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Salvador Dali, Madonna at Port Lligat, 1949

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Salvador Dalí
Spanish (1904-1989)
Madonna at Port Lligat, 1949
Oil on canvas
19 ½ x 15 in.
Gift of Mr and Mrs. Ira Haupt, 59.9



Upon examining Salvador Dali's initial version of *La Madonna de Port Lligat*, one immediately becomes aware that this painting is not as incomprehensible as many of his, that there is indeed a rather decipherable sense of what the painter had in mind, both aesthetically and thematically. Painted in 1949 following World War II, the *Madonna* does, in fact, represent a kind of transition for Dali, away from a complete (conscious or unconscious) adherence to avant-garde principles, towards a fusion of the same with more classical and religious traditions. This synthesis is apparent in the *Madonna*, as is his relationship with such Spanish mystics as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Such was the religious sense of the work that Pope Pius XII found fit to bless it that very same year.

The painting itself presents the Virgin Mary (modeled by Dali's wife and inspiration, Gala) cradling in her lap the Christ child (modeled by a neighboring fisher boy), both of whom are suspended in air and somewhat "dematerialized," as Haggerty Director Curtis Carter describes them. Each has a section carved out of her/his torso and the Virgin's arms are dismembered. Such weightlessness suggests not only the destruction that came with the atomic age but also the mystic sense of uplifting and oneness with a higher power, which is in itself inexplicable. The Child is holding a cross in one hand and balancing a globe in the other and both symbols are joined in what appears to be a mirror-like reflection, suggesting the reach of spirituality. Both the Virgin and Child are surrounded by an equally disjointed arch, and then by various Biblical symbols strewn about and with no apparent connection to each other, in typically surrealist arrangement. These include a sea urchin, fish, seashells, lemons, and an egg attached to and hanging from an inverted shell above the Virgin's head. Shells are commonly associated with pilgrimage (as in Santiago de Compostela), fish and lemons are traditional Christian symbols and the sea urchin projects a larger and all-encompassing image of the globe, albeit in skeletal, "dematerialized" form. Perhaps the most enigmatic and controversial symbol is the egg, which can suggest the Virgin (or Gala) as the center not only of the painting but of the universe, and as deeply immersed in a kind of baptismal ceremony. The use of both the egg and the seashell can also be traced back to the classical painter Piero della Francesca.

Also striking is the composition of the painting: the use of color, form and shapes. Rather than presenting an incoherent jumble of images with a meaning to be ultimately discerned, the painting is very clear, translucent and symmetrical, as in a classical model. The bright blue of the background reflects the Catalonian sea, dear to Dali's heart. The other sea objects accentuate the marine backdrop as well as the painting's Biblical framework. Overall, the work is a wonderful mix of traits that characterize Dali in his surrealist phase along with others that reflect his more classical and religious orientation. What a privilege it is to have this painting as a permanent part of Marquette's collection!

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