

GIOVANNI SEGANTINI'S FANTASY OF LOVE:
MOTHERLY LOVE SYMBOLISM AND THE ANGEL OF LIFE

Born 15 June 1858 at Arco in the Trentino near Lago di Garda, Giovanni Segantini was, as a Tirolese, an Austrian citizen, but Italian in heritage, language and character. His father was a lumberjack, and the family name derives from *seghe*, (lumber (*segare*: to saw)). When Giovanni was five years old, his mother died. Remembrance of her maternal love is constantly reflected in his art; for example, the love of man for his animals (Fig. 1), the love of a cow for its calf (Fig. 2), and the love of a mother for her child (Figs. 3, 4 and 5). The loneliness, suffering and sadness of Segantini's early youth is also felt in all his major works, particularly in his symbolist paintings. Perhaps the reason for Segantini's concern in carefully studying and learning about nature is that he found love and solitude in it, feelings he understood the best, which enabled him to identify himself with nature.

Segantini's paintings can be divided into four periods: Milano, 1877-1881; Brianze, 1882-1885; Savognino, 1886-1894; and Majola, 1895-1899. In the Milano period, Segantini demonstrated a concern for technical values such as perspective, light in the canvas, and division of colors. Most of the works completed in this period represent *la natura morta*. The art critic Victor Grubicy has called the Brianza period the "Millet period" since the majority of Segantini's paintings reflect a direct influence from Millet's pastoral engravings.¹ Segantini began to study and analyze nature in all its detail, and his pictures express melancholic and sweet sentiments toward pastoral men and their land. A deeper study of nature was undertaken during the Savognino period. Segantini achieved a feeling of harmony and unity in his compositions. At Majola, he attained his goal of understanding nature in all her gradations and completeness in order to create a powerful, vigorous and beautiful ideal encompassing both love and nature.

In the early stages of his work, Segantini painted nature pure and simple. He painted what he saw. Gradually, however, his realistic figures began to represent such abstractions as motherhood, devotion, or resignation. Alpine landscapes are used as backgrounds for the viewer to empathize with the symbolic figure. As Segantini's symbolism evolves, the representation of nature becomes wilder and bizarre; the depiction of a beautiful nature, the concept of beauty as nature, is stressed, while the human figure loses importance in the setting. On the next level of development, the composition illustrates a weird and exotic Engadine landscape; the human figure returns in the scene as a fantastic creature who signifies such abstractions as love, eternity,