

MARGARET DIESENDORF

DEATH OF THE MADONNA

ANDREJ RUBLJOW
ICON. FIFTEENTH CENTURY

He did not see her as the carpenter's wife,
the woman who on Caesar's census form, when asked
her occupation, doubtless would have written
'home duties' (but Joe's likely to have filled it in),
woman who, later, would serve plain kosher meals
(such a caring mother & hostess, did she not
request wine for the wedding guests?); woman who
lost no thought on sweeping the mud floor twice (those wood
shavings!) unashamed of her work-roughened hands
& the chipped finger-nails.

Rather would he see her
as one of the fine ladies of the rising
Byzantine bourgeoisie, delicately shaped in
her elegant dress, slim white hand raised to bless
those who believed in her son's mission though they might
disapprove of his ultimate sacrifice . . .
A lady sanctified, facing her death calmly,
aware that her son stands by, near yet distant.

As to the disciples & followers who chose
to be present at this historic moment,
expressing their sentiments in fitting ways, they
vie for the grace of carrying her hither,
on the luxurious couch where she lies, eager to
join her late son . . .

That a flock of bright angels
should fill in the space above them does not surprise,
nor the candles lit for her comfort & theirs,
or even the shadowy saints who take part in
the proceedings; their shadows line the temple's
Roman arc.

What does surprise, even disturb, is
to see Mary's death made a public event
(as was her son's crucifixion) — alien to the
quiet chamber where the angel hailed his birth
& the straw-lined crib whence he faced this mortal world.