

Cosimo Rosselli: the Nativity in Italian Renaissance

Painting



'The Adoration of the Infant Christ' by Cosimo Rosselli, about 1480, tempera on wood, 177.8 X 149.5 cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

Transcript

Welcome to this Christmas podcast from the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham. My name is Jennifer Young and I am a guide here at the Barber. I have chosen to talk today about the *Adoration of the Child Jesus* by Cosimo Rosselli painted in about 1485. This is a typical late-fifteenth century Florentine depiction of the Nativity, with all the scenes of the story shown on a single panel and all set against a verdant landscape. The work formed part of a large altarpiece which now measures 177.8 cm by 147.3 cm but was cut down slightly at some stage in its former life, and has probably lost its *predella* (or base section, usually painted with small scenes). It is painted with tempera on a panel of poplar wood. Tempera is a fast-drying medium made from finely ground pigment mixed with egg yolk. The original location of the altarpiece was potentially identified by Susan May and George Naszlopy in an article published in 2015 as the Gianfigliazzi Chapel in the Vallombrosian Abbey of Santa Trinità in Florence. Vallombrosia is a village near Florence which was the site of the mother house of the Vallombrosian Order. This, in rural abbeys, followed a very strict version of the Benedictine Rule. Cosimo Rosselli was born in Florence in 1439. At the age of 14 years he became a pupil of Nero di Bicci, whose work is also represented in the

Barber. He spent most of his life in his native city and died there in 1507. He painted also in Siena and Rome. He was a prolific artist of religious scenes and is best known for his work on the frescoes on the walls of the Sistine Chapel in association with Perugino, Botticelli and Ghirlandaio. His contribution was much praised by Pope Sixtus IV. Apart from large pieces he produced also some wonderful small works including the three hauntingly beautiful *tondi* (circular pictures) each depicting the Adoration of the Christ Child (now in Seattle, Amsterdam and Florence). The Barber *Adoration of the Child Jesus* was previously attributed to the School of Verrocchio and later to Piero di Cosimo, before the now widely accepted attribution to Cosimo Rosselli was made by the distinguished art historian Bernard Berenson in 1963. The painting was acquired for the Barber's Collection two years later.

The many figures in the panel are arranged in a symmetrical distribution against a green Florentine landscape, with lush fields, a river, distant buildings, background hills and a carpet of flowers in the foreground. The central figure is the Virgin Mary, who kneels before the Infant Jesus. She is clad in a red gown and a cloak of vibrant ultramarine blue. Ultramarine was the most expensive pigment, the name coming from the Latin *ultramarinus*, meaning 'beyond the sea', an allusion to its origins in distant

Afghanistan. This highly prized blue made from finely powdered lapis lazuli, was used to honour the Virgin. Her hands are clasped in prayer, as she gazes lovingly and reverently at her son. The Infant is a chubby baby with golden curls who is emanating a radiant light. He lies on the ground on a bed of straw. Arranged on either side are large figures of the three Magi and the Saints Jerome, Benedict and Francis, all with haloes similar to that of the Virgin Mary.

The Magi or three Kings or Wisemen were distinguished foreigners who followed the Star to Bethlehem to bring gifts to the newborn Saviour. On the left is Balthasar the youngest Magus, he has long brown hair, a bright face and is dressed in a black gown and a red over mantle. He kneels to offer his gift of myrrh. On the right is the kneeling Caspar, the oldest of the three. He is bald with a long grey beard and is dressed in a black and grey gown and a cloak of red and orange. He offers his gift of gold. Behind Caspar kneels Melchior dressed sumptuously in a cloak of red, orange and grey. His gift is a vessel of frankincense. A cult developed for a time in Florence which venerated the Magi as saints, hence their haloes. The powerful Medici dynasty were very influential in this movement and the Gianfigliazzi would have wished to acknowledge this by the inclusion of

the Magi in their altarpiece and their celebration of the *Festa de' Magi*, a cavalcade through the streets of Florence on the Feast of the Epiphany.

Above and just to the left of Balthazar is the figure of Saint Benedict a bearded elderly man in a black habit. He was a reformer and credited as the Father of Western Monasticism and the founder of the Benedictine Order. Above him and to the left of the Virgin Mary is the kneeling elderly bearded Saint Jerome. He holds a stone symbolic of his life of penance, part of which was spent as a hermit in the Syrian Desert. Saint Francis is a much younger tonsured man, who kneels to the right of the Virgin Mary and wears a light grey habit. He was the founder of the mendicant Franciscan Order. He has a cord around his waist knotted in three places indicating Vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. In his left hand he holds a crucifix and his right clasps his breast. Both hands show bleeding stigmata, which are bodily wounds corresponding to those of Christ on the Cross and thus emphasising the holiness of Saint Francis.

At the top centre of the panel is an image of God the Father surrounded by an oval of five angel heads each with five scarlet wings. Two large flying angels are present in the blue sky either side of him and below is the dove of the Holy Ghost in a circle of golden light. God the Father is shown in half length with long grey and white hair and an elaborate halo. He is

dressed in a red gown and a black cloak over one arm. With one hand he is blessing the World and with the other pointing downwards towards the Holy Ghost and the Infant Jesus below, thus uniting the three components of the Holy Trinity. In the fifth or sixth century Pseudo-Dionysus described a hierarchy of angels consisting of three spheres. The topmost sphere includes angels nearest to God and at the peak of these the Seraphim, who have scarlet wings indicating they are afire with the love of God. Just below them in importance are the Thrones who fly among the clouds. The two large angels dressed in blue, have long hair, widespread white wings and are flying horizontally with their feet on small fluffy clouds.

Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary, was often an insignificant figure in Renaissance painting. Here he is shown as a small figure among the fields and trees to the very right of the panel. Dressed in blue and yellow he is half lost due to the former cut down of the altarpiece. The last remaining scene from the Biblical Nativity is the Annunciation to the Shepherds which preceded the arrival of the Magi. Among the hills on the left it is just possible to discern tiny figures with a minute angel hovering above them.

The Adoration of the Child Jesus is a complex picture which displays not only the features we usually associate with the Nativity, but also contains symbols and references that were especially favoured in the fifteenth century. These include the addition of God the Father and the Holy Ghost and by placing the Child Jesus directly beneath them, Rosselli has completed the depiction of the Holy Trinity in allusion to the name of the Abbey. The bed of straw beneath the Child symbolises the Eucharist and foreshadows his future death.

The Magi were popular figures in Renaissance art as they allowed scope for colour and flamboyance, characteristics not possible for example with the plain clothes of the Shepherds. The gifts of the Magi are symbolic also, gold representing the worldly kingdom, frankincense indicative of deity and the embalming oil myrrh associated with death. The inclusion of the three Saints from an entirely different historical time initially seems problematic but Florence at this period was in a state of ecclesiastical frenzy with great importance attached to saints and their roles in religion and these beliefs were endorsed by the Gianfigliazzi family. Following their attainment of public office in the thirteenth century, they embarked on a programme of extensive building on the banks of the Arno including

chapels, a palace and a tower. The much-renovated Torre del Gianfigliazzi still stands in Florence and is now a hotel.

The church of Santa Trinità was much enriched in the fifteenth century by the establishment of family chapels, most notably for the Sassetti family, which included the well-known frescoes of Saint Francis by Ghirlandaio.

Rosselli had previously worked with Ghirlandaio and it is possible that he recommended him to the Gianfigliazzi when they wished to commission an altarpiece for their Chapel in Santa Trinità. May and Naszlopy believe that this was likely to have been done in association with the Abbot of the Vallombrosian Abbey. The Chapel was dedicated to Saint Benedict and the inclusion of Saint Jerome and Saint Francis was in keeping with their austere and penitent lifestyles, also favoured by the Vallombrosian Order. Both saints are shown together in other churches of this Order.

The feast of Saint Francis was a major celebration and was financed by branches of the Gianfigliazzi until the demise of the family in the eighteenth century. There is no trace of the traditional Bethlehem stable in this altarpiece. Instead all the figures are placed in a gently rising verdant landscape in keeping with the commonly rural setting of the Vallombrosian abbeys, one of which may be suggested by the indistinct building by the river. The flowers in the foreground are also symbolic.

The aquilegia represents the Holy Ghost, the maiden hair fern the innocence of Mary and the violet the Incarnation, all of which would be known to educated Renaissance worshipers.

I hope you have enjoyed this podcast on this beautiful and fascinating altarpiece. Do come and see it in the Gallery and feel united at Christmas with those who have viewed it for the past five hundred years.

I would like to thank Jack Davies who composed and played the music.

Best wishes for Christmas and 2021 which I hope will be a better year for us all.

Further Reading

Berenson B. 1963 *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Florentine School*

May S.J. and Noszlopy G.T. 2015 ‘Cosimo Rosselli’s Birmingham

Altarpiece’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, LXXVII, pp. 1-37

Heil G. and Ritter A.M. 1991 *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. De Cœlesti Hierarchia. De Mystica Theologica*

Speaker Information

Jennifer Young is a Volunteer Guide at the Barber. She was formally a Senior Lecturer in the Dept. of Cellular Pathology University of Birmingham. In addition to her Medical Degrees she has Arts Degrees from the Universities of Dublin and Oxford.