

REVIEW

## Maternity: science, art and history

## Maternidad: ciencia, arte e historia

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** maternity is not only a natural fact, it is also a multi-determined cultural construction, defined and organized by norms that arise from the needs of a specific social group and from a defined period of its history. Women are considered as historical beings and a source of inspiration for artists and creators through motherhood.

**Objective:** characterize the impact of motherhood in science, history and art.

**Method:** a literature review was conducted by consulting original articles, case reports, and open access systematic reviews in peer-reviewed academic journals from the last 5 years. Search terms include motherhood, science, art, and history, as well as their English translations.

**Results:** from a biological perspective, the mother is the living being that assumes this condition from the moment of fertilization. From a cultural perspective, it constitutes an essential element in the upbringing of individuals, as well as in the constitution of the family institution.

**Conclusions:** it was concluded that it is necessary to emphasize that motherhood and upbringing should be the subject of a renewed and constant psychosocial study that does not ignore that they will always be closely related to the different conceptions of children, social class, customs and social, historical and cultural norms. This concept has been the central axis of multiple artistic creations where the feminist art movement stands out.

**Keywords:** Maternity; Impact; Science; History; Art.

### RESUMEN

**Introducción:** la maternidad no es solo un hecho natural, es además una construcción cultural multideterminada, definida y organizada por normas que se desprenden de las necesidades de un grupo social específico y de una época definida de su historia. Se considera a las mujeres como seres históricos y fuente de inspiración para artistas y creadores por medio de la maternidad.

**Objetivo:** caracterizar el impacto de la maternidad en la ciencia, la historia y el arte.

**Método:** se realizó una revisión bibliográfica consultando artículos originales, reportes de caso y revisiones sistemáticas de acceso abierto en publicaciones académicas revisadas por pares, de los últimos 5 años. Los términos de búsqueda incluyeron maternidad, ciencia, arte e historia, así como su traducción al inglés.

**Resultados:** la madre desde una perspectiva biológica es el ser vivo que desde el momento de la fecundación asume esta condición. Desde una perspectiva cultural, constituye un elemento esencial en la crianza de los individuos, así como en la constitución de la institución familiar.

**Conclusiones:** se concluyó que es necesario enfatizar que la maternidad y la crianza deben ser objeto de

un renovado y constante estudio psicosocial que no ignore que las mismas siempre van a estar en estrecha relación con las diferentes concepciones de niño, la clase social, las costumbres y normas sociales, históricas y culturales. Ha sido este concepto eje central de múltiples creaciones artísticas donde destaca el movimiento de arte feminista.

**Palabras clave:** Maternidad; Impacto; Ciencia; Historia; Arte.

## INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is a phenomenon composed of social discourses and practices that form a complex and powerful imaginary that is both the source and effect of gender. This imagination currently has two central elements that sustain it and to which an essential value is generally attributed: maternal instinct and maternal love.<sup>(1)</sup>

Considering that ‘female nature’ is rooted in a biology that ensures both elements, motherhood is understood as something separate from the historical and cultural context, whose meaning is unique and always the same. Furthermore, any phenomenon that seems to contradict the existence of the elements above is silenced or labelled as ‘abnormal’, “deviant” or ‘sick’.<sup>(1)</sup>

From the 1960s onwards, motherhood began to be addressed by demographic history, which analysed phenomena linked to fertility and found the first traces of contraceptive methods. Shortly afterwards, other angles started to be explored from a more anthropological perspective, closer to the study of mentalities, through work on the history of childhood, the family, and private life. Women’s history placed motherhood in a different light, focusing on the experience of mothers, linked to the social status of motherhood and inscribed in women’s bodies.<sup>(2)</sup>

In ancient times, the word “motherhood” did not exist in either Greek or Latin; although the maternal role was very present in mythology, it was not a subject of serious attention for either doctors or philosophers.<sup>(2)</sup>

In the 12th century, the appearance of the term “maternitas” was accompanied by the invention of “paternitas” by clergymen who used it to characterise the role of the Church at a time when Marian worship was undergoing enormous expansion, as if they needed to recognise a spiritual dimension of motherhood without ceasing to despise the carnal motherhood of Eve. The educational role of the mother began to take shape, closely determined by the Church.<sup>(2)</sup>

The glorification of maternal love developed throughout the 19th century, reaching its peak in the 1960s. Over the last century, the state’s authority has imposed itself over the authority of the father and intervened in such a way as to begin to restrict the maternal role, politicising it.<sup>(3)</sup>

Demographic movements gave rise to pro-natalist policies that defined motherhood as a patriotic duty and launched measures to encourage women to give birth. At the same time, repressive measures condemned contraception and abortion.<sup>(3)</sup>

Modernity, through the triumph of medicalisation and the growing impact of political power, has brought motherhood into a period of turbulence and confusion from which it has not been easy to escape. This period took a turn in the 1960s when the first feminist approaches dissociated women from motherhood, allowing each woman to assert herself as an autonomous subject.<sup>(3)</sup>

The last stage of motherhood is the one we are experiencing at the dawn of the 21st century, in which this practice presents a very acute tension between the private and public spheres in the general debate on motherhood, and in which the feminist movement and theory have actively participated.<sup>(3)</sup>

This work considers women as historical beings and a source of inspiration for artists and creators through motherhood. It is motivated by the desire to discover or clarify the link between science, history, and art within a maternal universe, a subject that has been largely overlooked in world literature. The aim of this work is to characterise the impact of motherhood on science, history, and art.

## METHOD

A literature review was conducted by consulting original articles, case reports, and systematic reviews available in open-access peer-reviewed academic publications from the last five years. Databases such as ScieELO, Regmed, Dialnet, and Mayoclinic, among others, were reviewed. Search terms included motherhood, science, art, history, and their English translations.

## DEVELOPMENT

From a biological perspective, the mother is the living being who assumes this condition from fertilisation.<sup>(4)</sup>

The maternal-filial bond originates from the moment of fertilisation, when the mother’s body takes on characteristics different from those before conception. Consequently, embryonic development is fundamentally based on the interaction between the mother and the new cell that forms part of her and will eventually

become a life independent of her. In this way, a complex process of physiological communication takes place in the mother's body to select genetic characteristics; a signalling pathway characterised by a process of gene selection inherent in the communication that the mother transmits to the zygote.<sup>(4)</sup>

In the case of mammals such as humans, the mother gestates her child (first called an embryo and then a fetus) in the womb until the fetus is sufficiently developed to be born. The mother goes into labour and gives birth.<sup>(4)</sup>

From a cultural perspective, the mother is an essential element in the upbringing of individuals. She is also critical of the constitution of the family institution.<sup>(4)</sup>

The equation woman = mother is already established in the social imagination. This equation reflects a social myth that structures its effectiveness on resources such as the illusion of naturalness and the illusion of timelessness. Regarding the illusion of naturalness, popular wisdom often considers it natural for women to be mothers, since they have a reproductive system and supposedly also have a maternal instinct. Maternity is therefore equated with reproduction and considered natural rather than cultural. Maternity in human beings is linked to the artistic order. It has a psychosocial meaning, thus differentiating it from reproduction, which is a biological fact with a meaning related to the order of the species.<sup>(4)</sup>

Therefore, motherhood should be another social function of women who decide to have children and not be considered inherent to the female sex, as is often the case. Possessing a reproductive system is a necessary condition for being a mother, but it is not the only one.<sup>(4)</sup>

Consequently, motherhood is undoubtedly a transition involving challenges, transformations, and difficulties with various meanings.<sup>(5)</sup>

Throughout history, motherhood has emerged as a set of beliefs and meanings in constant evolution, influenced by cultural and social factors, which have been supported by ideas about women, procreation, and child-rearing, as strands that meet and intertwine in its interpretation. As motherhood is a concept exchanged in the social sphere, its interpretation and impact on individual experience are significant. It has long been the most potent force for self-definition and self-evaluation for every woman, even those who are not mothers.<sup>(5)</sup>

Today, we are witnessing many changes, where traditional roles and relationship patterns are undergoing significant transformations and new alternatives for self-definition are emerging. The definition of motherhood is not excluded from this context, along with other milestones in women's development. Thus, since the beginning of the last century, women no longer view motherhood as a compulsory path or a predetermined course of action, which is complemented by other achievements in areas that previously belonged only to men, such as the workplace, politics, and science.<sup>(5)</sup>

On the other hand, the transformations that have taken place with great intensity in the last century are not a response to current conditions but rather to the entire history of humankind. Considering a historical understanding of the concept of motherhood not only provides a broad overview of the multiple perspectives and meanings it has taken on in the past, but also places us in an evolutionary perspective towards the future, present in the act of co-construction that pushes new meanings, opening paths in uncertainty.<sup>(5)</sup>

### Prehistory

About prehistoric mothers, it can be said that the bipedal position to which humans adapted caused the size of the pelvic bone canal to decrease, shortening the gestational period, which is why women began to give birth to less developed offspring than animals. This is not a disadvantage, as acquiring this position allows mothers to have their hands free to care for their immature offspring. As a result, mothers have greater responsibility once the child is born.<sup>(5)</sup>

### The Mother in Greek Mythology and Culture

Female deities appear to have been predominant in a very ancient period of our history, which, according to archaeological findings, has been characterised by organised, peaceful and prosperous societies with rising social, technological and cultural development. Some theorists have based their arguments on the existence of these deities and on the sedentary, peaceful, and earth-bound way of life as indicators of a matriarchal organisation.<sup>(5)</sup>

In this era, the father's participation in procreation was ignored, while that of the woman was evident, as she preserved and nurtured the seed in her womb and propagated the life of her clan in the visible world. From this perspective, the universe is seen as a benevolent Mother who gives everything, and the earth in its fertility represents women.<sup>(5)</sup>

This archaic culture is overtaken by the invasion of warrior peoples who impose a patriarchal model of domination. The goddess becomes a subordinate wife, dividing her qualities among multiple goddesses. The multiple goddesses represent complex and multifaceted feminine dimensions.<sup>(5)</sup>

The virgin goddesses (Artemis, Athena, and Hestia) represent the quality of independence and the ability to focus consciousness on what makes sense to them in Greek mythology. They expand the feminine attributes to

include competence and self-sufficiency. In contrast, the vulnerable goddesses (Hera, Demeter, and Persephone) embody the traditional roles of wife, mother, and daughter, expressing the need for affiliation and bonding. These goddesses are raped, dominated, or humiliated by male gods.<sup>(6)</sup>

In Greek culture, the virtuous woman is the faithful wife, submissive to her husband, who loses her purity through sexual relations and must undergo 'purification' to regain her virgin purity temporarily.<sup>(6)</sup>

Demeter, goddess of the harvest, represents motherhood. Her quality is generosity, which finds satisfaction in caring for and nurturing others. Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty, and sensuality, enters relationships of her own free will and is never victimised.<sup>(6)</sup>

### The Mother in the Middle Ages

Taking first the interpretations of Genesis, as already noted, Eve is seen as extremely guilty, almost even of killing the Saviour. The most prominent feature is that she allowed herself to be seduced by the serpent and led man into disobedience. For this reason, she bears most of Yahweh's curses. I will multiply your pains in childbearing; in pain you will bring forth children, and you will be under the power of your husband, and he will rule over you (Genesis 3:16).<sup>(7)</sup>

This first biblical incident, which shows how this 'sex' with its persuasion abused the first man, Adam, is homologated to a second episode in the New Testament, that of the woman at the gate, who with her question induces the apostle Peter to deny Christ, excluding him from the life of Christ. These interpretations also show how women are associated with mysterious forces of life and death in many cultures. However, in the Middle Ages, the bridge between Eve and Mary was temporarily broken. An unnamed Eve was replaced by an inaccessible Mary, distancing her from women as a role model because of her virgin motherhood.<sup>(8)</sup>

The primary obligation of women towards their offspring is to bring them into the world: to bear children continuously until death.<sup>(9)</sup>

Sterility is experienced as a condemnation and a breaking point in the couple's union.<sup>(9)</sup>

A mother's love for her children is seen as self-evident, on the assumption that she feels greater pleasure in loving than in being loved. However, this is another aspect of her disadvantage and weakness, as it is a carnal, passionate love that privileges the body, i.e., the health and well-being of her children, at the risk of losing their souls. At the same time, the educational role assigned to the mother is insignificant.<sup>(9)</sup>

### The Mother of the Modern Age

#### *Child-rearing as a Scientific Enterprise and the Idealisation of Motherhood*

Towards the end of the 19th century, the new sovereignty of reason and logic, scientific development, and its methods began to dominate medicine, public and domestic administration, child-rearing, and all areas of society. With this, women lost their role as health and care providers in the family, and maternal instincts, virtue, and affection seemed insufficient.<sup>(10)</sup>

Women, who were seen as incompetent in caring for children, indulgent, irrational, and emotional, had to be trained in child-rearing. Children, whose upbringing became increasingly important, were no longer seen as innocent but once again considered full of dangerous impulses. In low-income families, pressure increased for mothers to stay at home with their children during early childhood and go out to work later.<sup>(10)</sup>

In the second half of the 19th century, motherhood was identified with child-rearing. In the 20th century in the United States, women organised themselves around the need for a new vision of the romantic ideal, which ironically took the form of the housewife concept, where the home and motherhood were simultaneously valued.<sup>(10)</sup>

A cult of domesticity emerged, in which women appeared protected in this private context under beliefs about motherhood as a moral duty. From this perspective, motherhood was seen as a social position due to its contribution to social welfare.<sup>(11)</sup>

Child-rearing thus becomes a task for those who perform it best, namely individual mothers, which is assumed in the ideology of exclusive motherhood. The mother's constant presence is irreplaceable in providing a constructive early experience, with the father not being directly important. This leads to another belief, intensive motherhood.<sup>(11)</sup>

The task of mothers is now to understand each child as an individual, to be attentive to their stage of development, and to be objective and reflective in responding to their needs. These approaches contribute to giving relevance to the mother in the child's healthy development.<sup>(12)</sup>

From this perspective, healthy and positive relationships and emotional responses in adult life result from good-quality maternal care. On the other hand, negative personality traits and psychological disorders in mothers have negative repercussions on their children's development.<sup>(12,13)</sup>

In the culture of the idealised mother, beliefs implicitly identify women with motherhood. Motherhood is the central goal in women's lives, and femininity is a condition of motherhood. Women are considered to have a natural capacity for love, connection, and empathy with others, pointing to the female personality as a model

for a more humane world. Motherhood also fulfils a function of satisfying unconscious desires and rewarding the mother herself.<sup>(12,14,15)</sup>

Another consequence of omnipotent motherhood is the asexual mother.<sup>(14,16)</sup> Female sexuality outside the circuits of reproduction or the willingness to relate to others thus seems threatening. An indicator of the desexualisation of motherhood would be the lack of questioning about how the mother became pregnant, which leads to the automatic assumption that somewhere there is a man/father/husband who remains undisturbed.<sup>(13)</sup>

### The Mother of the Postmodern Era

According to sociologist Alain Ehrenberg<sup>(12)</sup>, today's society has been abandoning the criteria of the first half of the 20th century based on a disciplinary model of what is permitted and what is prohibited, broadening perspectives, freedom of choice, and promoting personal fulfilment. Traditional authority is being called into question, and, instead of norms or patterns of upbringing, multiple possibilities emerge from which to choose.<sup>(14)</sup>

From this point of view, motherhood is beginning to be seen as contrary to personal fulfilment. The number of children is decreasing, and career options and activities outside the home are increasing for women and mothers. The postponement of motherhood is becoming accepted, as evidenced by a widening generation gap.<sup>(14)</sup>

Parenting itself is beginning to be seen as a collective task. An example is the postnatal leave being granted to fathers in some countries.<sup>(15)</sup>

On the other hand, the new and growing problems faced by children and young people today (behavioural problems, violence, drug and alcohol addiction, early sexuality, antisocial behaviour, etc.) are no longer seen solely as maternal failure.<sup>(15)</sup>

### Motherhood and culture

To argue that motherhood is a cultural practice also means relativising commonplaces about it, since it implies assuming, from the outset, that the meaning of this practice is closely related to the cultural, social, and economic context in which it occurs.<sup>(16)</sup>

Approaching the phenomenon of motherhood in this way raises once again the old and false opposition between nature and culture, since automatic responses bring back the aforementioned notions about the 'nature' of women, the 'maternal instinct', and the 'feminine essence'.<sup>(16)</sup>

When analysing motherhood, cultural aspects are usually associated only with its phenomenology, not its existence. In traditional terms, no one would dare to argue that motherhood is a cultural rather than a biological fact today. In other words, it is a gender issue.<sup>(16)</sup>

Apart from childbirth and breastfeeding, all other activities, behaviours, abilities, attributes, and characteristics were modified according to the prevailing gender value system.<sup>(17)</sup>

However, technological development has also begun to destabilise aspects related to conception, pregnancy and childbirth, and even more so breastfeeding, introducing heated debates about their 'naturalness'. Seeing it this way does not imply denying the apparent presence of biological factors in conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. However, in our day, the real possibilities of avoiding or suspending a pregnancy are so accessible in general terms that not doing so is an act of will, even if the motives remain unconscious.<sup>(17)</sup>

The contours of motherhood begin to take shape when work moves outside the home. It has been suggested that the growth of industrialisation led men, women, and children to cease being involved in the tasks they shared with work in the home. The "private" sphere emerged from then on, and women were left in this new sphere, markedly different from the public sphere.<sup>(17)</sup>

From then on, women's position was belittled, either through devaluation or through an equally complex mixture of idealisation and contempt.<sup>(17)</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, a new phenomenon emerged: childhood began to attract more and more attention as a specific and central phase of life, and children's growth and future began to be formulated as key social goals.<sup>(18)</sup>

Parallel to the social construction of motherhood, the social construction of childhood took shape, which was equally determined by history and culture and operated as a counterpoint to formulating the maternal imaginary.<sup>(18)</sup>

In recent years, changes in family and working life, advances in medical technology, and the multiplicity of interpretations and practices promoted by the women's movement have continued to shape the meaning of motherhood. Feminist responses have been many and varied. Some theorists see motherhood as a path to psychological development and social change. Others emphasise the repressive aspects of motherhood and attribute to it a central role in devaluation and subjugation to silence and otherness. Still others seek to avoid the dichotomy by focusing their attention beyond motherhood and closer to womanhood, sisterhood, or the shared position with the daughter.<sup>(18)</sup>

In the mid-1980s, feminists' ambivalence towards motherhood gave way to a new pleasure in bearing witness to and representing the maternal experience.<sup>(18)</sup>



In recent years, another perspective has begun to gain ground; various academic works have raised serious questions about the effects of changing customs and the crisis of patriarchy on the function and social role of men and women in the reproduction of the social group and the care of new social subjects.<sup>(18)</sup>

At this stage in the development of feminist theory and gender studies, it is clear that motherhood is a historical and cultural phenomenon, definitively determined by both the moment and the context of its production, and in which the subjective and structural dimensions come into play to construct the meaning of this complex social practice which consists, in short, the reproduction of the social group and the care of new social subjects.<sup>(19)</sup>

However, in the Latin American context, studies analysing the social construction of motherhood based on the history and cultures of the region are still in their infancy.<sup>(19)</sup>

### Art explores motherhood

Between 1936 and 1939, the artist Francis Bartolozzi produced the series War Drawings while working for the Altavoz del Frente, an organisation dependent on the Government of the Republic. They were not made public until the 1980s because the artist hid them under her mattress and kept them there throughout the dictatorship.<sup>(20)</sup>

Eighteen of these drawings were shown in the collective exhibition *Yo, la peor de todas* (I, the worst of all), which I curated in 2017 at the Museum of Navarre. The series, which mainly features women carrying children, sacks, bags, and household goods, explores the daily life and suffering of the population during the Civil War and offers a very particular view of the conflict, far removed from heroism and the front line. It is a peripheral and feminine perspective.<sup>(20)</sup>

In her drawings, the burden becomes a driving force that activates new imaginaries and produces a subjectivity different from that of the militiaman on the front line, but also different from that of the artist as an individual genius, autonomous and exclusively dedicated to creation, which was the prevailing conception of the artist at the time. The iconography of the charge is also present in the works of other women artists of the period, such as Manuela Ballester, who in *¡Votad al Frente Popular!* (1936) depicts a woman carrying a child as an emblem of Republican femininity. Juana Francisca, who, in the Spanish Republic Pavilion in Paris in 1937, presented an image of a woman carrying a dead soldier.<sup>(20)</sup>

Through carrying, Bartolozzi proposes a different way of understanding relationships with others based on carrying, sustaining, and caring. Anchored in vulnerability and interdependence, and far removed from subject-object relational logic, Bracha Ettinger proposes the concept of ‘carriance,’ which has no direct translation into Spanish and implies carrying something or someone. The positions embodied by Bartolozzi and her contemporaries invite us to think from other logics about images’ affective, empathetic, and political qualities.<sup>(20)</sup>

Feminist art emerged in the late 1960s and broadly encompasses the efforts and achievements of the feminist movement to make art made by women more visible in art history and artistic practice. A distinction must be made between “art made by women”, which can be the same as that made by men in terms of themes and genres, and “feminist art”, which aims to be different, to address other issues, and to challenge traditional values in art.<sup>(21)</sup>

The movement began in the 1960s, flourished throughout the 1970s, and its effects continue. The growing prominence of women artists in art history and contemporary artistic practice can be attributed to this feminist art movement.<sup>(21)</sup>

The artists dealt with subjects typically excluded from traditional art, such as female biological functions or motherhood. It is therefore a political art form, intended to be made by women and about women and their social situation, dealing with issues such as rape, racism and working conditions. The media varied, from performances to minor arts such as embroidery, fabrics, cut paper, and patchwork.<sup>(21)</sup>

The Women’s Building in Los Angeles was a prominent museum known for its feminist art exhibitions.<sup>(22)</sup>

Within feminist art, the pattern painting (decorative painting) or Pattern & Decoration movement stands out. Its name derives from “pattern”, a decorative motif. This movement emerged from a group of Californian artists opposed to minimalism, who used “feminine” craft techniques. This trend is personified by Tony Robbins, Valérie Jaudon, and Myriam Schapiro.<sup>(22)</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

It is necessary to emphasise that motherhood and child-rearing must be the subject of renewed and constant psychosocial study that does not ignore that they will always be closely related to different conceptions of children, social class, and social, historical, and cultural customs and norms. This concept has been the central theme of many artistic creations, notably the feminist art movement.

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## FINANCING

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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