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Representations of Birth in Art

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By Mary Nolan

It's interesting that there have been remarkably few representations of birth in art over the centuries. There are many paintings that feature pregnant women, and also women who have just given birth (the vast majority painted by men), but there is little art that tackles the transformative experience of giving birth in all its earthiness, sacredness, and complexity. In an excellent article on 'The Art of Birth' by Carmen Winant (2016)[1], Winant writes that 'there are some bodily experiences that overwhelm language' and we would expect that where language proves inadequate, art will do its duty and step in. Yet Winant goes on to ask, 'Where are the images of the birthing process?' She wonders whether the fact that the physical action 'is distinctly lacking from the folios of art history' is because labour is 'too grotesque? Too much a woman's issue? Not romantic enough (or at all?)'.

I suspect that the reasons for the lack of portrayal of birth in art probably go to the heart of women's subjugation down the millennia. I have recently been reading Janina Ramirez's book 'Femina'[2], in which she asks why women who were hugely influential in the medieval era have been written out of its history. Her book aims to reinstate the women whose courage, learning and leadership were pivotal in shaping the course of European history. Yet, the women of whom she writes have had to wait until the 21st century to have their contributions acknowledged.

Not being an art historian, I would not presume to try and answer the question of why birth art is largely missing from the vast human output of artistic work since the dawn of time. I have approached Alex Smith's kind invitation to write about representations of birth in art with enthusiasm but a great deal of caution, not to mention humility. Having given the matter much thought, I have decided to concentrate on six pieces of art which I have been familiar with for many years and that I have referred to in lectures and discussed with students preparing to work with women and their families across the transition to parenthood. These are works that resonate powerfully with my own thinking and my personal experiences of being pregnant and giving birth, as well as those of the many women whom I have met during the course of my career.



mymodernmet.com

My first choice is the so-called 'Venus of Willendorf', a four and a half inch figure discovered in Austria in 1908 that is thought to have been carved up to thirty thousand years before the birth of Christ. For me, this wonderful Venus captures with throbbing immediacy the roundness, the voluptuousness, and the generosity of the heavily pregnant woman who is ready to give birth. The figurine suggests a powerful connection with the earth, mediated through the colour of the limestone, a connection that I know so many women feel when the moment comes for them to bring their babies into the world. The head of the Venus has no face; it is covered in what appear to be thick braids of hair – a symbol of her rich fertility. She is not an individual; she is 'woman' and her 'woman-ness' is exuberant.



© Dumbarton Oaks, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, DC

My second choice is the 'Dunbarton Oaks Birthing Figure', labelled after the museum where she is now on display in Washington. This figure presents problems of both dating and authenticity for scholars. While she has characteristics of Aztec art and might be considered an Aztec deity, she is unlike other Aztec works because of her nudity and lack of adornment. And while the figurine appears to be very old, when it was examined under a microscope in the 1970s, evidence of the use of rotary tools in its carving was found, suggesting that it is far more recent than the Aztec period of the 13th to 15th centuries. Scholars now believe that it is indeed centuries old but was re-carved in the 19th century.

Whatever the truth about its age, the figure is instantly recognisable as portraying the immensity and contradiction of emotions that characterise labour and birth. Is the figure experiencing the most intense agony imaginable, or is she in an ecstatic state as she fights to bring her child into the world? Surely she is experiencing both agony and ecstasy, even at the same time. Her body shares the rich roundedness of the Venus of Willendorf, but her connection to all women is signified not by her having no face but by the unseeing stare and stretched mouth of the birthing woman. The deep squat captures the power of the woman who is drawing on all her strength to bear down and expel her baby, the arms clasped behind her increasing the downwards thrust. The power of the figure is simply remarkable.



Picture taken by author

My third choice can be found in the 15th century Lady Chapel in Gloucester Cathedral. It is a work of art that captures with immense poignancy the sometimes tragic outcome of childbirth. Here is a memorial to Elizabeth Williams who died giving birth in 1622 at the age of just seventeen. Her stillborn baby lies beside her wrapped in the white covering that the child would have been baptised in. Elizabeth was the daughter of Bishop Miles Smith who worked on the King James Version of the Bible. Elizabeth's sister also died in childbirth.

While the Jacobean memorial is stiff and highly formalised, it still conveys an immense sorrow. The young mother rests her face on her hand and looks down at the little bundle beside her; the baby does not return her gaze but is forever separate from her even though newly emerged from her body. The relationship that should have been between the two is denied. The memorial captures the harsh reality of the death of so many birthing women and so many babies down the centuries. Yet there is no anger in this memorial; I find the calm resignation of the mother is the ultimate sadness.



Fridakahlo.org

This shocking portrayal of birth by the Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo, is well known. Frida (1907–1954) was

influenced by indigenous Mexican artwork as well as European surrealism and realism. Her painting is entitled 'My birth' but the title is multi-layered. The painting may depict Frida's recent experience of miscarriage; or it could depict Frida's mother as the head emerging from the woman's body appears to be Frida's own. Frida's mother had died shortly before this painting was made and it may, therefore, represent a daughter's acknowledgement of her mother's pain and sacrifice in giving life to her. It may also be that the painting refers to the Virgin Mary as on the wall behind the bed is a depiction of the Virgin of Sorrows. The Virgin shared the experience of pain and suffering of all mothers when she gave birth to Christ.

The birthing mother's head is covered with a cloth – perhaps a shroud? Is Frida suggesting that both mother and child stand on a threshold between life and death during labour and birth? It is not unusual for women to describe how they felt they were going to die when labour was at its most intense.

Frida's painting is without comfort; the birthing woman lies unattended in a bleak room with only the sorrowing Virgin for company, and she gives birth to a strange version of herself. It is a highly realistic portrayal of birth, while also surreal. It represents the act of giving birth as spiritually problematic and physically brutal.



https://kahimyang.com/kauswagan/articles/898/today-in-philippine-history-january-26-1930-napoleon-abueva-was-born-in-tagbilaran-bohol

This sculpture, entitled 'Childbirth', is the work of the Philippine artist, Napoleon Abueva (1930–2018). [3] He was the youngest person ever to receive the prize for National Artist of the Philippines for Visual Arts. Whilst well-known in the Philippines, I was unfamiliar with his work until this particular sculpture was brought to my attention by a colleague antenatal teacher.

When Abueva was in his early twenties, studying for a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture, he was strongly influenced by the work of the ancient Greek sculptors and admired the beauty of their depiction of the human form and their belief in humanity's capacity for the heroic. This sense of the monumental is very apparent in 'Childbirth'. I really love this sculpture for its portrayal of the magnificence of the female body in the act of giving birth. Here is a tribute to a woman's strength, her body revelling in the challenge of birth and ecstatic in her ability to bring forth new life. She is an immensely powerful figure, unconfined. She is balanced (literally!) on the threshold of motherhood as the artist depicts a liminal moment in a

woman's life. She and her baby are transforming each other and being transformed. The woman herself takes her baby in her own hand directly from her body.

This is a celebratory work of art. For me, Abueva's sculpture is inspirational and offers strength on days when the task of achieving a joyous birth for all women seems overwhelming.



https://twincitiesmidwifery.com/birth-art-and-inspirational-images

Original source: Spiritual Midwifery.[4]

If you put 'Birth Art' into Google Images, you will find many truly beautiful images of pregnancy, birth and motherhood that aren't – at least as yet – considered major works of art. However, they represent facets of so many women's experiences and understanding of giving birth that they deserve a call-out in this article. I love this image of the baby's head emerging from the centre of a flower - an image of the cervix opening to bring forth a new life. This is a wonderful motif for women in labour to focus on, visualising the birth of their child as a blossoming rather than a stretching and tearing of the vagina.

Finally…

Works of art are created when artists grapple with their own humanity and try to understand it better. In the best art, we who are not artists can find echoes of our own experiences that both enrich them and enable us to integrate them ever more profoundly into our sense of self. It seems to me that the art works I have discussed in this article offer amazing insights into that most profound of human experiences, giving birth.

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[2] Ramirez, J. (2022) Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It.

W.H. Allen

[3]Capili, J.W. (2003) In focus: An interview with national artist for sculpture, Napoleon Abueva. https://ncca.gov.ph/about-culture-and-arts/in-focus/an-interview-with-national-artist-for-sculpture-napoleon-abueva

[4]Gaskin I. M. (1975) *Spiritual Midwifery*. Summertown TN, The Book Publishing Company