

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART  
WASHINGTON

# Christmas Story

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 mural paintings 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 evil. 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?

## The Adoration of the Magi

c. 1440/1460

(detail, cover)

by Fra Angelico

(pronounced: An-jay-lee-coe)

(Florentine, c. 1395–1455)

and

Fra Filippo Lippi

(pronounced: Fee-leap-poe Lee-pea)

(Florentine, c. 1406–1469)

■ 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 kings, 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.

This depiction of the adoration, a popular subject during the fifteenth century, was painted jointly by two monks, Fra Angelico (“angelic brother”), who began the work, and Fra Filippo Lippi, who completed it. The painting depicts the magi’s worship of the Christ child, who sits on the knee of his mother, the Virgin Mary, while her husband, Joseph, looks on. However, the magi are only the first of a multitude of pilgrims. The tondo, or round format of the painting, which is distinctly Florentine, helps construct a sense of spatial recession. The crowd of figures radically diminishes in size to create an illusion of depth, while conforming to the circular shape.

Although the painting has an air of verisimilitude, or truth to life about it, it is also deeply symbolic. The peacock perched on the roof symbolizes immortality, and the seed-filled pomegranate held by the child signifies both his resurrection and the diversity of souls unified by the church.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Have you ever taken a long trip to see someone special? How was your journey like the one you see in this painting?
- 2 Does the painting strike you as “realistic”? Why or why not?
- 3 How have the painters of this image indicated the special status of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Joseph?

## The Rest on the Flight into Egypt

c. 1510

by Gerard David

(Bruges, c. 1460–1523)

■ According to Christian scripture, Joseph, husband of Mary, was warned in a dream of an impending massacre intended to kill the infant Christ. In response to the dream, he and his family fled to safety in Egypt. Gerard David represents a moment of repose during the three-day journey when, according to legend, Christ ordered the branches of a palm tree to lower themselves so that Joseph might collect fruit for the Virgin Mary. He also caused a spring to open at the base of the tree, so that they might drink. In this rendition of the story, the artist has replaced the palm tree with a Flemish chestnut tree. He depicts Joseph at right in the background using a stick to gather nuts. The stream can be seen in the lower right of the painting, at the bottom of the ledge. The donkey used for the journey appears at left.

Although David has made his representation of the Flight into Egypt as naturalistic as possible, it retains its symbolic significance. The Virgin Mary wears robes in her traditional colors of red and blue, with blue symbolizing heaven; fine rays of golden light emanate from her head as well as that of the Christ child, indicating their divinity; and the bunch of grapes held by the Virgin Mary is a symbol of the Eucharist. The plants in the foreground also have special meaning: the plantain at left, an effective stauncher of blood, alludes to Christ's crucifixion; and the violet at right signifies the humility of the Virgin and Child.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 If you were unaware of the story that David's painting illustrates, would you be able to tell that the Virgin Mary and the Christ child represent revered figures? If so, how?
- 2 Do you think this setting resembles Egypt, where the story took place? Why might the artist have made it look more like Europe?
- 3 Imagine that you were asked to illustrate the Flight into Egypt. How would you do it?

## Alba Madonna

c. 1510

by Raphael

(pronounce: Rah-fay-el)

(Central Italian, 1483–1520)

■ Raphael's *Alba Madonna* does not depict a specific moment from the life of Christ; it presents an emblematic image of the Christ child, the Virgin Mary, and St. John the Baptist, who would baptize Christ, that effectively encapsulates the story of Christ's life. The Virgin Mary is here pictured as the "Madonna of Humility," seated on the ground in a rustic setting, rather than enthroned as the Queen of Heaven. The painting is deeply symbolic. Although a child, St. John the Baptist proffers a crucifix made of reeds to the young Christ, who grasps it willingly, making reference to his future sacrifice. In the foreground, the plants have specific spiritual associations. The dandelion near the Christ child is a bitter herb that represents his suffering and death on the cross; the violet near the Virgin Mary signifies her humility. The holiness of these three figures is indicated by the golden halos above their heads.

The format of Raphael's painting reinforces his depiction of the individual figures as powerful symbols of spirituality. The tondo, or round format also lends the work a majestic dimension, which is enhanced by the arrangement of the three figures in a broad, low pyramid. They both conform to and dominate the space. The Christ child's outstretched arm parallels his mother's, and their expressions emphasize the profound spiritual bond of mother and child.

This painting is one of the most important works by the artist in an American collection. The painting's title refers to the fact that it was once owned by the Spanish dukes of Alba.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Why do you think Raphael represented Christ as a child while also making reference to his sacrifice as an adult?
- 2 Do the figures of Christ and St. John the Baptist resemble other children you have seen? How? How are they different?
- 3 Why might Raphael have chosen this bucolic setting for his representation of the Christ child, the Madonna, and St. John the Baptist?

# Information

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