing milk has taken on these mythical qualities over time.

Jutta:

There is a lot to be said. I'm working now more on the ancient end of things; that brings me to ancient Egypt. This is when you realise the historical depth of breastfeeding – and of adult breastfeeding too, though you encounter this less often. As well, you discover the entire depth of spirituality behind it. So when you say, 'milk is a politically charged fluid', that really goes way back. Milk is spiritual, religious – it's very powerful. It's divine, actually. It can make humans immortal. I mean, all the good stuff comes through milk! As a feminist historian of the Renaissance but also having looked at legal history, looking into patriarchy and how it works, my observation is that the privileged fluid is always paternal blood. If you start reading ancient Roman family law, you notice that they know it's a fiction, they know that the entire idea of paternity is a fiction to some extent, because they don't really know how it works. They know that the mother is always the mother, but the question of fatherhood is always a little iffy. However, Greek medical authors, and, in particular, Aristotle, said that a mother contributes nothing to the process of generation, unlike the father, who contributes everything the baby needs to come into being, namely his

blood in the form of sperm. By analogy, Roman law said that only paternal blood creates kinship – what they called ‘agnatic kinship’ – by the vertical passing of the father’s blood through the ‘empty vessel’ of the mother’s uterus. Of course, they knew this theory was not accurate, because it cannot explain why children resemble their mothers. But for political reasons, they stick with this medical fiction; the entire legal system of patriarchy in Roman times was built on it. In fact, it worked precisely because it’s a fiction: like civic law, it was man-made, in distinction to natural law. Mothers may be related to their children according to natural law, but that didn’t count for purposes of inheritance or to determine one’s social status. This fiction of paternal blood is a counter-discourse to what was prior: if you look at pre-Roman societies, you get a glimpse of the fact that, back then, milk was the bodily fluid that created kinship and belonging through nurture.

What you said about the animals is interesting because it goes both ways. On the one hand, you can, and people did, nurse puppies or other animals. And then there are little babies like Zeus, who, on occasion, get suckled by goats.

Anni:

When you talk about how milk comes with the ability to build kinship through nurture, I’m thinking about how nurturing and nursing are reciprocal acts – quite different from passing on your genes, or blood. Beyond oxytocin and psychological effects of closeness, I was amazed to hear about the phenomenon of retrograde milk-flow: when a baby nurses, saliva can flow back into the breast, carrying information about the baby’s health and triggering changes in the composition of the milk.

You’ve written about the link between milk and blood, and how people once believed there was a connection between the blood supplied through the placenta and maternal milk. That was one reason it was recommended – or even required – to stick to the mother’s milk instead of wet nurses’. The very first milk my child had at the hospital was donated by a stranger. I remember feeling curious about the person behind such a kind gesture. Maybe they were paid; I hope they were.

That's one of the rare occasions when mediated wet nursing or wet donation actually happens, but outside of clinical settings, sharing milk is very uncommon here. Intimacy gets fenced in by the nuclear family and other norms. The other day, though, I was talking with a friend who is pregnant and hoping to chestfeed the baby together with their partner through induced lactation. It's such a beautiful idea, nursing can be a lonely task.

Talking about breastfeeding adventures: I had to take a break last spring because of strong medication. During that time, I pumped my toxic milk into little pouches that I stored in the freezer – just in case I might want to use it in my work someday. I marked the pouches with drawings of skulls.

Jutta:

It brings me to the story of Madame Roland, that's parallel to yours in a sense. She was an aristocrat and a revolutionary, married to a minister in the French revolutionary government. She tries to do what Jean-Jacques Rousseau told women to do: be the republican mother, meaning, have a kid and breastfeed. But she can't breastfeed her daughter, and she hates doing it, and tries out all these complicated things. Eventually she develops a terrible breast inflammation as the daughter cannot drain the breast. Then the daughter, of course, needs a wet nurse, and due to the hiatus Madame Roland needs a breast-sucker to make the milk return. She thought she needed to continue breastfeeding for political reasons, because she wanted to be on the party line. So she gets a breast-sucker, a peasant woman, who sucks her breasts twice a day. That's when you notice that when people read the archives, they just don't take it in. There is actually a book written about wet nursing in the French Revolution and Madame Roland's writings are being analysed, but that part about her breast-sucker is just silenced over, nobody mentions that she needed a *têteuse*. But when you talk about milk and liquid exchange and the bonds created through these social relations, the affectionate human relations that are created through nursing – through breastfeeding – not only go both ways, they do so in many directions, right? I find it so fascinating that at the end, in her letters, Madame Roland is very sad to see her breast-

sucker go, as her doctors instruct her to. It's interesting that scholars have not noticed that – what they see and don't see. It also happens with Caravaggio's painting. It's a big painting, lots of things going on there. *Nobody* has said anything about this particular part of it, that is, the breastfeeding scene, even if it's clearly an eye-catching scene. I don't want to ridicule them, because people just don't know what to say about it. Because what are you supposed to say about it, unless you know the entire backstory and take that seriously and unravel it from there?

Anni:

I guess that lack of contextual knowledge and of other than literal meanings could also explain why many paintings on the theme were hidden or destroyed, leaving attention to flow to easier-to-navigate places...

How do you steer towards and select the topics you focus on. For me, as an artist, I tend to go towards events or phenomena that both fascinate me and have some element of shame or embarrassment attached to them. It feels meaningful to process, through art-making, the cultural friction between attraction and the tendency to keep certain things hidden. I was wondering if there was any of that in your journey to this topic?

Jutta:

Certainly. When I first saw the painting I was young and deeply disturbed by it, because breastfeeding had not been on my mind when I was 22 and stumbling onto the painting at an exhibition. Then I forgot about it for a long time, for twenty years. It came back to me at Villa I Tatti, a Harvard-run, posh Renaissance centre near Florence where I was on a scholarship for a year. We'd be served lunch there, the waiters came with white gloves. I hadn't noticed that children were not allowed into the entire estate, so I got my kids to come. My older daughter was five and the little one was turning two – I was still breastfeeding her in Villa I Tatti as well. And as you mentioned about these cultural norms about weaning age, 'In Italy', they said, 'we kind of wean them at six to

eight months old.' So I had this toddler there, and I noticed it was a little weird... But whatever, I just did it and then at some point Giovanni, who was working at the photo library, came up to me and said, 'Jutta, you know what you should be doing? You should work on *Roman Charity*.' I asked, 'What is that? That sounds interesting.' 'You know, the Caravaggio', he said, and showed me a photo. And I said, 'Oh, oh my God, yes I think you're right, I should be working on that.' He meant it as a joke, he meant to say, your kid is too old, don't do this. But I thought, oh my God, I remembered the painting. Then I ditched the topic I was working on at the time, which was about legal history and patriarchy. I wasn't making progress and I was also so sleep-deprived, I was in this daze all the time. So halfway into my scholarship I decided to switch. What fascinated me - I mean there were many things, there was the contemporary question about breastfeeding: Why do people have such a hard time looking at you feeding a toddler, what's going on there? On the other hand, I live in the Renaissance, really, with my thinking, and that's a patriarchal context. I was used to investigating how patriarchy works mainly through archives. It occurred to me that this topic was not to be found there. By looking at paintings and the eroticised female body, I came to the conclusion that it was the female body with the lactating breast that was a sign of power and desire. People got a kick out of it, that was the provocative thing. Not the little virgin's smooth round breast, which got depicted ad nauseam.

The Renaissance, the 16th century, is really when phallus arrived as a new sign of desire. It manifested, for example, in paintings of the Crucifixion or the Deposition of Christ, with him having an erection visible underneath his loincloth, as Leo Steinberg pointed out in *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1983). Patricia Simons has recently argued that 16th-century art celebrates not necessarily the erect penis but ejaculation as a sign of male fertility, in her book *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe* (2011). It's a competition with the other sign that arguably is still more powerful, the lactating breast. You get at the anxieties surrounding this when you explore the discussions around wet-nursing and how to pick a good wet nurse, especially on whether the wet nurse is allowed to have sex or not. There was a very explicit rule in Renaissance Italy that a wet nurse could not

have sex with her husband or anybody else. You cannot mix blood and milk, you cannot spoil your milk with a man's sperm, when you nurse. What I think is also going on there, and that's what they did not say, is that whoever has sex with a lactating woman will ingest her milk. When you kiss a lactating person's breast, the milk comes out. They wouldn't say it, they would reverse the causality [to sperm spoiling milk], but the real issue was that. I speculate that, as a man, imagining sex with a lactating woman would perhaps be disturbing, because it would be considered as a regressive fantasy, a situation where, as a man, you are confronted with another person's bodily performance that's way more powerful than yours. I thought working on Roman Charity was the perfect way to prove it because the way it usually has been read is by saying that the father objectifies and abuses his daughter, and arguably you can make that point because that is what he sort of is doing, even though the daughter volunteers and there's a parallel story with a mother. So the daughter volunteers and keeps patriarchy alive if the father is an allegory of a very problematic kind of patriarchy – after all he's a murderer, a convicted criminal of some sorts. Then again, he also happens to be her father; so out of charity she decides to keep him alive and not starve him to death, which she could easily do.

Anni:

So, in a way, the daughter holds the power, draining her superior liquid into the weak patriarch's mouth, demonstrating her higher position while still keeping the patriarch alive. I wanted to ask about the anxieties surrounding wet-nursing, which you mentioned as proof of competition between the breast and the phallus. Could you tell me more about that?

Jutta:

Wet nurses in Early Modern times would often teach children how to speak, so the children might acquire their accent. There was a strong attachment between the nurses and children, resulting in great anxiety about how to choose the 'correct' or best wet nurse. Having been wet-nursed themselves, the parents knew about the power of milk and the way it really socialises you and structures powerful attachments



Followers of Robert Campin, *The Virgin in Front of a Fire Screen*, 1440

early in life. Coming back to the point about the lactating breast as a powerful source of desire: while the phallus will eventually win out, Roman Charity shows that the significance of the lactating breast doesn't really fully go away until the French Revolution – then it's kind of over. But during the transition period, the Renaissance, they're sort of in competition. What was very innovative and provocative at the time in medical literature was that the breast and nipple were erogenous zones and were compared to the penis. While the medical literature is patriarchal, the physicians are the most liberal ones in a way.

In this context, I'd also like to talk about the lactating Venus. There's a very famous painting by Paolo Veronese, also in The Met, with a beautiful Venus, all naked, and Mars in armour, sitting in front of her. You see his back. Normally Venus doesn't get shown like that, but there she is. Venus is really a sign or object of desire, from the perspective of the male gaze, but here you have Veronese saying, let's play with the breast, let's make Venus lactate. In one of my articles, I unravel that a little bit, bringing it in conversation with other representations of Venus Pudica in which she has a V-hold of her nipple. People sometimes say she's covering her breast, but in reality she's making this gesture to offer the nipple. Once you start looking at it you kind of see it everywhere, or it's hard not to see it anymore: it's a sign of power and desire. So, Roman Charity is one iconography where you see this sign – the V-hold, that is – and it's a little problematic; but then there are also other iconographies in Renaissance art where it appears. The Virgin Mary does it too. My friends say to me, jokingly, 'OMG, when I go to a museum I see it now.' They send me photos. Renaissance images of lactating breasts are everywhere.

Anni:

What I noticed is that, apart from some Madonna Lactans where the milk is squirting out from the breast, such as (very subtly, in the form of three drops) in *The Virgin in Front of a Fire Screen* (1440) by followers of Robert Campin, Early Modern paintings often don't depict actual milk in situations where, in reality, it would spout or leak out. Why do you think that is?

Jutta:

That's a good question, and it shows how differentiated the Virgin Mary iconography is. There's a lot of symbolic and historic depth to every one of these little changes in composition prior, both in terms of religious literature and references to religious literature on one hand, but then also prior depictions of goddesses and their breasts. So on one side there is the story of St Bernard who, as you already mentioned, gets milk drops squirted into his mouth – that is, without bodily contact. His mouth actually suckling from the breast of the Virgin would probably have been too radical in the European context, but there are other cases where bodily contact happens. There's an Ethiopian saint, Saint Giyorgis of Säglä (1365–1425), who has an icon of the Virgin Mary that he's very devoted to. In Ethiopia, they inherit Egyptian Coptic literature and have a close relationship to Coptic Christian Egyptians who, since they are Egyptian, love a good breastfeeding goddess. For Egyptians, Christianity was always about the nursing Virgin, and the Ethiopian Saint Giyorgis of Säglä inherited the whole theme. At some point he gets inspired and runs up to the icon, which shows the nursing Virgin with one bare breast. He puts his mouth to the icon, starts suckling and Lord behold, milk comes out. But is it an apparition? Is it a picture? This is unclear. Usually in European art, when the Virgin bares her breasts and the child on her lap is not interested, I make the argument that she's offering it to the viewer and not the child. Why is there no milk depicted? The Dutch and the Flemish painters did do it once in a while, but it's really restricted to Northern art. I guess it's a taboo, it is a transgression when the milk actually comes out.

Anni:

It's powerful when bodies leak – when the insides make their way out and become visible. With milk, I didn't realise until I was lactating myself just how fiercely it can sometimes shoot out. I love how, in some paintings of St Bernard and the Madonna, the stream of milk cuts sharply through the image like a laser, totally under Madonna's control. Your texts also explore how the Madonna's breast is sometimes portrayed in an unnatural or displaced style, and at other times more naturally.



Ethiopian Orthodox, *Madonna with a Crown*, mid to late 15th century

Jutta:

It was the early Flemish painters that started to depict the breast in a natural way. This may have some religious background. When you depict the Virgin Mary it's because you're devoted to her. The depiction is a religious object, but what is the religious meaning? On one hand, there is the Middle Eastern nursing Virgin who is a powerful goddess: she has the milk that makes Jesus both divine and human. She is the mother of God, she is the mother and origin of everything. And the milk is the sign of that, the Logos. So there is this deep spiritual literature in which Christ is just an afterthought, because it's really about the Virgin who has the power to give birth to Christ and then produce the virginal milk, which is a powerful, magic substance. That's how it all gets started – with the Coptic and Syrian depictions of her.

But in the Middle Ages, when Western Catholics go to the Middle East during the Crusades and see all of this and bring it home, they put a

spin on the imagery. They master and control it and diminish its meaning by saying, 'Oh well, it's the "Madonna of Humility".' Meaning, yes, the Virgin Mary nourishes her child because what else is she gonna do, he's a human. So she's a housewife and that's her task, and in doing so she humbles herself by performing this abject motherly task, despite the fact that she's an exalted figure. She could also be the Queen of Heaven – and she is the Queen of Heaven with a crown, and that's how people like to see her – but let's take her down from that exalted position and make her very meek and humble, because that's more suitable. After all, we wanna stress how Christ was a man and consequently how the Virgin was a woman and mother.

Anni:

There's a lot of history in her, and it's great that we have the paintings to explore it.

Jumping back to Roman Charity paintings, it seems to me that clothes and textiles play a big role in them. Pero's outfits are often like eye candy, with bright colours and extravagant fabrics; this is in sharp contrast with the earthy colours of the dungeon and the father's garments. Like gift-wrapping, Pero's clothes present – at the very centre of the scene – the lactating breast. I like to think of these images as connecting two worlds while the nipple serves as the sensitive joint, the juncture between them. The world outside the prison might seem to offer vivid and colourful human experiences, but then I'm also thinking about Jean Genet's admittedly romanticising portrayal of the prison as a stage for intensified sensuality. As a place where desire, constraint, cruelty and imagination intertwine.⁴

Jutta:

Yes, in the scene a well-dressed lady is granted access to a dungeon and that creates an interesting contrast. In the Baroque they loved contrast, I think that is what inspired them.

Anni:

I also paid attention to the tools of captivity, like metal bars and chains and cuffs. I associated them with the treatment of captured animals



Giulio Bonasone, after Giulio Romano, *Jupiter Suckled by the Goat Amalthea*, 1531–1576

and restrained animality: the father lying on a straw bed like a cow in a shed, held back by chains. And then there's this gracious mammal, Pero, performing an unexpected gesture.

Jutta:

Interesting thought! You take it a step further by bringing in animals and mammals – that's a great angle, and very timely. I hadn't thought about it that way, but why not? The connection to modern conditions is really compelling, because it opens up a link...

Anni:

Continuing with the themes of imprisonment and forcing, there's also a spectrum of consensuality and nonconsensuality in depictions of animal-human animal nursing, just as there's a difference between 'expression' and 'extraction'. On one hand, you have the wolf happily feeding Romulus and Remus, and on the other, the goat who in some

depictions is abused and forced to provide milk for Zeus (or Jupiter). It's interesting: earlier art often depicts close kinship, and of course also violence, between humans and other animals. Now that animals are being centred in the contemporary 'animal turn', and human exceptionalism is being challenged, I wonder what we can draw from historical representations of animals, as we reconfigure our self-understanding vis-à-vis other species?

Jutta:

When it comes to humans and cows, I was totally astonished when doing the research. When I read about medical use of breast milk and treatments for gout, I noticed how they talk about wet nurses and cows interchangeably. That blew my mind! It's always clear that the best milk would be human breast milk, but in the late 17th, early 18th century, you can see that the sensibilities are changing, and they start considering what other milk can be used. Donkey's milk ranks really high. Then the cow comes into picture, and the question of how to choose a good cow. If you have gout or tuberculosis and you need to endure drinking lots and lots of milk, then you need to buy yourself a good cow who has good moral qualities, just like with a human wet nurse. The cow needs to be well behaved, clean and she has to feed on good grass. She has to be a mild, well-tempered cow.

Anni:

In relation to morals, I'm interested in ritual nursing and how it was used as a punishment or cure for misbehaving. Is there visual art on that, or were those practices mainly stored as texts?

Jutta:

The way I thought about it was in the context of taboo – that sex and lactation cannot go together, but I don't know about visual depictions of that. There is another instance of ritual breastfeeding but that goes into another direction and has a different meaning. I found an article from the 1950s that analyses an Etruscan mirror depicting the Creation of the Milky Way and Heracles being nursed by Hera. It's a retelling of the myth of Hera, who in the main story of the myth refuses to breastfeed Heracles as a baby and then squirts out the milk and creates

the Milky Way. She says, well this is a bastard son of yours [Zeus], I'm not gonna make him immortal, no way!

The Etruscan mirror, however, shows the adult Heracles achieving the goal of being breastfed by the goddess and therefore becoming divine. And that is of course analogous to the Egyptian myth of Isis nursing Horus. In Ancient Egypt they have this concept of a divine wet nurse who renders the pharaoh immortal. The pharaoh is just a human, but he gets deified because he has a wet nurse that's divine. And sometimes she's also a cow, if you wanna look at a society that sees cows differently. What is really specific to how the Egyptians think of their ruling class is that the pharaohs are always divine, god-like, because of the way they have been breastfed – sometimes as adults. This is just a ritual where you have to ingest a few drops of milk.

But when it comes to ritual breastfeeding as a punishment, we're talking about an Islamic society and they don't depict much. There is a way to connect the two, the Islamic and Etruscan ritual breastfeeding, I think. A key to linking them is the creation of kinship. When the Etruscan Hera breastfeeds the adult Heracles, she adopts him, ritually, via breast milk. There is now a sexual taboo being created between her and her adoptive son. The adoption via nursing creates a powerful sexual taboo, and thinking in terms of taboos is very productive, because sexual taboos create the family. When you then look at Islamic literature on breastfeeding, and the legal ramifications of it, you can see how the two come together. In Islamic law they spell it out: you can never marry, in other words have sex, with your milk sibling, with your wet nurse or any descendants of that wet nurse to the nth degree. So, ingesting milk in the Etruscan myth and in Islam have the same meaning, and in Islam they codify it, it appears in the legal literature on the Quran. That is what the anthropologist Peter Parkes found in a little mountain community in Afghanistan, where they use it as a punishment. They force lovers to breastfeed, and they can never ever have sex with each other, ever again. The prohibition is very powerful because it is in the Quran. So this is how all of this connects: prior to the Greek and Roman periods, you find similar prohibitions in different societies everywhere in the Mediterranean and Middle East. These are



Jan Gossaert, *Virgin and Child* (1527–30)

remnants of a matrilinear past whose matrilineal family formations were based on the transmission of milk.

Anni:

I'd like to talk about the period when Roman Charity paintings stopped being popular and how this was connected to politics and debates of the time. Influential art critics such as Denis Diderot were criticising the theme. He was not happy about the classicising approach of the paintings and how the supposedly starved father is looking too strong and healthy, 'as if he had two cows at his disposal'.⁵

Jutta:

The visual language in those works is classicising because, in the time of the paintings, if you depict a nude man, he has to look heroic and therefore have muscles, especially from Rubens onwards. Rubens is the one who starts depicting him almost naked. We're inside the dungeon,

we look at him, he has a loin cloth, so you see his naked body. He's old so there are folds, he's withering away and starving. But you still see the muscle tone, there is no other way of rendering a nude man, that's the demand coming from the art of the time. Otherwise people couldn't look at it.

Once the theme changes, in the course of the 18th century, from being a historical painting to being genre painting, the demands on style are minor and can be loosened. Then you can have a man that looks a little different. But Diderot doesn't like that either because then Cimón looks too pathetic in the painting, which he is. In fact, Diderot doesn't like the entire topic, which is interesting because he could've said, well, patriarchy or monarchy is on its way out, this is an allegory of our tyrannical monarchy – why don't we let the father die. He could've played with it in many other ways, but he doesn't do that because sensibilities around breastfeeding are changing, especially among philosophers like Diderot and Rousseau. They don't want to see a woman wildly breastfeeding an adult man. They wanna go the other way, towards the mother-child direction. I'm trying to suggest that, during the French Revolution, the daughter-mother variant of the Roman Charity experiences a little bit of a comeback. I counted three instances, which is quite a lot considering that this variety hardly ever gets depicted. In the Renaissance when the topic initially takes off, it's the father-daughter version, and then there's a boom in the Baroque before the topic goes away.

But in the revolutionary period or just prior, people start getting interested in the daughter-mother variety and the question is, what is that all about? And there is, potentially, a totally different meaning that emerges, that comes out, especially when you look at how female art critics wrote about it. There's a German poet in the 17th century, Sibylla Schwarz. She gets interested in Valerius Maximus's anecdote itself; by the way, these anecdotes have their own literary afterlife, for example in the form of theatre. Schwarz, who died at the age of 17, writes about the daughter-mother relationship in the Roman Charity anecdote and says that they become sisters, and that it's a model of perfect reciprocity. She ends her poem 'A Daughter Suckles her Mother'

with the line: 'We both want to be daughters, and both mothers to one another'.⁶

Anni:

There's a sense of mirroring and intense reciprocity as, in that case, both would have had each other's milk at different times.

Jutta:

Yeah, it's totally beautiful. So that could've been the model of the French Revolution, sisterhood. Of course it ended up being all about brothers. But it could've been sisters. And there were a few people who picked up on it.

Anni:

There's a video called *Familiar* (2007) by Palestinian-American artist Jumana Manna, which shows her mother casually seeming to breastfeed the 30-year-old artist on a bed at home. It really touches this part of me that continues to be in awe of the fact that my adult body came from my mum's body. Manna's work came to mind when thinking about this mixing of different roles in Schwarz's poem. In the video, the child-parent relationship gains aspects of siblinghood, friendship and collegiality, cutting through time.

Going back to nursing children – looking at paintings from earlier times, it seems that toddler breastfeeding wasn't taboo back in the day. I wonder about the artists' choice to often depict toddlers in these paintings rather than small babies. Was it because toddlers brought more value to a painting through being more vigorous and expressive, offering more to look at, or was there another reason you can think of?

Jutta:

I guess the virtue of an older baby or a toddler is that they can carry themselves and they get muscle tone, too. I think it's always about muscle tone.

Copy editor's note, Rebecca: Perhaps, too, as small babies were more likely to die, toddlers who survived were auspicious and indicative of joy, good fortune, for that reason.

A: Milk-built muscles, milk-fed flesh.

I'm also thinking about the imaginative and defiant faculties of toddlers, how inspiring – and nerve-wracking – they are. In one of your texts you discuss Jan Gossaert's painting *Virgin and Child* (1527–30), in which Jesus is trampling on a book Mary is reading.⁷ You call it a 'gesture of defiance' in relation to the written word, one that might have made a Lutheran audience angry. Then, there's another *Virgin and Child* (1527) painting by Gossaert, which you describe as 'gender-bending'. In that one, infant Jesus pushes wildly towards the viewer with engorged breasts. Mary seems to be squeezing one of them, as if to help milk come out. What I find endearing in toddler Jesus's gesture of offering his engorged breast is that that's just what toddlers do – they're free and so good at imagining what they could and will be able to do. My toddler has offered their 'boob' for me to suckle several times. Jesus, in this case, is just like any toddler, full of potential. But in his case, it's a specific potential to offer his body for others to visually and spiritually consume. This painting is like a premonition, and it connects to other paintings where adult Jesus appears to maternally nurse others from his bleeding wound.⁸ But yeah, I think it's a great use of toddler energy.

Jutta:

Artemisia Gentileschi is extremely interesting in the context of Madonna and Child paintings because she brings the nursing Virgin back. There's a certain prohibition against depicting the nursing Virgin, and if you look at the timeline, they have the kinkiest, sexiest versions of the nursing Virgin in Flemish and German art in particular in the 1520s, when the Reformation is already underway. Then both Protestants and Catholics start having problems with her. The Protestants do away with her, and interestingly the Catholics chime in and say, we cannot deal with the scene either! The Catholics prohibit the display of nudity in religious art at the Council of Trent in 1563, meaning the nursing Virgin but also other forms of nudity. It's an interesting form of self-censorship they are engaging in, because there is no formal punishment for this. It's not like the heretics, if you write the wrong book, you die; you don't get burned for painting the wrong

painting. But the nursing Virgin falls off the radar and no longer gets depicted.

Gentileschi, however, brings her back in 1609. It is now a different nursing Virgin and will forever be, because she's no longer eroticised. It's a very intimate, sensual scene, which Gentileschi depicts three times. You always can tell – when an artist makes three paintings, people want them. Also, it's not a newborn baby in the painting, maybe an eight-month-old baby, but still, no longer a toddler. She also did a Roman Charity, just to top it off! It was hidden, lost for a long time, and they recently found it in a tiny little town in Southern Italy.

Anni:

I wanted to ask you a broad question of what the value is of bringing Early Modern Roman Charity paintings to contemporary audiences and discourses?

Jutta:

Well for one, as a historian, it shows the historical nature of how our modern sensibilities got created. There's nothing natural about them, they are a historical construct and you see it unfolding when looking at the squeamishness surrounding breastfeeding, the many rules, the need for us to talk about it only in the medical context, saying that it's healthy, but that's about it, as if there's no other benefit. So I think it shows the historically created quality of what we think is natural in the context of breastfeeding, and it shows that, well, you know, it used to be very different. The way we think about our bodies and the way we draw boundaries and borders surrounding body fluids and the meaning of body fluids, that's all very political and therefore very historical and subject to change.

I always wondered why there aren't any historical studies that look seriously into one's first attachments to a wet nurse and the trauma of being separated from them. How would we historically think differently about family and family relations and bonding in the light of such a study? Because if you looked at the birthplace of Modernity in the 16th century, if you looked at society in terms of the economy of

emotions, it must have worked completely differently because everybody in the upper classes was wet-nursed and had different relationships to their mothers. It was a different kind of mothering. If you were a mother in the Renaissance, different things were required from you and you had to deal with not being allowed to breastfeed. There was a chain reaction of displacing kids for the purpose of nursing and turning it into an industry.

Anni:

One kind of dairy industry.

Jutta Sperling teaches Early Modern History and Visual Culture at Hampshire College, MA, USA. She has published widely on late medieval and early modern lactation imagery, including Roman Charity and the Nursing Virgin. Her most recent research focuses on the sacred art of late medieval Ethiopia and apocryphal writings on the Virgin Mary.

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The conversation is edited by Anni Puolakka and Maija Timonen, and copy-edited by Rebecca Bligh.

Endnotes

¹The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

²Jutta Gisela Sperling, 'Address, Desire, Lactation: On a Few Gender-Bending Images of the *Virgin and Child* by Jan Gossaert', *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, vol. 76, Freunde des Wallraf-Richartz-Museum und des Museum Ludwig e.V., 2015, p. 56.

³Jutta Sperling, 'Squeezing, Squirting, Spilling Milk: The Lactation of Saint Bernard and the Flemish *Madonna Lactans* (c. 1430–1530)', *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 3, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 898–99.

⁴Jean Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, Gallimard, 1946.

⁵Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Roman Charity: Queer Lactations in Early Modern Visual Culture*, transcript Verlag, 2016, p. 203.

⁶Sibylla Schwarz, in Helmut W. Ziefle (ed.), facsimile of *Sibyllen Schwarz, Vohn Greiffswald aus Pommern Ander Theil Deutscher Poëtischer Gedichten nuhn zuhm ersten mahl Aus ihren eignen Handschriften herausgegeben und verleget vohn M. Samuel Berencz aus dem Herzogtuhm Württemberg* (ed. Georg Theten Witwen), 1650, n.p., Peter Lang, 1980, cited in translation in and by Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Roman Charity: Queer Lactations in Early Modern Visual Culture*, transcript Verlag, 2016, p. 251, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839432846>.

⁷Jutta Gisela Sperling, 'Address, Desire, Lactation: On a Few Gender-Bending Images of the *Virgin and Child* by Jan Gossaert', pp. 69–70.

⁸Jutta Gisela Sperling, 'Address, Desire, Lactation', pp. 55, 64–65.



Océane mixes milks, 2025. Photo by AP.



Anni Puolakka, *New Farmer*, 2025


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