

# A contemporary Madonna from the Eastern Cape: Female agency in the Keiskamma Art Project's *Rose Altarpiece*

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## Abstract

The Keiskamma Art Project, based in Hamburg in the Eastern Cape, produced the *Rose Altarpiece* in 2005. A work modelled on the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* altarpiece in the Church of the Dominicans in Colmar, France, that features a panel made by Martin Schongauer in 1473, the *Rose Altarpiece* substitutes the fifteenth-century rendition of the Virgin Mary in an enclosed garden with a representation of Nokwanda Makubalo, a project member, with a child whom she had adopted. The *Rose Altarpiece* may best be understood as a “parody” of the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* altarpiece in the sense that this term is defined by Linda Hutcheon (1985), including her concept that the various likenesses between a representation and its source serve in fact to emphasise their differences from one another. Particularly distinctive in this instance is the difference between the idea of virtuous womanhood conveyed in the two works. Whereas the iconography that informs the Virgin Mary’s representation in images such as Schongauer’s panel was not grounded in the empowerment of females, the *Rose Altarpiece* represents women as having agency and capacity to effect social transformations. Made in the context of escalating HIV/AIDS infections, the South African work gives visual form and shape to “feminist *ubuntu*” in its suggestion of the way in which women have sought to negotiate this health crisis.

**Keywords:** *Rose Altarpiece*, Keiskamma Art Project, HIV/AIDS, Schongauer, *Virgin of the Rose Bower*.

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# Introduction

During the second half of 2005, the Keiskamma Art Project, a community art project based in the village of Hamburg in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, completed a work called the *Rose Altarpiece*. Representing a woman and child in its central panel (Figures 1 and 2), this image – revealed when the altarpiece is in an open position – is constituted from appliqué, embroidery and photographs. Visible on the side panels when the work is seen in this view are wirework embellishments that approximate the carved tracery on historical altarpieces. When the altarpiece is closed (Figures 3 and 4), it features a male and female figure in customary dress – representations constituted from appliqué and beadwork – as well as embellishments in the upper third of these panels that seem to allude to shooting stars, made from wirework. Many of the large-scale works by the Keiskamma Art Project refer to, and rework, well-known art objects from the west. For example, the *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, which was exhibited at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown (now Makhanda) shortly before the *Rose Altarpiece* was made, reworks the famous *Isenheim Altarpiece* in the Musée Unterlinden in Colmar in France. The *Rose Altarpiece* is also modelled on a celebrated work and indeed one from the same city – the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* altarpiece (Figures 5 and 6) in the Church of the Dominicans (Figure 7).

The primary component of the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* altarpiece is a central panel that Martin Schongauer completed in 1473. The circumstances surrounding the commissioning of the Schongauer work are unclear. In the late-eighteenth century, Carl Heinrich von Heineken (1707-1791), a German writer, diplomat and collector, mentioned that Schongauer's panel was in Saint Martin Collegiate Church in Colmar (Figure 8) (Aulnas [sa]).<sup>1</sup> It is, however, uncertain whether it had originally been acquired for the Collegiate Church and, if it had, where exactly it would have been placed. Its form is not original. The Neo-Gothic sculpted frame and wings are nineteenth-century additions by Théophile Klem and his studio, and these incorporate an *Annunciation* by Martin Fuerstein from the same period, which is visible when the altarpiece is closed. What appears to be a small copy of the Schongauer work in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston<sup>2</sup> suggests that, when this altarpiece was constructed, Schongauer's panel was cropped significantly at the top (and that it had originally included an image of God the Father above the angels holding the Virgin's crown) as well as at the sides and to some extent at the bottom (Heck 1990:6). The placement of the altarpiece in the Church of the Dominicans is relatively recent. The work was stolen from the Collegiate Church in January 1972 and, when recovered from a suburb in Lyon in June 1973, was given its current location.



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Keiskamma Art Project, *Rose Altarpiece* (2006). Mixed media, 201 cm high, Collection of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Port Elizabeth. Photograph by Paul Mills.





FIGURE **Nº 2**



Keiskamma Art Project, Centre panel of the *Rose Altarpiece* (2005). Mixed media, 201 cm high, Collection of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Port Elizabeth. Photograph by Paul Mills





FIGURE **Nº 3**



Keiskamma Art Project, *Rose Altarpiece* (2005) seen from the side. Mixed media, 201 cm high, Collection of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Port Elizabeth. Photograph by Paul Mills.



FIGURE **Nº 4**



Keiskamma Art Project, *Rose Altarpiece* (2005) - closed view. Mixed media, 201 cm high, Collection of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Port Elizabeth.





FIGURE **N° 5**



*The Virgin of the Rose Bower* altarpiece in the Church of the Dominicans in Colmar, France.





FIGURE **Nº 6**



Martin Schongauer, *The Virgin of the Rose Bower* (1473), oil and gold leaf on wood central panel in altarpiece constructed in the late nineteenth century in the Church of the Dominicans, Colmar France.





FIGURE **N° 7**



The Church of the Dominicans, Colmar, France. Photograph by Paul Mills in 2012.

The *Rose Altarpiece* is 201cm high (see Figure 9 for a sense of its scale), the same size as the Schongauer panel. While it does not refer to the pinnacle on the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* altarpiece that was added in the late-nineteenth century, it includes side wings that are a counterpart to the tracery by Klem and his studio, as well as the paintings by Fuerstein. Although a functional altarpiece in the sense that it has side wings that can open and close, the *Rose Altarpiece* is an art object rather than one designed to operate within liturgical practices. The *Rose Altarpiece* may best be understood as a “parody” of the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* altarpiece in the sense that this term is defined by Linda Hutcheon (1985). For Hutcheon (1985:6), postmodern parody involves ‘repetition with critical distance which marks difference rather than similarity’. This is true of the *Rose Altarpiece*’s relation to its source in the sense that various likenesses between the two art objects serve in fact to emphasise their differences from one another.

As I reveal in this article, both artworks speak of the hope for deliverance from suffering, but whereas the Schongauer’s panel (and the altarpiece constituted from it) addresses an impetus to seek redemption in the afterlife, the *Rose Altarpiece* is focused on securing continuity and rebirth in this life specifically. Perhaps most crucial is the difference between the messages about virtuous womanhood made in the two works. The historical veneration of the Virgin Mary and the iconography that informed her representation in images such as Schongauer’s panel was not grounded in affirmation of women in ordinary



FIGURE N° 8



St. Martin's Collegiate Church, Colmar, France. Photograph by Paul Mills in 2012.





FIGURE **Nº 9**



Keiskamma Art Project, *Rose Altarpiece* (2006) viewed by a visitor, Shoni Netshia, when shown in the gallery of the SARChI chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, University of Johannesburg, in 2018. Photograph by Paul Mills.

life, as I indicate in this article. The *Rose Altarpiece*, however, reworks that historical imagery in such a way that mortal women are in fact invested with capacity. Made in the context of escalating HIV/AIDS infections, the South African work highlights one woman's story in such a way that it suggests how females in Hamburg and its surrounds have, generally, sought to negotiate this health crisis. The message conveyed, I observe, is of women as icons of strength and agency, and those who will ensure that the Hamburg community survives the impact of HIV/AIDS. I begin this article with a brief overview of the Keiskamma Art Project, as well as the impact of HIV/AIDS on Hamburg. After looking at the making of the *Rose Altarpiece*, I turn my attention to the content of Schongauer's panel and at how the meanings of this fifteenth-century panel are revised and reworked by the Keiskamma Art Project.<sup>3</sup>

## The Keiskamma Art Project and the HIV/AIDS crisis

A coastal village 82km from East London, named Hamburg – which had been designated part of the Ciskei prior to the demise of apartheid – has no industry and, before the establishment of the project in 2000, had very limited opportunities for its population of primarily isiXhosa-speaking people to earn a living.<sup>4</sup> Through her establishment of the Keiskamma Art Project, Carol Hofmeyr, an artist and medical doctor who settled in Hamburg, enabled people in Hamburg, as well as surrounding villages such as Bodiam and Ntilini, to obtain monies to support themselves and their families. The project has about 130 members. While approximately a dozen are salaried, the majority are contracted to work as a group on large-scale projects but are able to earn additional income by producing small-scale works individually for sale at the project's shop in Hamburg (which is alongside its main studio and in a building overlooking the mouth of the Keiskamma River) and at retailers in larger centres. Much of the work done by the project at its main studio, as well as in a studio in Bodiam, is needlework, but it has also established facilities that enable work in printmaking, wirework and ceramics.

When Hofmeyr first established the project,<sup>5</sup> she envisaged focusing exclusively on artmaking. However, the absence of any medical doctors in Hamburg and its surrounds presented a significant challenge to the community, who often had no means of reaching East London or Peddie when there were medical emergencies. This dangerous situation encouraged Hofmeyr to begin coupling her work on art initiatives with work as a primary care practitioner. A further impetus was the number of people in Hamburg who were dying from AIDS-related illnesses and Hofmeyr's increasing recognition that trying to address poverty without assisting people who were HIV-positive was untenable. Beginning by working in various rural clinics, Hofmeyr simultaneously began collaborating with an AIDS counsellor, Eunice Mangwane. Given Hofmeyr's increasing medical commitments, she necessarily had insufficient time to devote to the art project. In 2003, the Keiskamma Art Project employed Jackie Downs to manage its day-to-day running, and she would remain with the initiative until 2007 – including the period in which work was being done on the *Rose Altarpiece*.

Although Hofmeyr (2020) indicates that the first AIDS case she saw in Hamburg was in around 2003,<sup>6</sup> it is likely that HIV infections first emerged in the village considerably earlier – when it was part of the Ciskei and home to migrant labourers returning from urban centres. By the time Hofmeyr established the project, the effects of HIV/AIDS had become devastating nationally. By 2000, South Africa had about 4.2 million infected adults, the largest number of any country in the world; this meant that 19.9% of all adults in the country were infected (UNAIDS 2000:9). Women were particularly vulnerable. In 2002, 28% of women surveyed at antenatal clinics in the Eastern Cape were HIV-positive (UNAIDS/WHO 2004:2). Biologically more receptive to HIV-infection than men (see Karim

2005:45), women are also rendered susceptible to infection through unequal relations of power between males and females. Studies have revealed that women in rural communities, such as Hamburg, are often unable to refuse to have sex with their partners or insist on condom use, even in scenarios where it is known or suspected that those men have multiple partners (see, for example, Da Cruz 2004). In contexts where maternity is valued, and where failure to reproduce is a humiliation, women may also feel compelled to abandon prophylactics.

The social impact of the disease on children is also devastating. Sometimes infected at birth through lack of attention to protocols to prevent mother-to-child transmission, children may also be orphaned owing to the virus. Hofmeyr compiled an informal list of 70 orphaned children in Hamburg and its immediate surroundings in 2006, and there were likely still more whose identities and circumstances had not been brought to her attention. These devastating statistics and figures about the impact of HIV/AIDS in South Africa were not unsurprising, given South Africa's inadequate response to the disease. While the National AIDS Coordinating Committee of South Africa, constituted in 1992, sought a dedicated approach to managing AIDS, the disease tended to be put on the back burner during Nelson Mandela's term in office. A host of other matters required attention, but an additional factor was likely that, as Van der Vliet (2004:54) observes, 'AIDS warnings and the message of safer sex were not subjects congenial to those savouring the euphoria of freedom'. These problems would be compounded when Thabo Mbeki came to power in June 1999. Influenced by dissident scientists who questioned the link between AIDS and the HIV virus, and who viewed AIDS as a hoax concocted in the west, Mbeki and his health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, promoted the idea that the disease should be treated exclusively with nutrition. Given their stalling of the introduction of government sponsorship of antiretroviral treatment, it took extensive pressure from the public and the Treatment Action Campaign to succeed in enabling these medications to finally be approved for rollout in late 2003.

In 2004, prior to these government-sponsored programmes reaching Hamburg, Hofmeyr sourced sufficient medications privately to be able to put about eight people on treatment. During the first half of 2005, the Keiskamma Trust – a body set up to manage the various initiatives Hofmeyr was involved with – began to introduce antiretroviral treatment through the USA's President Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief in Africa. The Keiskamma Trust also then purchased a house in the centre of the village that was converted into a treatment centre. Named the Umtha Welanga Treatment Centre, it served as a space from which antiretrovirals were dispensed to more than 500 people in the region. The year 2005 was consequently a time of hope. The health of those placed on antiretrovirals in 2004 was visibly improved, and the new USA-sponsored programme, as well as the centre that was established, suggested that the health of others would soon be improving as well.



This mood of optimism would inform the content of the *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, completed in the first half of 2005. The *Isenheim Altarpiece*, originally commissioned for the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim, was intended to bring hope and comfort to sufferers of ergotism (or “St Anthony’s Fire”), a gangrenous skin condition. When Hofmeyr saw the altarpiece in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar in 2004, she thought of referring to it via a work focused on HIV/AIDS. The outcome was a magnificent altarpiece that, like its source, is comprised of two sets of folding wings and three different views. The third of these views (Figure 10) has iconography that served as a precedent for that of the *Rose Altarpiece*. Including life-size digital photographs printed on canvas, taken by Tanya Jordaan, a University of Cape Town graduate who worked at the project for about a year, this view shows in its central trio of panels three local grandmothers and their grandchildren, some of whom had been orphaned because of AIDS. The left niche features Susan Paliso with her arm around her eight-year old grandson; the funeral of Paliso’s son and the child’s father is in fact depicted in the closed view of the altarpiece. In the centre is Eunice Mangwane, an AIDS counsellor with three youngsters in her care. The right-hand side features Caroline Nyongo, the leader of a group in nearby Ntilini who undertook the beadwork in the altarpiece, with her four grandchildren. Substituting the actual three-dimensional sculptures of St. Anthony, St. Augustine and St. Jerome that had originally been made visible through the second opening of the wings of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Jordaan’s photographs nevertheless convey the illusion of three dimensionality. Indeed, the photographs convey a notable sense of the mass of the three adult women, and thus of their weighty impact on the community. Hofmeyr’s visit to Colmar in 2004 motivated thoughts about the possibility for not only the *Isenheim Altarpiece* but also the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* altarpiece inspiring works referring to HIV/AIDS. Both would involve the substitution of iconic religious figures with contemporary female “saints”.

## Making the *Rose Altarpiece*

When the Keiskamma Art Project produced its first large-scale work, the *Keiskamma Tapestry*, endeavours were made to involve all needleworkers in its design. Workshops were held in which the artwork’s narrative was discussed, participants were invited to draw scenes, and then selections were made from these and translated into the work of art itself. But by the time the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* was produced, the process had changed – and design work was the preserve of those who had aptitude in drawing. Those who took on drawing included a project leader, Noseti Makubalo, as well as four young people – Nomfusi Nkani, Nokuphiwa Gedze, Cebo Mvubu and Kwanele Ganto – who were each sponsored by the Claire Kantor Memorial Fund<sup>7</sup> to study a three-year diploma in Fine Art at Walter Sisulu University in nearby East London.



FIGURE **Nº 10**



Keiskamma Art Project, *Keiskamma Altarpiece* (2005). The second opening of the altarpiece. Mixed media, centre panel: 317 X 332 cm, each side wing: 265 x 106 cm. Photograph by Paul Mills.

The image of the Virgin and Child in Schongauer's altarpiece has been adapted in the *Rose Altarpiece* to represent Nokwanda Makubalo, a project member who was one of the leaders of the Bodiam group of needleworkers, and a child she had adopted. In an autobiographic commentary prepared for the project, Nokwanda Makubalo explained how she came to adopt the youngster in the context of an AIDS crisis,

People were dying around us. These people included my sister in law's daughter – my niece born in 1979 – who had just finished a management diploma and who also had a baby of her own. She came home one Christmas and she was so skinny and that night I discovered that she was also coughing a lot. Carol came and took her in her own car with me to Nompumelelo Hospital [in Peddie] and they found that she had TB. We persuaded her to be admitted to Cecilia Makiwane Hospital [near East London]. She was so short of breath that she died soon after that but at the time all she was worried about was her baby so I promised to take care of it. I still have that baby in my care now. Her name is Zusake and her biological gran and I both take turns to look after her.<sup>8</sup>

In a photograph of three generations of family members, probably taken in the first half of 2005, a smiling Zusake – dressed in red trousers and a white shirt – is posed in the centre of a group (Figure 11). Nokwanda Makubalo, shown fifth from the left, is hugged by one of her three daughters, Ntombizonke. As the eldest of seven siblings, Makubalo



FIGURE **Nº 11**



Photograph of Nowanda Makubalo (fifth from left) and members of her extended family that was probably taken in the first half of 2005. Photograph provided courtesy of Carol Hofmeyr. (Photographer is not known).

had already taken on the responsibility of caring for her mentally disabled sister, Nonthombi, who is on the far left of the image and who is leaning against Nombeko Ganto, another of her sisters and a member of the Bodiam group of needleworkers in the project.<sup>9</sup>

Those designing and drawing the *Rose Altarpiece* undoubtedly referred to reproductions of *The Virgin in the Rose Bower* altarpiece that Hofmeyr brought back from Colmar, including a paper foldout reproduction that imitates its form. But their more immediate source was a photograph taken by Jackie Downs that represented Makubalo seated on a bench in the doorway to her home, with her arm around Zusake (Figure 12). Blown up to approximately human scale, the photograph itself has been used for the faces of the two figures, while the appearance of their garments has been approximated through appliquéd fabric. A tea towel that has been used to represent a cloth wrapped around Makubalo's midriff (rather than the crisp white cotton in the original photograph), along with the child being shown with bare feet rather than sandals, convey an impression of





FIGURE **Nº 12**



Nokwanda Makubalo and Zusake, the child she adopted (2005). Photo by Jackie Downs used as a source for the *Rose Altarpiece*.

humbleness. It is noticeable also that, while Zusake wears shorts in the photograph, this has been substituted with a skirt – presumably to emphasise that this youngster is female.



FIGURE **Nº 13**



Keiskamma Art Project, detail of the *Rose Altarpiece* (2005). Photograph by Paul Mills.

As with the *Keiskamma Altarpiece*, the making of the *Rose Altarpiece* involved members deploying skills in appliqué and embroidery while also including elements in wirework as well as beadwork by Nyongo and her group. But its making also involved a further form of technical training for project members. In the Schongauer painting, the roses referred to in the title are those painted in the trellis; The tracery arch surrounding her, made by Klem and his studio in the nineteenth century, includes filigree work featuring sculpted angels rather than flowers. In the *Rose Altarpiece*, however, the trellis features an assortment of generalised blooms, while roses constitute a bower just within the boundary of the frame of the central panel (Figures 13 and 14). Made via *cartapesta leccese*, a technique which involves modelling three-dimensional forms from paper, these were produced under the guidance of Luisa Cotardo, a journalist from Lecce in Italy, where (as the name *cartapesta leccese* indicates) the technique is considered part of local heritage.<sup>10</sup> But in translating Schongauer's panel (and the altarpiece in which it was recontextualised in the nineteenth century) into new form, the *Rose Altarpiece* did more than give it an updated and South African reinvention. Through the device of parody, it also, in fact, articulated a message about ideal womanhood somewhat differently from that of the source.





FIGURE N° 14



Keiskamma Art Project, detail of the *Rose Altarpiece* (2005). Photograph by Paul Mills.

## Schongauer's *Virgin of the Rose Bower*

In Martin Schongauer's panel of the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* (Figure 6), the Virgin is depicted seated on a simple wooden bench or pew, in front of a wooden trellis supporting roses, and two angels holding a crown above her. A halo frames the Madonna's head and on it is the phrase 'ME CARPES GENITO TU QU(OQUE) O S(AN)CTISSI(M)A V(IRGO)', which means 'pick me also for your child, oh most holy Virgin'. While the deployment of wording, as well as the gold leaf background, flattens the image, the rose bush itself is naturalistic, as are the birds that appear in it. The latter have in fact been identified as particular species, such as robins, sparrows and finches (see Heck 1990:12). The image of the Virgin in an enclosed garden became popular in Germanic art in the fifteenth century, and, prior to the Schongauer work, was deployed in a panel known as the *Little Garden of Paradise* in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt (see Städel Museum 2020) as well as a small work by Stefan Lochner from around 1450 that is now in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne (see Zehnder 1986). Its inspiration was the Song of Songs, passionate love lyrics that appear in Wisdoms and are ascribed to King Solomon (although their actual authorship remains in question, as does the date when they were composed). The beloved or object of desire – a Shulamite maiden – is described in the Song of Songs (4:12-16) as follows,

12 a garden enclosed, sister my bride  
a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed  
13 your emissions a paradise of pomegranates  
with the fruits of the fruit trees  
cyprus with nard  
14 nard and saffron  
cane and cinnamon  
with all the trees of Lebanon  
myrrh and aloe  
with all prime spices  
15 the fountain of the gardens  
a well of living waters  
which flow rushing from Lebanon  
16 arise, north wind and come, south wind  
blow through my garden that its spices may flow <sup>11</sup>

Marina Warner (1985:124-5) explains how the erotic lyrics in the Song of Songs came to be taken up in Christian ascetism,

Because first Yaweh [in the Old Testament] and then Christ [in the New Testament] appear as bridegrooms, and because the Virgin was identified with the Church, the bride of Christ, it was possible for rabbinical fathers to read the passionate poetry of the Song of Songs as an allegory of God's love, and for later Christian exegetes to identify the lover of the Song with Christ and his beloved with the Church, each Christian soul, and the Virgin Mary.



Various theologians contributed to the development of these analogies. These included, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who was largely responsible for creating a discourse around the Virgin Mary as an intercessor between humankind and God. Also important was Rupert of Deutz who, in the early twelfth century, E. Ann Matter indicates (1990), developed a discourse in which the entire Song of Songs is understood to be about the Virgin Mary. Becoming 'not only the symbol of the Church, but the embodiment of it', Mary would emerge simultaneously as 'the model of monastic virtues: virginity, humility, and obedience' (Matter 1990:163). Within this iconography, the motif of the enclosed garden becomes a favourite signifier of Mary's virginity. The motif also associates the Virgin with a new Eden. As Victoria Larson (2013:303-4) observes, 'The Mother of God was transformed into an enclosed garden, with flowers representing her many attributes. Further Scriptural support from Romans 5:12-22 built up this interpretation: just as Christ is the new Adam, his mother is the new Eden, an incorrupt, pure, and sinless paradise'.

While the Frankfurt panel shows various flowers, Schongauer's panel, like that of Lochner, features a rose bower specifically. The rose refers to the Virgin Mary in iconography that associates her with the restoration of paradise. 'Mary is called the "rose without thorns", i.e. sinless', James Hall (1974:268) notes, observing that an 'early legend mentioned by St. Ambrose tells how the rose grew without thorns until the Fall of Man'. Appearing in numerous other images of the Virgin and Child, it is also invoked in the Catholic rosary, which derives from the idea of Mary as a 'mystic rose' (Larson 2013:304). This link to the rosary would seem to be significant. Within an argument focused on how the social meaning of artworks should be interpreted through consideration of the circumstances surrounding their reception rather than only the moments of their creation, Keith Moxey (1994) suggests that the founding of the brotherhood of the rosary by members of the Dominican order in 1485 had an impact on the interpretation of the Schongauer panel by devotees. He points out that prayers to the rosary were associated with the cult of granting indulgences, thus potentially allowing a devotee to escape the torments of purgatory and instead enjoy automatic entrance into the realms of the blessed following the Last Judgement. Moxey (1994:109) speculates,

If the rosary offered one mechanical aid to mitigate the torments of the afterlife, then the image afforded another. Considering the popularity of the confraternity of the rosary, the significance of the inscription on the Virgin's halo takes on new significance. If we are to understand the power of the words 'Pluck me also for thy son, O holiest Virgin,' we cannot forget the anxiety at the heart of the pursuit of indulgences. Such a plea is not just a manifestation of a mystical desire for union with God, ... but also a cry of mortal terror provoked by the doctrine of purgatory.

This cult, Moxey (1994:109) suggests, may have had 'special resonance for women', as the brotherhood of the rosary admitted females, unlike other confraternities, and in fact included more women than men.

Hall (1974:323) suggests that the growth of a Marian cult in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries 'was to some extent countered by the Church's traditional hostility to women, an attitude that was very much alive among some earlier theologians and monastic institutions who used the figure of Eve, the temptress, by way of justification'. But, notwithstanding the spectacular beauty of images of the Madonna and Child, such as that of Schongauer, nor the fact that the brotherhood of the rosary admitted women, one might argue that discourses that structure the Virgin Mary as an object of veneration are in fact as embroiled in pejorative constructs about women as are images of Eve. As Marina Warner (1985:336) has suggested, Mary, as a construct, does not only represent an impossibility (the woman who was both virgin and mother) but also translated that impossibility into a contradictory 'moral exhortation' to ordinary women. Through the figure of the Virgin Mary, Catholicism 'affirms the beauty and goodness of the natural world and insists that man's purpose is to cultivate fully his God-given gifts on earth; but on the other it endorses the most pessimistic world-denying self-sacrifice as the state of the elect, and accords virginity, the symbols of renunciation, the highest accolade' (Warner 1985:337). And if the Virgin Mary is linked to imperatives that are impossible to reconcile and therefore necessarily constructs women as deficient, she is additionally part of a circularity that is intrinsic to religious fear – in other words, a religious system that creates terror and then offers itself as the only mechanism to negotiate it,

Mary's virginity underlines the pollution of intercourse; her freedom from the pangs of birth focusses exaggerated attention to them. In addition, the Church's teaching on contraception and abortion, which stems directly from the same misogynist ideas about women's role contained in the myth of the Virgin, exacerbates the terrors of sex and childbirth by maintaining pregnancy as a constant and very real danger. In turn, this reinforces the believer's need for solace, and swells the Church's authority and power (Warner 1985: 338).

While theology has worked to de-historicise her, and thus to obfuscate the way the concept of the Virgin Mary has served as 'the instrument of a dynamic argument from the Catholic Church about the structure of society, presented as a God-given code' (Warner 1976:338), the myth of the Virgin Mary is, for Warner (1985:339), less likely to be adaptable to 'new circumstances of sexual equality' than to eventually ultimately lose her hold on humankind.

## Women and agency in the *Rose Altarpiece*

The parody of the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* in the *Rose Altarpiece* was not motivated by an intention to critique the construct of the Virgin Mary and its associated iconography.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the *Rose Altarpiece* offers a representation that not only substitutes a Christian saint with a contemporary woman, who is implied to possess saintly qualities, but it also replaces a figure who (if Warner's arguments are accepted) is associated with female disempowerment in everyday life with a representation that celebrates how women may assume agency for the common good. Images of the Virgin and Child, such as that of Schongauer, are intended to inspire in the viewer religious devotion and to suggest a route to everlasting salvation. The *Rose Altarpiece*, however, engages with salvation within the realms of this life. Rather than being in Latin, as it is in the Schongauer work, wording in the *Rose Altarpiece* is in English and isiXhosa. The phrase 'TAKE ME ALSO FOR YOUR CHILD' (and, in isiXhosa, 'NCEDU'NDISE EBANTWANENI') is embroidered across an orange field above Makubalo's head, which serves as a substitute for the golden halo surrounding the Virgin in Schongauer's painting. Whereas in the fifteenth-century work the Latin phrase on the halo served as a plea to the Virgin to assume the role of intercessor for a suppliant, the Keiskamma Art Project's reworking features a plea on the part of a child orphaned through HIV/AIDS for maternal care. By featuring Nokwanda Makubalo and the child she had adopted, it invokes a sense that youngsters in Hamburg and its surrounds, who have been orphaned through the disease, are integrated into families and are nurtured through the commitment of women in their community.

The *Rose Altarpiece* replaces the representations of the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin, on the exterior of the *Virgin of the Rose Bower* altarpiece, with a male and female figure in customary dress.<sup>13</sup> Through its substitution of the moment of the Incarnation in Christian thought with a couple who seem to be older or from a prior generation, the *Rose Altarpiece* conveys the message that, through the actions of Nokwanda Makubalo and other women who provide homes for orphaned youngsters, communities such as Hamburg and its surrounds will ensure continuity of life and sustain future generations. If the altarpiece in the Dominican Church articulates understandings about salvation in the afterlife rather than salvation in this world, the *Rose Altarpiece* also differs from the fifteenth-century source it parodies in its focus on African understandings of the world rather than western ones. Key here would seem to be the idea of *ubuntu* – the widely understood and popular philosophy that 'I am because we are' or 'a person is a person through other persons'.

One could link the representation of Makubalo and the child she adopted with comments Priscilla Ndlovu (2016) makes about motherhood in the context of *ubuntu* values and approaches in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe, where this philosophy also enjoys currency. Her

interviews with a range of female leaders revealed consensus that motherhood shaped by *ubuntu* values involves not only nurturing one's own biological children, but also those of others, 'The participants concurred that a mother has the responsibility of taking care of her own children, children from the extended family, friends' children, and neighbours' children' (Ndlovu 2016:110). She refers to statements by participants in which the mother is envisaged as an umbrella who provides 'shade or protection to all those under their responsibility' (Ndlovu 2016:111). This sense of the mother as a nurturing force who shields the child against danger and threat is conveyed visually in the *Rose Altarpiece* where, in addition to the woman literally shielding the child with her skirt as well as her arm enfolded around the youngster, the idea of providing an "umbrella" over others is invoked through the bower of roses and the arch shape constituted through the embroidered wording. One might also interpret the use of fabric in the central panel in the light of metaphors associated with care. Connoting a quilt or bedcover, it is suggestive of an item which provides warmth and nurture, and through the stitching used within this section of the work, there are perhaps also allusions to suturing and thus to the healing of wounds.

But if the work can be interpreted as representing an instance of motherhood shaped by *ubuntu* values, might it not also be seen to sustain traditionalist values that are not in keeping with feminism? The value of the concept of *ubuntu* has, in some instances, been challenged, and suggestions have been made that it functions as a tool for sustaining patriarchal control. Sinehlanhla Chisale explores, for example, how a supposed interest in prioritising community needs over those of individual females has been used as a vehicle for justifying and perpetuating violence against women in isiZulu-speaking communities in KwaZulu-Natal, '*Ubuntu* is a porous, fluid and complex social and political theory that may be used in a biased and gendered way to control young women's behaviour through wife battering that was justified as love, discipline and punishment' (Chisale 2016:7281).

But *ubuntu* has also been conceptualised as having potentially transformative and activist applications that may be useful for feminism. Drucilla Cornell and Karin van Marle have proposed the concept of "*ubuntu* feminism". For them, *ubuntu* involves the individual making an active contribution to a larger community (rather than simply being part of a larger community) as well as doing so in ethical terms. *Ubuntu* 'encapsulates how we know the world, as well as how we are in it through the moral obligations as human beings who must live together. It implies the moralisation of all social relations' (Cornell & van Marle 2015:1444). Potentially important in defining a form of feminism that sidesteps historical divisions between black and white feminists, it offers in place of radical individualism,



an understanding of the human being that is always already intertwined in relations that are ethical. The community however is not something abstract and outside. It is part of who and how we are with others. It is this intertwinement that makes *ubuntu* transformative as there is always more work to do together in shaping our future (Cornell & van Marle 2015:1444).

I would view the *Rose Altarpiece* in light of Cornell and van Marle's conceptualisation of "ubuntu feminism" rather than traditionalist invocations of *ubuntu*. The work speaks of a community of women who, in unison with each other rather than in deference to patriarchy, work together to sustain their society and community. Shaped by ethical responsibility rather than by a spirit of obedience, their activities of taking into their homes orphaned youngsters stem from an agency they have assumed rather than from directives provided them. In reworking the image of the Virgin Mary in Schongauer's painting, the *Rose Altarpiece* also goes beyond simply "Africanising" an inherited iconography. It takes subject matter and iconography that, as Warner has suggested, has historically been bound up with prejudicial views of women, transforming it in such a way that it speaks of females assuming power and agency.

## From then to now

In mid-2005, when the *Rose Altarpiece* was made, the community of Hamburg and its surrounds witnessed the original group of people who had received antiretroviral treatment enjoying improved health, and were looking forward to an additional 500 people recently placed on antiretrovirals doing the same. But the situation would prove less straightforward than envisaged. In 2007, the Keiskamma Health Programme ended its relationship with the President Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief in Africa. While initially allowed by Nompumelelo Hospital in Peddie to commence treatment and care for patients and to assist in the distribution of medication, the Keiskamma Health Trust was no longer able to take on this role in 2009. It was also no longer permitted to provide hospitalisation at the Umtha Welanga Treatment Centre, and patients were required to instead seek out treatment in Peddie or at the Cecilia Makiwane Hospital in Mdantsane township near East London. For patients with insufficient money to spend on public transport, these new arrangements created an onerous economic burden. Far worse, however, was the drop in the quality of care that people began to receive. As Hofmeyr (2014) summarised it, 'The staff don't investigate properly and mostly, in general don't give them the care they require'. The outcome was regrettably a preventable loss of life.

The personal narrative that formed the basis for the altarpiece – that of Nokwanda Makubalo and Zusake, the child placed in her care – also had a tragic outcome rather than the happy ending the work had presaged. In early 2006, Makubalo suffered a stroke, but recuperated sufficiently to be able to walk without a stick. Following vivid dreams

shortly after her discharge from hospital, she began working to become a *sangoma* (healer). Viewing this new role as a commitment to her community, she made the following comment in her unpublished autobiography, 'Leaders are not taught – they are born. And I pray to God to make me like Solomon, to be a leader. This is why I became a *sangoma* and was elected as one by my people'.<sup>14</sup> But to the shock of the community, Makubalo – so resilient and determined – died in 2010, some two or three years after making this comment. Zusake, whom she had been so committed to looking after, was subsequently placed in the care of other relatives. While these events make evident that the dedication and fortitude of women would not in fact be enough to sustain a community battling the effects of HIV/AIDS, the *Rose Altarpiece* nonetheless remains a powerful and inspiring image. Replacing an iconography bound up with pejorative understandings of womanhood with one suggesting how females are agents for social upliftment, it may also be understood to give visual shape and form to a concept of "feminist *ubuntu*".

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## Notes

1. Constructed between 1234 and 1365, it was named a 'collegiate church' to designate the fact that it was 'entrusted to a panel of clerics (collegiate chapter), whose meetings take place outside of an Episcopal seat' (French Moments [sa]).
2. See Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum ([sa]) for an illustration.
3. The *Rose Altarpiece* is now in the collection of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum in Port Elizabeth, but was first exhibited at the University of Johannesburg in 2006. Its showing at the National Arts Festival in 2007 was alongside the much larger *Creation Altarpiece*, modelled on the *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432). Perhaps because it was made shortly after the large and impressive *Keiskamma Altarpiece* and shown at the National Arts Festival at the same time as another spectacular altarpiece modelled on a famous work, it has been somewhat side-lined in prior literature. The project was commented on in two short paragraphs in a small booklet published to accompany its exhibition at



the National Arts Festival (Keiskamma Art Project 2007) and I mentioned it briefly in an article on the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* (Schmahmann 2010). The most detailed existent study of the *Rose Altarpiece* was a general overview included in *The Keiskamma Art Project: Restoring Hope and Livelihoods* (2016). I examine the subject matter and the implications of using the Schongauer source in far greater depth in this article – with the intention of revealing its hitherto unacknowledged complexity and significance..

4. Hamburg is part of Ward 12 within the Ngqushwa municipality. A census study undertaken in 2016 indicated that the population of the eight villages constituting Ward 12 consists of, in total, 6051 people, 53% of whom are female. The site indicates the following: Nearly all of the people (99%) in the municipality are African, and the remaining 1% is comprised of Coloureds, Whites and Indians.” This figure is indicated to be 8.1% lower than when a previous census was taken in 2011 (see Ngqushwa 2020).
5. Background information on the project provided here is a summary of the fuller account in Schmahmann (2016).
6. E-mail communication, 15 August 2020.
7. See <https://clairekantor.com/the-claire-kantor-foundation/>.
8. Unpublished and undated autobiography by Nokwanda Makubalo provided to me by Carol Hofmeyr.
9. Nokwanda Makubalo was born in Port Elizabeth in 1958. While her autobiography is unclear about when the family came to be in Bodiam, her sister, Nombeko Ganto (who was born in 1964), indicated to me in an interview in Hamburg that I conducted on 19 January 2010 that they settled in the area in 1972. Makubalo indicates that her eldest daughter was born in 1974 and she had three more daughters – in 1978, 1980 and 1988. Married to a mineworker in Gauteng who tended to return home only in December, she sought work as a domestic worker in East London and subsequently on a pineapple farm in Peddie until the operation folded with the demise of the Ciskei as an entity in 1994. She was introduced to Hofmeyr when she was in the early stages of establishing the Keiskamma Art Project and, as she explains, ‘went from being unemployed and looking for work to becoming an embroiderer – and then to actually managing the women and [she] was not penniless anymore’
10. The altarpiece seems to have been made between June and August 2005. A short article published in an Italian newspaper on 25 June 2005, focusing on Cotardo’s impending visit, indicates that ‘there is in preparation a large project to make an Altarpiece of the Virgin of the Roses’ (Porcelli 2005). Another newspaper article, dating to 18 August 2005 and made after her return from her 20-day visit to Hamburg, includes a photograph of the central panel of the altarpiece that had been e-mailed to the author, and describes the final work as ‘almost done’ (Cotardo 2005).
11. The version used here is that of Matter (1990:xxv).
12. Hofmeyr is a practising Anglican. Other participants in the Keiskamma Art Project mostly describe themselves as ‘Christian’ even though they may also participate in customary practices. See Schmahmann (2010:47) where I explain the syncretic relationship between Christian and customary belief systems. For example, I quote commentary by Nozaliseko Makubalo (2008): ‘When it is time to do traditional work, I’m there. And when it is time to go to church, I go to church. But I can’t leave traditional work at home and go to church’.
13. They were likely based on photographs by Barbara Tyrrell, although the exact source is unclear.
14. Unpublished and undated autobiography by Nokwanda Makubalo provided to me by Carol Hofmeyr.

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