



## **Newsletter Archives**

### **The Ideals of Motherhood Aesthetics of Form and Function**

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## The Ideals of Motherhood - Aesthetics of Form and Function

### Article of the Month - January 2004

Brahma, after creating the world, set out to make human beings. He first made man, and then came to the modeling of woman. To his discomfort he realized that he had run out of the solid material he was using. But whatever happens, happens for the best. Brahma was very resourceful. He went outside, saw a curvaceous creeper, and gave woman its gracefulness of poise and carriage. Her breasts he modeled on the round moon, endowing them with the softness of the parrot's bosom. To her eyes he gave the glance of a deer. On her complexion he imprinted the lightness of fresh leaves in spring. He shaped her arms with the tapering finish of the elephant's trunk. Into her general build up went the tender clinging of tendrils, the trembling of grass, and the slenderness of reeds. Then he anointed her completed form with the sweetness of honey, and bathed her in the fragrance of flowers. Finally, he touched her lips with ambrosial nectar.

By moulding the feminine body on the living forms of nature, Brahma provided human artistic instinct with an inspired motif, which at once expressed transcendence and immanence, romantic fervor and cosmic grandeur, a reality soaked in spiritual abstraction. With rounded off contours, corners and angularities, the feminine in Indian art is but a representation of the first woman created by Lord Brahma himself.



To the connoisseur of Indian aesthetics, the profusion of voluptuous women dominating its canvas comes as no surprise. To the less acquainted however, such a scenario is both pleasing and perplexing, prompting one to ponder upon the creative inspiration which gave rise to such vivacious imagery, perceptible even today in the traditional art of modern India. But while celebrating the female body in glorious images the creative instinct of the artist never loses sight of the fact that whatever nature creates, it creates with a purpose. No form is accidental and every natural form must have a divinely ordained function. Whatever be the artistic representation, it must glorify (through outward symbols) this inherent natural function.



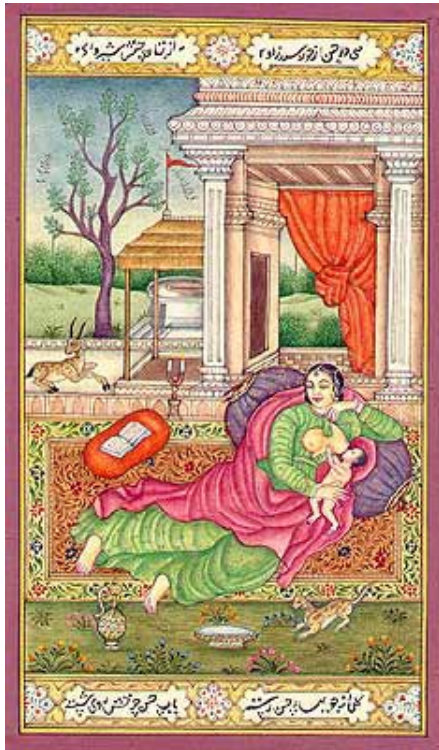
Thus such an art form expresses itself through imagery that parallels the forms of nature. By extension it is naturally surmised that the essential creative attribute of nature is mirrored in such a configuration. Indeed, providence has blessed women with the primary responsibility of the perpetuation of the human race. Understandably her physical body has been richly endowed for this glorious function. How does the artist celebrate this aspect of womanhood? Simple. He highlights those visible aspects of the anatomy, which contribute most to this supreme function. Take for example the Indian artists' almost notorious obsession for the feminine bosom.

This is a well thought out aesthetic strategy, which conveys a multitude of emotions simultaneously, the paramount one being that of motherhood. An observer puts it this way: "no woman is completely beautiful unless she possess breasts that are beautiful enough to hold the promise of being functional when the time for their exercise arrives, and nipples that can give suck." (Quoted in Ellis).

Erasmus Darwin says in his book 'Zoonomia' (1800):  
Mother and Child

"When the babe, soon after it is born into this cold world, is applied to it's mother's bosom, its sense of perceiving warmth is first agreeably affected; next its sense of smell is delighted with the odor of her milk; then its taste is gratified by the flavor of it; its thirst and hunger quenched; and last, the sense of touch is delighted by the softness and smoothness of the milky fountain, the source of such variety of happiness.





"All these various kinds of pleasure at length become associated with the form of the mother's breast, which the infant embraces with his hands, presses with its lips, and watches with its eyes; and thus acquires more accurate ideas of the form of its mother's bosom than of the odor, flavor, and warmth which it perceives with its other senses. And hence at our maturer years, when any object of vision is presented to us which by its wavy or spiral lines bears any similitude to the form of the female bosom, whether it be found in landscape with soft gradations of rising and descending surface, or in other forms of some antique vases, or in other works of the pencil or the chisel, we feel a general glow of delight which seems to influence all our senses; and if the object be not too large we experience an attraction to embrace it with our lips as we did in our early infancy the bosom of our mother."

Thus in our infancy, our only source of climactic bliss is the bosom, an association which is carried over even to our older years. It is a storehouse of both delightful joy and rapturous fulfillment. Hence is also brought into visual focus John Keats immortal words "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever" (Endymion).

Beginning from our early childhood, this essential source of wholesome pleasure continues to influence our aesthetic outlook throughout life.

The reasons why children should be suckled at their mothers' breasts are larger than some may be inclined to believe. In the first place the psychological reason is one of no mean importance. The breast with its exquisitely sensitive nipple, since it is the primary focus of the intimacy between a mother and child, furnishes the normal mechanism by which maternal love is developed. Also, the infant's best food is that elaborated in his own mother's body. All other foods are more or less possible substitutes.

The multi-dimensional nature of the mother-child intimacy is also borne out by the fact that the pleasure afforded during the actual act of nursing works both ways. While its exalting effect on a child has been noted above, it is significant that many women also state generally that suckling is the most delicious physical feeling they have ever experienced. It is not difficult to see why this normal association of a rapturous emotion with suckling should have come about. It is essential for the preservation of the lives of young mammals that the mothers should have an adequate motive in pleasurable sensation for enduring the troubles of suckling. The voluptuous element in suckling may thus be called a merciful provision of nature for securing the maintenance of the child. This is another instance where can be perceived the functional creativity of nature, which is joyous, comforting, and gratifying, all at the same time.

Even before man cooked his food, he sucked at the breast. Hence the attractiveness he feels towards it is both archetypal and historical. If we believe in the maxim that 'beauty is something which attracts', then putting two and two together it comes as no surprise that the female bosom is highlighted in the manner that it is in the annals of



Indian art.



The particular nature of such an attraction is but felt even in the affections of a husband and wife. Truly, everyone from his first years retains something of the child, which cannot be revealed to all the world. Husband and wife are each child to the other, and are indeed parent and child by turn. The woman here retains a certain erotic supremacy, for she is to the last more of a child than it is ever easy for the man to be, and much more essentially a mother than he is a father. Indeed, the latter is true and it is the mother who is always the child's supreme parent. According to Havelock Ellis the doyen of sexual psychology "At various points in zoological evolution it has seemed possible that the functions that we now know as those of maternity would be largely and even equally shared by the male parent. Nature has tried various experiments in this direction, among the fishes for instance, and even among birds. But reasonable and excellent as these experiments were, and though they were sufficiently sound to secure their perpetuation unto this day, it remains true that it was not along these lines that Man was destined to emerge. The male is an important figure in the early days of courtship, but after conception has once been secured the mother plays the chief part in his development. When she has once been

impregnated the female animal angrily rejects the caresses she had welcomed so coquettishly before. Nature but accords the male but a secondary and comparatively humble place in the home, the breeding place of the future human race. The mother is the child's supreme parent."

When the devotion in the tie between mother and son is added to the relation of husband and wife, the union of marriage is raised to the high and beautiful dignity it deserves, and can attain in this world. It comprehends sympathy, love, and perfect understanding, even of the faults and weaknesses of both sides. The foundation of every true woman's love is a mother's tenderness. He whom she loves is a child of larger growth, although she at the same time may have a deep respect for him. Thus says psychologist K. Gross: "Love is really made up of both sexual instinct and parental instinct."

In the great ages of humanity, the fundamental fact of the predominant position of the mother in relation to the development of the human race was duly recognized. In classic Rome at one period the house of the pregnant woman was adorned with garlands, and in Athens it was an inviolable sanctuary where even the criminal may find shelter. In the exuberantly vital times before the Renaissance, the ideally beautiful woman, as pictures still show, was the pregnant woman.

The Indian aesthete too accepts this supremacy as a central and sacred fact. If the abundant imagery of women with particularly well-endowed bosoms is one evidence, there is another anatomical attribute which engages interest, wherein are echoed the words of Chaucer, according to whom a beautiful woman is one "with buttocks brode and breasts rounde and hie"; that is to say, she is the woman obviously best fitted to bear children and suckle them. The swelling breasts in Indian art are such divinely gracious insignia of womanhood because of the potential child that hangs at them and sucks; similarly, the large curves of the hips are so voluptuous because of the potential child they clasp within them.

Logically, broad hips, which involve a large pelvis, are necessarily a characteristic of the highest human races, because the race with the largest heads must be endowed also with the largest pelvis to enable their large heads to enter the world. These being the two visible flag bearers of successful mothering and parenthood, a general admiration was accorded alike to developed breasts and a developed pelvis. Both are indications of functional effectiveness as well as being aesthetically alluring.



Here it may need to be stated that by asserting that motherhood is a supreme boon and responsibility granted to the female of the species, the intention is not to conform to the traditional patriarchal view which conveniently used this ideal to constrict women to the narrow confines of the home. On the contrary, it is vigorously believed that if a woman has herself not gone out in the world, how is she to prepare the future generation to face it? Nevertheless, it also needs to be reaffirmed that motherhood is no mere accident in a woman's life. Excepting exceptional circumstances, wherever possible, even at the cost of a little extra trouble, a woman does need to attempt to discharge this divine responsibility which nature has endowed her with and also granted her the potency to fulfill the same.

## **Conclusion:**

"When we experience the beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming." (John O' Donohue)

The comfort that comes to the child from being held against the bosom makes a woman the shelter and refuge, and a source of security against the cruel world outside. The oral satisfaction found in sucking, and all its associated pleasures, is thought to have led to the cultivation of the culinary arts. The milk that comes from the breast and nourishes the infant makes the mother a symbol of abundance and generosity. As Sigmund Freud pointed out, the child's first erotic object is the breast, and thus shapes its whole consequent sensual outlook throughout life. Here it must be realized that this development in outlook is asexual, that is, since both the male and female child are nursed at the breast, beauty for both the sexes remains feminine in nature. Indeed it is the appreciation of beauty, based on a remembrance of the mother's bosom, which accounts for the development of sculpture and the plastic arts. For example, it is believed that the earliest pottery was modeled in direct imitation of the female breast. Hence, as with other motifs underlying the science of Indian symbolism, the ancient roots of this expression too can be found in the archetypal depths of the human subconscious.

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