Pablo Picasso, Spanish (1881–1973)

Mother and Child, 1921

Oil on canvas

Gift of Maymar Corporation, Mrs. Maurice L. Rothschild,
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Pablo Picasso never feared change. Instead of finding one style or theme and clinging to it as many other artists have done, he often experimented with new methods of expressing his experiences and ideas. From about 1902 to 1905, for example, everything he produced was dominated by melancholy shades of blue, reflecting the recent suicide of a close friend and the artist's hunger and poverty as he tried to get by in Paris. When his situation improved and he befriended a talented circle of artists and writers, his “Blue Period” gave way to the lighter and happier “Rose Period.” After creating with fellow artist Georges Braque the groundbreaking style of art called Cubism, Picasso's interests returned to the traditional methods of painting and drawing with which he was trained in his youth.

A trip to Rome in 1917 sparked his enthusiasm for the art of ancient Greece and Rome. In 1921, three years after his marriage to Olga Koklova, a Russian ballerina, his first child, Paolo, was born. This event inspired Picasso to create at least thirteen works that year featuring mothers and children. The style of this painting reflects what later became known as Picasso's Classical period.

Mother and Child offers a sense of the security that exists in a loving family relationship. The figures have large, solid bodies that may remind the viewer of classical sculptures
rather than living humans. The mother’s robes drape her massive body like those of a Grecian goddess. Her heavy limbs envelop the child and offer protection. The two beings appear almost as one. Picasso acknowledged their strong bond when he decided to cut the father from the canvas. He originally painted the father to the left of the figures, dangling a fish over the child.

The intimate relationship between the mother and child is apparent from the tender gaze they exchange. The mother’s face, arms, and hands are enlarged as the baby would see them. The infant reaches up to touch her, simultaneously grabbing his foot in the natural way of small children. In one instant, he learns about both self and other.

The abstract background of sand, sky, and sea offers a sense of serenity. The soft greys and browns do not distract from the scene but act as an extension of the flesh and folds of drapery. The flat and orderly bands of color add to the calmness of the mother’s contented expression. It seems as if nothing could disturb this affectionate moment.

Picasso’s style continued to change after his fascination with mothers and children faded. As he once said, “Art does not evolve by itself. If an artist changes his way of expressing himself, it means that his way of thinking and seeing reality has changed.” The painting Mother and Child is clear evidence that in 1921, Picasso’s reality was peaceful and satisfying due in great part to his wife and new son.
CLASSROOM SUGGESTIONS

1. The baby in this painting is learning about both self and family. Ask students to discuss how the baby is learning about himself, his mother, and his environment. Which of the five senses might he be using?

2. How does Picasso show us the loving relationship between the two individuals (eye contact, touch, and the mother’s large and encompassing body that seems to protect the baby)? Have students find photographs and magazine pictures that show examples of loving relationships between family members. Ask them to identify the signs of love, respect, and protection in each picture.

3. Picasso painted this picture (and at least 12 others with the same theme of mother and child) around the time of the birth of his son, Paolo. He was presumably moved by his son’s new life and by the creation of a new family. Have students discuss various ways families celebrate new additions; ask them to bring in any records (photographs, birth announcements, copies of birth and/or adoption certificates, etc.) that document the welcome they received from their own families.

4. The relationship between a child and a parent/caretaker is based on both need and want. Ask students to make a list of things (physical and emotional) that babies need from an adult. What else might babies want? Similarly, are there things that parents/caretakers need from their children? Are there things that they want?