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The Four Janets: Finding Truth in Illusion

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ABSTRACT. At first sight, the picture we are looking at could be just a simple family photograph: an elderly woman watching with pride over her daughters, nieces or granddaughters. Yet one quickly realises that all three girls sport the exact same wigs and that far from being sisters or cousins, they are actually three representations of the same person at different ages of her life.

Indeed this picture was taken on the set of Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table*, the film adaptation of Janet Frame's autobiography. The elderly lady receding in the background is not an aunt or a grandmother but the author of the books and the main character in the film. Many such mistakes can be made when looking at this photograph for the first time. I will try to explore those misreadings in order to see what this picture tells us of Janet Frame's autobiographical practice.

KEYWORDS: Autobiography, Photography, Madness, Motherhood, Identity

Les Quatre Janets : la vérité dans l'illusion

RÉSUMÉ. À première vue, la photographie qui nous est donnée à regarder pourrait être une simple photo de famille représentant une dame âgée posant fièrement auprès de ses filles, de ses nièces ou de ses petites-filles. Mais le spectateur se rend rapidement compte que les trois jeunes filles portent exactement la même perruque, et que loin d'être parentes, elles incarnent la même personne à différents âges de sa vie. En effet, cette photo a été prise sur le tournage du film *An Angel at My Table* de Jane Campion, l'adaptation filmique de l'autobiographie de Janet Frame. La dame âgée qui disparaît dans le décor n'est pas une tante ou une grand-mère ; elle est l'auteur des ouvrages et le personnage principal du film. De nombreuses erreurs de ce type peuvent être faites dès lors que l'on observe cette photographie pour la première fois. Je vais m'efforcer d'explorer ces erreurs afin de voir ce qu'elles nous apprennent de la pratique autobiographique de Janet Frame.

MOTS-CLÉS : autobiographie, photographie, folie, maternité, identité

In August 1989, New Zealand writer Janet Frame travelled north to Auckland in order to visit the set of the film *An Angel at My Table*, directed by

fellow New Zealander Jane Campion and adapted from the three volumes of her autobiography published between 1982 and 1984 (King, 2000: 491). Known for her shy and reclusive disposition, Janet Frame was reported to have enjoyed the experience immensely and she was even persuaded to have her photograph taken along with the actresses impersonating her at different stages of her life. The stunning publicity picture was featured in the promotion of the film which came out in September 1990 to great critical and popular acclaim, granting both Jane Campion and Janet Frame sudden international visibility.



Figure 1: Janet Frame (back) poses with the actresses who portrayed her at different ages in Jane Campion's film *An Angel at My Table* (1990)—from left, Karen Fergusson, Alexia Keogh and Kerry Fox. Courtesy of Hibiscus Films.

Roland Barthes defines the essential function of photography as documenting an event (see Barthes, 1980), something that happened and was captured by the photographer—here, John Maynard, the set photographer. From that point of view, the picture we have here actually attests to the fact that this meeting took place. Although it could appear as a mere document, a souvenir, even, the “Spectator”, in the words of Barthes (*Spectator* in French), is arrested by the evocative strength of this picture. Anybody without the right information about Janet Frame and her literary career could interpret the picture as a family frame—or a family Frame—representing a benevolent grandmother posing proudly with her daughters and granddaughters. Those two readings combined and superimposed over each other make for a striking portrait of the author which, I will argue, documents who she was and what she was performing on

the set but also reveals, in the photographic sense, materialises her autobiographical self as what we might call her “becoming-icon”. Other types of mistaken readings can be made. Following up on those misunderstandings, I would like to explore different points of view on this portrait both within and outside the context in which it was taken. My point is to confront different interpretations of the same image and, ultimately, show that cultivating mistaken, out-of-context interpretations of this picture can unlock meaning that the in-context reading of the picture would not necessarily allow to emerge. I would like to argue that the multiple layers of meaning which can be extracted from this photograph mirror the complex relationship between the autobiographical text written by Janet Frame and its filmed adaptation by Jane Campion. Construing the picture as what it seems to represent will allow me to formulate a theory of autobiographical writing as literary reproduction of the self, with the author giving metaphorical birth to her own literary representations.

A portrait of the artist as icon

In a short essay aptly entitled “An Assemblage of Janets”, Bridget Ikin recounts Janet Frame’s enthusiastic visit to the set, and the context in which this picture was taken (Ikin, 1994: 141-142). She also explains how much the production relied on Janet Frame’s own personal photography collection in order to turn the written material of the autobiographies into cinematic material.

I’d been wondering about the nature of Janet’s memory in the autobiographies. It seemed so photographic; the childhood episodes in particular were so specific. I asked if she had any photographs. Janet brought down an old shoebox from the mantelpiece. Here were the triggers, the clues to so many of the scenes in the books. Yet why hadn’t they been published? “No-one asked me whether I had any.” (141)

Photographs are more than just documents of the past, they are taken as “clues” or “triggers” to scenes of Frame’s autobiography, which were later transformed into moving, cinematographic images by the scriptwriter and the filmmaker. They are the “originals” in a series of representations and reinterpretations starting from the pictures of real-life people and happenings featured as protagonists and events in Janet Frame’s autobiographical text, and later in Jane Campion’s filmic object. Jean-Jacques Lecercle notes that the family pictures were added to the edition of the autobiography which was reprinted after the film came out. It participates, according to him, in the superimposition of representations that turn the autobiographical text into a “collective apparatus of enunciation” (“un agencement collectif d’énonciation”, Lecercle, 2000: 303, translation mine). The picture of Frame posing with the three actresses can be read as a metaphor for the composite, atomised nature of the autobiographical

text as it stands in coexistence with its filmed adaptation. Janet Frame became like a “pop” portrait by Andy Warhol:¹ infinitely reproducible, an icon, in the pop sense of the word.

The word “icon”, especially when used to refer to female performers or artists, describes a phenomenon through which they become incorporated into the collective unconscious. A photograph of pop singer Madonna, who designed her public image with constant references to Marilyn Monroe in the 1990s, and to whom Janet Frame has sometimes been compared in a rather tongue-in-cheek way (See Wikse, 2006; Scott, 2010), is more than just a representation of Louise Ciccone, who is never really present in the picture; it is a picture of Madonna, the performer of “Vogue” that conjures up iconic elements of her performing body that act as supplements of meaning to the actual photograph. Like Madonna, incidentally, Janet Frame adopted an artist’s name by changing her official name to Janet Clutha, making “Janet Frame” her pen-name.

In New Zealand, Janet Frame was an icon in the original and in the pop sense of the word: a star, but also a saint. She was institutionalised for most of her twenties, between 1945 and 1953, but she narrowly escaped a lobotomy and went on to become one of the most famous writers of her generation. A figure of the marginal turned national hero, her whole life reads like one of the stories she pored over as a teenager, telling of disabled children growing up to become famous artists (Frame, 1990: 78). Because everyone likes an underdog, her story had universal appeal; it illustrated the triumph of the gifted over the power of social conformism: even from the depths of the mental hospital, Janet Frame’s genius was able to shine through like a diamond in a heap of refuse. In a 1990 interview to *The Guardian*, Jane Campion explained that she had grown up believing that Frame was a mad writer, but that “the three autobiographies painfully unravel this myth and I wanted to make the story of her life available as widely as possible.” (Qtd in Brown, 1991: 67). Yet the stigma of madness persisted well after she was certified to be perfectly healthy by psychiatrists in London. What remained then was her trauma at having been institutionalised when she was not insane herself, but also her fear that she may indeed have been mad. Isn’t the surest sign that a person is mad their very denial of being mad? Frame’s mythology is, as Lecerclé calls it, a “surface myth” (“un mythe de surface”, Lecerclé, 2000: 300, translation mine) with the ghost of madness hovering over her public persona.

More than a star and/or a saint, then, Janet Frame was an icon, and the set photograph we are looking at documents that status. Just as Madonna constructed herself, at least at one given period of her career, as a modern-day Marilyn Monroe by adopting the actress’s coiffure, Janet Frame is signified by her red hair in the picture and in Jane Campion’s film, which thereby turns her into an icon. In the picture the red wigs worn by the actresses catch our eye. From one point of view they help us make sense of what we are seeing, but

¹ See for instance, Andy Warhol, Marilyn Diptych, 1962, acrylic paint on canvas, 205.44 x 289.56 cm, Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/warhol-marilyn-diptych-to3093>, last accessed 17 March 2020.

they are also misleading. The fact that the four protagonists in the picture are all sporting the same type of hair—which an untrained eye would not immediately recognise as fake—could plead in favour of the picture being read as a family portrait, as it would then indicate the genetic traits shared by the four family members. But once placed in the context of a film set, the hair appears for what it is: a continuity prop that helps signal the actresses' *Janet Frame-ness* through time, thereby creating the illusion that the three are the same person. But I believe the wigs do not just serve a technical purpose, they also document Jane Campion's imaginary recreation of Janet's character in the autobiography, they "colour", as it were, her aesthetics. In the aptly-named interview "The Red Wigs of Autobiography", she explains to Michel Ciment how the wigs first helped solve the technical problem of diachrony represented synchronically, but then went on to become the key to the film's whole colour palette (Ciment, 1990: 66). The film, like the portrait, is saturated by the wigs' redness, which takes on an extra layer of meaning as they become the outward symbol of Frame's marginal status (Henke, 2000: 655). Interestingly enough, Corey Scott shows that Frame's red hair became a sort of signature, a sign of her presence and her authority which was featured on posters and book covers (Scott, 2010: 227). The red hair—and the marginality—are therefore Frame's claim to fame, her pop essence and her saintly status.

A portrait of the artist as ghost



Figure 2: William Hope, *Elderly Couple with a Young Female Spirit*, c. 1920, photograph, National Science and Media Museum.

Yet on a closer look, we realise that the vibrant redness of the wigs stands in sharp contrast with the real Janet Frame's grey hair. Almost a shadow of herself, she is seemingly out-staged by her filmic avatars. This is the interpretation proposed by Alexis Brown, who sees here "the image of an author being replaced by the image of another" (Brown, 2016: 104). From that point of view, the picture reads like an example of spirit photography, one of those Victorian family pictures where a ghost who stood invisible when the picture was taken suddenly appears through the mysterious, alchemical process of film developing. She is both in the foreground and in the background, an optical illusion. The figure of Janet Frame is akin to a lifeless figure, a cardboard cutout of herself, a ghost haunting the film set. In this interpretation the author of the autobiography chooses to erase herself behind her literary avatars, or worse is buried under the Russian-doll layers of representation, only leaving an empty shell behind.

Photography, in Frame's autobiography, plays an ambiguous role: it is both life-affirming and deeply connected with death. As Ivane Mortelette shows, having her photograph taken was a way for Janet Frame to reassert her identity once she was out of the mental hospital and into the world (Mortelette, 2006: 120). As an inmate, she belonged to the category of "the dead who were no longer photographed" (Frame, 1990: 240); once she was out of the hospital, she had to reinstate herself into the world by having her picture taken: "The photograph was urgent, a kind of reinstating of myself as a person, a proof that I did exist" (Frame, 1990: 240). Yet photography can also be an object of mourning and signify the impossibility of letting a loved one go. Barthes has explored the relationship of photography with death, with the idea that photographs always already announce the subject's death by fixating them into an object (Barthes, 1980: 101). When Janet's sister Myrtle died as a teenager, her memory was kept alive by her photographs, specifically in the episode where Myrtle was literally extracted from a family photograph in order for her parents to own a single-standing portrait of their now dead daughter (Frame, 1990: 87). Both photographs provide some sort of temporary consolation but they also reenact the tragedy and participate in Myrtle's dis-memberment, the becoming-object that death has submitted her to. Photographic portraits are what is left of the dead; they are metaphorical corpses.

In the portrait of Janet Frame and the three actresses, are we looking at a real, live person, or at the ghost of a writer, then? This reading takes us along this interpretative route to another myth about Janet Frame as the shy, reclusive author, hiding from the public eye to foster her imagination. This is one of the common tropes in the representation the New Zealand media often gave of Janet Frame's public appearances during her lifetime. Vanessa Finney took a look at several press articles reporting Frame's presence at various public events, in which she was invariably represented as being only half there, on her way out, a ghostly, vanishing presence. She interprets Frame's eerie public representation as an explanation or a motive for Frame's decision to write her life story. Reviewing several articles, she concludes:

Both journalists describe Frame as physically absent, or rather, because her appearance gives no hint of the state of her mind, she is seen as a disembodied presence. The more such details I accumulated about Frame's public figure, the more I realised the importance of taking these cultural constructions into account. For it is against these that she is rewriting her name; against the prevailing image of her as physically absent, she is, in the autobiographies, going public, both literally and symbolically. (Finney, 1993: 194)

A portrait of the artist as statue

This raises the question of the autobiographical project in itself. Susan Ash notes that in the several interviews she gave before and after the release of her volumes of autobiography, Janet Frame changed rhetoric when addressing the question of referentiality (Ash, 1993: 24). In 1983 she said she was writing for the first time “the true story” (Frame, 2011: 114)—and her biographer Michael King does explain that the autobiographical project was part of an attempt on Frame's part to reestablish some form of factual truth at a time when her nascent literary fame was garnering unhealthy interest in the most critical moments in her life and particularly her decade in and out of psychiatric hospitals. There was a lot of speculation going round in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in academic circles, about whether Frame was really mentally insane, with some critics wondering if her works should be studied as a form of *art brut* (King, 2000: 388). Because two of her earlier works—*Owls Do Cry* and *Faces in the Water*, both published in 1961—had explored the theme of mental illness and because it was public knowledge at the time that Frame had been staying in two of New Zealand's mental institutions, it was widely assumed that Janet Frame was a certified lunatic, a modern-day Antonin Artaud. The “true story” that she aimed to recount in her autobiography was at least in part a correction to that particular misconception about her public figure. And the story that does unfold in her autobiography is that of a misunderstood young woman who got caught in the crushing mechanism of mental institutions in 1940s conformist and puritanical New Zealand, only to be saved by her writing. After ten years of institutionalisation, she narrowly escaped a lobotomy when one of her psychiatrists found out that she had been awarded a literary prize (Frame, 1990: 221).

Yet as Ruth Brown explains, by trying to reestablish the “truth”, Frame only created another form of fiction, a mythical version of her own self as the marginal hero, the misunderstood genius (Brown, 1991), a living stereotype of herself. Most studies of the autobiography have commented on the “transgredient” relationship the writing Janet Frame has established with the written Janet (see Oettli-van Delden, 2003; Ash, 1993). To further borrow from Bakhtinian theory, Susan Ash suggests that Frame has created an “epic” character out of herself. For both Ash and Tessa Barringer, Frame has “fixed” her life story in all senses

of the word: she has made it right by dismissing the rumours, but she has also solidified her own self into a concrete, linear progression, far from the playful exploration of identity in her previous literary works (Ash, 1993: 26; Barringer, 1996: 94). From that point of view, her autobiography then resembles Paul de Man's representation of autobiography as the writer's erecting of a statue of and to herself (De Man, 2013: 928). The description she gives of the autobiographical writing in a letter to a friend is also revealing of her representation of the autobiographical self:

[...] when I overcome the resistance, I'm enjoying it immensely, particularly the new insights and the glimpse of the pattern, the absolute pattern of my life, which I think would be true for everyone's life. The wholeness of being alive, of past present future [...] is quite overwhelming. (King, 2000: 433).

By the time the book had come out, Janet Frame was having a completely different discourse on her autobiographical writing:

I am always in fictional mode, and autobiography is found fiction. I look at everything from the point of view of fiction, and so it wasn't a change to be writing autobiography except the autobiography was more restrictive because it was based in fact, and I wanted to make an honest record of my life. But I was still bound by the choice of words and the shaping of the book, and that is similar to when one is writing fiction. (Frame, 2011: 137)

Referential truth has been relegated to the background while the autobiography is presented first and foremost as an addition to Frame's fictional oeuvre. The "written Janet" is not the same person as the writing Janet—she is an autobiographical alter ego whose function is to represent the author within the autobiographical text. From the point of view of the narrative itself, Tessa Barringer points out that Frame "repeatedly displaces the apparently fixed and stable image of her written self by creating gaps in her own texts which disrupt the closure implicit in such acts of self-definition" (Barringer, 1996: 102). Indeed she frustrates her readers' expectations (Mercer, 199: 46) by glossing over the facts of her institutionalisation, referring her readers instead to the fictional works she wrote on the subject, and specifically *Faces in the Water*. While this device is by no means unheard of in the autobiographical canon,² it does destabilise the whole enterprise as if Frame had been playing a trick on her readers whom she knew were probably attracted by the lurid details of her plight,³ and it also grounds the autobiographical project in fictional writing.

2 In her own autobiography, Doris Lessing also refers her readers to her Martha Quest novels for further description of yet another critical moment in a woman's life, the birth her first child (Lessing, 1994: 218)

3 The figure of the writer-as-trickster is a recurring one in Janet Frame's later fiction—see particularly *Living in the Maniototo* (1979) and *The Carpathians* (1988).

In several of the interviews she gave around the release of the film, Jane Campion repeatedly explained that she was interested in Janet Frame, not as a real-life person, but as a character in her own fiction:

I am not interested in the real Janet Frame but only in the literary character *which she has made of herself* [emphasis mine]. The latter is what I had to do justice to. Therefore it was only important for the clarification of details—for instance what kind of songs she listened to at the time—that I got to know the author. I think it was much to her interest that I approached her work as an independent artist, not as a slave. She knew that I would add my view and my interpretation. (Fendel, 1991: 86)

Unlike Frame, who chose a euphemistic representation of her psychiatric episode, Jane Campion retraced Frame's steps and seemingly used the experience of madness recounted in the semi-autobiographical *Faces in the Water* in order to reconstruct the physicality of the psychiatric episode, with melodramatic shots of Frame being taken to the day room, or being given electric shocks. The actress who plays Janet Frame in the movie therefore lends her corporeality to embody Jane Campion's fantasy of what Janet Frame's experience must have been like. As Alexis Brown shows, the conjunction of Frame and Campion's imaginations about the psychiatric episode in Frame's life is precisely what turns it into a mythical event:

While the autobiography may have served as Frame's most ambitious attempt to control the public's perception of her, it was only through relinquishing that control to Campion, another authorial presence—and through the multifarious medium of film—that Frame's mythic misdiagnosis finds fruition. (Brown, 2016: 118)

Jane Campion's film then only adds another layer of myth to Janet Frame's autobiographical legend. By dint of Campion's obvious identification to Janet Frame's persona as a marginal artist, the film almost takes on a hagiographic quality. For producer Bridget Ikin, the family pictures in the shoebox allowed the production to have access to Janet Frame's autobiographical imagination, on which Jane Campion could then superimpose her own imagination:

We'd always viewed the autobiographies as Janet's personal fiction—her mythology—as much fiction as any of the novels. I think that the process of adaptation appealed to Janet's fascination with the transmutation of reality into fiction. We were converting her fiction into our fiction, casting actors as “little Janet”, “teenage Janet” and “Janet”, finding or making Eden Street and Willowglen—even making her rooms in Ibiza—in an Auckland warehouse. (Ikin, 1994: 143)

A portrait of the artist as mother/grandmother

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Figure 3: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, c. 1503, oil on wood, 168x112 cm, Louvre Paris, Wikimedia commons.

In the portrait Janet Frame posed for along with the other Janets, the original (in all senses of the word) writer stands here not so much as haunting presence but as the figure of a benevolent grandmother, a smile both proud and distant not unlike Da Vinci's representation of Saint Anne, the patron saint of grandmothers. This brings us back to the first, and probably most obvious, mis-conception about what this picture represents: if we don't know anything about who Janet Frame was, it is tempting to read it as a family picture, with Frame the grey-haired matriarch. This is due to the gender bias that would have us perceive an older lady as first and foremost a mother or grandmother. As Nancy Chodorow has shown, most of the parenting is done by women, therefore a woman must be a mother (See Chodorow, 1978). Yet Frame was not a mother, and even less of a grandmother: she chose not to have children in order to be able to devote herself to her art. Her autobiography only mentions the possibility of motherhood as a problem to be solved. "That would be terrible", her one-time lover Bernard exclaimed when she evoked the possibility of becoming pregnant (Frame, 1990: 352), and Frame did describe in her autobiography her own musing over the terrible impediment to her writing having children would be indeed. She was especially scared of taking after her own mother who let her own creativity become engulfed in the endless toil of domestic chores.

The writer and the younger women sitting in front of her are no relations, yet they are metaphorically related—the young women are Janet Frame's literary creations in the flesh, born from a form of literary parthenogenesis, in which Jane Campion played the role of the midwife. Could we say that Janet Frame "gave birth" to her own literary representations, that she somehow "mothered" them, just like an artist will be commonly said to have "fathered" his/her works? Are we looking at a different type of sexless lineage which would do away with male intervention? And what a beautiful story that would be: lonely writer finds a family in her writing.

It is tempting again to succumb to that reading but it would mean indulging in the type of metaphorical fallacy that traditionally equates female authorship and motherhood. In "Writing and Motherhood", Susan Rubin Suleiman has shown that psychoanalysis does not allow a space in which mothers can write: they can be the objects of writing and even obsessional objects, but never the subjects. The underlying assumption here is that woman's creativity is projected into their children, and that childless women necessarily channel their mothering needs into artistic creativity, books becoming putative babies.

Whereas the male writer, in comparing his books to tenderly loved children [...], could see this metaphorical maternity as something *added* to his male qualities, the childless woman whose books 'replaced' real children too often thought (was made to feel) that she had less, not more. (Rubin Suleiman, 1979: 119)

Susan Stanford Friedman makes a similar point in "The Childbirth Metaphor":

Facing constant challenges to their creativity, women writers often find their dilemma expressed in terms of the opposition between books and babies. [...] Male paternity of texts has not precluded their paternity of children. But for both material and ideological reasons, maternity and creativity have appeared to be mutually exclusive to women writers. (Friedman, 1987: 52)

Maybe the myth of the artist as failed mother needs to be deconstructed. Does the childless artist need to be compensating some form of lost opportunity? And does the artist who wants to be a mother need to be overwhelmed with guilt at not attending to her babies and/or her books?

“Babies are never books”, says Susan Stanford Friedman, but the reverse is also true, books are never babies. The view that one can replace the other results from a patriarchal view of what women can claim as their achievements. What the assemblage of *Janets* shows us is a woman who has not had to choose, who has had her cake and has very much eaten it. Her relationship with the actresses is a little bit more than just metaphorical, but it stops short of being an actual family lineage. It matters in the context of two works of art—the film and the book—in which the matrilineal influence is such a strong inspiration for the two artists (Brown, 2016: 113). The picture can then be understood as a celebration of motherhood and grandmotherhood not as the actual work of bearing children, but as the work of literary foremothers being passed on to later generations: Frame was not a mother, but she definitely was a happy metaphorical grandmother.

A portrait of the artist as artist

The Janet Frame we are looking at here is neither a statue, a ghost, nor a grandmother; she is an artist and the author of her own oeuvre. In collaborating with Jane Campion and in letting her use her life story as a canvas for her own imagination, she disconcerted many critics, as if she had broken a sort of literary fourth wall. Yet she was constructing her own autobiographical paradigm, and in fact making use of a concept she explored in all her fiction: the idea that we do not completely own our selves, that identity is diffuse, fluid. The more we try to solidify it, the more it will escape us. Janet Frame did write her autobiography, but she was very quick to hand on her autobiographical creation for Jane Campion to build her own imagination on.

A picture never really shows what it is supposed to show, it is misleading in its very simplicity. Very often, as Barthes has observed, we know that some meaning is trying to emerge, but we can never really pinpoint what it is, or what it is telling us. I have tried to show that there is some truth in illusion, and that idea served as a thread in the representational maze of the Frame/Campion collaboration. I will never exhaust the meaning of this portrait of Janet Frame, which remains as mysterious as it was when I saw it for the first time. The four

Janets are not looking at each other, they are looking at us, the *Spectators* almost daringly, challenging us to make sense of what we are looking at. I choose to see them all posing together as an allegory of fiction.

List of figures

Figure 1: Janet Frame (back) poses with the actresses who portrayed her at different ages in Jane Campion's film *An Angel at My Table* (1990)—from left, Karen Fergusson, Alexia Keogh and Kerry Fox. Courtesy of Hibiscus Films.

Figure 2: William Hope, *Elderly Couple with a Young Female Spirit*, c. 1920, photograph, National Science and Media Museum.

Figure 3: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, c. 1503, oil on wood, 168x112 cm, Louvre Paris, Wikimedia commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leonardo_da_vinci,_The_Virgin_and_Child_with_Saint_Anne_01.jpg

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