



Isis Nursing Horus, limestone, Isis Temple at Gizeh, 664–610 BCE, Princeton University



Eirene, Goddess of Peace, marble, 370 BCE, Roman copy of Greek votive statue, Glyptothek, Munich



Morgan Madonna, wood, c. 1175, Romanesque, France, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Black Madonna, Our Lady of Rocamadour, walnut, 12th century, France



Virgin and Child, ivory, 1260–1280, France, The Cloisters Collection, New York



Virgin and Child, sandstone, c. 1425–1430, Nuremberg, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Our Lady of Kazan, 18th century, engraved, gilded silver oklad on hardwood, Russia

10 *Isis and Madonna*

RUDOLF STEINER spoke often of the evolutionary movement of consciousness from earliest Lemurian and Atlantean times, through the ancient mysteries, through the different cultural epochs, culminating in the Mystery of Golgotha, “the turning point of time”: the beginning of the return journey. Most pertinently to our theme, in the first two lectures of *Universe, Earth and Man* (1908), he addressed the relation of Isis and the Madonna, specifically in relation to healing.

He began by pointing out the deep relationship between our time and that of the civilization of ancient Egypt.

It is as if, during the Egyptian epoch, certain seeds were sown in the womb of gradually evolving humanity, seeds which remained dormant during the Greco-Roman period, but were to appear in a very remarkable way in the present age. Much that arises in our souls today, much that surrounds us, much of which people speak and dream, much of what scientists think, is like the germination of these seeds of ancient Egyptian culture—but few of us realize it.

If we look carefully at history, he continued:

We may see how cultural threads carry over from Egypt through the Greek age, the Roman age, the early Christian age, into our own time. All this is a kind of communication on the earth’s surface, but there is also a hidden, subterranean force that works, more or less directly, from the ancient Egyptian age into our own. Many a remarkable secret is revealed when we follow these connections through and understand them.

We may contemplate the movement of consciousness implicit as we consider first the Sphinx, then the Egyptian temple, then the Greek

temple with its gods sculpted as ideal perfected human forms, and then figures of the Roman epoch where the sculptures are wholly expressive of their own human personalities. If we reflect upon this sequence, we will probably notice or discover, as Rudolf Steiner put it, that “the spirit has descended completely into humankind.”

With this, Rudolf Steiner turned to the famous moment when God told Moses to guide his people to the “one God”; Moses asked God whom he should say had sent him. God replied, “Say to those to whom I send thee, the I AM has sent thee.” But who is this I AM? The voice that spoke these words, Rudolf Steiner told us, “was the same being (and this is the secret of the ancient Egyptian mysteries) ... the same being who later incarnated as the Christ. By then he had become visible to those around him, but previously he could speak only to those who were initiates.”

In this way, Rudolf Steiner described the deity, the spiritual being gradually descending, approaching the Mystery of Golgotha. From this turning point, he told us, humanity will begin to recapitulate the previous cultural epochs in reverse order. In so doing, humanity should become able to unfold new phenomena in art, science, philosophy, and religion; in the present case, new “creations” that resonate like echoes of ancient Egypt.

And among the creators of such “new creations” at a given moment, as Rudolf Steiner described it, “gradually out of the stream of Christianity, a remarkable figure appears... whose mysteries are deeply, deeply hidden.” We may picture this figure, he continued, “in the wonderful form given to it through the painter’s art in Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*.” Whoever has seen this painting, he said, will have experienced a sensation of awe. He noted, almost as an aside, that “it was not for nothing that Raphael surrounded his Madonna with clouds out of which many angelic forms, like children, appear.” With that, Steiner’s tone changed:

Let us allow our feelings to be completely taken up with this image. With sufficiently deep feelings one can sense that there is something in it very different from what ordinary understanding might grasp. Do not these cloudlike angels surrounding the Madonna have a special significance? If we contemplate them deeply, they will convey

something of the greatest significance. When we are absorbed in this image, something murmurs in our soul, suggesting that here is a miracle in the best sense of the word; surely this child in the arms of the Madonna was not given birth in the ordinary way. These wonderfully delicate forms of angels in the clouds seem to be in the process of coming into being, while the child in the Madonna's arms seem to be a densified manifestation of them, like something that has crystallized more strongly than these fleeting angel forms. Brought down from the clouds and held fast in her arms; that is how the child appears to us, not as if born from the woman. A mysterious connection between the child and the Virgin Mother is alluded to. If we call up this picture before our souls, another Virgin Mother appears to us: the Egyptian Isis with the child Horus. We may sense a mysterious connection between the Christian Madonna and the Egyptian figure known as Isis, on whose temple were inscribed the words: "I am what was, and what is, and what will be: my veil no mortal can pierce." The miracle we have hinted at in the image of the *Sistine Madonna* is also suggested in the Egyptian myth: Horus was not fathered by ordinary conception. It is said that a beam of light fell from Osiris upon Isis, and a kind of immaculate birth took place, and the child Horus appeared. Thus we see how various threads are interwoven though without earthly connection.

Egypt itself, Rudolf Steiner stressed, is a connection that reaches not only forward into the future, but also back into the most ancient traditions of the past, making it accessible to us today as "a direct yield... like a remembrance." In other words it was a holy deposit, which then passed underground while continuing to echo, metamorphose, and evolve right up to the beginning of our own Age of the Consciousness Soul, to Raphael and Kepler. Kepler famously wrote in the Preface to his *Harmonia Mundi*: "I am stealing the golden vessels of the Egyptians to build from them, far, far away from the boundaries of Egypt, a tabernacle to my God."

With the groundwork thus established, Rudolf Steiner returned to Isis, this time in the context of incubation or temple sleep. In such sleep, a patient was taken into the temple and put into a kind of somnambulistic trance-state or sleep (as in the ancient Greek

mysteries of Asclepius). This state was then intensified by the priests, who directed and shaped the healing vision-figures to the point where a patient would experience genuine visions of gods and other spiritual-divine beings, many with healing powers. This was first introduced into Egypt (by legend at least) by Imhotep, physician, architect, and priest to the Pharaoh Zoser (c. 3000–2950 BCE). Such temple-sleep healing indicated, as Steiner said, “another characteristic feature of the period, namely that the Egyptian priest-sages, (and indeed all ancient civilizations), held that *wisdom was closely linked with the art of healing, with health.*”

Sadly, as a culture, we have forgotten this primordial link between *gnosis* and healing. As Steiner put it: “In comparison with ancient understanding, today we have only the dimmest notion of the inner relationship between wisdom and health, between knowledge and the art of healing.” Furthermore, he added, “It is a task of spiritual science to direct humankind to the concept of spiritual reality through which wisdom and the art of healing and health are brought once more into meaningful relationship....” The important point here is that, as regards healing:

Isis was connected in a mysterious way with the whole art of healing, and in this respect was regarded as the teacher of the Egyptian priesthood. Indeed, in the last Hellenistic ages of antiquity, it was said that Isis, even when among the immortals, still took particular interest in the art of healing, in the health of humanity....

Cutting a long story short, he went on to speak of how the priests of ancient Egypt knew that in earliest times, before the Fall (before sexual reproduction, I-consciousness, and the arising of sickness and death) human beings reproduced by taking into themselves from their surroundings etheric-spiritual substances that contained fertilizing, health-giving forces. Thus they knew that, “The further we guide a person’s vision back into earlier conditions, the nearer do we bring him or her into conditions of existence in which there is no illness.” At the same time, it is also true that once humanity had fallen, the gods always continued to offer healing possibilities to humankind, and that this is still the case:

Even the mere vision of the old Atlantean gods could have a curative effect, but this was even stronger when the priest guided these visions in such a way that the temple sleeper had before him or her those primeval human forms which were fertilized not by their fellow creatures, but from their surroundings.

Before the sick patients, who lay in temple sleep, stood the form of she who bore her kind without fertilization by her kind. Before them stood she who brings forth the woman with the child, the Virgin Goddess, who in the Lemurian epoch was the companion of human beings; but who had since disappeared from their sight—she who in ancient Egypt was called holy Isis. In primordial times, before death entered, Isis could be seen. Human beings in their ordinary consciousness were then companions of such figures, who hovered above them...

Even once Isis was no longer the visible companion of humanity (when she had withdrawn into the circle of the gods) she continued to interest herself in the health of human beings from the spiritual world. And when the image of those ancient figures, the Isis image, was brought to a person in temple sleep, she remained the means of healing; for she is the principle in human beings which was present before mortal sheaths enveloped them. "No mortal has lifted her veil" for she was present when death had not yet come into the world. Rooted in the eternal, she is the great healer, the being whom humanity will reach once more when human beings return to spiritual wisdom.

We can experience something of what remains of this in the *Sistine Madonna*, that wonderful picture of the Virgin Mother. From the standpoint of spiritual science, it can certainly be emphasized that the picture has a healing effect. When it is contemplated in such a way that it has an after-effect upon the human soul (when the soul lies in sleep and can, for instance, dream of this picture) it has a healing effect to this very day.

Certainly, then, contemplation of the *Sistine Madonna* can be healing, but it can be more than that; it can be transformational. Indeed, perhaps healing is transformational, and transformation is healing.

As Rudolf Steiner put it a year later (Berlin, April 29, 1909) in his lecture “Isis and Madonna”:

If we try to make an image of the soul that gives birth to the higher human being out of itself, out of the spiritual universe, we need only call to mind the painting of the *Sistine Madonna*. In the *Sistine Madonna* we have a picture of the human soul born of the spiritual universe, and springing from this soul, the highest that a human being can bring forth; the human being’s own spiritual birth, which within the human being is a new beginning of cosmic creative activity.



Here it should be noted that Rudolf Steiner is not alone in linking the meaning and mystery of Isis and Horus with Mary and Jesus in the Incarnation. Much evidence exists showing that the iconography of the Madonna and Child flowed seamlessly from that of Isis and Horus. Without doubt, a deep esoteric continuity underlies ancient Egyptian myth and religion (above all, the prophetic and dramatic cosmological events involving Isis, Osiris, and Horus) and what flowed forth from the Mystery of Golgotha. Indeed, already in Hellenistic, pre-Christian times the conviction existed among initiates of the Egyptian temples that a future Horian revelation of resurrection was approaching—and would soon come to pass. Such a revelation would come to complement the ancient Osirian teaching of reincarnation. In subterranean fashion, this reality then flowed in turn into the development of Christianity. The strength and depth of this stream is perhaps most visible in the close kinship to be seen between Egyptian images of Isis-Horus and the now famous black madonnas of the early Middle Ages.