

# Five on Five: Prudence Flint on Dieric Bouts' *Virgin and Child*

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION – PUBLISHED 10 AUGUST 2018

PRUDENCE FLINT [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]

There is something animal in the transfixed, half-closed eyes of the mother and child gazing at each other.

TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]

For this series of Five on Five, we're asking five artists to talk about a painting that has influenced or inspired them. In this episode, hear Prudence Flint reflect upon 'Virgin and Child', a 15th century work by Dieric Bouts.

PF

My name is Prudence Flint. I'm a figurative oil painter. I mainly paint women in interiors and occasionally outdoors. There are many paintings I love and go back to time and time again to remind myself of the potential wonder and tenderness of painting. I have a particular interest in early northern religious paintings for the intimacy and fearless sentimentality.

I came upon 'Virgin and Child' painted by Dieric Bouts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York last year. It is a small oil painting on wood, 21 centimeters by 16 centimeters, only as large as a paperback book painted around 1455. The two entwined figures, Madonna and child, have their faces touching but turned towards the viewer. This was a classic pose based on the byzantine tradition of the affectionate virgin, sometimes called the mother of God of tenderness, embodied in the famous Russian icon painting *Virgin of Vladimir*. Bouts has given this pose a more contemporary feel by omitting the halo and gold leaf and putting in a dark recess background. This brings out the warmth of the flesh and makes for a more realistic space for the figures to inhabit. The painting is vivid in its intimate, erotic tenderness. The lips of the woman and child sit touching like mirror images, the fleshy gentle hands cup, hold and reach for each other.

These gestures are the embodiment of love. While I was standing in front of this painting, at The Met, a man said to me, I don't understand why they paid a million dollars for this work, which at the time I thought was very funny and strange because I was in New York for the first time and I had a lot to take in, and this small picture completely impressed me.

Bouts has rendered the figures quite realistically, even though there are a few awkward elements that I especially enjoy. The child's belly button is far too towards the center and flattens the figure and appears like another strange eye. The child's foot that appears behind the Madonna's hand is very elongated and adult. There is something animal in the transfixed, half closed eyes of the mother and child gazing at each other. The Madonna's hair is pulled back severely and framed by a black band and the deep blue of the robe and simple white undergarment of the Madonna and cloth that is held under the child. The purpose of these religious paintings was to enchant, to be vivid, and to create strong feeling. They are illustrations in the true sense of the word, and not as it is used in contemporary times.

Dieric Bouts was influenced by Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden. I love to visit the NGV to see 'The Man of Sorrows in the arms of the Virgin' by Hans Memling, who also worked around the time of Bouts. I went to a Catholic girl school. The convent was situated in an ornate Victorian red brick building at the front of the school. There was a contemporary painting of a crucifixion in the stairwell that led up to the nuns quarters. There were priests, a chapel with wooden pews, kneelers and altar confessionals and holy water in stoops. I'm not religious and I'm not sure I even really believed in God as such, but this was what was in the background of my suburban southeastern Victorian childhood.