

ADDITIONAL TYPOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM IN
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S THE GIRLHOOD OF MARY VIRGIN

That Dante Gabriel Rossetti followed an explicit iconographic program in The Girlhood of Mary Virgin (fig. 1) was initially pointed out by Rossetti himself in his related sonnets. Since then, there have been numerous attempts to deal with the symbolism of this painting. I hope to clarify a few facets of Rossetti's program which have remained either unexplained or insufficiently elucidated.¹

When Rossetti began work on The Girlhood in early August 1848 his two mentors -- Ford Madox Brown and William Holman Hunt -- no doubt influenced his choice of subject matter. They had both begun Marian works in 1847: Brown with his Our Lady of Good Children and Hunt with his Christ and the Two Marias.² A letter from Rossetti, (November 14, 1848) to Charles Lyell explains some of his aims in doing the painting:

The subject is the education of the Blessed Virgin, one which has been treated at various times by Murillo and other painters, -- but, as I cannot but think, in a very inadequate manner, since they have invariably represented her as reading from a book under the superintendence of her Mother, St. Anne, an occupation obviously incompatible with these times, and which could only pass muster if treated in a purely symbolical manner. In order, therefore, to attempt something more probable and at the same time less commonplace, I have represented the future Mother of Our Lord as occupied in embroidering a lily, -- always under the direction of St. Anne. . .³

The Girlhood combines two traditional modes of representing the Virgin's youth. James Hall notes that "the favorite theme, especially in Counter-Reformation art, depicts her education in the strict sense, at the knee of her mother Anne, learning to read."⁴ Rossetti refers to this tradition as the standard depiction. The other tradition of representing the Virgin's youth (though much less common) comes from the New Testament apocryphal Protevangelion of James the Lesser. In Chapter IX we read that Mary was chosen from among seven virgins of the temple to spin the purple thread for the temple veil. A variation of this in Jacobus de Voragine's The Golden Legend states that Mary occupied herself by weaving in the temple from the third to the ninth hour.⁵