

# 2008 Virginia Women in History

## EXCERPTS FROM

“Symbolism and Iconography in the Art of P. Buckley Moss”

By Bonnie Stump, P. Buckley Moss Museum

**Symbols:** A representation that stands for or has a meaning different from what is visually apparent. For example, a lamb may be used as a symbol of Christ in an image.

**Symbolism** in art is the practice of using an image to represent that which is tangible or intangible or to invest a thing or object with a meaning that is not readily apparent. The use of the image suggests a deeper or subconscious meaning other than what is visually portrayed. Symbolism is the hidden meaning behind the visual image.

**Iconography:** Not to be confused with “Icon.” Iconography is the area of study dealing with the description of visual images and symbols. This is the ‘subject’ of a work of art.

**Icon:** A revered work, specifically a portrait representing a saintly person such as Christ, the Virgin Mary, Madonna and Child or any number of Saints. An icon can appear in any medium, though most often the word is associated with painting. In art history, icons appeared specifically in Byzantine, Greek, Russian Orthodox church art representing Christ or the Madonna. In Buddhist art, the image itself becomes more than the image of the saint portrayed, but rather becomes the embodiment of that figure (usually Buddha). Some paintings, such as Leonardo Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa was so beloved by its viewers it became an icon. In Moss art, The Blue Madonna could be considered an icon as it is a beloved work of a revered personage.

### *The Canada Geese*

Throughout the history of western art and civilization the geese served as religious icons to which virtuous qualities were attached. In early Christian art they represented the theological idea of Divine Providence. They were harbingers of weather and changes of season, and therefore seen as blessing from God. It was noted by some that geese mate for life and both the male and female participate in the raising of baby birds. This observation evolved with geese becoming symbols for loyalty and matrimony.

There was of course one flaw and that was the scaly, clawed webbed foot of the goose which traditionally is a symbol for pride, a sin. The devil in depictions during Medieval and Renaissance times was often shown with the webbed foot of the goose as appendages. Pat’s Canada Geese are symbols of Divine Providence. They are often painted in pairs to represent loyalty, matrimony and vigilance. They are painted without their feet so as not to have any negative connotations associated with her symbols of divinity.

### *The Plain People*

When Pat arrived in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in 1964 she became acquainted with the Amish and Old Order Mennonites who lived in the counties surrounding Waynesboro. While the plain people have a long history going back to the Anabaptists, Pat’s highly stylized interpretation of them is both generic and symbolic. The figures do not represent specific individuals, but are used for their visual archetypal value.

With their strong work ethic, traditional lifestyle and devotion to faith, family and community these plain people became part of her iconography; symbolic “Living Saints,” supplanting earlier Catholic ones. The elongated figures, part of Pat’s unique style, are shown as hard working, faithful, and family oriented. The woman is often depicted holding a basket of eggs or a baby in a basket to represent new life. The man is often shown with a bucket of sticks, a symbol of manhood or fertility, which is a common symbol found throughout art history.

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The figures are depicted holding a basket of apples to indicate both a strong work ethic and the ‘fruits’ of labor. The female figures are painted as slightly transparent with the landscape showing through part of her torso. This transparency is used to symbolize the ‘earth mother’ or woman’s intuitive nature.

*The Moravian Style House*, also called the generic house or spirit house, is based on the German style houses from the Moravian period of 1741 to 1844. The Moravian community was founded in Pennsylvania to form a kind of utopia which attempted to bring Christianity to Native Americans while still allowing for cultural expression. Their communal way of life established extraordinary 18th-century industry and hand made crafts which came about through shared cooperative efforts. The Moravian style houses and other communal buildings, including churches, were combined with 18th-century German style architectural elements. These included the use of herringbone pattern doors, high pitched roofs with flared eaves, brick jack-arched windows and doors, tiled roofs, sloping-roofed dormers, and parged stone walls. The deep-set windows represent the largest collection of Germanic style architecture in the United States.

In Pat’s art, the Moravian style house is also referred to as a ‘spirit house’ or ‘generic’ house. The house is often painted without doors or a roof to symbolize a spiritual dwelling, after all a spirit doesn’t need a door or a roof in order to be closer to God. These stylized building are generally painted as a vertical element with long, clean lines. Buildings depicted with doors and a roof are usually realistic representations of an actual place.

**Eggs** in Moss art signify new life or resurrection. Eggs in art history are often used as symbols of fertility. Likewise, apples in a basket represent the ‘fruits’ of physical labor or if the figure holding the basket is female it could denote the woman’s ability as a child bearer or archetypal earth mother.