

A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words: Mary in the Middle Ages



The Middle Ages was an age of symbols and signs; a time in which the world and all its “things” – animate and inanimate – were understood as being the microcosm of God’s great macrocosm of all creation. As everything was regarded as an expression of God, it is no surprise that, at this time, highly decorative paintings, sculptures and stained glass windows assumed great importance, particularly when we remember that the majority of the medieval populace was illiterate. The visual splendour, then, of the great medieval cathedrals, was not only crafted to reflect the splendour of God but also to provide the uneducated Faithful with a means of spiritual and religious formation via richly symbolic images that could be understood without the benefit of the ability to read and write.

In the above depiction, the two upright figures on either side of the central tree are the Virgin Mary and Eve. Mary is standing on the tree’s right side and is indicated by her blue robes, her crown and its surrounding halo. On the left is Eve, represented by her nakedness and by her association with the accompanying (prostrate) figure of a naked Adam, the tree, and the serpent coiled around the tree. The right-left placement of the two main female figures is, of course, also significant, and builds on the scriptural precedent of the Last Judgment in which God directs the

Blessed to his right side and the Damned to the left (see Matthew 25). In the medieval understanding, Mary was the “new” or “second Eve”, the woman who, by consenting to bear the Son of God, reversed the consequence of the sin of the first Eve. Between Mary and Eve is the tree and, of course, this represents both the tree through which Adam and Eve transgressed and the “tree” on which Christ was crucified, thereby bringing about salvation. Thus the tree simultaneously divides and links the Mary and Eve figures by doubly signifying Eve’s role as the conduit by which Death entered the world, and Mary’s role as the conduit of Life.

This duality is reinforced by the image’s other symbolism. Above Eve, in the foliage of the tree and among the fruit, is a human skull. On her side, then, Eve has brought only Death to the world and will continue to do so for those who “kneel” before materiality only. Death is also exemplified by the despair on the faces of Eve’s followers and most particularly by the dark, skeletal figure in the background. This was a typical figure of the *danse macabre*, a popular medieval representation of Death and its inevitability and universality. Typically, depictions of the *danse macabre* featured attractive figures garbed in the finery associated with high status positions (such as kings and ladies) paired with their skeleton counterparts. The message, of course, was that death is the unavoidable equaliser with which we “dance” every day of our lives. The speech scrolls in *danse macabre* images usually contained a message on the theme of “remember, you too shall die”. In line with this “death” theme, if you look closely you will see that Eve is feeding her followers fruit from the mouth of the serpent. In contrast, on Mary’s side, above her head, is “Life”, in the figure of Christ on the Cross and you will notice that Mary is “picking” Eucharistic hosts from the tree and feeding the faithful with them. Mary’s action here shows her to be the “mediator *par excellence*” and this powerful role is one of many that have been ascribed to Mary throughout the ages, right to the present day.

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