

Passion Painting

By Patty Wickman

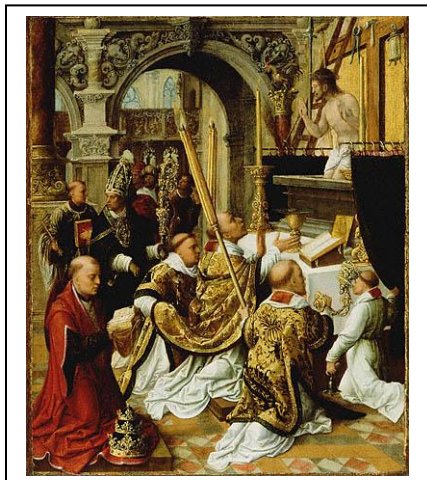


UCLA painting instructor Patty Wickman calls this piece *Passion Painting*. At first glance it seems to be mislabeled. It depicts a young girl wrapped in a blue blanket with her head resting on a table. Maybe she got up early to watch the sunrise but fell asleep while waiting. Maybe she was having nightmares and went to her patio before dawn to pray. In either case, passion or strong emotional excitement, as it is used in current jargon, seems to be absent. However, in addition to the title,

three other elements give us clues that the painting may actually be a visual parable with other layers of hidden meaning.

First, on the card table next to the girl's head is a rooster ready to crow announcing the dawn of a new day. How many suburban homes in America have a rooster for an alarm clock? Might the rooster have a more symbolic meaning pointing to an earlier use of the word passion? The Latin root *pati* means to suffer or endure and the term was used by the early church to refer to the sufferings of Christ between the Last Supper and his Crucifixion. It was during those days that a rooster crowed announcing Peter's third denial. It was also during those days that his disciples fell asleep after Jesus had asked them to watch and wait with him as he prayed to his Father.

A second clue to the painting's hidden meaning is found in the Passion Flower Vine growing at the edge of the patio. It is a mirror image forming a Rorschach pattern that seems to be emanating from the young girl's head. The Passion Flower Vine was discovered by sixteenth-century European missionaries traveling to South America. They saw the instruments of Christ's suffering--nails, crown of thorns, and whips-- symbolically represented in this beautiful plant.

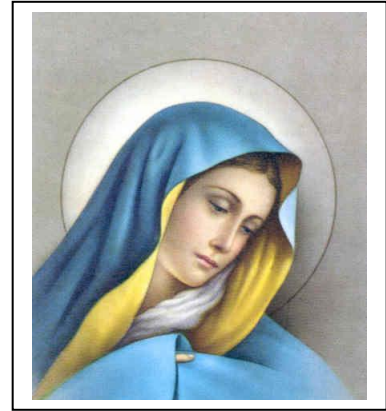


Patty Wickman says that one painting that influenced her work was called the *Mass of St. Gregory* done in the 1500's. Pope Gregory was leading Mass one day when he sensed the presence of an unbeliever. He prayed that Christ would reveal himself. Suddenly he had a vision of Jesus above the altar surrounded by the instruments of his torture. Ms. Wickman uses the Passion Flower Vine to represent that event but she gives it an interesting modern twist by making it a mirror image.

Swiss psychiatrist, Hermann Rorschach's father was a painter. Hermann considered a career in art himself but later entered

the field of psychiatry. Using ink blots, he developed a diagnostic system that helped him identify mental illness in his patients. In today's narcissistic culture, might those who chose to suffer or identify with those who suffer (compassion= to suffer with) be considered mentally unstable? And on that night so long ago, what divine madness compelled Jesus to offer his life for a world of sleepy traitors?

The setting of the painting is a garden patio. Patio is a Spanish word meaning open courtyard and it was in such a courtyard of King Herod that Jesus was flogged by Roman soldiers. The young girl, wrapped in a blue blanket with a single digit showing reminded the artist of an Italian painting called Madonna with the finger. A humble young girl was asked to become the mother of the Man of Sorrows. Ms. Wickman mentioned that she saw such a girl wrapped in blue one early morning in a village market place.



The energy of the painting comes from outside the frame on the left. The rays of dawn flood the patio with light. The faithful dog stands attentive, in awe of what he sees.

This is a painting done by someone entering the second half of life. Fueled by effort and self discipline, the heroic, sensual, black and white passion of youth has been displaced by something more ambiguous. In the second half of life, we are more painfully aware of our betrayals and failures. Yet a humble gratitude that we have been forgiven for our deceit energizes us to reach out to others in love. The madness of faith becomes more apparent not only when we have more fame and security to lose, but also when we realize that we can't trust ourselves. Finally, self effort gets us only so far. We need power and energy from outside ourselves and only a posture of prayerful waiting on the Lord will lead to new life. In those moments of helpless surrender, we meet the compassionate God who renews our strength.

Steve Stuckey
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