The Expressive Power of the Artist's Hand

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What place is there for the intimate and personal—the hand of the artist—in the wake of the industrial and technological revolutions? Does the artist’s spontaneous hand remain pertinent even in a world of digitized reality? The hand plays an essential role in human life, shaping culture, language and the brain. At the center of our evolution, the hand relates to the cognitive uniqueness that we consider the hallmarks of humanity. (Wilson, 1998. p.1) The German philosopher Martin Heidegger once offered the image of the hand as a metaphor for human thought.

Beginning with our bodily experiences, we create ever more intricate metaphors which construct our realities. As we continue to mark the world with our imprints, we are linked to those humans whose roots can be traced back more than 30,000 years ago when on the walls of the oldest known paintings and engravings in the world, a human hand is imprinted on the earth.

The most common symbol to be found in prehistoric art is the stenciled hand. Its direct registration is an imprint of human warmth on the passage of lived time. Appearing at the very dawn of art, the fragment is the oldest of all the signs—the part, the hand, standing for the whole, representing the entire human being. (Mazonowicz, 1974. p. 191) Hand stencils by the thousands exist as far apart as South Africa, the Americas, Siberia, China and Australia. (Simons, 1996. p. XX3)

Few places in Europe have as many imprints of the presence of prehistoric peoples as the web of caves along the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains dividing France and Spain. These symbols in a language of gestures have sent us messages over the millennium. Who are we? Sooner or later, in one place or another, it is assumed that the caves are bound to give us the answer to our question. Interest has soared by the discovery of two spectacular caves, the Cosquer near Marseilles and the Chauvet in the canyon of the Ardeche River. (Clottes, Jean and Jean Courtin, 1996. p. 8)

In his book Prehistoric Cave Paintings, Max Raphael talks of the extraordinary importance of the hand, that the world was conceived after the hand, the single motion of spreading it the main source of arithmetic and geometric compositional form in Paleolithic art. Then, taking proportions into account, with the hand and fingers taken as the basic scale, if two hand lengths were equal to three hand widths, we obtain the origin of the golden section, the two approximate formulas, 2:3-3:5. (Raphael, 1945. p. 28)

During the summer of 1907 Picasso did a large caricature drawing of Andre Salmon on the back of which the artist has traced the outlines of his hand, something he had done before to show how the figures in his Saltimbanques corresponded to the configuration of his fingers. (Richardson, 1996. p. 40) Might Picasso have envisioned his five demoiselles in the same form? The hands give birth to ideas. As a young man Seurat, who venerated Poussin, made a copy of his right hand, his painted hand, that is to say, as it was portrayed by Ingres in his “Apotheosis

As technology changes the nature of art, have we sacrificed art’s traditional emphasis on the acts of the hand for new media? Does the fact that a painter or sculptor makes things by hand give them their special magic? The hand-made object preserves the finger prints, be they real or metaphorical, of the artist who created it, a manifestation of sensate presence connecting us to our archaic pasts, the bodily origins of our modes of thought.

According to Nelson Goodman in his groundbreaking book Language of Art, painting is autographic in which authorship and execution are united. (Goodman,1976. p. 32) The sense of human immediacy is palpable in the record of the artist’s touch. The expressive power of the artist’s hand reactivates our memory and lies at the center of human evolution.

When we think of our achievements at the beginning of the new millennium, is it our artistic expressions that come to mind or is it science and technology at which we excel? Or the marriage of the two? What constitutes the art in techno-art? Has the proliferating role of computers in the art world deepened our sense of what it means to be human, renewing our interest in humanism? Has the widely fast paced manipulation of images afforded by the computer had sufficient effect on the senses to command our attention, to stir our imaginations or do electronic media and the computer limit our human abilities, thereby holding us back?

We’ve been making marks for an awfully long time, says Sarah Rogers, director of exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio and curator of “Body Mecanique: Artistic Explorations of Digital Realms.” “Even if the mark is made with a keyboard and a mouse,” states Rogers, “the process is going to go on for a very long time to come.” (Rogers in Madoff, 1999. p. AR37)

Technology is part of our landscape affecting the way we communicate. Our interactions with technology more and more define our interactions with the world. An astonishing core of artists is building an art world with different rules, different tools and imaginations. As an extension of traditional studio tools, many artists use the computer for all sorts of painterly investigations, a powerful metaphor for the mind, a vehicle for addressing questions about contemporary culture.

Terry Winters uses the computer in the creative process and as a means of generating art. His 1991 retrospective at the Whitney explored the zone between geometry and gesture through abstract forms, ambiguous in meaning but rich in illusion. This preeminent Y2K painter uses computers as an aid in structuring his linear compositions. Is Winter’s art the shape of things to come?

Since the early 1980s, Peter Halley has made reductivist paintings called “digital fields” that treat geometry as a reflection of social space meant to evoke the hidden systems that govern our activity in postindustrial society, a marriage between computer-generated techniques and computer related imagery. Since 1992, he has incorporated digital technology into his printmaking as well. Serving as a metaphor for the electronic saturation that characterizes the major components of the information age, his 1997 installation at MOMA consisted of wallpaper and large press-on flow charts that the museum purchased as digital files on a computer
Halley's attitude toward computer technology is more ambivalent than all-embracing, its ramifications paradoxically include the isolation and mechanization of the individual as well as the means for faster, more wide reaching communications. (Figura, 1997. p. 16) Will artists remain unique in an automated world?

What about haptic interaction, the coordination of hand, eye and tool? Will the medium have a feel that we can sense in action?

Jeff Elrod’s hard-edge paintings start as digital drawings using the mouse that have been projected into canvas and transferred using tape and paint rollers. Their origins on the computer screen are often hinted at in titles like “Analogue Painting.” Incorporating recently outmoded technology, what we see is human movement graphed onto the computer through the sudden jerks, turns, and drops of line.

Abstracted from human touch, Elrod’s canvases place the hand at a digital remove and have an unmistakably “technological touch” whereas Maya Lin, designer of the Museum of African Art in Soho and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial sees herself as a visionary escort in an exploration of the touch and feel of the human hand.

What of the movement of the hand and its special role and status by which the physical and the psychological coordinates of the self come into being? Almost a primal kind of gesture, Pollock compensates for losing the sense of touch maintained by artists for centuries by imprinting the image of his hand in two of his poured paintings: “Number 1A” of 1948 (Plate 5) and “Lavender Mist” of 1950. Only the prehistoric source seems to be the precedent for the lateral repetition of hands in which he reaffirmed the sense of touch he had lost in the poured technique. (Cernuschi, 1992. p. 110) These private signatures become the evidence of his physical role in the creative process and seem to have generated a feeling of co-identity between the artist and his work.

The most likely influence is an illustration from Baldwin Brown’s Art of the Cave Dwellers in Pollock’s possession which reproduced the stenciled hands from the caves of Castillo in Spain. After completing “Number 1A,” Pollock was given Leonard Adams’ book Primitive Art which also included an illustration of handprints which may have caused him to reintroduce the motif in “Lavender Mist.” (Cernuschi, 1992. p.112) We know Pollock spoke about “being in” or “being part” of his paintings. One always senses the bodily movement continuous with Pollock’s painted surfaces, his drips indexed to the body’s energies.

To which artists is the record of the hand a disclosure of the act of art’s creation? To which artists are signs of the artists active presence tangible reflections of the artist’s own internal reality? According to Meyer Shapiro, the mark is inseparable from the biography of the artist, of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence.

The presence of their own handprints, one measure of subjective experience, can be found in the works of modern artists Hans Hofmann, Adolf Gottlieb, Man Ray, and Gabriel Orozco, among others.
The most consistent topological motif in Jasper Johns' work lies in the body and, more precisely, in skin. (Varnedoe, 1996. p. 29) His skin drawings of the early 1960s in which he rubbed oil on his own body and face, then printing on flat sheets and dusting the stains with charcoal powder, made meanings manifest in physical terms, metaphorizing toward larger issues of time and spirit. The physical immediacy conveyed by body imprints and casts had developed into a vehicle for complex meaning for Johns at an early date. Terry Winters, as a young painter maturing in the 1970s, felt Johns' kept both the mind and the body in the image and, thus, allowed abstract painting to go forward.

All of Susan Rothenberg's art is rooted in gesture and impulse and there are many recurring hands—asking for something, doing something—in her paintings. All of her work is about body orientation. (Auping, 1992. p. 32) Her first horse paintings of 1974 made in raw sienna color, like clay, relate to the body, to the earth, and to prehistoric cave paintings. In the early 1980s she painted a series of schematic hands, inventing new forms to reinvent the human body. For Kiki Smith, the human body in all its variety and complexity has dominated her art making. Smith's work reminds us that it is the body which is "our primary vehicle for experiencing our lives." (Wells, 1995. p. 229) She created "Identical Twins" in 1990, an aluminum cast made from wax casts of a pair of twins' hands in which the sculptural and genetic are visually linked.

Bruce Nauman, who Michael Kimmelman of The New York Times said may be the most influential American artist around, is known for the sheer intensity of his poke-in-the-eye black humor and the acute anxiety and discomfort his work causes. Nauman called his early cast of the wax mouth and a bit of neck, arm, and hand From Hand to Mouth," and while literalizing the cliché, it also constitutes an aesthetic equation relating the work of the hands to the workings of language. (Storr, 1995. p. 6) A more recent exhibition at Castelli featured a group of untitled sculptures each consisting of a pair of life sized hands, those of Nauman himself cast in white bronze.

As a varied set of stimuli for mind and eye, one can access a range of symbols and memories from the iconic gestures of the hands. Durer's famous 1508 ink drawing "Praying Hands" evokes spirituality and piety. Raphael left his handprint, a clearly labeled marker, his autograph, in the fresco surface of his 1508 “School of Athens” which decorates the library and study of Pope Julius II in the Vatican Museum. (Butturini, 1996) Mel Bochner’s 1968 Polaroid photographs, rephotographed, enlarged and mounted engage issues of language and measurement. Entitled “Enlarged Hand,” his use of the hand is impersonal and formal as he maps three dimensions onto two. In 1924 Picasso made a whole series of charcoal drawings, gouaches, and pastels of his left hand working from life. And, under the strained circumstances of the German occupation of Paris, Brassai photographed castings of Picasso’s closed fist and his right hand, a series of imprints in white plaster. (Plate 11, “Cast of Picasso’s Hand,” 1944)

During Rodin's long career, he obsessively modeled thousands of hands in clay and plaster. Many were miniature, little hands kept hidden like talismans, squirreled away in chests of drawers in his studio. Periodically he would rummage through them and carry them around with him. (Cotter, 1997) Some of the larger detached hands were incorporated into compositions—a bronze left hand on one of the burghers of Callais or "The Hand of God in which a man and woman are curled within its half-opened palm.
At 14th Street and Broadway, thirty blocks downtown from the Algonquin Hotel on a new building is a ten story art work called “Metronome.” On its facade is an enormous hand cast and enlarged from Union Square’s equestrian statue of George Washington. It is one part of a giant timepiece on a complicated artistic puzzle about time.

What separates art created before the dawn of history, the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance from the art of our own time? If they were starting out now, would Picasso, Raphael or Pollock use the computer to generate their paintings?

New systems of communication gradually modify our ways of thinking and very probably intervene in the actions of our eye, brain, hand, our neural network. Gary Schneider’s “Genetic Self-Portrait” consists of embodiments of flesh and blood, his own body inside and out in genetic codes and scans. In a roomful of highly magnified black and white photos of his hands which result from the residue of heat and sweat left on film emulsion, we find an enduring focus, a reinvigoration of art by reintroducing the artist’s hand. “The hands,” says Schneider, “are the most intimate of images, a reassuring representation of the familiar in human anatomy while confronting the unknown of future biology.” (Schneider in Wilford, 1999. p. 109)

Almost no scientific invention, principle, fact, technique or technology seems immune to the artist’s appetite. Artists today have at their disposal the on-going, expanding technology to explore new dimensions of space and mind.

Today I began with the earliest expressions—hand silhouettes and countless finger tracings on cave walls and close with the iconic hand—the five fingered icon that is seen on computer screens. What is it to be creative and to be human? Can the general direction of the future still be traced by the artist’s hand? Is it still the work of the hands that intrigues?

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A MOTHER’S PERSPECTIVE: VERMEER, MODERSOHN-BECKER AND NEW CHILDSCAPES

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Two years ago, the last time I presented a paper (then on Clement Greenberg) at this conference, I was about three months pregnant with our third child, our first little girl, born in April 1999. Since that time, I have become inspired by her birth and by her interactions with her brothers to begin a new series of works which I have called “Childscapes,” seen from the mother’s perspective. Two or three other artists have also come to my attention again and have become inspirational: the work of Vermeer, of the ubiquitous Mary Cassatt and of Modersolm-Becker especially in their works of pregnant and nursing mothers. For it is in these works that one finds not only an updating of the traditional Mother and Child image but also an earthy and yet spiritual version that is more in keeping, perhaps, with our everyday habits in the modern age. Their concentration on love and relationships speak to all women, mothers and parents today. What particularly interests me is the development of relationships in these pieces: from the awkwardness of a first “date” in Vermeer through pregnancy to the later pleasures of one’s own children.

To my knowledge, the image of pregnant women in the work of Vermeer has not been extensively researched. The poignancy of these images struck me only after I myself had become pregnant, and apparently this subject is a matter of scholarly debate. Visions of pregnancy have been quite rare throughout art history. The Reims Visitation (left slide) is as close as we can get to Medieval representations of full-fledged pregnancies, as the Virgin Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth (the mother of St. John the Baptist) who is three months further along than she. In the Northern Renaissance, visions of fertility are often confused with pregnancy. Van Eyck’s Eve from the Ghent Altarpiece (left slide) from 1432 and his famous Arnolfini Wedding Portrait (slide) from 1434, show women with enlarged stomachs as if they were indeed pregnant. However, Eve is still innocent, for she has yet to eat from the fruit in her hand, and it is doubtful that Mr. Arnolfini would pay a premium price for the painting of a shotgun wedding. So although it is acceptable to suggest pregnancy, the discomfort of the real thing is avoided until the twentieth century.

I think the most spiritual images of pregnant women were no doubt done by Vermeer (Woman with the Balance, left slide, c. 1664). It is here that I will spend a bit of time analyzing the importance of these images. I never realized their importance myself until I had had several children, and now I am fascinated by these paintings: their stillness, their self-possession and the light that shines upon them. I am still amazed that Vermeer, who married in 1653 at age 20 (the same year he decided to become a painter) and died only twenty-three years later (on Dec. 13, 1675) at age 43, fathered fifteen children, eleven of who lived and ten of whom were still minors at his death. (Imagine the hardships of being his widow with those ten minor children!) And yet the silence of his paintings, and of his studio, must have been in strong contrast to the continual activity in his house (even though many of his children were daughters). Contrast the activity in Steen’s St. Nicholas Eve (right slide) from 1660-65 with the only work known by Vermeer to contain children: his Little Street from 1658! I imagine somehow that Vermeer must have found a spiritual respite in his studio and sought to impart this in his work. The two
little ones here, about four or five years old, would coincide with the ages of his own children at that time. And even though he did not paint prolific images of his own family, he must have loved and valued all of them for his paintings are resonant with these values, especially as seen in the budding life within his wife's body.

Few critics have latched onto the meaning of these pregnant women. I see them deriving from several sources: the Bible, traditional symbolism and daily life. I imagine that his wife was a handy model, especially pregnant as much as she was during their years together. Yet I also think he relished the miracle of birth and brought to bear upon it a new spiritual dimension. Holland was predominantly protestant, after its split from Catholic Belgium, and yet Vermeer converted to Catholicism before marrying his beloved wife. Because he was, like his father before him, also an art dealer, the paintings in the back of his paintings vary and can often be construed as symbolic.

In his earlier works, Vermeer shows an awkward relationship between the few men and the more numerous women in his paintings. Like many men through the ages, the males in his work (Girl with a Wine Glass from c. 1659-60 left slide) seem intent upon seducing their favorites with wine. There is an uneasy, distant and tipsy relationship here that is all too true of the awkward moments of first dates.

Interestingly enough, it is in the Procuress (right slide) (a 1656 painting of prostitution) where a sense of deeply intimate and reciprocally satisfying sexual relationship is seen. (Note that the dates place this painting four years before the “previous” scene in Girl with a Wine Glass. Both of these works can be seen as a preambles to the pregnancy pieces later on.) As in The Jewish Bride (left slide) by Rembrandt, the man’s hand is upon the woman’s breast. But whereas Rembrandt’s work seems to show an acceptance and yet psychological distance (for the breast is so small that his hand seems to be generally upon her chest, somewhat below her breast; instead of feeling her breast, his hand rests there with hers added upon his for acceptance), Venmeer’s is most assuredly a sexual move. And yet the woman welcomes it. As many critics have noted, this loving and warm connection between these two (in lusciously warm colors) is in stark contrast to the darker, separate figures to the left. Is it only through a painting of prostitution that the deeper joys of a sexual relationship can be shown? Beyond occasional symbolic allusions to a bed, sex itself was not an overt subject in most marriage portraits. But yet the sexual relationship is warmly, richly and overtly referenced here. Thus it is my supposition that Vermeer himself had undoubtedly experienced just such a relationship with his young wife and sought an acceptable framework in which to display this and the high value he placed upon just such a love.

I could examine the theme of Vermeer’s love letters (Girl by the Window With a Letter left slide). Letters perhaps related to Rembrandt’s Bathsheba (right slide). But time constraints limit me. Let it suffice to suggest that his paintings of letters, like many ostensibly simple works, operate on many different levels that can be variously interpreted by viewers and critics. The reflections of Vermeer’s young girl can be used as symbolism for her inner, more private reflections. Letters, a new form of communication at that time, can be seen as an essential connection within relationships involving distance. In Woman in Blue with a Letter we see the fullness of life in her belly despite the suggestion of distance seen in the map and the empty chair. It, too, is an inward moment, pregnant with inner life. In this way, Venmeer may be reflecting some of the ideas evident in ModersohnBecker’s later image of pregnancy.
I think that much of Vermeer's work concerns relationships between males and females and between human beings and their God. To show a particularly harmonious painting from his later period, in contrast to the awkward relationships of his early works, let us examine Couple at a Virginal (left slide) from 1662-1665. Here, as in The Concert (right slide), stolen from Boston's Gardner Museum several years ago, music plays a prime role in the harmony of relationships. Note how in the Virginal painting the glance from the suitor (or instructor, or both) is answered only in the mirror, (Virginal detail, right slide), representing perhaps the glance the modest young woman would like to return to the young man. For this position of her head in the mirror does not correspond to that of her head in the main painting. (Is this double-viewing developed more obviously by Manet in his famous Bar at the Folies-Bergere? (left slide) There is a stillness and peace between them, no awkward poses or expressions. Even the instruments (the virginal and viola da gamba) seem to echo and partake in their closeness. Thus we see a confidential give and take, acceptance and peace that are common to the best relationships. As Edward Snow has written, "This is the moment that counts." In fact, on the virginal itself, the Latin inscription can be translated as: "Music is the companion for joy and the medicine for suffering." Cannot the same thing be said for relationships?

In The Concert, we have a seated woman playing a keyboard instrument, a seated male with a stringed instrument, and a standing woman (who appears pregnant) who provides the vocals. Many critics focus on the relationship between the seated couple and read various interpretations into it. Looking at how the male (here an artist instead of musician) was portrayed in The Artist's Studio (left slide), one of his last works from 1672, I see a strong likeness in the pose, dress and body of both men. This has led me to suppose that this is a portrait of family peace and bliss: the accomplished (marriage-ready?) daughter plays, accompanied by her father and her mother (with yet another sibling on the way). Like the earlier paintings, this painting can be said to be dealing with relationships.

It was indeed Vermeer's images of pregnant women that caught my attention recently, probably after I had executed my own image of pregnancy. Woman with a Balance (left slide, within a year of Woman in Blue Reading a Letter) has traditionally been viewed as a weighing of materialistic jewels vs. the weighing of souls in the painting behind her. Yet in 1977, scholar Arthur Wheelock noticed that there is nothing on the scales. Then what exactly is this woman weighing? Until recently, I had not even noticed the subject of the Last Judgement in the rear painting, nor did I thus extend the parallel (as previous critics did in droves) to suggest that it is the Virgin Mary herself who is interceding, as she has throughout religious history, on behalf of sinners. Instead, I focused upon her thoughts and her pregnancy. Note how the lines of her lower arms, hands and scales intersect at and enclose her protruding belly. Even her contented, peaceful expression points this way. How can she not be weighing the relative unimportance of material goods against the precious child within her? Her downcast eyes seem to register some uncertainty of her future, of that of her child, and yet a broad acceptance of this experience as well. In her field of values, she suggests the values reiterated more loudly in the Neoclassical painting by Angelica Kaufman in 1785, more than one hundred years later, in her Cornelia, Mother of the Craachi (right slide) painting.

But suppose Vermeer's image works as well as a Virgin Mary, also weighing the child in her belly against all the jewels in the world. Can we take this analogy further in another image of pregnancy, Woman with a Pearl Necklace (right slide, unfortunately a very light slide) from
1665, one year after the Woman with the Balance? This painting has also been associated with vanity and a love of riches, even though pearls traditionally have signified purity. If the pearls do represent purity, could the woman not then also be the Virgin Mary? To me, she seems to look acceptingly (not vainly) toward the window, appreciating the gift(s) given to her. Could this not even be the moment of the Annunciation? Yes, she is already pregnant, but so were early images of Eve before she ate the fruit. Aware of Henry Osawa Tanner’s much later interpretation of The Annunciation (slide) from 1898 as a source of light (instead of the traditional angel Gabriel). I wonder if here, too, the Virgin Mary is not accepting with love and awareness, from that stream of light, her role to bear the Christ child. But, as is true of the ostensibly simple works of Vermeer, this could indeed operate on the sacred and secular level at the same time.

In this way, it is my contention that Vermeer created some of the first sensitive and spiritual images of pregnancy, even if he was a man!

But images of birth in Western art are relatively rare until the 1990’s. A bit earlier in the twentieth century, we begin to see more uncomfortable images of pregnancy: Alice Neel’s daughter-in-law Margaret Evans (left slide) and artist Gillian Melling Me and My Baby (right slide) from 1992. In my own work, the Ninth Month (left slide) being one of the first works executed after Sarah’s birth. I wished to convey the weight and discomfort of the last month, as well as a suggestion of the miracle of those moving little limbs within my body. I had thought to put a hand on the belly, but then I would have hidden her little being. So I left it as it was and forgot to add an arm. (Instead of just discomfort, I hope that my work also shows the beauty behind the pain and pressure, suggesting the spiritual rewards more subtly inherent in Vermeer’s work.)

Images of birth are even rare than those of pregnancy, and this one of mine, Spring Waterbirth (Sarah) (right slide), conveys the buoyancy of a waterbirth, the connection with the spring landscape outside, and the little arms and legs which I felt move through me. This is positively peaceful compared to a similar view by a father during childbirth evident in Jonathan Waller’s Mother No. 27 from 1996.

Less rare than pregnancy and birth in Western art are images of nursing, especially during the Renaissance. The Flemish artist Jan Gossauert’s Holy Family (left slide) from the early sixteenth century shows a post-nursing scene. The contented child has fallen asleep and his weary but loving mother watches over him carefully. Even more intriguing is father Joseph in the back: an elder man enjoying if not relishing his family. This may even reflect a modern family’s feelings, especially those today with older fathers. This is in spite of the distorted breast. (Women were rarely used as models back then, so this awkward anatomy is common in many Northern Renaissance works of the time.) However, Postmodern photographer/artist Cindy Sherman’s Untitled (right slide) from 1989 misses the point. As costumer, set designer, actress and photographer, she focuses primarily upon the breast. And yet the rest of the work is stiff as can be; as formally posed as any Rococo work from the eighteenth century. As she moves from character to character in her pieces, always surprising the viewer in almost unrecognizable guises, she lacks a center (as the School of Visual Arts’ own critic Donald Kuspit noted in an Art New England article). In Sherman’s pointed, ironic commentary, she shows herself to be the poorer, because she also lacks the love and intimacy, which makes the Gossaert image so special.
Even Giorgione in his famously mysterious Tempest (slide) from c. 1510 portrays a mother and nursing child with an awkward leg between them. (Why is the baby not resting on his mother’s lap? It is because already he is beginning to act on his own inspiration?) Viewers have wondered for centuries about the subject of this painting, for Giorgione was the first to paint a mood, without the set cast of characters to portray a specific story or moral. About the time that I began to desire my own children, this piece suddenly struck me as being about creativity: the shepard/soldier to the left representing guardianship and poetry, the dome and towers of the various styles of the architecture of the town behind, the unfinished works in the foreground needing the spark of creativity provided by the lightening in order to be completed. And what is more creative than giving birth to one’s own child and nurturing that child closely? Although it may seem odd, in “reality,” that she is nursing in the nude, in the past, the nude represented innocence and purity (the sacred and spiritual, not the materialistic and secular world.) As she looks at us knowingly, she has no questions; she understands it all and accepts it. For she realizes that it is in the deep dark beauty of nature (as well as within ourselves) that we find the sparks of inspiration to create with our lives what we can. It is an enigmatic and mysterious piece, perhaps it is about as much as anything else, how essential it is to connect with that special creative germ in us all.

I know that in my own life, in some of my most creative moments (right slide; my nursing slide Yearling Nursing, Almost Weaned, 2000), forms are created in a welling of ideas that come a deep, dark inside. Something says to me: “do this line, this texture, this gesture, this shape,” even though it may not have a rational reason. But it is these moments that lead to new shapes, developments and realizations, for some of my simple forms can work on many levels. (And already I am getting some very interesting ideas about my most recent work, now showing in Fitchburg, MA at Applewild and at Mocha Alley: ideas which may not have occurred to me explicitly when I created the piece but which do reflect ideas relevant to the whole.)

It is interesting that some people do not realize what the bumps are in these nursing images, and then suddenly, with shock, they realize what they are seeing. I hope, and think sometimes that it works, that the viewer may also feel the intimacy and preciousness of these nursing moments. When looking at works hanging side by side like this, I almost feel as if I was nursing again.

Even Mary Cassatt did at least one image of nursing, Young Mother Nursing her Child, left slide) although, of course, not from her own viewpoint (since she never married nor had children). For some centuries (perhaps ceasing with Rousseau’s natural wisdom in the late eighteenth century many women sent their children out to be wet-nursed, often by farmer’s wives far away in the country. I can’t imagine losing my child for the most precious two years of their lives!

Mary Cassatt could be seen has having secularized even further the traditional theme of Virgin and Child in her Impressionist paintings of the nineteenth-century. Women are assumed to have more sensitivity toward children, so when Mary Cassatt began her theme of mothers and children in 1880, they were immediately accepted by the critics and by the public. But what is fascinating is not only the content of her paintings but how she painted them. Her use of pattern and swelling forms in pastel create an intimacy that one can almost touch. As Nancy Mowell Matthew has noted, “Her mothers and children were emphatically modern but had the
monumentality of the traditional Madonna and Child. Her early images were of single or double portraits, but after her extensive exposure to Japanese prints in 1891, her composition tightened and became more modern in its complement of form and content. Quite often, the loose pastel creates an abstract flat picture plane in the lower part of the painting; from this flat plane, little chubby bottoms, arms and legs poke out, bringing the image as close to the viewer as possible. The sense of touch is strong: between the abstracted pastel patterns and the rounded colors of the physical forms, the closeness of the cheeks and heads, the viewer becomes involved directly. And if she does not create such closeness through pastel, she does it through a Japanese flattening of the picture plane, seen in The Boating Party (left slide) from 1893 and Alexander J. Cassatt and his Son (right slide) from 1884.

Nor are these are sentimentalized images. In her work, there is a portrayal of children as they really are (and how, naturally, she must have experienced them upon visits with her family). Children are grouchy upon waking up from a nap (slides), squirming, bored and restless. (Girl in Blue Armchair). But Cassatt knew that because she drew children she knew best: not her own, but those of her sisters and brother. She never married, so many of these portraits are seen from the point of view of the outsider. And yet she made them as tactile and alive as possible. (Cassatt’s Mother and Child, left slide; The Bath, right slide)

In Cassatt’s later prints, such as Maternal Caress from the 1890 or 1891, she shows the influence of Japanese artists such as Utamaro’s nursing Mother and Infant from one hundred years earlier (the 1790’s). Cassatt is no longer flattening areas of the medium so that other, rounder areas pop out toward you, but she is tightening the play of shape, line and flat areas to create an overall closeness. The baby is not only wrapped in its mother’s arms, but their heads are enclosed in the violet bed bounded by pattern.

Yet again it is a soft sense of touch, between mother and child as well as between the shapes themselves, that move us too. These shapes and patterns create their own kind of closeness between mother and child and their environment. Obviously, Cassatt has been an influence in my own work.

But it is Paula Modersohn-Becker, along with Vermeer, upon whom I also plan to concentrate in this paper. She was a happy but serious woman, relishing life, aware of its brevity, while struggling to portray her sensibility in her art. She could be seen as on the cusp of the art of the new century—inspired by Cezanne, she abstracted into flat shapes and expressionist colors and shapes which combined human forms with those of nature.

Almost two hundred years after the death of Vermeer, Modersohn-Becker also takes her own tact with some of the most earthly mothers and children in the history of art. She includes some of the most graphic images of nursing, yet shows it as a natural enterprise. As in her other portraits of peasants, she continues a strained mood in her mother/child images, showing the effort it takes to be a mother (especially one in poverty). Yet she also lightens them with a relishing of color and texture that is truly modern (rivaling perhaps that of Cezanne, an artist who she admitted influenced her).

Paula Becker was born in Dresden, Germany on Feb. 8, 1876, at the time when Cassatt was creating her Impressionist paintings and only a few years before she began her mother and child series. Modersohn-Becker started taking art lessons fourteen years later in 1892. Like van
Gogh, her life in art was short-lived (but not quite as short-lived). When she was nineteen, she was introduced to the Worpswede colony of artists and in 1901 she married fellow painter Otto Modersohn, and they settled in Worpswede, Germany. Their relationship became rocky, especially after Paula left for Paris for just over two years, from February 1905 to March 1907. (She had felt trapped in Worpswede and needed to paint in a more cosmopolitan city.) She thrived in Paris, her fourth and longest visit to the city, taking art lessons and working happily and long on her own work, often living in her studio. When Otto came to visit in September 1906, they reconciled their relationship. When they returned to Worpswede in the spring of 1907, she was pregnant with their first child. (Her first letter in regard to her pregnancy was written March 9, 1907.) Matilde was born November 2, and on the 20th when Modersohn-Becker endeavored to rise from her bed for the first time since giving birth, she collapsed and died of an embolism at age 31. Her friend Clara Rilke wrote her description of Paula’s last moments this way (after Otto Modersohn’s recollections):

Paula was given permission to get out of bed and happily prepared herself for this occasion. She had a large mirror placed at the foot of her bed and combed her beautiful hair, braided it, and wound the braids into a crown around her head. She pinned roses which someone had sent her to her dressing gown a few when her husband and brother were preparing to support her on either side, she gently walked ahead of them into the other room. There, candles had been lighted everywhere in the chandelier, on a garland of candleholders around the body of carved baroque angel, and in many other places. She then asked for her child to be brought to her. When this was done she said “Now it is almost as beautiful as Christmas.” Then suddenly she had to elevate her foot—and when they came to help her, she said only. “A pity, . . .”

In the previous November, Paula Modersohn-Becker had finally began to achieve recognition for which she had long worked. Gustav Pauli of the Kunsthalle praised her work for its “uncommon energy, . . . sense of color,” and decorative power. Other critics agreed. Despite her need for independence and the freedom to paint, Modersohn-Becker had been lonely in Paris. When she returned to Worpswede, she relished the intimacy with her sisters and mother again. She needed the emotional support of her family, and this is perhaps a great reason that she returned to her husband (and the fact that he loved her a great deal). This down-to-earth intimacy and love is evident in her paintings completed at this time as well as their reaction against the “cooler” paintings she had completed in Paris. Perhaps she needed Paris to open up her form, to explore and experiment like the Post Impressionists. But it was home in Worpswede that she could use that form to convey the warmth of relationships that truly moved her. Here we not only see the combination of Cezanne’s roughness, the “influence of van Gogh and the Nabis . . . united with her own personal and lapidary style of expression,” but her own solid, earthy relationships (to the peasants, to her family and to her own artistic need for honest self-expression).

And yet in every one of her works there is also, even in a hidden way, a human warmth, a heartfelt quality, and love. This is art that a woman created. However this description of it must not be misunderstood, especially today, for hers is certainly no “feminist art.” Everything programmatic or ideological was antipathetic to her personality and creativity.  

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In the end of her life, there was a surge of creativity. She admitted in the summer of 1907 that

I have not done much work this summer, and I have no idea if you will like any of the little that I have accomplished. . . . What I want to produce is something compelling, some-thing full, an excitement and intoxication of color—something powerful. The paintings I did in Paris are too cool, too solitary and empty. They are the reaction to a restless and superficial period in my life and seem to strain for a simple, grand effect.

I wanted to conquer Impressionism by trying to forget it. What happened was that it conquered me. We must work with digested and assimilated Impressionism. 10

After the difficult birth of Matilde, Paula’s mother wrote that she found Paula “herself as young as a rose.” Not a trace of suffering new mother in confinement; all was joy and maternal happiness and gratitude for the safe delivery . . . Paul reclines on snow-white pillows beneath her beloved Gaugins and Rodins . . . After the bath. [Matilde] is laid at Paula’s breast and takes hold as cleverly as an old hand, and nurses and feeds until she falls asleep, a little brunette next to a big brunette. 11

The paintings of Modersohn-Becker which most interest me today are those of pregnancy and nursing. On her fifth anniversary, while painting alone in Paris, she executed a painting entitled Self Portrait on Fifth Anniversary 1906. May 15. What is interesting is that she was not feeling kindly toward her husband at this time and in a letter written three and one half months later, on Sept. 3, had said openly that she did not want his child 12 (Yet only six days later she had changed her mind and welcomed her husbands planned visit to Paris, saying “my wish not to have a child by you was only for the moment, and stood on weak legs.” 13 Yet in this picture from May 15, she shows herself as pregnant, revealing in paint the contradictions that riddled her letters: the need to belong and the need to be independent, the need to be a painter and. I think, the need to be a mother. She may also be pregnant with creativity—the bursting of paintings within her. (From my own experience, I know that one can feel a close link between creativity and nurturing, whether pregnancy or nursing. as seen in Giorgiones The Tempest.

She did not write about this painting in her diary or letters nor did she write about the one next to it in the slide: Composition with Three Female Figures: A Self-Poffrait in the Middle from 1907. In this right slide, she may indeed be pregnant, or perhaps she is imagining herself as pregnant. The glance, the swollen belly and even hand positions are similar. I am only sorry that I do not have a color slide of this work; nor have I seen this image in color. (The self-portrait is in Bremen, Germany and this Composition with Three Figures was destroyed.) Is Paula thinking of the motif of the Three Graces in this Composition? Do these three women represent the Three Graces as in Botticelli’s Primavera? Perhaps we thus see different aspects of relationships through the three women: the virginal one on the right with flowers, the married woman with the fruit and the pregnant woman with the bowl of fruit. And yet there is her familiar earthy awareness in the central portion that is anything but coy or symbolic. Does she thus bring the iconography of love down to earth? What is also interesting is how she seemed unusually able to understand what pregnancy and nursing would really feel like, to the mother herself. And yet she died before being able to paint one image from her own
It seems that Modersohn-Becker intuits what it is like to be a mother, not only in the pregnant images but in her nursing images as well. It is this earthy look, evident in Nursing Mother and Mother and Child from 1906-7, which especially appeals to me. (Reclining Mother and Child and Nursing Mother with Child slides). Some critics say that these show the tedium of nursing, and they may be right. But what I see is resignation coupled with intimacy: the way the peasant’s mother’s hand holds that of her baby even while her other fist is almost clenched in Nursing Mother (an undated image; I believe in a date circa 1906-7). None of these mothers looks angelic or beautiful: they are not the Virgin Mary. Neither are these newborn babes. They must be at least six to nine months old, if not older. The discomfort is enhanced in Mother and Child from 1906-7 in the way the mother kneels. Why is she kneeling? No mother that I know of would do this for the twenty or more minutes required for nursing. Is this a way of giving homage to motherhood, as if in prayer? If so, it is a new way to combine religious iconography with earthly motherly themes. The Virgin herself could not be more devoted: kneeling nude to nurse her child.

This is a direct and beautiful image: unashamed and mater-of-fact, yet glowing in purple colors (unfortunately too light in my slide). The nipple is even evident in this slide, something uncommon even in nursing images. It is only a shame that Modersohn-Becker died before translating her own experience of motherhood into powerful artworks.

My favorite nurturing image of hers is Reclining Mother and Child. In this work she shows an uncanny understanding of the need for sleep after nursing, especially in the middle of the night. Here the mother and child are nude, but there is none of the sexuality and sensuality traditionally associated with female nudes throughout the history of art. Instead, this is a nourishing mother, much like mother earth herself. This work has inspired a direct image from my own work, but with a much clumsier body of the mother (my work: Morning Nursing, Pool Pond 1999).

Shortly after the birth of our third child in April 1999, I also became interested in mother/child images, but from the mother’s viewpoint. I have been inspired by the spiritual light of Vermeer, the touch of Cassatt and the nurturing earthiness of Modersohn-Becker. Within a month or two of Sarah’s birth, I began doing pastel drawings of pregnancy from the mother’s viewpoint as well as the waterbirth, nursing and multiple other experiences. As an artist, I was fascinated by the shapes, colors and closeness that nursing, cuddling and playing with the other children entailed. As I prepared for one of several recent exhibitions, I thought of the title of “Childscapes,” which also connected to my previous work in aerial perspectives.

There are many things I wish to convey in these ostensibly simple drawings: the preciousness of daily life with children, the inherent spirituality of such a loving relationship, the adorable shapes and interactions as they learn to scramble into your lap, climb stairs, play with siblings, etc. At the same time, I want to make these experiences universal. These are not traditional portraits; often only the top of the head is seen. One only sees my legs and arms, not my face. I am hoping the viewer will be able to put him or herself in my place and feel what I feel about being a mother. So far, this is the reaction from many viewers at my recent shows.
Like Modersohn-Becker, the breasts are not sensual but nourishing. Although, my husband is made uncomfortable by these partial nude images, I am not embarrassed. One loses all modesty giving birth anyway, but I hope that these works go beyond traditional limits of sexuality and obscenity to convey the deepest aspect of mother as nurturer. And like Vermeer, these images are quiet, although they do contain up to three children. (I’m only glad I don’t have as many as eleven!)

Images of pregnancy, birth and nursing are rare in western art, perhaps because women artists rarely have time to be both mothers and artists at the time when this inspiration is the freshest. Because pastels can be easily worked up, I have been able to create dozens of these works thus far.

I hope that this paper has conveyed some of the intimacy, preciousness and spirituality that is true of motherhood. In these works, we have traveled from Vermeer’s spiritual kinship with his beloved and pregnant wife to a Cassatt’s view of other mothers to Modersohn-Becker’s intuited feeling of an earthy mother. I have tried to take these steps further to portray children from a mother’s point of view in my own childscapes. In our busy era, when we rush from one commitment to another, we need to relax and relish the brief time we have with our children.

My latest works, with several members of the family (now even including Daddy too), cuddled in a bed or on a sofa—reading, watching a family movie, or even taking a bath (children only), uses a more complex play of shapes and layered color to suggest the intimate and spiritual possibilities of family life. As one of the recent articles about me said: “It’s about attitude.” One can be resentful of the work involved in taking care of one’s children or one can relish each moment. Perhaps it is easier for working mothers to treasure the moments they do have with their children since these times are more rare than for stay-at-home moms. Or perhaps it is the stay-at-home mom who is the wisest to appreciate her kids when they are home. Working as a college professor is the best for me, with the time off to spend with children during long vacations in addition to the intellectual stimulation of teaching. It is truly wonderful to be able to mix career, creative and childcare goals in one rich and blessed life. I hope that you have found a few my insights into the works of Vermeer, Cassatt and Modersohn-Becker, as well as my own attempts at artworks, at least somewhat informative and helpful. Thank you for sharing my ideas today.

NOTES

2. Snow, pp. 4-6.
3 Ibid. p. 198.
7. Ibid. p. 412.
8. Ibid. p. 7.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE SAPHHIC MODEL: THE SCREEN OF OUR DESIRE

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In Rainer Maria Rilke's Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge he portrays the object of Sappho's desire as "less important than the very nature and the continued existence of that desire" (DeJean 25). He sees Sappho as a model for communities of artists because her poetly is continuous longing, not fulfillment, but greater and greater longing. Whether it be verbal or visual, Sappho's representation is the consummate embodiment of that desire that makes each of us strive for something.

Sappho scholarship is enormous, and the mythology and history are contradictory. Information about her ranges from the historical to the hysterical, poetic shards to internet figments. We can only reconstruct her from remaining fragments of her poetry and lingering images. She has become the screen onto which readers, critics and artists have projected our own desires.

We know very little about her other than that she was a late sixth-century Lesbian, that is, born on the island of Lesbos. The word lesbos has nothing to do with female sexuality; instead it is attributed to the Phoenician word "esvos," which means seven. The isand is the seventh largest in the Mediterranean.

Dudley Fitts's Foreword to Mary Barnard's 1958 translation of her poetry suggests that most of Sappho's history is "nothing but speculation" (viii). Joan DeJean believes that Sappho is "a figment of the modern imagination," but is, nonetheless, known as "the poetess," the one "truly legendary figure (1). DeJean contends that to the extent that Sappho is a figment of the modern imagination, she and her fictions are merely projections of "the critic's/writer's desires onto the corpus, the fictive body, of the original woman writer" (3), and this is most clearly apparent in the visual depictions accompanying the textual reconstructions of Sappho's work.

While doing my research, I discovered much the same thing that Joan DeJean found: "Sappho makes a great many people nervous," including and perhaps especially those people who live in Mytilene, the capital city of Lesbos. I think we all know why, despite Judith P. Halley's insistence that "the surviving fragments of Sappho's poetry do not provide any decisive evidence that she participated in homosexual acts" (453). According to Rae Dalven, Sappho was born about 612 B.C. into an aristocratic family in Eressos, a town now turned lesbian pilgrimage destination, mecca-resort, on the west coast of the island. Imagine my scholarly disappointment when I visited the town and discovered thatched roofed beach bars that played Brazilian music and served colored drinks in fluted, frosted glasses topped with little dancing cocktail parasols.

We learn from Herodotus (2-135) that Sappho's father, Scamandronymos, was a rich noble who died when she was six, leaving her three brothers and her mother who moved them from Eressos to Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos. Sappho married a wealthy man, Kerkylas, and had a
daughter whom she named Kleis after her mother. Kerkylas was killed in a war between Lesbos and Athens, leaving Sappho a widow at the age of 35. “From all accounts she lived until 572 B.C.” (Dalven 18). Even though Sappho’s poetry is not political, Dalven assures her readers that Sappho was involved with politics, allying herself with fellow poet Alkaios in a plot to overthrow the ruling tyrant, Mersilos. She and her family were exiled to Pyrrha, and then lived in Syracuse in Sicily. When she returned, she ran a school for what Dalven calls hetairai, used more pejoratively as a synonym for courtesan by DeJean. She calls them “companions,” those cultured young ladies who came to Sappho’s school to learn “the art of lyric poetry, metric forms and diction, singing, music, dancing and refined manners” (18). According to Alkaios, the group was “half culture and half political”; Sappho called the school a mousopolonoikian, “a dwelling frequented by the Muses” (Dalven 19).

In Sappho and Her Influence, David Moore Robinson claims that Sappho “was a twentieth century woman living in sixth century Lesbos” (Dalven 19, Robinson 244-245). Dalven finds that “contemporary Greek poets continue to emulate Sappho for her faith in the poetic idea, for her lyricism, but especially for her social purpose to elevate the status of women in a man’s world” (27). I would go further: the contemporary link to Sappho, whether it be in poetry, fiction or imagery, is tainted or tinted by the sexual possibilities/ promiscuities of the liberated, the passionate, the imaginative woman.

Sappho’s “refusal to be confined within stable definitions of gender and sexual identity invites . . . her readers to project their prejudices onto what has been denied them” (DeJean 22), and ironically this kind of projection of desire begins with Ovid’s Heroides, where he imagines Sappho to have been rejected by her legendary lover Phaon and then to have leapt from the Leucadian Cliff into the sea (12). By the nineteenth century, in France at least, Sappho leaves behind the disguise of her “modest and often timid heterosexuality” to emerge with “highly charged sexuality” (DeJean 13). Teresa De Lauretis, in her essay “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” (Theatre Journal 40, May 1988: 155-77) describes Sappho as a writer trying “variously to escape gender, to deny it, transcend it, or perform it in excess” (159). DeJean reads this as Sappho’s being “the archetypal lesbian writer” (21). According to her, until the late seventeenth century in France, Sappho was seen as “the archetypal woman in love and the archetypal woman writer” until the late seventeenth century, when “woman’s amorous passion and women’s writing are synonymous: uncontrolled, spontaneous, excessive outpourings” (23). During the eighteenth century when “the possibility of sapphism was most effectively suppressed,” Sappho is dismissed “on grounds of literary inadequacy” (24). During the Romantic period she is portrayed as quite literally “writing to stay alive,” writing to distract herself from the unfulfilled passion for Phaon (24). By the time of the “Sapho 1900” movement of 1903-1910, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote of Sappho as a model for writers, her poetry being “a continuous longing” (DeJean 25). By the turn of the nineteenth century the Germans begin to proclaim Sappho’s chastity, informed by the “never explicitly formulated assumption
that a great writer does not write as a woman” (DeJean 27). Her chastity celebrated the legitimacy of her as writer rather than sentimental female gusher.

DeJean finds that for centuries the opposed visions of Sappho are the “abandoned woman” and “detached and wry commentator” on passion (28). DeJean says we must “stop searching for the woman, and concentrate instead solely on what is left of her œuvre” (28), but then she traces the way Catullus and Ovid revised Sappho to put themselves “in the place of Sappho’s speaking subject” (29). Through the voice/character of Sappho (translations, reconstructions of her poetry) these authors establish and develop the authority of their own poetic voices and presence in the literary continuum. More modern scholars, translators, commentators, fictionalizers, form what DeJean calls “clusters” which “appropriate her work not only at the same time but also collectively” (29). Her first example is a sixteenth-century 20-year stretch of French poets’ “collective obsession” with fragment 31, where Sappho becomes “the original woman writer,” the “object of male literary desire” (33). Henri Estienne’s 1566 volume includes the 3 page “Sapphus-Vita,” which has become the standard biographical data. Catullus’s revision of this fragment (his ode 51) is the first example of “the male writer who sees himself as Sappho’s poetic double” (35), putting a man in Sappho’s female narrator’s place so that the triangle occurs when a man desires a woman who is desired by another man. Ovid, in his imagined letter from Sappho to Phaon, constructs Sappho as a figure who would choose men over women. DeJean sees fragment 31 as key to the interpretation of Sappho as lesbian: woman declaring her desire for another woman, and yet much of Sappho’s mythology is based also on Fragment I, “Ode to Aphrodite,” in which questions of the translation of one pronoun are at the core of the controversy. Joan DeJean gives 3 more versions of the fragment, first a 1711 one translated by
Ambrose Philips, then John J. Winkler's 1981 version and Lobel and Page's of 1955. At the end of the 5th stanza and beginning of the 6th, Philips uses the male pronoun as follows:

Tell me, my Sappho, tell me who?

Though now he shuns thy longing arms,
He soon shall court thy slighted charms:
Though now thy offerings he despise,
He soon to thee shall sacrifice;
Though now he freeze, he soon shall burn,
And be thy victim in his turn.

Winkler's 1981 version, the currently dominant homosexual representation, uses the female pronoun once:

Who, O Sappho, does you wrong?
For one who flees will soon pursue, one who rejects gifts will soon be making offers, and one who does not love will soon be loving, even against her will . . .

The Lobel and Page, like Mary Barnard's translation, consistently uses the female pronoun:

Who wrongs you, Sappho?
For if she flees, she shall soon pursue; and if she receives not gifts, yet shall she give; and if she loves not, she shall soon love even against her will.

DeJean believes Winkler is one of the “rare translations from any period to be absolutely faithful to Sappho’s decision to specify the beloved’s gender only once, in line 24 of 28. She does, however, acknowledge that the end of that ONE line is illegible, making questionable any decisions to codify versions with the female pronoun. The Lobel and Page reading is apparently the current scholarly position on this poem, despite their note to line 24 in which they retract the reading, stating that it is given “without the least confidence in it” (DeJean 320).

The authoritative Victorian text is Henry Thornton Wharton’s 1885 Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation by Henry Thornton Wharton, where Sappho’s name is directly linked in the title to the author/translator’s name; he appropriates the Sapphic signature as his own property. In each of these versions, according to Yopie Prins, Sappho’s name is the property of any and all translators, renderers and interpreters; her name “is signed each time by someone other than Sappho” (Prins 13).
Prins compounds the riddle that is Sappho by reminding us that to read the fragments we must “ask a question about voice” and that we can only “answer by projecting voice into the fragments” (25). I would argue that we do and have done the same thing with narrative constructions and visual images that relate to Sappho.

Images of Sappho come from peculiar sources; on the internet I found them ranging from a replica of a Byzantine mosaic of her to “Butchie,” a contemporary photograph of an oversized woman seductively posing for a lesbian dating service. The Frontispiece from Wharton’s Sappho, fourth edition, uses just a facial image, suggesting perhaps that “the book itself might be read as the body of Sappho” (Prins 56). Wharton insists in his Preface that the face of his Sappho is taken from her figure depicted in Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema’s Sappho and Alcaeus 1881 painting. This image is a far cry from 18th century interpretations of her work as “literally promiscuous,” which resulted in images of her as “sexually promiscuous Freudian mother” (DeJean 145). Charles Eisen’s illustrates “Hymne a Venus” in Moutonnet de Clairfons’ Anacon, Sapho, Bion et Moschus (1773), where the poet erases the female signature and makes the poem “sexually undecidable” (147). In Eisen’s illustration we see an image that is “all soft swirls, ripples and curls” (148). Venus’ chariot is a mass of billowy clouds “a cross between a chaise longue, a gondola, and a cradle” (148). In Eisen’s depiction of her fatal leap, our attention is displaced from Sappho onto her robes billowing about her, the swirls of the cliffs, and the plump little cupid covering his eyes. The significance of the subject is diminished because the tiny illustration is “lost in an elaborately appealing aesthetic complex” (DeJean 151).

In 1780 Alessandro Verri wrote Le Aventure di Saffo in which he places Phaon at the center of the Sapphic plot; she is “so enraptured with this display of male flesh that she is moved spontaneously to embark on her poetic career” (I 70 DeJean). Henry Tresham’s aquatints accompany Verri’s 1784 volume and reinforce this transfer of power to Phaon. According to DeJean, Verri and any writer who “makes Phaon the origin of Sappho’s poetic gift fulfills the Ovidian fiction: the beautiful young man now inspires, in addition to destroying Sapho’s poetic voice” (173). In the 18th century France homosexuality was an aristocratic privilege, but only for men (DeJean, 118).

By the 19th century in France, Sappho is depicted both visually and verbally as “the homosexual, feminist Sappho” (222); in fact, John Addington Symonds, in his 1873 book A Problem in Greek Ethics, is the first to use the female form of “homosexual” in English. He titles one section in his book “Sexual Inversion among Greek Women,” shifting his language from “sexual inversion” to “homosexual” on his first page (DeJean 348). By the end of the 19th century, the fin-de-siecle decadents of France and England joined in their efforts to “realize Symonds’s conclusion that Sapphism is the modus vivendi of the modern world” (DeJean 225). As a noun, “lesbienne” appears in the 1862 complement to the Academie Francaise dictionary. French usage of the term inspired English terminology, whereas English usage of “homosexual” predated the French (DeJean, 350). According to Bram Dijkstra, Simeon Solomon’s 1864 painting Sappho and Erinna in the Garden of Mytilene was a rare but explicit early treatment of lesbianism (225). To DeJean’s knowledge the “only visual representation” of the poet “initiating an embrace with another woman” (225).

Anne-Louis Girodet’s 1827 volume of poems, images and biographical
commentary incorporates spectacular engravings to illustrate a fragment. Plate 3 from her “Songe de Sapho” depicts a naked Sappho, stretched seductively in the arms of Venus, presumably dreaming of her future husband (243).

By 1852 Sappho descends completely into “popular fiction” and becomes commodified as a result of James Pradier’s statue Sapho, which sits in the interior of the Musée d’Orsay in Paris. Vulgar bronzes of this statue “became the image of Sappho for its age” (261), creating from Sappho a true creature of the sexual marketplace (263). In 1857 Mary Cowden Clarke dedicated her popular World-Noted Women, or, Types of Womanly Attributes of All Lands and Ages to Sappho and included as frontispiece a picture that had all the markings of a Sapphic reference, including lyre and residue of the billowy folds from 18th century engravings by Gravelot and Eisen. By 1884 Sappho in fiction “was a brand name advertising a package of lush amorous adventures, risqué yet acceptable for wide circulation” (263).

By 1898 Sappho’s image was fully clothed, appropriately seated, and suitably engaged with a text. The frontispiece from Michael Field’s Long Ago is a reproduction of a figure that is supposed to be on a vase in the museum in the Athens National Museum. I never did find it. The interesting thing about Long Ago, however, is not just the frontispiece with the floating fragment of Sappho’s name across the background, “S A P,” but the dual authorship of its lyrics. Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, aunt and niece, “lived as married couple and wrote together as ‘Michael Field,’” preferring to keep their authorial identities unknown (Prins 74). Bradley writes that she and her niece “Make up a single individual, doubly stronger than each alone, i.e. Edith and I make a veritable Michael” (82).

According to Yopie Prins, “Celebrated as a feminine ideal in nineteenth-century encyclopedias of exemplary women, female biographies, and other treatises on the “genius” of woman, Sappho becomes the emblem of Victorian womanhood” (184), and even Queen Victoria imitates the Sapphic pose in an 1841 etching that could be the young queen herself as she contemplates the fatal leap from the cliff (187). In fact, the etching appeared with an article, published the year before her death, but written as though the queen had already faced her dying moment. For Victorian women poets, “to follow Sappho is therefore to leap into an abyss of visual and verbal representation” (188). The primary example of such poetic trope is Letitia Elizabeth Landon L.E.L. who mysteriously died in 1838 in much the same way she had predicted in her Sapphic imitations published 20 years before her death.
Here are the first lines of an early poem of hers entitled “Sappho” (1822):

She leant upon her harp, and thousands looked
On her in love and wonder—thousands knelt
And worshipp’d in her presence—burning tears,
And words that died in utterance, and a pause
Of breathless, agitated eagerness,
First gave the full heart’s homage: then came forth
A shout that rose to heaven; and the hills,
The distant valleys, all rang with the name
Of the Aeolian SAPPHO—every heart
Found in itself some echo to her song.

In The Poetical Works of L.E.L.,
editor William Bell Scott (1873) used an
engraving alongside her poem “Sappho’s
Song” in which a female falls over the edge
of a cliff into the sea, losing her footing and
her lyre as she is about to hit the water.
Here is another one of those quirky
re-presentations, re-visions of Sappho, or is
it L.E.L. as Sappho?

The image of Sappho’s leap lingers in literary and painted references, going beyond those
already mentioned to Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun’s 1807 Portrait of Madame de Stael as Corinne to
Francois Gerard’s Corinne at Miseno (1822) to Germaine de Stael’s fiction Corinne ou Italie
(1890) (Korinna was the second most famous Greek woman poet) and finally to Peter Green’s
1966 novel The Laughter of Aphrodite. Green, like men and woman before him, takes on the
persona and the voice of Sappho, writing a novel as if it were a journal, personal and highly
evocative. At the very end we read Sappho as she is “Here on this promontory, high above
Leucas and the sea . . .” (265), presumably readying herself for the inevitable fall, the fall from
which she never disappears and only continues to fall, always present, constructable, refinable,
irrevocable. He, in the voice of Sappho, closes the novel by declaring, “I, Sappho of Mytilene . . .
deny, irrevocably, the words I have just set down” (266), but as readers, even as 21st century
viewers and users of the internet, we cannot deny the irrevocability of those words, those
fragments that have come down to us, piece by piece, construct by construct. Image by image to
create a legendary model that has forged literary, artistic, and historical identities to catch her
as she falls and to hold her for a moment in the projection or the construct that is our culture.

1. Mary Barnard’s translation reads

Dapple-throned Aphrodite,
eternal daughter of God,
snare-knitter! Don’t, I beg you
cow my heart with grief! Come,
as once when you heard my far-off
cry and, listening, stepped
from your father's house to your
gold car, to yoke the pair whose
beautiful thick-feathered wings
oaring down mid-air from
heaven
carried you to light swiftly
on dark earth; then,
blissful one,

smiling your immortal smile
you asked, What ailed me now that
made me call you again? What

was it that my distracted
heart most wanted? "Whom has
Persuasion to bring round now
to your love? Who, Sappho, is
unfair to you? For, let her
run, she will soon run after;

if she won't accept gifts, she
will one day give them; and if
she won't love you—she soon will

love, although unwillingly . . . "
If ever—come now! Relieve
this intolerable pain!

What my heart most hopes will
happen, make happen; you your-
self join forces on my side!

1958

2. In a miniature portrait of Edith Cooper by Charles Rickets (1901), she is depicted in similar
profile to that of the front cover of Long Ago, where Sappho is represented with her hair loosely
drawn into a knot, a ribbon tied around her neck and an inscription near the neck. In the
Rickets' profile, "M" and "F" are inscribed just below the chin; are these the initials of Michael
Field, or do they represent the male and female gender?

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