

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON

Renaissance Art

SELECTED WORKS OF ART FROM THE TOUR



The Annunciation

c. 1434/1436

by Jan van Eyck

(pronounced: Yon van Ike)

(Netherlandish, c. 1390–1441)

■ The Annunciation is one of the central events in the Christian faith. According to scripture, the Annunciation marks the moment at which Mary learns from the archangel Gabriel that she is to be the mother of Christ. The miraculous conception occurs as the Holy Spirit passes directly into her womb.

In this painting Jan van Eyck depicts Gabriel’s announcement to a startled Mary. Gabriel’s Latin salutation, “Ave gratia plena” (Hail, full of grace, Luke 1:28), is painted in gold lettering on the surface of the painting. Mary’s reply, “Ecce ancilla domini” (Behold the Handmaiden of the Lord, Luke 1:38), appears upside down, so that it can be read from above in heaven. A white dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, flies toward Mary. Behind it is a trail of golden light, representing the entry of Christ into the world.

Van Eyck’s painting is remarkably detailed and full of symbolic meaning. We can study the carved columns, stained glass windows, and even the mural figures in this ecclesiastical setting. Gabriel’s cloak is richly decorated with golden thread and jewels. His wings resemble a rainbow. In the design of the floor we can discern two biblical narratives: Samson’s destruction of the Philistines and David’s defeat of Goliath. These Old Testament stories prefigure Christ’s triumph over death. A bouquet of lilies in the foreground refers to Mary’s purity.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Can you think of other pictures that use words for dialogue? When do pictures need words? What do the words do?
- 2 Jan van Eyck’s painting incorporates many details that are not central to the story of the Annunciation—such as the carefully designed floor, the lilies, and Gabriel’s ornate costume and colored wings. What do such details add to our understanding of this event?
- 3 What event or events do you consider central to your own life?

Ginevra de’ Benci

c. 1474/1478

by Leonardo da Vinci

(pronounced: Lay-on-ard-o da Vin-chee)

(Florentine, 1452–1519)

(detail, cover)

■ Born into a cultured Florentine family, Ginevra de’ Benci was an accomplished young woman. Her contemporaries celebrated not only her beauty but also her intellect. In 1474, at the age of sixteen, she married Luigi Niccolini. This portrait may have been commissioned by her husband on the occasion of their marriage. It is also possible that the painting was made slightly later for Ginevra’s close friend Bernardo Bembo, the Venetian ambassador to Florence.

Leonardo’s painting conveys an air of serenity tinged with melancholy. Ginevra gazes forward through heavily lidded eyes. Her lips are closed and curl slightly down at the edges. Her pale skin contrasts with the dark juniper bush against which she is juxtaposed. Her porcelain complexion causes her face and torso to stand out against the landscape that recedes in the background. Lighting enhances this effect: Ginevra is softly illuminated from the upper right. Rather than relying on harsh lines to convey a sense of volume, Leonardo made innovative use of the technique of *sfumato* (literally, “smoky”), gently blending light and shadow.

Leonardo combines a careful observation of nature with symbolic details. The juniper bush, directly behind Ginevra, represents chastity, appropriate for a marriage portrait. The plant also creates a pun on the name of the sitter: in Italian the feminine form of the word for juniper, *ginepro*, is *ginevra*.

QUESTIONS

- 1 If an artist were to paint your portrait, what symbolic objects might you want included? What aspect(s) of your character would they represent?
- 2 If you were to paint somebody’s portrait, how would you determine the mood in which to depict your sitter?
- 3 Do you feel that Leonardo’s portrait gives you some insight into Ginevra’s character? Why or why not?

The Adoration of the Magi

c. 1478/1482

by Sandro Botticelli

(pronounced: Bot-tee-chel-lee)

(Florentine, 1446–1510)

■ According to Christian scripture, the infant Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem. His birth was heralded by a star in the sky. Following this star, three magi, or wise men, traveled from the east to visit the newly born Son of God. When the magi reached their destination, they fell to their knees in adoration of the Savior and presented him with special gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Botticelli's painting presents the kings and members of their entourage on their knees in front of the infant Christ, who sits in the lap of the Virgin Mary, his mother. Mary's husband Joseph stands protectively beside the Virgin and child. Christ's divinity is suggested through the sumptuous clothing and reverent attitudes of those who bow before him. The humble circumstance of his birth in a stable is suggested by the cow in the background and the straw below Mary's feet. The building itself does not resemble a stable as much as it does the ruin of an ancient, classical temple. Symbolically, Christ's presence in this crumbling building suggests that Christianity will grow out of the ruins of the pagan world, just as saplings take root in the ruins of the temple in the upper left of the painting.

Botticelli accentuates Christ's spiritual importance by placing him at the center of the composition. Our eye is drawn inward toward the holy infant by the triangular arrangement of pilgrims that move outward from the Virgin and child toward the foreground of the picture.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How does the artist focus our attention on the Christ child?
- 2 Does the infant Christ resemble other newborn babies that you have seen? How or how not?
- 3 If you were to make a painting of your own family, how would you arrange your family members?

The Feast of the Gods

1514/1529

by Giovanni Bellini and Titian

(pronounced: Joe-vahn-nee Be-lee-nee and Tih-shun)

(Venetian, c. 1430/1435–1516 and c. 1490–1576)

■ This painting illustrates a scene from the *Fasti* by the ancient writer Ovid. Ovid tells the story of a woodland feast attended by several mythological gods and goddesses. These include Silenus, god of the forest, who stands beside his donkey; Bacchus, god of wine, who pours wine from a barrel into a glistening glass pitcher; Mercury, the messenger of the gods, who wears a winged helmet; and Jupiter, king of the gods, who drinks from a silver and gold chalice and sits beside his imperial eagle. The divine revelers have eaten and drunk themselves into a happy stupor. Eager to take advantage of a quiet moment, Priapus, god of fertility, at the right of the composition, makes an advance toward the sleeping nymph Lotis. But Priapus' actions are interrupted by the braying of Silenus' donkey, which wakes the gods and goddesses from their reverie. They laugh at Priapus, who, angry at this outcome of events, demands that a donkey be sacrificed to him every year.

The Feast of the Gods depicts the moment just before the donkey brays, when the story's dramatic tension is at its height. In another moment, the pagan deities will disperse and Priapus will be a laughing stock. The painting was the first in a series commissioned by Duke Alfonso d'Este for the decoration of the study in his castle in Ferrara, Italy. The duke originally asked Bellini to execute this work. A few years later Titian was hired to complete the decorative program. He reworked Bellini's composition, creating a mountain landscape where there had been a row of trees. Titian also painted out other landscape features, presumably added by the duke's court painter Dosso Dossi.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why might Titian have revised Bellini's painting?
- 2 If you were an artist hired to complete a series of paintings, do you think you might be tempted to alter the work of the painter who preceded you? Why or why not?
- 3 Does *The Feast of the Gods* resemble any picnic that you have ever attended? How or how not?

Information

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