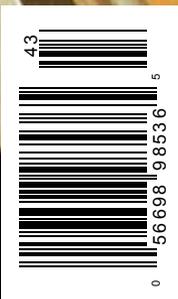


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PLATTER OF LOVE

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It is a twelve-sided painted wooden board about two feet in diameter, currently residing in the collections of the Louvre. Known in Italian as a *desco da parto*, or “birth tray,” such ornate serving platters were a standard-issue household item among the grand families of Tuscany in the *quattrocento*. Wealthy houses prepared them to celebrate the birth of an heir, and they functioned to bear sweetmeats, fruit, and other refreshments to the bedbound mother who had just delivered herself of a living child. This one is remarkable.

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In the precise and jewel-hued image, six men kneel attentively amidst the stylized flowers and trees of a pleasant garden. Above them, hovering in the air, surrounded by a radiant *mandorla* (the almond-shaped body halo generally reserved for medieval saints), hangs a winged female figure, open-armed and shedding rays of light. A pair of angel-like creatures floats to her left and right. The men’s devotional gazes—chaste, placid, devout—all fix upward on this glowing apparition, and several of the figures raise hands in supplication, one holding his arms crossed before his chest in a posture of prayerful respect. At a glance—say, fighting your way through the hoards of tourists looking for the Mona Lisa—you’d likely make a mental note along the following lines: “Hmm, some saint or whatnot, bunch of chivalrous worshippers; same old, same old.”

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You’d be importantly wrong, however. And a closer look would tip you off. For starters, those little angelic attendants have *claws for feet*—definitely non-standard for polite *putti*. Plus, the glowing blond female figure with wings is actually *stark naked*, which at least suggests that she’s probably not the Madonna. But the real kicker—the real “what the hell is going on here?” detail—lies in those needle-fine rays of golden luminance, which stream down on the supplicants from the object of their worship. Each of these gilt zips originates from a single point on the body of this beatific floating female—the

exact convergence of her small pubic wedge. A line of divine radiance runs from this celestial crotch directly into the upturned eyes of every member of this chorus of male admirers. So we are emphatically not talking about any regular Christian saint, or any ordinary convocation of the faithful.

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She is, of course, *Venus*, the goddess of love. And her circle of worshippers consists of figures drawn from the greatest legends of consuming desire: they are Achilles, Tristan, Lancelot, Samson, Paris, and Troilus. Like any learned Renaissance work, the painting is a dense confection of classical myth, vernacular literature, and Christian tradition: yes, she is Venus, but those wee devils do not hail from Venus’s pagan Rome; they are, of course, borrowed from the stern teachings of those clerical moralists in the service of the pope. Samson, in turn, is visiting from Hebrew scripture, but here he shares the stage with a womanizing knight of the round table, a famously tragic Latin lover, a Greek demigod with a penchant for boy-men, the abductor-provocateur who started the Trojan war, and the doomed hero of a popular French romance. And the whole scene—we are in a *garden*, recall, with some trees bearing very tempting fruit—is obviously meant to invoke that notorious Edenic park of old where a certain naked woman proved such a problematic temptress. So our hovering apparition of female erotic omnipotence is mostly Venus, but there’s definitely a little Eve in there too. Beneath her feet, a fruited tree.

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In place of another saintly veneration of, say, the Mother of God, we’ve come upon a kind of black mass in the woods, a secular Sabbath for lovers of the flesh, in which a pan-historical tribune of epic sensualists display their solemn commitment to snatch worship. Their stillness, elegant composure, and disciplined attention combine to dignify their

Opposite: Venus radiant. Italian birth tray by Master of Charles of Durazzo, ca. 1400.



thrall in a manner that oscillates between satire and apotheosis. There is nothing remotely slaving or violent in the intensity of their focus. No leers, no possessive appetite, no phallocratic ocularity. Just transcendent aspiration, religious intensity, and gobsmacked awe. “Look, this *really* is the most important thing in the world,” is written clearly on their radiant, respectful faces—which are bathed in a limpid pussy-light.

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Or is it the other way around? Maybe it is the countenances of these male admirers that vector their glow upon her mons pubis. Do those pinprick

gildings proceed (in keeping with extromission theories of vision then prominent) from their eyes to her zone? Do they pin her body to the labial mandorla in which she is enfolded?

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Maybe, you begin to suspect, Venus is trapped here, affixed by the desire she solicits, caught in the embodiment of what she symbolizes, held firm between her own lips.

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You suspect. Yes, she is still Venus, the goddess, still the pearl in the shell. But if she is understood

to be birthing herself in this way—bodying forth her own body from out the matrix-mouth—then suddenly she embodies not only beauty, love, fertility, sex; suddenly she embodies her body as well, and thus the paradox of embodiment itself. True, her sexual center, externalized (and alienated) as an enveloping slit-frame, attains to the dignity of a symbol, but that very sublimation is unstintingly besieged by her own bare skin. She is caught in her origin, stapled (in the flesh) as an idea (of the flesh). Behold, then, the whole, captured in its part; and then the part, again, within that whole, equally suspended. This impossible structure—an infinite matryoshka of part and whole, symbol and thing symbolized—recedes, diminuendo, to the horizon of thought. Out there, somewhere, near the limit of sight, she seems to become a tiny figure for the problem of problems: the approximation of “flesh” to what it “means,” work that has been done using the language of “bodies” and “souls.”

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The limits of sight. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan writes: “When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—*You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see.*” The frustration of this deferral sets in motion both the torments of desire and the mechanisms of hope: the solicitation of the gap, the endless inviting approximations that seek to close it, the (presumably futile, but endlessly alluring) attempts to seize the “essence” of what is always only an appearance. The geometry of the gaze traces out the paradox: What you see is not what she wants you to see. She herself, of course, cannot see what she wants you to see. You look for her soul in the flesh, or you look for the flesh of his soul. Either way, you are not sure what you are looking for, since no one has ever seen it. In the end, what you hope for is the impossible unification of sight and that at which your eyes are directed. In the end, what you hope for is the impossible unification of anything with what anything means. This is the conundrum of things and symbols wherein even a goddess cannot but be trapped. Indeed, this is

the veritable pillory of gods and goddesses.

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The goddess of love. You cannot free her from the trap, so you kneel, and you “devote.” You “pray.” You raise your eyes to her part, and desire a whole. You seek to transcend the fetishism of the symbol. To transcend sublimation itself, and then, to transcend the symbol of this transcendence in turn. You are frozen there. On your knees. Wide-eyed. Looking.

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And then you realize—as you gaze at her across the table, or stare at him as he sleeps beside you, or feast your eyes between her legs, or peer at the tray through the smudged glass at the Louvre. Then you realize, legendary lover that you are, that in love, you are doomed, forever and ever and ever, to beat around the bush.

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Failure, naturally. Always.

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But not today! With this tray, we shouldn’t worry, as we do not forget the circumstances. This *desco* has appeared to mark a small, pragmatic success in the impossible quest to pin body to soul: a birth. The successful reproduction of life. A thought occurs: could it be that the failure—to close the gaps, to make the infinite approximations into something else—is the mechanism of reproduction? Or, perhaps better, is the condition for reproduction? You suspect.

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Reproduction. It can hardly be denied that a birthing room would be a juicy setting in which to present this idiosyncratic image of secular devotion to carnal love in general, and the female genitalia in particular. Who knows exactly how it read to the assembled family and friends? Was the image supposed to be a lesson in the superior virtues of spiritual love? This is what the museum guides tell us. (Note, again, the *demons*—the take home point may be, given their presence, that this is all a big mistake, this sort of worship). Was the idea, perhaps, to warn against the sterility of “romantic” love, and thus to reaffirm the

sacred genealogies of conjugal fidelity and patriarchal lineage? Maybe, but it takes a serious stretch to get that message from an image so luxuriantly committed in its devotions to the flesh. In the end, the whole thing is a bit of a mystery. Who really knows what everyone was thinking as the fruit came off the tray, revealing this painted paean to the pudenda?

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Though there may be a clue hidden right there—in the process of taking the fruit off the tray. There's a significant tradition in Italian tableware (wood, faience, metal) of relying on the act of eating itself to tell the tale. Which is to say, one finds lots of richly painted bowls and plates that present a picture-story on their rim or lip—a story transformed or completed by another picture that is revealed upon the eating of the food. Take, for instance, an early sixteenth-century faience soup bowl with a high, wide, richly decorated margin. When it came to the table, you saw a pretty woman in full stride on one side of your *zuppa*, and a charming fountain on the other. Only when you had slurped up your meal did the missing bit of the story come to light: an old naked man madly chasing that fleeing girl; he'd been lurking under the minestrone all the while. At which point—at least if you'd been reading your Ovid—you recognized the tale of the randy river god Alpheo and the nymph Arethusa, whom Artemis transformed into a bubbling spring on a remote island, lest she fall into the clutches of her inflamed pursuer. And it gets better: for those truly in the know, there's quite a sophisticated double game going on in this bowl, since the notorious outcome of the Alpheo and Arethusa story is that the old river god won't take no for an answer, and actually punches his stream through a long subterranean channel in order to mingle his waters with those of his nymph/lover/fountain on her remote island. So your soup, lapping at the edge of the fountain painted on that decorative rim, *was* the lover god himself in his liquid form, lasciviously licking the tender feet of his beloved.

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Against this background it is reasonable to wonder about the dramaturgy of this peculiar *desco da parto*. How, exactly, was the fruit stacked? And who pulled which thing off first? What different stories could

the painting be made to tell depending on these arrangements? Picture the tray delivered into the birthing room, mounded high with succulent gifts. And as the fruit comes off, piece by piece, what is revealed is something more than a vexing allegory of courtly love (or carnal lusts). What is revealed is nothing less than a remarkable mimesis of the room itself, where assembled eyes have been focused between the woman's legs for the last two days, expectant and awed.

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By these lights, we might hazard that this tray was designed to function as a kind of communion table for what is, in the end, the veritable high mass of secular love, that sacred occasion that sees the actual, palpable, incarnated form of desire—the mysterious occasion that sees eros become (a) life. Tellingly, in Italian the term is *dare la luce*—"to give light." Which is to say, to give birth. And "giving light" is surely what is happening on this *desco da parto*, which for a moment feels like it might be, above all, an elaborate visual pun.

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But more than that, too. Return for a moment to our imagined birthing room, and the little celebratory feast occasioned by the arrival of the birth tray: notice that now everyone present has *shared the fruit*. As in the garden. The fruit. They ate it. And in eating it, they realized a nakedness. Hers. And theirs. Ours.

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The nakedness that is love, and the nakedness that is not.