

"The Madonna of the Chair"
by Raphael
A Reflection on the Montessori Philosophy

Raphael's "Madonna of the Chair" is a masterpiece in the art world. It is a work of art that expresses the roles of Jesus, Mary, and John the Baptist in the spiritual world. All three characters and elements are essential for the beauty and glory of the picture. None could stand-alone. None could exist without the others. The unity of the picture relies on the connection and interconnections of the three characters. Together they reveal the glory of God and the beauty of creation.

Jesus

The infant Jesus is the center of the picture; He captures the eye of the viewer and radiates a sense of dignity, respect, innocence, and unlocked secrets of creation; He is the "truth and the life" of the picture; the light radiates from him.

Read: John 1: 1-5

Mary

Mary is caressing the infant; her body surrounds and supports the infant; she radiates a sense of stability, strength, and nurturance; she is holding the spirit of creation in her arms, revealing him for all to see.

Read: Luke 1: 30-33

John the Baptist

John the Baptist is the child hidden in the background; he is present, but virtually unnoticed; he is looking on at the mother and child, longing to be the center, but knowing full well his role is that of "going before the Lord, to prepare his ways," "making straight the paths of the Lord," and "testifying to the light so that all might believe through him."

Read: John 1: 6-9; 23

Another name for Raphael's picture could be "The Montessori Philosophy." It is also a work of art that expresses the roles of the three elements in the Montessori Philosophy and the atrium: the child, the environment, and the adult. Just as in the picture, all three are essential elements of the whole picture; all three are interdependent upon one another. Each has its own purpose in the creation of the whole. Each radiates different values, different purposes, different views, and different lives. However, all three work together to reveal to the world the beauty and glory of the child, and his role as the creator of the human spirit.

The Child

The child is the center of the philosophy; the child captures the eye of viewer and radiates a sense of dignity, respect, innocence, and unlocked secrets; the child is the essence of humanity, the face of God on Earth.

"The child is a worker and a producer. Although he cannot share in the work of adults, he has his own difficult and important task to perform—that of producing a man...But this tiny child eventually grows into an adult and if the latter's intelligence has become enriched through his psychic conquests and become resplendent with a spiritual light, this is due to the child he once was."

Maria Montessori: The Secret of Childhood

The Environment

The environment caresses the child; the environment surrounds and supports the child; it radiates a sense of stability, strength, and nurturance; it holds in its arms the future man.

"The secret of free development of the child consists, therefore, in organizing for him the means necessary for his internal nourishment...But to ensure the psychical phenomena of growth we must prepare the environment in a definite manner and from this environment offer the child the external means directly necessary for him."

Maria Montessori: Spontaneous Activity in Education

The Adult

The adult is the onlooker; the directress is present, but virtually unnoticed; the adult observes the child in the environment and longs to be the center, but knows that his/her role is that of preparer, prophet, guide, and model.

"The adult should remind himself that he is the unworthy servant of the Gospel. The adult's function is necessary, none the less it should not be overvalued."

-Sofia Cavaletti: The Religious Potential of the Child