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# THE MADONNA OF PORTLLIGAT. AN ONEIRIC EXPLOSION

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The line of Leonardo,  
The geometry of Raphael,  
The light of Vermeer,  
The poetical conception of Dalí...  
And classical beauty smiles again.

—Prince Matila Ghika

*The Madonna of Portlligat*, considered to be one of Salvador Dalí's masterpieces, is an allegorical painting, striking in both iconography and composition, which synthesizes his entire artistic evolution, from surrealism to the nuclear mysticism that marked a new stage in his career, and in which, to express his conception of the world, he combines nuclear physics with religion and a certain return to classicism. Dalí explained this in a short but illuminating article, on the occasion of his exhibition in 1950 at the Carstairs Gallery in New York, in which he first presented *The Madonna of Portlligat*:<sup>1</sup> "The old Dalí is gone. That was the nightmare period with confusions and suffering, without elevation, and he used a lot of greens and reds and black for expression. Here in the new Dalí you see more blues and yellows, the serene colors. That is because now Dalí is now leading in mysticism, in a mystical direction."<sup>2</sup>

Now let us look at the Madonna from a different perspective, as a poetic work with an admirable technique in which the painter reconstructs the link between mysticism and science,<sup>3</sup> and invites us to dream. On the one hand, we appreciate in this work the great weight of atomic physics and the disintegration of the atom, the representation of lightness and buoyancy, which are also apparent in his previous painting, *Atomic Leda*,<sup>4</sup> from 1947-1949. On the other hand, it is Gala who stands out in both paintings, and the same representation of Gala: in one, a woman seduced by the god Zeus, and, in the other, transformed into a Madonna, more specifically a Madonna of Renaissance inspiration. A Madonna that was to be an introduction or an anticipation of others, as in *Lapis Lazuline Corpuscular Assumpta*,<sup>5</sup> from 1952 or, in a further step, and in line with advances in science, in *Maximum Speed of Raphael's Madonna* (c. 1954).<sup>6</sup>

1. The works by Salvador Dalí cited in this publication are accompanied by a letter and a number, corresponding to the relevant entry in the *Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings by Salvador Dalí*, which can be consulted on the website of the Fundació-Gala Salvador Dalí: <https://catalogues.salvador-dali.org/catalogues/en/catalogue-raisonne-paintings/>. P660

2. Wambly Bald, "Dalí suggests dreams as cure for worries", *New York Post*, New York, 21/12/1950. This is the article referred to in the present text.

3. At this point, I would like to note the importance of Ramon Llull and the alchemists in the thought and work of Salvador Dalí.

4. P642

5. P670

6. P683

7. José Ángel Montañés, *El niño secreto de los Dalí*, Roca, Barcelona, 2020.

8. Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, Dial Press, New York, 1942, p. 383.

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And yet, this Madonna is Gala. Gala, muse and companion, inspiring and creative, believing in her own way, the model for so many of the painter's works, some of which he signed Gala-Salvador Dalí. Gala, a divorcee, a free woman with a rebellious and nonconformist spirit, is the image of Mary, with all the subversion that this entails. Gala, spiritual and carnal.

A Gala depicted in a clearly defined and concrete setting, in a composition that both refers us to the *Sistine Madonna* by the Raphael he so much admired and makes explicit references to Piero della Francesca and Carlo Crivelli. A Madonna of Portlligat, the painter's eternal landscape, which inspired and nourished him, with its special light, and with an infant Jesus who is also a real child, and a part of his everyday universe: this child was Joan Figueras, who was often brought to the house and for whom both Gala and Dalí felt great affection.<sup>7</sup>

The basket of bread with its symbolism, the ear of wheat, the egg, the rose, the jasmine flower, the olive branch, the pomegranate, the rhinoceros, the cuttlefish bone, the seashell, the sea urchin or the *trompe-l'oeil* in the arches are representations of forms that invoke the whole of Dalí's work. They are iconographic elements, some presented as still lifes, set in a particular landscape, arid and mineral, around a Madonna at once Renaissance and real, Gala, of whom Dalí wrote that "she and she alone was reality; and all that my eyes were capable of seeing was 'she', and it was the portrait of her that would be my work, my idea, my reality."<sup>8</sup>

Salvador Dalí  
Maximum speed  
of Raphael's  
Madonna, c. 1954.  
Museo Nacional  
Centro de Arte  
Reina Sofía, Madrid



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As compared to the first version of the Madonna, which Dalí painted in 1949, this one comes closer to the classics; there is more depth and a greater sense of harmony, more iconographic richness, more precision and more emphasis on buoyancy and suspension. And, above all, more presence of Gala, a Gala in movement, in the manner of an echo, who also appears as a maiden—angelic being—bride, a being that seems to have arisen from the transformation of a cuttlefish bone. From a creature symbolizing nostalgia and also transformation; perhaps Dalí was alluding to Gala's spirit and at the same time to her capacity for adaptation, her chameleonism, in terms of aesthetics. Dalí manages to create harmony from decomposition and leads us with the Madonna towards serenity. As he observed, in the newspaper article cited above: "There is a big confusion in the world today *parceque* there is too much materialism and nuclear research—and the only answer is serenity through good dreams. That is how to escape the drama of modern times."

Dalí saw in dreams, so surreal and so scientific at the same time, a cure for our anxieties. Whether or not his intention was to provoke, he advocates having more and better dreams. And he adds: "Monsieur, my painting is like a mission to help provide some of the answer, through good dreams. This is the real psychology anyhow." And this is a Dalí who has transcended Freud.

Salvador Dalí  
Lapis Lazuline Corpuscular  
Assumpta, 1952.  
Masaveu collection, Oviedo

