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**The Virgin Mary, Common Womenfolk
The Perspective of Belgian and European Iconographic Revival
in *fin-de-siècle***

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At the end of the 19th century, one witnesses the emergence of a new religious art in European art exhibitions. This art revitalized traditional religious themes by rooting them in the present. This phenomenon is observed in Belgium. Many Belgian artists like Léon Frederic, Constantin Meunier, Jakob Smits or the members of Sint-Martin-Latem School chose to present religious work and proceed with a sacralization of common womenfolk (the female worker, the peasant women...). A woman became the incarnation of a contemporary Virgin Mary, an allegory of the pain of the poorest in society or of immutable values (family, nation, religion). This text would like to question this revival of religious art at the *fin-de-siècle* in view of ideological, political and artistic contexts.

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As demonstrated by French art historian Bruno Foucard in his important text *Le Renouveau de la peinture religieuse en France* (1987), the 19th century presents a revival of religious art. The author states in the introduction an essential notion: "How the genre of religious painting which limited the personal way and whose subjects are fixed by tradition, could have developed in the 19th century, a century of nationalism, individualism, advancement of sciences and technology, and the triumph of secularism?"¹ In order to answer this question, many conferences have been organized focusing on the refiguration of Christ, a figure which catalyzes all ideological, theological, scientific and artistic thoughts of the 19th century. We quote here *Figures du Christ dans l'art, l'histoire et la littérature* (Université d'Artois, 2000),² *Jésus en représentations. De la Belle Epoque à la postmodernité* (Université de Lausanne, 2011)³ or *Le Christ refiguré (1848-1939)* (Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2015).⁴ The figure of the Virgin Mary was less studied by the art historians of the 19th century. However, the subject was not disregarded altogether and has encountered a real success going hand in hand with the development of Marian devotion. Looking beyond the traditional and Saint-Sulpician representations, many artists of the *fin-de-siècle*, particularly in Belgium, gave a hallowed status to common womenfolk (the female worker, the peasant women...). They have become the incarnation of contemporary the Virgin Mary, an allegory of the pain of the poorest in the society or of immutable values (the family, nation, religion). Using iconographic or iconological processes, these artists enrolled in the realist or naturalist tradition but decided to sanctify daily life and reality. These works can't be defined as liturgical art nor are painted to fit the decorative commissions for religious buildings. This art has developed in secular contexts such as private or public commercial exhibitions called Salons.

The sanctification of daily life: from *contemporaneization* to *personalization* of Marian iconography

At the beginning of the 19th century, the "High art" with biblical themes almost disappeared from the Salons. We were assisting to the decline of painting depicting the life of saints in favor of genre painting. These were representations of daily peasant life which depicted piety or folklore. The era of this "*peinture de genre religieux*,"⁵ whose name was given by art historian Michaël Vottero using the terms of Catholic critics, is due to the public

taste of the bourgeoisie. This public was more inclined to prefer scenes depicting daily life than classical subjects. The “*peinture de genre religieux*” or religious genre painting became the vehicle of more direct subjects, didactic and moralizing. Despite the religious or spiritual wish of certain artists, many critics only detected the picturesque aspect. Jules Castagnary, the famous French art critic, noted about *La Communion à l'église de la Trinité* (1876, Musée des Beaux-arts, Dijon, France) of the French painter Henri Gervex at the Salon of 1877: “the scene did nothing religious [...] the show is purely peaceful, and has no other purpose than to flatter the sensuality of a worldly eye.”⁶ Since 1870 other works favorably received by commentators depicted peasant scenes with values appreciated by the public, like religion. These scenes of pardon or grace took over from traditional biblical scenes.⁷ The French painters Jules Breton and Jean François Millet are the artists that best represent this inclination.

In contrast, the artists studied here decided to disavow this way and tried to reinterpret codes of biblical scenes including the contemporary world by way of holy and mythic figures. From the Apparition of *Notre Dame de Penmarc'h* (1896, Musée des Beaux-arts, Quimper, France) on the Brittany Coast of the French symbolist painter Lucien Levy Dhurmer, to the virgin of Pont-Aven of Maurice Denis, nicknamed the “Nabis with beautiful icons”, through the *The Flight into Egypt* (1891) of the German painter Fritz Von Uhde right in the German suburbs, the painting's exhibitions in Europe are marked by a series of Apparitions of the Virgin Mary like a sort of continuation of the Apparitions in Lourdes or La Salette in France. Belgium isn't exempt from these new representations of the Virgin Mary like common womenfolk in a contemporary daily life. Léon Frederic, going beyond the naturalist way of Bastien-Lepage, continually paints the Madonna in her rural daily life. This also is the case with the Dutch painter Jakob Smits within the Belgian district La Campine. Let's also note that Gustave van de Woestijne and the Laethem-Saint-Martin School were living in a little town next to Ghent. In another vein, the Belgian sculptor Constantin Meunier and the painter Anto Carte chose working-class women as the contemporary incarnation of the Virgin Mary. The non-concerted choice of Christian iconography and more precisely the Apparition of the Virgin in a contemporary world are surprising. Sure it is necessary to ask why this iconographic revival happened, but first, it seems important to define the form that it takes.

Proceeding from diverse geographical horizons and contrasting aesthetic sensitivities, these different works seem to be based on common picture strategies. The painters opt for a strategy called *contemporaneization* by Julia Bernard in her paper *Crises de l'image religieuse*.⁸ This process consists in depicting a religious scene in a contemporary environment. It isn't exclusive to the 19th century. We can observe the same strategy in Flemish paintings and Dutch art of the 17th century.⁹ However, Julia Bernard brings draws an important distinction characterizing the paintings of 19th century: “This *contemporanéisation* of the late 19th century can be defined as a conscious manipulation or a reinvention of the topics concerned, to reconceptualize their relevance to the present.”¹⁰ The German painter Fritz von Uhde is the first to update this strategy. The religious scenes localized in a peasant interior were extremely successful in Parisian exhibitions around 1880.¹¹ If Jesus is a favorite figure of Uhde, we can see the Virgin Mary represented as common womenfolk in *Flight into Egypt*. Her holy aspect is highlighted by the nimbus of the child. The Belgian painter Léon Frederic began his career in the vein of international naturalism, but he always wished to bring into his art a spiritual aura. In *Les Marchands de craie* (1882-1883, Musées royaux des Beaux-arts, Belgium; fig. 1), exhibited in different European Salons between 1883 and 1884 (Brussels, Anvers, Ghent, Paris), he depicts a typical day of a *marchands de craie* family. They were miserable vagabonds in the suburbs of industrial cities. Thanks to the singular and symbolic format of triptych, Léon Frederic confers a religious accent to this miserable and naturalist scene.¹² The symbolic parallel with the *Flight to Egypt* and the *Rest of the Holy Family* is an essential element too. Léon Frederic wants to transcend the reality with his art and refresh religious painting. In the central panel of *La Sainte Trinité* (1892, Eglise de Nafraiture, Belgium; fig. 2), two angels wander in the Belgian countryside showing the veil of Veronica where the *Sainte Face* appears bloody and is painted with an unvarnished realism. Léon Frederic also represents the Virgin in a contemporary rural place. The delimitation between the genre scene and the religious scene is often blurred. We can see his work *La Mère et l'enfant* (1900, private collection) in which the sacred is only detectable by the act of benediction of the child.

It's the same process in *La Sainte Famille* (1924, private collection) passed in auction under the title *La Dentellière* a few years ago.¹³ Only the rattle shaped as a crucifix and the father woodworking in the background allow us to discern a religious aspect. Next to these genre scenes, many artists want to revitalize religious and iconographic themes. *The Annunciation* is the first. After the *Salutation angélique* (1893, private collection) seen at the Salon de la Société nationale des Beaux-arts in Paris in 1893 is seen depicting an angel greeting a Belgian peasant in a contemporary place, Léon Frederic paints more than five works on the same theme. There is *L'Annonciation douloureuse* (1921, private collection), *L'Annonciation aux moutons* (1923, private collection), *L'Annonciation victorieuse* (1923, private collection), *L'Annonciation aux hortensias* (1927, private collection), *L'Annonciation* (1929, private collection ; fig.3). All these works use the same strategy. We can observe the apparition of an angel to a young peasant in a landscape known by Frederic (Belgian Ardennes or Belgian Coast). His friend Jakob Smits uses the same strategy to paint many *Mater amabilis* (undated, Musées royaux des Beaux-arts, Bruxelles, Belgium; fig. 4) taking the iconography of the *Madonna with Child* accompanied by a lamb. Obsessed by Dutch art of the 17th century and in particular Rembrandt, Smits painted the apparition of Christ several times in a peasant interior of La Campine, his Belgian home district.¹⁴ We can see this heritage in many artists' paintings of the realist or naturalist tradition like the German painter Fritz von Uhde with *Le Christ chez les paysans* (1887-1888, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France) or the French Léon Augustin Lhermitte with *L'Ami des humbles* (1892, private collection).

This revival isn't only defined by this strategy. Julia Bernard also notes a process of personalization especially in the Nabis' and the Pont-Aven School's art. The two concepts are at some points interchangeable. However, this personalization strategy implies more than only the representation of the biblical theme in the modern world. Bernard rightfully adds that the personalization strategy studied in avant-garde art doesn't only helps to the integration of the Christian themes in the modern world, but these artists give new significance thanks to private symbols used to embody their personal beliefs.¹⁵ So it isn't merely the Apparition of Virgin Mary as common womenfolk in a contemporary place, but the Apparition in their own daily life. In 1893, Léon Frederic exhibits in Paris the *Salutation angélique*. The angel appears to Mary in a peasant interior known by Frederic as it's the place where Frederic came to paint in the small town of Nafraiture in the Belgian Ardennes for thirty years. The stonework houses and the slate roofs are typical of the Belgian Ardennes. Critics glorified the talent of Frederic, his modern archaism, the reference to the Early Italian and Flemish painters to renew religious painting. In the *Annonciation victorieuse* (1923, private collection; fig. 5), Léon Frederic also depicts the mystic scene in the little town of Nafraiture. We can see in the background the typical stone houses and slate roofs from Belgian Ardennes. Jakob Smits, Frederic's friend, uses the same approach in many works.¹⁶ In *Annonciation en Campine* (1919, private collection) Smits indicates in the title of his work the territorial anchorage of this apparition. The *personalization* of Christian themes do not merely reflect their own daily lives but seem to resonate with their own spirituality and Christian conception of the world. Constantin Meunier demonstrates in his art a feeling of piety acquired in contact with Trappist monks. He stayed several times in the Westmalle abbey between 1857 and 1875 giving him the opportunity to sketch the lives of these monks and develop a deep spirituality.¹⁷ It impregnated his art and it can be felt through his religious paintings and representations of the worker's daily life. In the art of Meunier, the contemporary reality of the workers is transcended by a Christian and social spirituality. This feeling culminates in the sculpture *Le Coup de Grisou* (1888-1889, Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Belgium).

These unanimous and non-concerted representations don't only concern an artistic innovation or the will to renew religious themes, but seems to be the incarnation of an ideology. As Julia Bernard remarks about these *contemporanésation* of the late 19th century, these reinventions of religious themes tend to reconceptualize their relevance to the present. The works that we have seen, all involving women sanctified in the Madonna, seem to be part of two visions of the woman and the condition of the people at that time. One appears to be a vector of immutable value related to rural workers such as family and religion; the other seems to denounce the miserable conditions of the people.

Common womenfolk as *Mater dolorosa*

In the 19th century, Europe was touched by important political and economic changes. Belgium experienced a very spectacular industrial boom. In 1880, this little country of 5 million inhabitants became the second most powerful industrial country after Great Britain. Those important revolutions had a negative impact from a social point of view.¹⁸ In 1885, there was an agrarian crisis. In 1886, this crisis extended to the labor sector and a popular revolt broke out.¹⁹

In Belgium and in a part of Europe, miserable representations of people thrived and went hand in hand with the advent of international naturalism on the artistic scene.²⁰ This new pictorial movement made gains throughout Europe particularly through the reputation of the French painter Jules Bastien-Lepage.²¹ An artist like Léon Frederic was marked by the exhibitions of *Les Foins* (1877, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France) at the Salon triennial of Brussels in 1881. We can observe this inspiration in the first masterpiece of Frederic, the triptych *Les Marchands de craie*. The pessimistic treatment of the subject is due to the development by a later generation of Belgian artists of social realism. Belgian artists of the 1850 generation expressed their strong interest in this iconography, representing the fate of the humblest,²² for example Joseph Stevens with *Les Mendiants* or *Bruxelles le matin* (1857, Musée royal des Beaux-arts, Anvers, Belgium) or Charles Degroux with *Scène hivernale* or *Le Moulin à café* (1877, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France). Signing up against Belgian academism dominated by romanticism, these painters were seen as the standards of modernity until naturalism took over. In this work *Les Marchands de craie* Frederic didn't compromise on the rendering of reality. He sought to portray every detail whether it be the patched clothes subjects, the grime of his dealers who walked barefoot all day, the harassing everyday of such a life. The atmosphere of the suburbs conquered by industrialization and the choice to represent the meal of this family on a wasteland seems indebted to the French artist's works Jean-François Raffaelli such as *Le Chiffonnier allumant sa pipe* (1879-1880, Musée des Beaux-arts, Nantes, France). Unlike naturalist painters, Frederic wanted to go beyond the simple representation of daily life. He gave this work a spiritual aura thanks to the triptych format inherited from medieval retable²³ and the composition, reminiscent of religious iconography. Religious sentiment and parallels with the fate of the holy family allowed the artist to press the pathetic aspect of the subject and make this kind of scene the equivalent of "High art". The artist's social message is significant here. Frederic depicts their misery which induces compassion and Christian mercy. *Les Sans-asiles* (1883, Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, France) by the French painter Fernand Pelez is in the same vein of social naturalism. Pelez work has to be seen for what it is: the representation of a family who has just been expelled. It is however clear that through the subject and composition, Pelez is citing a religious reference: *Mater dolorosa*. Pelez isn't the first painter to use this traditional iconography, the bearer of a great deal of pathos, in order to provide a genre scene the importance of a historical painting. Alexandre Antigna with *La Mort du pauvre* (1850, Musée Charles de Bruyères, Remiremont, France) demonstrated the same wish and picture strategy.²⁴ *Mater dolorosa* isn't the only iconographic theme, related to the Virgin Mary that can underline the difficult condition of workers. *Pietà* remained a current iconographic *topos* for these artists seeking sanctification of daily life. The *Coup de grisou* (1889, Musées royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, Brussels; fig. 6) of Constantin Meunier is the work that best expresses in Belgian art the thin line between the representation of reality and the revitalization of Christian themes. Accustomed to the representation of the worker class, Meunier chooses here to depict the most feared catastrophe in a miner's life. This incident is an accidental gas explosion in a mine, which often proved fatal. Meunier has composed a sculpted group of two figures: the corpse of a miner lying and his grieving mother looking at the body of her son. The parallel with the iconography of the *Pietà* is evident. But Meunier chooses to insist in the title on the contemporaneity of the subject. This isn't the case with an artist like Anto Carte who explored the same subject but in a painting significantly called *Pietà* (1918, Musée des Beaux-arts, Mons, Belgium; fig. 7). The working women become contemporary incarnations of Mary, images of compassion and mercy and a new banner of the suffering and of miserable condition of people.

These images appear in a particular political and ideological context. The increasing difficult condition of the people is, on the one hand, at the center of the political debate because of the rise of socialism, and on the other hand, central in the artistic scene with the emergence of the social art issue. In 1885, the Belgian Workers Party (P.O.B.) was created. The entry of socialists in the Parliament in the 1894 elections marked a turning point in the political life of the country. The number of voters had increased tenfold and the working class accessed in some way a political and social maturity. Previously, the social protection of workers had remained traditionally the domain of the Belgian Catholic Party and various charities remained well represented in the countryside.²⁵ The reflections on the conditions of the working class became a point of ideological rapprochement between progressives and some Catholics, encouraged by the *Rerum Novarum* encyclical of Pope Leo XIII in 1891.²⁶ P.O.B., renovators of the Catholic Party and the intellectual bourgeoisie agreed on social ideas and wanted to improve the people's fate. Regarding the Belgian art scene in the early 1880s, the debate centers around the issue of *social art*.²⁷ The main progressive artistic revue *L'Art moderne* ardently defended this vocation of art.²⁸ Despite the affiliation of most of the members and founders with the new Belgian Labour Party P.O.B., the editorial line of the revue was intended to be free and clear of any political influence. The concept of *social art* isn't theorized but comes in three categories more or less explained that "appear as its metonymic relay": "*l'art pour tous* that can be defined as the aesthetization of everyday life; *l'art nouveau* which perceives also as popular; and finally *l'art charitable* that emphasizes the feeling of compassion and solidarity that representations of the people are supposed to generate, between sympathy and empathy."²⁹ For *L'Art moderne*, *social art* isn't determined by the subjects, or by a particular genre, but in terms of an aesthetic and ethical "spirit". All artistic practices can be perceived and are compatible with the project of *social art*. Many Belgian artists like Léon Frederic and Constantin Meunier tried to position themselves on these issues.

The political and socio-cultural context seems to impact the art of the religious artists. The aim of these artists is not to attract the viewer with shocking pictures, but to arouse the spectator's empathy for the miserable condition of people. Whether it is in the art of Léon Frederic, Constantin Meunier or Anto Carte, the religiosity and the social apprehension of the Christian message are primary.

Marian apparitions in rural countries as proof of a world of immutable values?

The societal changes were radically transforming the urban landscape, making of the city the seat of modernity and progress in front of an abandoned rurality. The countryside is emptied of its population, the industrial sector being attractive as it supplied work. At the same time, there was in Europe an urban exodus of many painters. Ernest Bieler (1863-1948) discovered Savièse in Switzerland in 1884; Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) left Paris in 1888 to stay in Pont Aven and settled later in the remote village of Pouldu; Giovanni Segantini (1858-1899) abandoned Milan to settle permanently in the Alps; in 1889, Fritz Mackensen (1866-1953), Hans am Ende (1864-1918) and Otto Modersohn (1865-1943) settled in Worspede, Northern Germany. Belgium wasn't spared by this phenomenon. Leon Frederic settled in 1883 in the small Ardennes village of Nafraiture. Jakob Smits bought a farm in the rural area of Campine and Ghent artist Gustave van Woestijne settled in the town of Sint-Martens-Latem. All of these artists used the contemporary peasantry as a model for Madonna which gave sign for a renewed Marian iconography. In his series of works depicting annunciations, Léon Frederic depicted peasant women dressed in the typical costume of Belgian Ardennes visited by angels. In the *Annonciation victorieuse* (fig. 5), we can see a young peasant returning from the garden with a basket full of cabbages. On her way, she meets an angel flying towards her, the hand in a gesture of blessing and holding a wreath of flowers. All the village community assists at this mystic scene. Frederic chooses to implant this apparition in Nafraiture, village of Belgian Ardennes which is recognizable thanks to the typical farmhouse with its slate roof. Nafraiture was the place chosen by the artist where he spent many years in communion with the peasants. Jakob Smits painted a similar scene in his *Annonciation en Campine*. In a contemporary farmhouse, a peasant is spinning wool but her spinning is stopped by the visitation of an angel. Gustave Van de Woestijne, representative of the school of Sint-Martin-Latem, took another



1 Léon Frederic, *Les Marchands de craie*, 1882-1883, triptych, oil on canvas, 2x4.98 m, Musées royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels)



2 Léon Frederic, *La Sainte Face* (central panel of the triptych *La Sainte Trinité*), 1892, oil on canvas, 0.95x1.23 m, Eglise de Nafraiture, Belgium (photo: B. Foudral)



3 Léon Frederic, *Annonciation*, 1929, triptych, oil on canvas, 0.59x1.11 m, private collection (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels)



4 Jakob Smits, *Mater amabilis*, undated, oil on canvas, 1.46x1.15 m, Musées royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels)



5 Léon Frederic, *L'Annonciation victorieuse*, 1923, oil on canvas, 0.86x0.67 m, private collection (photo: B. Foudral)

strategy: Virgin and Child appeared in the small village in *Dimanche après-midi* (1914, Musées royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium), however, this isn't a peasant woman sanctified as Madonna by the intervention of an external mystical event, but a Marian apparition in a contemporary landscape. This art tinted of mysticism isn't unique to Belgium; in France, many artists settled in Brittany and changed their naturalist production to religious work such as *Notre Dame de Penmarc'h* by Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer. Here the artist depicted an iconic Madonna in Breton traditional dress in front of the coastline at low tide and the Virgin arose as a protector of sailors.

Marked by the crisis and social context,³⁰ all of these artists would oppose the anti-modernist frenzy of an urban utopia, and would return to the simplicity of the rural world perceived as a primitive Eden. The sacredness of rurality in their paintings seems to express their own vision of rurality as conservatory of unchanging values and a naive and authentic religion. The art historian Pascal Ruedin observed this phenomenon throughout Europe that he calls "rural primitivism."³¹ The work of Marius-Ary Leblond published in 1909 entitled *L'Idéal du XIXe siècle* analysed this cultural phenomenon recognizing the Belgium artists as art critics.³² This book proposes to synthesize and identify the ideal of the time in which the authors detect a unity in the aspirations despite differences of schools, opinions and beliefs. This ideal is the "modern primitivism" that they try to define as having its source in primitive "gathering of the peoples of prehistoric times" to be close to nature and, on the other hand "artists who, in the late Middle Ages, had through the rise of a strong, simple faith, found the Christian ideal of purity, mystical grace, expressiveness of the soul through the body, transformation and domination of the body by the soul, for whom beauty is present in an illuminated emanation."³³ The modern primitivists would be "those who by way of a natural growth of their liberal, fraternal, socialist and generous faith in their religion of earthly happiness, evoke idyllic paintings by helping to compose their retrospective intuition."³⁴ Apart from the utopist socialist orientation, the book of Leblond is very interesting and makes a list of many writers, artists and philosophers of the 19th century (or who have had an echo in the 19th century) which manifest this desire to return to "Edens primitive," such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Georges Sand or Emile Zola. The Belgian literature³⁵ will echo rejection of the city by elites, such is in *La Nouvelle Carthage* (1888) by Georges Eekhoud, which helps lend the city a negative image. In the same spirit, in his book *L'île vierge* published in 1897, the famous Camille Lemonnier



6 Constantin Meunier, *Le Coup de grisou*, 1889, bronze, 1.52x2.12x1.09 m, Musées royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels)



7 Anto Carte, *Pietà*, 1918, oil on canvas, 0.94x1.13 m, Musée des Beaux-arts, Mons, Belgium (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels)

exposes a thought qualified at the time as “*naturisme*”³⁶: a necessary return to nature that is considered primitive in front of a hostile urban environment.³⁷ This literary and intellectual context leads some artists to embrace this utopic vision and they apply it to their own lives, as we see with Leon Frederic, Jakob Smits or the members of School of Sint-Martin-Latem.

Ruralilty and Christian religion seem to be linked by these artists. Peasant women represented as Virgin Mary manifest the vision of a rurality as conservatory of a naive and primitive faith. Was this unchanging link between rurality and Christianity real or purely imaginary for these urban artists? This topic needs further study although one may say that the link between religion and countryside was real in Belgium. Catholic political parties had an important and increasing control over rural and labor populations. The major parties can be included in the sphere of social Catholicism. At that time, we can observe the creations of guilds and workers’ organizations which create an important territorial network for the Catholic parties. In the same Federation there were two ways of thinking: the ultramontane whose main objective was to control the religious and moral education of the people in order to keep them in “the poor environment given by Providence”, and the progressive current which hopes to include the notion of social justice in the ideology of prevailing Catholic policy. In those two currents, paternalism and charity retain the main ideologies.³⁸ Following this idea, from the 1870s, the “Fédération des Sociétés ouvrières catholiques belges” encouraged opening of local economics schools, religious communities and women’s groups in the countryside to stop the decline of religious influence. The Federation considered that the battle for the re-Christianization of the society was grounded in the family – the woman.³⁹ In the late 19th century, the countryside was doubly enrolled in a political fight with the Catholic parties and in a crusade to moralize and save the familial, religious and traditional values against the significant electoral progress of socialism.

Is the non-concerted choice to represent Mary in the contemporary countryside a manifestation of the ideology of these artists close to the claims of Catholic parties? The peasant Virgin would incarnate values like Family and Religion. The many representations of the Virgin Mary common to womenfolk like a mother which takes over classical iconography of Madonna and the Child would corroborate this hypothesis. We need to nuance the hypothesis of Marian figures as the banner of the dominant ideology of social Catholicism and to affirm that these urban men were faced with an alien world to their own. They wanted to paint things appearing singular and “exotic” and, in that context, they perceived the very strong link with religion. These representations of common womenfolk obtained a religious and sacred aura, within the new daily life close to people and peasants. This feeling was intensified by the development of Marian devotion and the impressive liturgical feast.

We can conclude that the revitalization of Christian topics originated from two pictorial strategies at the *fin-de-siècle*: *contemporaneization* and *personalization*. The line between representation of daily life and religious scenes was clearly distinguishable - the Virgin Mary as common womenfolk or common womenfolk as the Virgin Mary? However, these paintings seem to be the expression of the spiritual daily lives of the artists and their apprehension of the miserable condition of peoples' lives. Ideologies, politics and religion appear as the basis of a European iconographic revival at the *fin-de-siècle*.

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Djeвица Marija, obična žena iz naroda, u kontekstu belgijske i europske ikonografske obnove u *fin-de-siècleu*

Na početku druge polovine 19. stoljeća, sakralno je slikarstvo gotovo nestalo s europskih umjetničkih izložbi u korist žanr-slikarstva koje prikazuje pobožnost i folklor, no već krajem 19. stoljeća svjedočimo pojavi nove religijske umjetnosti koja je revitalizirala tradicionalne teme tako što ih je smjestila u sadašnjost. Europski umjetnici odabiru iste slikarske strategije: *suvremenizaciju* i *personalizaciju* biblijskih tema. Ovaj fenomen možemo pratiti u Belgiji u kojoj brojni umjetnici, poput Léona Frederica, Constantina Meuniera, Jakoba Smitsa ili članova kolonije Sint-Martin-Latem, odabiru prikazati religijske sadržaje te sakralizirati običnu ženu iz naroda (radnicu, seljanku...), koja postaje inkarnacija suvremene Djevice Marije, alegorija bola najsiromašnijih u društvu ili, pak, postojanih vrijednosti (Obitelj, Nacija, Religija). Obnova religijske umjetnosti se doima kao odgovor na duboku žudnju za duhovnošću uzrokovanom snažnom industrijalizacijom. Radnica kao Djeвица Marija odbacuje jednu sudbinu radničke klase, dok seljanka kao Madonna odgovara duhovnom idealu, koji se pronalazi u svakodnevnom ruralnom životu koji naliči na primordijalni Raj. Ovaj tekst propituje proces oživljavanja religijske umjetnosti *fin-de-sièclea* kroz ideološki, politički i umjetnički kontekst.

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