

**PRESS RELEASE**

March 2025

# **MAMA**

## **From Mary to Merkel**

12 March–3 August 2025

**Whether exclaimed joyfully, grumbled, uttered quickly or drawn out slowly, the word MAMA immediately conjures a sound in everyone's ears. The exhibition at the Kunstpalast is dedicated to the manifold ideas of what it means to have, become or be a mother. The focus is on the societal expectations that have always influenced motherhood and are reflected in art, culture and everyday life. In addition to painting, sculpture, video installations and photography, the exhibition also includes everyday objects, music and advertising images. The approximately 120 works from the fourteenth century to the present day create a panorama that involves everyone – including fathers and those without children of their own.**

The exhibition explores the many different aspects of motherhood over eight chapters. From the concept of the "good mother" to care work and family configurations, the show illustrates how the role of mother quickly breaks down into different, highly individual perspectives that are nevertheless deeply intertwined in cultural history. A polyphonic sound installation uses pre-recorded voice messages to give space to personal experiences, memories and visions.

"Everyone has a mother. By placing motherhood at the centre of an exhibition, the Kunstpalast is once again addressing a topic that directly touches the lives of our visitors and that everyone can relate to with their own experiences and opinions. The show combines seriousness with humour and art with everyday life and pop culture – thus tying in with the Kunstpalast's mission statement on several levels," says Felix Krämer, general director of the Kunstpalast.

Popular culture and art both emphasise societal expectations of mothers and the role of the GOOD MOTHER. We begin with figures of the Virgin Mary from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The image of Mary – probably the

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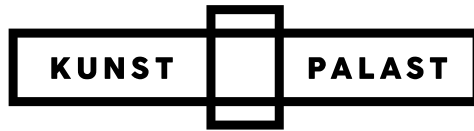
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most prominent mother in Christian culture – remains a symbol of total maternal devotion today. The stereotype of the “good” mother was established in the eighteenth century and is still widespread: contemporary artists in the exhibition explore the efforts involved in attaining this ideal. For a portrait of his mother, Aldo Giannotti (b. 1977) pressed a sign into her hands. The word “MOM” on it only becomes an admiring exclamation of “WOW” when she subjects herself to the strain of hanging upside down from the ceiling. Motherhood is a yardstick by which a woman’s achievement is measured – even if she is not a mother. A well-known example is Angela Merkel (b. 1954): nicknamed “Mutti” (Mum) when she was German Chancellor, she can also be seen as Mother Theresa on the cover of *Der Spiegel* magazine.

The historical changeability of notions of “good” motherhood is demonstrated by advice books from various decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whose recommendations to mothers are often fundamentally contradictory. ADVICE OR REGULATION – from the Weimar Republic to National Socialism, the early Federal Republic and the GDR to the present-day reunified Germany, this genre is characterised by both consistencies and inconsistencies. A bookshelf in the exhibition gathers advice literature from recent decades and invites visitors to pause and read.

“Ideals and role models, advice, expectations and emotions – the aim of this exhibition is to make the subject of motherhood tangible in all its artistic, cultural historical, social and, of course, highly personal dimensions,” agree the three curators of the show. Linda Conze, Westrey Page and Anna Christina Schütz have approached the topic from different angles, finding mothers and non-mothers in the Kunstpalast collection, supplementing these artists with important, sometimes international loans and bringing everything together to create a narrative. “Connections between the collectively selected works reveal continuities, but also the mutability of images of mothers, which are constantly being reappropriated, reinterpreted, contested and celebrated. We see the show as an invitation to open up a dialogue about care and motherliness and look forward to hearing the audience’s perspectives,” explains the curatorial team.

Looking after children is work. Nevertheless, CARE WORK remains mostly unpaid and has traditionally been automatically assigned to women. With a critical eye, artists have drawn attention to the fact that care is influenced by

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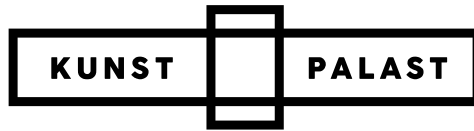
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social norms and class affiliations. For a long time, only poor mothers breastfed their babies themselves, while wealthier women hired wet nurses. Around 1800, the idea that all women should take care of their babies themselves became prevalent; the presence of the biological mother became more important. In the present day, working mothers who focus "too much" on their careers are judged just as much as those who devote themselves entirely to their children and the household. The balancing of care and paid work as well as the role of caregiver and other identities is a recurring theme among the women artists in the exhibition. Several paintings in the exhibition are by Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907), who was always fascinated by motifs of the bond between mother and child. However, she was also apprehensive about the effects of her own motherhood on her artistic work. In her sculpture of a body dissolving in the mechanics of a breast pump, Camille Henrot (b. 1978) focuses on the fine line between providing nourishment and self-sacrifice.

The exhibition delves deeper into the subject of the PLACES OF MOTHERHOOD: historical doll's house kitchens are brought into dialogue with the video work *Semiotics of the Kitchen* by Martha Rosler (b. 1943), which examines the distance of the housewife's domain from intellectual settings. Scottish artist Caroline Walker (b. 1982) portrays mothers with their newborns in the intimate yet isolating domestic sphere. Finnish artist Katharina Bosse (b. 1968) photographs herself in erotically charged poses with her toddler crawling beside her in natural landscapes. In this way, she disrupts the seemingly natural idyll that surrounds motherhood in art and cultural history.

Several women artists use their work to address the fact that the decision to (NOT) HAVE CHILDREN often could not and still cannot be made freely, despite all the progress that has been made. For centuries, female "nature" was defined in a wide variety of societies by a woman's ability to conceive and bear children. The Virgin Mary, whose life is depicted in Dürer's *Life of the Virgin*, is both a female role model and a special case. Her actions are always centred on her son, whom she conceived by divine intervention.

The medical achievements and societal developments of the twentieth century allowed women to emancipate themselves from their socially prescribed destiny for the first time by taking the contraceptive pill or asserting their hard-fought right to terminate a pregnancy. Hannah Höch (1889–1978) paints her

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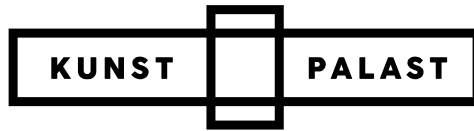
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struggle with the decision to not have a child by Raoul Hausmann. Nina Hagen's (b. 1955) protest against the expectations of fulfilling her duty as a mother in the song "Unbeschreiblich Weiblich" (Indescribably Feminine) is juxtaposed with Elina Brotherus's (b. 1972) confrontation with her own involuntary childlessness.

For a long time, the physical bond between mother and child was unquestioningly viewed as a prerequisite for a motherly love that was regarded as intrinsic. The exhibition also shows that the often positively connoted intimate relationship between mother and child at all ages can also have a potentially traumatic side. In a series of photographs, Leigh Ledare (b. 1976) explores his CLOSENESS to his mother, who confronts her adult son with uncompromising desire. In a video work by performance artist Lerato Shadi (b. 1979), she and her mother lick sugar and salt off each other's tongues and explore the space between repulsion and affection. The armchair by Italian designer Gaetano Pesce (1939–2024) promises a return to the mother's womb, with the foot section connected to the main body of the furniture via an "umbilical cord".

In German, the word MUTTERSEELENALLEIN describes the utmost loneliness. Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, mourning her dead son Jesus Christ, is one of the central motifs in Western art history. Artists have repeatedly made reference to the so-called Pietà, appropriating and reinterpreting it as a motif. The loss of the child is juxtaposed with the loss of the mother, which artists of different generations have sometimes made an autobiographical theme and thus given expression and form to their personal grief. Finally, "mutterseelenallein" can also refer to anyone who has been denied motherhood, whether due to social norms, physical conditions or decisions that were not made voluntarily.

The exhibition chapter FAMILY CONFIGURATIONS asks what influence family images have on motherhood. In the eighteenth century, the nuclear family rose to become the ideal of the Western world. In this model, the mother is the centre of care, while the father is responsible for financial support. Through processing their own personal or observed experiences, artists have questioned the dominance of this father-mother-child constellation. Alice Neel, who lived apart from her daughter, captures psychological subtleties in her family portraits that resist simple narratives. Oliviero Toscani's photos for a campaign

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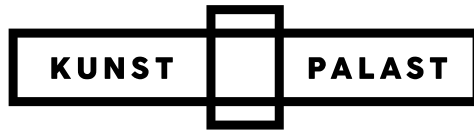
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for the Benetton fashion brand around 1990 challenged conservative notions of family by placing homosexual parents at the centre. Queer lifestyles can inspire ways of thinking in which the burden of care is placed on several shoulders instead of being the sole responsibility of the biological mother. The circle of people who can be mothered also extends beyond biological relatives: foster, step-, adopted children and those in care are also looked after. In the complexity of modern living arrangements, the bond with a pet can be just as important as other relationships. Art reflects the shift from the question "Who is the mother?" to "Who is mothering?"

The exhibition is an invitation to continue the dialogue about care and motherhood – for example in the diverse accompanying programme, which ranges from a midwife consultation in the exhibition to workshops with various collectives and organisations such as Düsseldorf family centres.

One of Germany's most prominent mother figures has recorded the audio guide for the exhibition: Marie-Luise Marjan, aka "Mutter Beimer" from the popular TV series *Lindenstraße*.

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