

Harappa to Botticelli: 5,000 years of the mother icon

SOMITRA DAS

A two-part series on an exhibition of images of the mother down the ages whose highlight is Botticelli's *Madonna and Child*.

The anchor of a small but outstanding exhibition of Indian and Italian masterpieces titled *One Mother, Many Tongues*, now on at the Humayun Tomb Museum, Delhi, is Sandro Botticelli's *Madonna and Child*.

The painting foreshadows Christ's death on the cross. The exquisite sculptures of the mother goddesses culled from all over India and Italy are in a dialogue with each other. The exhibition is part of the celebrations of the Special Strategic Partnership between India and Italy. The wall texts are enlightening.

The exhibition is on in Delhi until August 8, and then it moves to Bengaluru, where it opens at the National Gallery of Modern Art on August 20 for a month. From there, it

moves to Mumbai.

The exhibition is co-curated by Naman P. Ahuja, curator and professor of Indian art and architecture at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, and general editor of *Marg* magazine, and Andrea Anastasio, director of the Italian Cultural Centre in India, who is also a designer, artist and student of Indian languages.

As the title suggests, the 26 superlative exhibits are a celebration of diversity and multiplicity, globalisation-induced anxieties of homogenisation notwithstanding, and of the many aspects of the mother, way beyond her traditional and predictable roles in society.

The exhibition traces the continuity of the mother and child icon "over the past 5,000 years, starting with Harappa and all the way to Botticelli — the dawn of the Renaissance", said Ahuja.

He added that it showcases rarely seen treasures hidden in the holdings of Indian regional museums.

"We know of the monumental sculptures, but little

of the smaller ones."

The smallest and oldest exhibit is the terracotta figure of the mother cradling a child from Harappa 2500 BC.

Ahuja traced the linguistic and iconographic connectedness of these *Matrika* or divine mothers, and analysed how the meaning of the word extends to Vageshwari or Vak-devi, the goddess of speech, and how alphabets that are viewed as *matrikas* form the basis of our intellectual universe.

While showing around Havells gallery at the Humayun's Tomb Museum, where the 26 gems are exhibited, Ahuja commented — occasionally with playful asides — that it is both a "celebration and interrogation" of inheritance and was not meant to "decry" it. It questions the "repetition of images through millennia: Is motherhood the only rubric under which women are granted agency? Are little boys only paired with their mother-goddesses, or is there any place for the girl child too?"

"The mother is symbolic of being a protector. The child need not be a human child. It is not just about procreation. It is symbolic of an idea or a concept, of a new society, of a new future that needs to be born and needs protection as much as a human child", said Ahuja.

First, let us have a look at Botticelli's tempera on wood painting, a work of the final years of the Italian master's life executed around 1500.

It is a loan from Museo Stibbert in Florence, and this cultural exchange gives us a rare opportunity to view a great Renaissance work of art up close.

Museo Stibbert, founded by Frederick Stibbert (1838-1906), has a Bengal connection. His grandfather, Giles Stibbert, was commander-in-chief for the British East India Company in Bengal at the end of the 18th century and ruled as governor for several years.



Botticelli's *Madonna and Child*

Frederick had inherited his grandfather's vast fortune.

Andrea Anastasio, who, Ahuja said, had negotiated the loans of artworks from Italy, analysed the Botticelli painting in a telephone interview. It had been in the same family for 300 years till it was sold at the beginning of the 20th century.

The sprawling Stibbert family villa, the core of which dates back to the 15th century, has been converted into a museum. Botticelli had painted 40 Madonna portraits, all of which are different. This portrait has "no trace of naturalism — it is symbolic and idealistic".

Child Christ's aura is different from Madonna's aura, which is in concentric

circles. Christ's aura is similar to rays.

A layperson would notice two things that would establish the divinity of the mother and child — Madonna's gaze is completely introverted. Neither the baby nor the mother engages with one another.

The mother has a strong melancholic expression. She is contemplating the death and suffering the child will face in later life.

This corresponds with Botticelli's philosophy after the death of the Italian ascetic Dominican friar, Jerome Savonarola, in 1498, when the artist withdrew from social life and stopped painting mythological figures.

Botticelli died in 1510 at the age of 65. He conveyed



Mater Matuta

his Christian message through the articulation of the Madonna and child. The baby appears to be weightless as the Mother of God holds a spiritual being. The only act of intimacy is the baby holding his mother's nipple between two fingers, in keeping with the iconography of the *lactans*, she who breastfeeds.

She wears a blue mantle, symbolising the sky with stars on her shoulders. (Shades of the *digambar* or skylad Hindu deities like Shiva or Kali). "It has a strong reference to pre-Christian iconography," says Andrea Anastasio.

That took him to the dignified Mater Matuta statue of Etruscan origin, enthroned with an infant in

swaddling clothes in her lap. She was made of tuff with a coated and painted surface. The protector of dawn, and city and community, she is an archetype intertwined with oral traditions and represents a shared Eurasian legacy.

Some of these statues were found with knives and swords at archaeological sites in Capua (that is north of Naples, in the south of Italy) in keeping with her role as protector of a community.

In Christian iconography, Mary is occasionally portrayed with the baby in her arms, stepping on a serpent, representing Satan. The mother is ready to kill to protect her offspring.

(To be continued)

Government of Maharashtra Public Works Department P.W. Division, Panvel

Telephone No. 022-27452778

E-Tender Notice No. 14 (Open ONLINE)

Year-2026-27

E-mail address:- panvel.cc@mahapwd.gov.in

Fax Number :-022-27467440

Executive Engineer P.W. Division Panvel invite B-1 Tender From Registered Contractor with Govt. of Maharashtra Detail Tender Notice Available On www.mahapwd.gov.in and www.mahatenders.gov.in Portal.

Note:-Total 1 Work include in Tender notice.

Online Tender Download & Bid Preparation Period Date 04.08.2026 At 10.00 AM To Date 11.08.2026 18.00 PM.

Online Tender Bid Preparation Last Date 11.08.2026 at 18.00 AM.

E-Tender/O.No./P.W./PNL/

Office of the Executive Engineer,

Public work Division, Panvel

Dist. Raigad

Date -

Sd/-

Executive Engineer

P.W.Division

Panvel

ROC-2026-27/NO.5/C2080