



# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

## HOLY MOTHER!

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

**P**rehistoric knowledge of reproduction was certainly limited, but the cycle of pregnancy and birth was no doubt understood as both precious and precarious. We have no way of knowing the statistics on maternal mortality in prehistory, but it seems reasonable to believe that the incidence was much higher than that of today, at least in the developed world. As a result, the need arose to mitigate mortality in any way possible, including the veneration of a deity who might guard against such misfortune.

Since the 1960s, the alleged worship of the Great Mother and the idea of an associated prehistoric matriarchy has gained currency. These ideas have largely focused on the abundance of female figurines from prehistoric Europe, some dating as early as the Palaeolithic period. Numerous examples, with large hips, stomachs, and breasts, have been construed as

representations of pregnancies. Similar images continued to be produced for millennia, and the Museum's Neolithic example may date some 20,000 years after the earliest ones. Scholars rightly point out, however, that these are merely figurines, and there is absolutely no

evidence that they represent a Great Mother deity. Goddess aside, a few points are certain: the figurines are extant, they represent women, and some are seemingly pregnant. This is probably enough to suggest a rudimentary veneration of motherhood, even if the figurines only served as good luck talismans. Otherwise, why make them at all?

In later cultures, when details of religious practice were recorded, there is abundant evidence for the worship of mother goddesses, including the Great Mother herself. In ancient Egypt, Mut (whose name means "mother" in the ancient Egyptian language) was a primal deity who gave birth to the earth. Mut would never be as celebrated as Isis, however, and the latter would become one of the most popular mother goddesses ever, embraced by Greeks and Romans as avidly as Egyptians. With her husband Osiris and child Horus, Isis formed a divine trinity in ancient Egypt, and was sometimes shown nursing her child to emphasize her roles as both mother and life-giver. Indeed, she had even resurrected her dead husband after he was murdered by his wicked brother.



**Seated Woman**  
Greek, Neolithic, 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE  
From Thessaly (Greece)  
Terracotta  
Museum Purchase (66.343)



**Isis Suckling Horus**  
Egyptian, Ptolemaic, 332–30 BC  
Faience (55.121.5)  
Metropolitan Museum of Art  
New York  
Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest Fund

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**Venus**  
Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE  
Bronze  
Chorn Memorial Fund (61.25)



**Plate with “Mistress of Wild Animals”**  
Greek, Late Geometric, ca. 750 BCE  
Pottery  
Museum Purchase (73.212)

Most of the goddesses of the Graeco-Roman pantheon were mothers, except a few who remained virgins. A “great mother” above all, however, was worshiped in various guises, most commonly by Greeks as Ge/Gaia or Cybele, the latter as “Magna Mater” by the Romans. Ge/Gaia is simply the Greek word for “earth,” and the personified

goddess was venerated in many places, including the famed sanctuaries at Delphi and Olympia. Cybele was a Phrygian mother goddess whom Greeks associated mostly with the wilderness and wild animals, such as lions. We might imagine her as the equivalent of “Mother Nature” but sometimes Greeks venerated a goddess they called *Potnia Theron* or “Mistress of Wild Animals.” It is possible that *Potnia Theron* could refer to Ge, Cybele, or even Artemis (as Homer labeled her). Suffice it to say, the boundaries between all of these goddesses can get blurred.

Although ancient Romans very much embraced the worship of “Magna Mater” and built a great temple to her in Rome, Venus remained “mother of the Roman people” and the tutelary deity of Rome’s first family, the Julians, who claimed descent from her. As a goddess of sexuality, Venus was the very personification of fertility, and her offspring were many. These included Aeneas, from whom Romulus descended, and thus the Roman people themselves. Her worship was widespread in Italy, while her Greek equivalent, Aphrodite, was also heavily venerated in the Greek-speaking Mediterranean.

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(Detail)  
Domenico Morone (Italian, 1442–1518)  
*Madonna and Child/Man of Sorrows*, ca. 1500  
Tempera on linen  
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation (61.75)

With the ascendancy of Christianity, the Graeco-Roman goddesses faded away, to be replaced by one mother above all: the Virgin Mary. At once virgin and mother, vestiges of the pagan goddesses seem inherent in the persona of Mary, but she was never given the label of “goddess” and the Church did not recognize her as divine. But her role as mother became pivotal, and the Ecumenical Council of 431 CE bestowed upon her the title of *Theotokos* or “Bearer of God,” often translated as “Mother of God.” In subsequent artistic representations, she was thus frequently shown breastfeeding the child. The *Virgo lactans* (nursing virgin) in art persisted, but it had largely disappeared from the artistic repertoire by the eighteenth century.\*■

\*The first image of the *Virgo lactans* may come from the Catacomb of Priscilla (ca. 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE) in Rome, but the identity of the image has been questioned. *Virgo lactans* imagery does not seem to have been widespread in the Byzantine period, but Pope Gregory II mentions one such image in a letter to Emperor Leo the Isaurian (recorded in Acts of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council, 8<sup>th</sup> century CE).