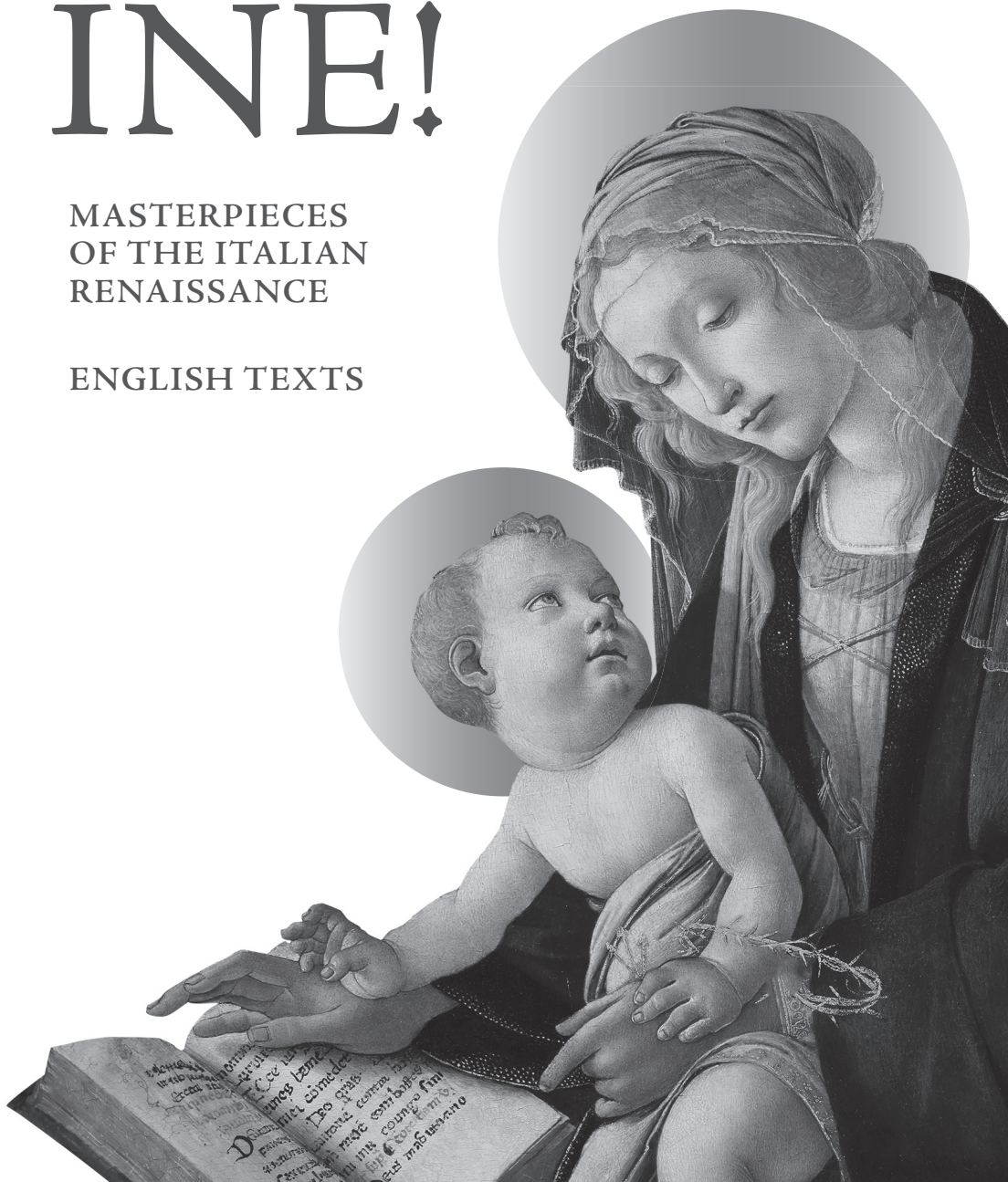


DIV INE!

MASTERPIECES
OF THE ITALIAN
RENAISSANCE

ENGLISH TEXTS



DIVINE!

MASTERPIECES OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance is a period of European art that was centred in the cities of northern Italy, especially Florence, and lasted from the early 15th century to around 1525. At the height of this era around 1500, masterpieces were created by world-famous artists such as Botticelli, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, which remain an integral part of our cultural visual memory to this day. They truly deserve to be called «divine!» In fact, these works of art say a lot about us humans.

The historical view of the Renaissance period was and still is characterised by an emphasis on the influence exerted by the rediscovery of antiquity. In terms of the history of ideas, their foundations actually go back a long way, to the Christian theological upheavals of the late Middle Ages. Renaissance art expresses a new view of humanity, redefining the relationship between God, man and the world. We encounter people as individuals in these works. This, however, would not be possible without the fundamental Christian idea that God Himself became human, as it were, in Jesus Christ. Together with the philosophy of the late Greco-Roman antiquity, this gives rise to a new view of humanity that completely redefines and revolutionises our world as well as what we can create within it. This new attitude to life encompasses everything, but especially art. At the beginning of this new view on the world and humankind is the stupendous voyage into the afterlife by the poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), who transforms salvation history into a world theatre in his *Divine Comedy*.

I.

DANTE AND PETRARCA – TRAILBLAZERS OF THE RENAISSANCE

The poet Dante Alighieri stands at the beginning of Italian literature. His magnum opus, the «Divine Comedy» from the early 14th century, is a voluble journey into the afterlife, through hell, purgatory and paradise. It assembles figures from antiquity, the Bible and contemporary history thus unfurling a vast universe of medieval education. Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), on the other hand, explores entirely different themes. He extols the love for an unattainable, idealised female figure and clothes his feelings, love, longing and despair in new words. In his heartbreak, he even implores the Virgin Mary for assistance. When the printing press revolutionised the world of knowledge in the 15th century, Dante and Petrarch became bestsellers and the forefathers of Italian literature.

Despite neither of them being clergymen or theologians, they confidently incorporated Christian motifs and beliefs into their works and viewed the world, humanity, faith and destiny through a new lens. The significance of this new world view during the Renaissance is clearly illustrated by the two Madonna paintings from around 1460 shown here. The hems of Mary's robes are adorned with legible letters, which do not form prayers or Bible verses, as had been customary until then, but quotations from Dante's «Paradise» and Petrarch's «Canzoniere». Although both text passages do contain praise for the Mother of God, they were written by secular, non-clerical poets. In these images, old boundaries between the heavenly and the earthly, the divine and the human, grow hazy and dissolve. A new, revolutionary era is heralded in art.

MASTER OF THE NATIVITY OF CASTELLO

(Florence, active from the 1440s to the 1470s)

VIRGIN WITH CHILD AND YOUNG JOHN THE BAPTIST

(«MADONNA DANTESCA»)

Florence, 1465/1470, tempera on wood

Livorno, Museo Civico

This madonna does not bear biblical quotations on her garment's hem but rather an excerpt from the «Divine Comedy» by Dante Alighieri. The Hail Mary from the 33rd chant of Paradiso, written by a secular poet, attests to a whole new view of the relationship between God and man.

Cat. 1

ZANOBI MACHIAVELLI (Florence 1418/1420 – Pisa 1479)

VIRGIN MARY, WORSHIPING THE CHILD

(«MADONNA PETRARCHESCA»)

Tuscany, 1460/1465, tempera and gilding on wood

Fucecchio, Museo Civico

This madonna bears a famous Marian hymn, that is often set to music, on the hem of her robe: «Vergine bella, di sol vestita». Here, too, the quotation from the work of a non-clerical poet demonstrates how boundaries between the sacred sphere and the secular world shifted during the Renaissance. Cat. 4

in the showcases

DANTE ALIGHIERI

(Florence 1265 – Ravenna 1321)

DIVINA COMMEDIA

Borgo San Sepolcro, 1419, manuscript on parchment

Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Barb. lat. 4112)

This early manuscript is an example of the huge and wide-spread popularity which Dante's poem enjoyed long before the invention of the printing press. The images illustrate important scenes from the famous voyage through the afterlife. Cat. 2

DANTE ALIGHIERI

(Florence 1265 – Ravenna 1321)

DIVINA COMMEDIA. COMMENTO DI

CHRISTOPHORO LANDINI FIORENTINO [...]

Florence, 1481, print on parchment

Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Inc. p. 153)

The annotated edition of Dante by Florentine humanist Cristoforo Landino (1424–1498) became a bestseller in early book printing and promoted the popularity of the «Divine Comedy». Cat. 3

FRANCESCO PETRARCA

(Arezzo 1304 – Arquà 1374)

IL CANZONIERE

Milan, third quarter of the 15th century, manuscript on parchment

Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Barb. lat. 3943)

The canzoniere (collection of songs) is the most important work by the poet Petrarch. In 366 poems, he processed his unrequited love for Laura whom he revered and idealised. The work sets new standards in the conception of love and emotions. Cat. 5

2. ✦

OLD IMAGES – NEW THOUGHTS

Dante and Petrarch reveal a new perspective on humanity and the world, which can also be found as such in Renaissance works of art: landscapes and pictorial spaces become spaces of experience for the individual, humans become living, real, sentient protagonists in the picture, and the divine is accessible to all, transported into the human world.

Medieval art, however, had a completely different objective: in order to promote the veneration of the holy people portrayed, they are deliberately depicted as aloof, abstracted and exaggerated. This is achieved through a rigid, centralised composition of the image, a gradation of size corresponding to the importance of the figures, as well as a golden background, which transports the scenes into a timeless beyond. Completely extraneous, even disruptive are realistic details as they distract from the message of the image and make it hard to recognise: the image is not supposed to depict reality but elicit reverence. This principle still applies to this day in Byzantine Orthodox icon painting, which is why there has been barely any stylistic development in this field.

The ideological changes, occurring in the 14th century, were not to take effect in art until more than a century later. This revolutionary world view in the writings of Dante or Petrarch is also an indication of how the world will change.

in the showcase

MASTER OF THE CAPPELLA MEDICI POLYPTYCH

(active Florence, c. 1315–1335)

WINGED ALTAR WITH ENTHRONED
VIRGIN WITH CHILD AND SAINTS

Florence, 1315/1320, tempera on wood

Venice, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Galleria di Palazzo Cini

The little winged altar is a typical object of piety from the late medieval period: stylistic devices such as the different size of the figures and the golden background are supposed to enhance the sacred nature of the depictions and thus promote their worship. Cat. 6

PARRI DI SPINELLO

(Arezzo, c. 1387–1453)

OUR LADY OF MERCY WITH
SAINTS LAURENTINUS AND PERGENTINUS

Arezzo, 1435/1437

Tempera and gilding on wood

Arezzo, Museo Nazionale d'Arte Medievale e Moderna

The monumental painting of the Virgin protecting the citizens of Arezzo under her mantle and the two patron saints of Arezzo, whose story is told in the predella, served as a processional image. It was created during the transitional period of the early Renaissance: the lively corporeality of Mary is contrasted with the archaic significance of size and the golden background. Cat. 7

3+

CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Occidental painting has almost always attempted to depict reality. During the Renaissance, a truly revolutionary invention was made in this regard: with one-point perspective, all edges in the image converge at one vanishing point and vanishing lines are determined using basic knowledge of geometry. If the vanishing point is positioned correctly on the horizon line of the viewer, the two-dimensional surface of a painted, flat image opens up like a window to a new space, a new reality. Sculptor, architect and engineer Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) was long considered to be the inventor of geometrically calculable perspective, first described in practical terms by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435. From the mid-15th century onwards, an abundance of paintings was created whose pictorial space opened up into almost dizzying depths. During this period, sculptors also created superb architectural reliefs, and artisans created surprising depths of space using inlays. North of the alps, on the other hand, it would take more than a century before artists were able to master and apply one-point perspective.

This generation of illusionary spaces, which can be entered with the eyes, is far more than mere artistic showmanship. It is also a visual expression of a new relationship with the divine, for Christ or Mary are brought directly into reality here. Furthermore, numerous devotional books from the 15th century recommend imagining biblical events in real, familiar settings. Perspective spaces of the Renaissance thus also serve for meditation.

GIOVANNI ANGELO D'ANTONIO

(Bolognola, Marche, 1415/1420–1481)

ANNUNCIATION WITH DONORS

Spermento (Camerino), 1455/56, Tempera on wood

Camerino, Museo e Pinacoteca Civici

With its almost somewhat exaggerated vanishing lines, this painting testifies to the great enthusiasm with which one-point perspective was employed in the mid-15th century. The depicted scenes open up like an illusionary space into our reality and thus seem within one's grasp. Cat. 8

AMBROGIO and NICOLAO PUCCI

(active in Lucca, first half of the 16th century)

INLAID DOSSALS WITH CITY VIEWS OF LUCCA

Lucca, around 1523–1532, wood inlays

Lucca, Museo Nazionale di Villa Guinigi

Choir stalls whose back panels (dossals) are adorned with architectural views are typical of the Italian Renaissance. The streets and squares, which are frequently recognisable parts of the cityscape, are intended to help viewers imagine biblical scenes as close to life as possible. Here, too, real places in Lucca are depicted. Cat. 9, 10, 11

HANS MEMLING (Seligenstadt c. 1433/40 – Bruges 1494)

PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST WITH DONORS

Bruges, 1470/1471, oil painting on wood

Turin, Musei Reali – Galleria Sabauda

The portrait was commissioned by Tommaso Portinari, head of the Medici Bank in Bruges, and his wife, both of which are also depicted in the painting. Upon viewing the detailed cityscape one can virtually retrace Christ's suffering with one's own eyes and follow Christ suit in meditative prayer. The image thus serves as a spiritual experience. Cat. 12

4.

VIEW OF THE LANDSCAPE

During the Renaissance, a new relationship between humans and the environment emerged. Humanism sparked a scientific interest in the world, with people deliberately seeking out experiences and exploring possible connections. The ascent of Mont Ventoux by poet Francesco Petrarca in 1336 is considered a key moment, as he undertook it as a personal experience of nature. Observation of nature is increasingly becoming a mark of quality in art as well, in order to create beautiful and well-balanced yet realistic paintings. Humans complete God's work of creation in their art, as it were, by shaping nature creatively into a comely cultural landscape.

Human figures appear increasingly three-dimensional and physical. In their portrayal of the body, artists often copied ancient statues, as nude studies were still considered problematic well into the 16th century and only a few artists, such as Michelangelo, acquired knowledge of anatomy. Because of this, textbooks and studies on human proportions, like the ones by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) or Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) were important. Emotions and the relationships between the figures are depicted realistically in paintings and often also contain important iconographic clues for interpreting the image.

Landscape painting gains great importance for backgrounds. Flemish Renaissance painting was ahead of Italian art when it came to depicting landscapes but also everyday objects. Italian merchants therefore specifically imported paintings by Flemish masters, so Italian painters drew inspiration from them for their own styles. This way, the divine is brought into human reality by art.

GERARD DAVID (c. 1455 – Bruges, 1523)

MADONNA DELLA PAPPÀ

Bruges, c. 1510/1515, oil painting on wood

Genua, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Bianco

The «Madonna with the pap» is one of the most delightful inventions of Flemish Renaissance painting. The homely interior and the maternal, everyday action are rendered very naturally. At the same time, the familiar scene is charged with salvation-historical significance: the feeding of baby Jesus refers to the human nature of the Son of God and hints at his future suffering. Cat. 15

GIOVANNI BATTISTA CIMA DA CONEGLIANO

(Conegliano, c. 1460 – c. 1517) and WORKSHOP

VIRGIN AND CHILD

Conegliano, 1496/99, tempera on wood

Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia (on permanent loan in the Musei Civici di Santa Caterina in Treviso)

The painter Cima da Conegliano and his workshop created several versions of this painting. They all share the detailed landscape as a common theme. It can actually be identified as the small town Conegliano, above which a castle rises on a hill. This situates the Virgin Mary in familiar surroundings. Cat. 14

BIAGIO D'ANTONIO (Florence, c. 1445–1510)

VIRGIN WITH CHILD AND AN ANGEL

Florence, around 1480, tempera on wood

Milan, Museo Poldi Pezzoli

The group consisting of Mary, the naked baby Jesus and the angel with the roses rises monumentally against a landscape of hills, trees, a river and a distant mountain ridge. Inspired by Flemish models, the pictorial space extends deep into the horizon. The landscape invites contemplation and thus becomes a space for experiencing the divine. Cat. 13

5.

RENAISSANCE – REBIRTH IN THE LIGHT OF ANTIQUITY

The term ‘Renaissance’ comes from the French word for ‘rebirth’. It refers specially to a central element of this era, namely the rediscovery of art and writings from antiquity. Even though ancient Rome was a model and inspiration throughout all of the Middle Ages, with many references in language, art, politics and administration, a new, very specific interest arose with humanism: works by ancient authors discussing secular topics such as history, poetry and philosophy were discovered in libraries and disseminated. Now, Greek also became the second language of knowledge for intellectuals, enabling them to read the writings by Plato and Aristotle in the original. This, however, was also accompanied by an orientation towards cultural ideals: princes imitated the lifestyles and behaviours of ancient rulers, and even emotions like friendship played an important role all of a sudden. This gave rise to the humanist educational canon based by antiquity, which formed the dominant culture of the Western world up until the 20th century.

Art also saw a firm orientation towards antiquity. Most evidently, this can be seen in architecture, with buildings being constructed, inspired by ancient ruins preserved throughout Italy but especially by the writings of Roman architect Vitruvius. In painting and sculpture, images of humans are made that are clearly inspired by ancient reliefs and sculptures: the new images correspond to the new way of thinking of the time.

GIOVANNI DE FONDULIS (c. 1430/37 – before 1491)
VIRGIN AND CHILD

Padua, 1475/1480, terracotta

Venice, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Galleria di Palazzo Cini

This clay sculpture clearly shows the rediscovery and influence of ancient Roman art on Renaissance artists. With her standing pose, the folds of her robe, the voluminous bodily proportions and her confident yet relaxed posture, Mary clearly matches ancient portrait sculptures of Roman matrons. The artist must have had such a sculpture in mind as a model Cat. 16

JACOPO CARRUCCI DI PONTORMO

(Pontormo/Empoli 1494 – Florence 1557)

DOUBLE PORTRAIT OF TWO FRIENDS

Florence (?), 1523/1524, oil painting on wood

Venice, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Galleria di Palazzo Cini

The fascinating double portrait depicts two unknown men – obviously a pair of friends, as the conspicuous sheet of paper pointed to by the man on the left contains a quote from Cicero's famous treatise «De amicitia» (On Friendship). The painting reveals how cultural notions and ideals of antiquity were rediscovered during the Renaissance. Cat. 17

in the showcase

MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO

(Arpinum 106 BC – Formiae 43 BC)

M. T. CICERONIS PHILOSOPHICORUM PARS TERTIAE,
CONTINENS ... DE AMICITIA

Paris: Dupuys, 1573

Diözesanbibliothek München und Freising

Cicero's work «De amicitia» was a bestseller in the 15th and 16th century. The importance attributed here to friendship in the emotional life of men clearly struck a chord with the spirit of the times. Cat. 18

6.

CHRIST – HUMAN AND DIVINE

The core of every search for higher knowledge is constituted by two questions: for one: “What is man?” – yet at the same time: «What is God?» In Christianity, these two questions become tangible and crystal clear in Jesus Christ, who is both fully human and fully God. His image reveals how different eras place their emphasis here: in the Romanesque period, he appears as a triumphant, divine ruler, in the passion mysticism of the late Middle Ages as a tormented man on the cross.

The Renaissance depiction of Christ, on the other hand, expresses something new. Jesus appears as lifelike as a contemporary portrait of a man, with physical presence and comprehensible emotions. Even in images that seek to show his suffering and evoke pity he is painted as a handsome man of noble, attractive appearance, inspired by Psalm 45: «You are the most beautiful of all humans.» This idea of beauty is strongly based on the reception of antiquity.

Greco-Roman art has a particular influence on sculpting: ancient sculptures had a very specific role in bringing the past to life, with images of rulers and memorial portraits both serving as representatives. This immediate presence now reappears in the image of Christ. The incredibly human, touching Christ of the Renaissance brings the distant God right into the human world. At the same time, the sight of Him invites us to identify and empathise with Him, thus leading us to God.

ANDREA MANTEGNA (Isola di Carturo 1431 – Mantua 1506)
CHRIST THE REDEEMER

Correggio, 1493, tempera on canvas

Correggio, Museo Il Correggio

Christ is depicted here against an empty background and in a painted frame, almost like in icon painting. He himself, however, appears incredibly physical and present, like a contemporary portrait of a man: 'Ego sum, nolite timere' (It is I, fear not), the writing on the book proclaims. His sorrowfully relaxed expression seems to foreshadow his future suffering. Cat. 19

HANS MEMLING (Seligenstadt c. 1433/40 – Bruges 1494)
BLESSING CHRIST

Bruges, 1480/1490, oil painting on oak

Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Bianco

This suffering Christ originally formed a diptych with the painting of a grieving Virgin Mary. As a pair, the two figures against a dark background invited the viewer to engage in intimate contemplation and emotionally charged meditation. The extremely realistic details of Christ's physiognomy, his drops of tears and blood make the mystery of salvation humanly tangible. Cat. 21

MATTEO CIVITALI (Lucca, 1436–1501)
CHRIST THE REDEEMER CROWNED WITH THORNS

Lucca, 1485/1490, Carrara marble

Lucca, Museo Nazionale di Villa Guinigi

The marble bust of suffering Christ crowned with thorns conveys powerful, immediate presence. It is designed according to principles similar to those used for the heads of ancient emperors, but the open mouth and solemn expression lend it a touching closeness, inviting compassion. Cat. 20

7.

WOMEN – ERUDITE AND PIOUS

According to statistics, over 50 percent of all Renaissance art depicts Mary. This is in part a continuation of the veneration of the Mother of God in the Middle Ages, but now new emphasis can be identified in both texts and images, which primarily relate to the role of women in the Renaissance.

Social opportunities for women around 1500 were limited; they were still mainly focussed on a life as a wife and mother. Mary, the mother, governess and carer of incarnate Christ, is therefore mainly assigned the role of being the model of the ideal mother. This period gives rise to a large number of sermons and devotional books that encourage women to raise their children in a Christian spirit. They often recommend placing images of the Madonna in homes, intended to help visualise a loving and devout mother-child relationship.

At the same time, the wealthy bourgeoisie in the cities forms a social class in which lay people, women as well as men, are literate and educated. These people now want to practise their faith intellectually, like clergy, for example through daily prayers with preciously adorned books of hours. Prayer books become a popular accessory for women's portraits, demonstrating their social role of intellect and piety.

Images of the Virgin also reflect this new self-image of women. In images of the Annunciation or the Virgin and child, Mary is now often depicted in a contemporary study, reading and understanding the biblical prophecy and passing it on to Jesus.

SANDRO BOTTICELLI (Florence, 1445–1510)
VIRGIN AND CHILD (MADONNA WITH THE BOOK)

Florence, 1480/1481, tempera on wood

Milan, Museo Poldi Pezzoli

This masterpiece by Botticelli shows Mary with baby Jesus at the moment of reading and understanding: the child recognises its biblical destiny as the Messiah, his fate already foreshadowed in the nails and crown of thorns. At the same time, the realistically painted book of hours and the interior reflect the Renaissance ideal of female education. Cat. 22

ANTONIO DE SALIBA (Palermo 1467 – Messina 1535)
ANNUNZIATA (MARY OF THE ANNUNCIATION)

Venice, between 1480–1497, tempera and oil painting on wood

Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia

This painting is an early copy of the well-known Madonna by Antonello da Messina. His nephew Antonio de Saliba also forged his famous uncle's signature. The image depicts Mary in the moment after the angel's departure, contemplating his message: a woman, educated and reading, in the moment of intellectual reflection. Cat. 23

in the showcase

WILLEM VRELANDT

(working in Bruges, around 1450 – 1481), workshop

BOOK OF HOURS

Bruges, third quarter of the 15th century,

illuminated parchment manuscript

Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana (Nuova Serie 43 =13093)

The precious little book contains the liturgy of the hourly monastic prayer times as well as other devotions. Wealthy, educated lay people, women and men alike, were able to deepen their faith practice with such books. Cat. 24

8.

FRANCESCO DATINI – IN THE NAME OF GOD AND OF PROFIT

The artistic achievements of the Renaissance were only possible because this period also saw enormous economic prosperity. In the cities of Northern Italy, but also in Flanders for example, an elite of merchants emerged that amassed huge economic fortunes, thus replacing the previous aristocratic and cleric patrons. Our current economic system of capitalism originates from this period, achieved through innovative, new methods of business transactions: merchants established networks of trading posts throughout Europe, double-entry bookkeeping allows complete control over all transactions, and standardised bills of exchange facilitate cashless money transfers.

Francesco Datini (1335–1410) is representative of this new elite. At the end of his life, he bequeathed his fortune to a charity for the poor, which is still based in his former palace in Prato today. There, his complete company archive was found during renovations in 1870. Over 150,000 documents provide a detailed insight into his business affairs but also testify to the interplay between business and piety: account books bear headings such as «In the name of God and of profit!»

For the people of the Renaissance, wealth and trade were ambivalent: the Gospels preached lack of possessions, and interest and loans were considered sinful. Like Datini, this wealthy merchant elite consequently financed pious foundations, donated chapels, altarpieces and many other items of church furnishing, in order to return the acquired wealth to God for the sake of salvation. In this way, they contributed to the enormous flourishing of art in the 15th and 16th centuries.

LORENZO LOTTO (Venice 1480 – Loreto 1556)

THE DOMINICAN FRIAR MARCANTONIO LUCIANI

Venice, 1526, oil painting on canvas

Treviso, Musei Civici

The fascinating portrait highlights the discord between the clerical ideal of poverty and ecclesiastical possessions: the Dominican depicted was the treasurer of his monastery and is shown surrounded by the insignia of his office. His possessive posture, however, makes him appear almost like a personification of greed and parsimony. Cat. 32

LODOVICO BUTI (Florence, 1550–1611)

PORTRAIT OF FRANCESCO DI MARCO DATINI

Prato, 1588, oil painting on canvas

Prato, Museo Civico di Palazzo Pretorio

Thanks to his fully preserved business archive, the merchant Francesco Datini from Prato (c. 1335–1410) is one of the most important figures in economic history. He left his fortune, acquired through a business empire spanning Spain, France and Italy, to a charity for the poor, the «Ceppo dei poveri». This posthumous portrait of the great philanthropist was created for the town hall in Prato. Cat. 25

in the showcase

LEDGER OF THE DATINI BRANCH IN AVIGNON

Avignon, 1384 – 1386 (with additions up to 1404),

paper register, parchment and leather binding

Prato, Archivio di Stato

This ledger of a Datini branch contains all the accounts according to the double-entry bookkeeping system. It begins, however, with an invocation to God, Mary and the saints, «who may grant profit.» Cat. 26

LETTER WITH ATTACHED FABRIC SAMPLES

Barcelona, n.d. (around 1402/1403), paper and woollen cloth

Prato, Archivio di Stato

The merchant Francesco Datini (1335–1410) from Prato ran his business empire by writing and receiving around 50 letters a day. One of his main areas of business was the cloth trade. Here, his branch in Barcelona informs him about quality, quantity and special features of the fabrics that were traded and also adds textile samples. Cat. 27

BILL OF EXCHANGE FROM THE DATINI BRANCH IN BARCELONA

Barcelona/Florence, 13th April 1401, paper

Prato, Archivio di Stato

There are over 5,000 bills of exchange for cashless money transfers in the Datini Archive: the client deposits a sum of money and receives this letter. The recipient can then collect the money from the specified business partner at their destination. Cat. 28

LETTER FROM FRANCESCO DATINI TO CRISTOFANO DI BARTOLO CAROCCI

Florence/Mallorca, 27th February 1402, paper

Prato, Archivio di Stato

In this long letter to his business partner in Mallorca, the now elderly Datini outlines his intention to rearrange his business affairs and establish a pious foundation: «I would like to return to God these temporal goods which He has lent me.» Cat. 29

LETTER FROM SER LAPO MAZZEI TO FRANCESCO DATINI

N.p., n.d. [1406], paper

Prato, Archivio di Stato

In numerous letters, Datini and his close friend and lawyer Ser Lapo Mazzeo plan the establishment of his pious foundation «Ceppo dei

poveri» for the care of the poor. Here, Ser Lapo advises his friend on the correct form of drawing up a will. Cat. 30

WILL OF FRANCESCO DATINI

Prato, 31st July – 1st August 1410, parchment codex, bound in leather

Prato, Archivio di Stato

This collection of important bequests to the city of Prato, established 1552, is headed by the will of Francesco Datini from 1410. He left his entire fortune to the care of the poor. Cat. 31

FABRIC SAMPLE

Prato, 2012–2015

Wool, milled, combed, sheared

Prato, Museo del Tessuto

In an experimental project, the Textile Museum in Prato has reproduced wool fabrics, as they were traded around 1400. Specification about quality, dyeing and weaving techniques stems from the extensive Datini archive and refers to wool from Menorca, which was further processed into valuable textiles in Pisa and Prato. These were then also sold in Mallorca and Valencia. [not in catalogue]

FILIPPO LIPPI (Florence, c. 1406–1469)

and FRA DIAMANTE (Prato, c. 1430 – c. 1498)

ENTHRONED MADONNA WITH CHILD AND SAINTS

(MADONNA DELLA CINTOLA)

Prato, c. 1456/1466, tempera and gilding on wood

Prato, Museo di Palazzo Pretorio

The altarpiece depicting the Virgin Mary giving her belt to the apostle Thomas was commissioned by a convent. This led to a scandalous love affair that unfolded between painter and monk Lippi and the young novice Lucrezia Buti. Cat. 33

9.

PHILANTHROPY – SELF-PROMOTION AND SALVATION

In Christian art, the portrait of the donor has always existed. Patrons appear in artworks they have commissioned, in eternal adoration before the depicted holy scene. On the one hand, this is intended to record their piety for posterity, and on the other hand, their image is supposed to obtain salvation through prayer in the patron's place. In Medieval art, these images clearly separate the earthly from the divine: the donors are depicted on a much smaller scale than Christ or Mary, and often a saint must guide them to the centre of the picture, as a patron, so to speak. The second half of the 15th century saw a new development in painting, which indicates a fundamental change in people's self-image. Donors are now shown in the same size as the main figure in the painting but separated by a painted balustrade or some other spatial element; the painting style reveals a different approach to the planes, with earthly realism contrasting divine idealisation. In the 16th century, however, these boundaries begin to blur: donors move up to privileged positions right beside Mary, and some images of saints turn out to be hidden portraits through their features. In art, an encounter between man and God is possible.

BERNARDINO DI BETTO called PINTURICCHIO
(Perugia c. 1454 – Siena 1513) and WORKSHOP
VIRGIN WITH CHILD AND A DONOR

Siena (?), 1500/1510, tempera on wood, transferred to canvas

Milan, Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Pinacoteca

As was customary in donor portraits around 1500, the unknown patron kneels in equal size before the Mother of God but is separated from her by a parapet. Similarly, his stern profile and lifelike features place him in a different, earthly plane of reality. Cat. 34

ANDREA PREVITALI called IL CORDELLIAGHI
(Brembate di Sopra c. 1480 – Bergamo 1528)
VIRGIN WITH CHILD AND DONORS

(«MADONNA CASSOTTI»)

Bergamo, c. 1520, oil painting on wood

Bergamo, Fondazione Accademia Carrara

In this unusual painting, donors and saints have switched places, so to speak: the married couple Paolo and Agnese Cassotti from Bergamo sit on either side of the Mother of God, while their patron saints, St. Paul and St. Agnes, kneel humbly before Mary and are seen from the back. Cat. 35

PIETRO GRAMMORSEO

(Mons/Belgium c. 1490 – Casale Monferrato before 1531)

SAINTS ANTHONY OF PADUA AND DEFENDENS

Casale Monferrato, 1523, tempera on wood

Turin, Musei Reali – Galleria Sabauda

The image, the right wing of a polyptych, shows St. Anthony alongside the martyr saint Defendens who is worshipped in Piedmont. He is dressed in contemporary clothing of the nobility and has unusually realistic facial features. It is presumably the hidden portrait of the patron. Cat. 36

BONFIRES OF THE VANITIES

In the Middle Ages, new pious movements kept emerging, criticising the state of the Church and calling for repentance and penance. An extreme example is the flagellant movement of the 14th century: seen as God's punishment, the plague epidemic of 1348/49 led to lay people dressing in penance robes and hoods and joining processions; participants thereof flagellated themselves to pay penance for their sins. In many cities, this movement gave rise to brotherhoods, which often fulfilled various spiritual, social and charitable purposes. Over time, however, many brotherhoods also became wealthy, and their oratories became important places of worship in the cities, furnished by renowned artists and artisans. The conflict between the biblical ideal of poverty and secular reality also had a visible influence on Italian Renaissance art. In Florence, the period of Girolamo Savonarola was crucial for this. The Dominican monk and reformist preacher gained influence over the people, and with the banishment of the Medici in 1494, he also became a political leader. In public «bonfires of the vanities,» he had luxury objects burnt, including jewellery, mirrors, books and many works of art. Even artists like Botticelli destroyed their works under Savonarola's influence; art production in the city came to a halt during this period. In 1498, Savonarola was overthrown, convicted and executed as a heretic.

THE BROTHERHOOD OF SANT'ANDREA WORSHIPS THE CROSS

Florence, early 16th century, tempera on wood

Empoli, Museo della Collegiata di Sant'Andrea

In the Middle Ages, a large number of lay associations emerged in Italy. These brotherhoods had social, charitable and religious purposes and maintained hospitals and chapels. However, many also held acts of penance and processions during which they flagellated themselves. The brothers from Empoli carry whips on their belts for this, preserving their anonymity by wearing white robes Cat. 37

ANSANO DI MICHELE CIAMPANTI (Lucca, 1475–1535) CRUCIFIX WITH TWO PENITENTS

Lucca, late 15th century, tempera on wood

Lucca, Museo Nazionale di Villa Guinigi

The panel, which belonged to the White Penitents in Lucca, whose church still exists today, once served as a processional banner which was carried on a pole at the head of a penitents' procession. The two anonymous penitents in their white robes represent the brotherhood whose patron saint was Christ on the cross. Cat. 38

II.

ARTISTS AS ENTREPRENEURS

The Italian Renaissance is often considered to be the era of brilliant artists. But besides undisputed masters like Botticelli, Raphael and Donatello, many smaller workshops also managed to achieve success in the art market, by specialising with refined business strategies. Two examples from Florence shall illustrate this point: Neri di Bicci (1419–1491) was the third generation to run a painting workshop which had been established by his grandfather Lorenzo di Bicci (c. 1350–1427) and kept in business by his father Bicci di Lorenzo (1373–1452). The operations of this family business are documented exceptionally well, as Neri's books of commission (*ricordanze*) from 1453 to 1475 have been preserved. Not only do they document the clients, prices and the periods spent on his work, but a close collaboration with a network of suppliers as well: frame carvers and gilders, stuccoers, carpenters and sculptors. Despite its conservative and rigid style of working, the Bicci workshop was thus able to cater to a more middle-class clientele at a reasonable price.

The sculptures from the Della Robbia workshop, on the other hand, take a completely different direction. The sculptor Luca della Robbia the Elder (c. 1400–1481) invented a technique to coat large terracotta reliefs with a glaze, similar to ceramics. These sculptures shine bright like marble but are significantly lighter than stone. The material is cheap, the fired glaze protects against weather damage, and castings can be used to reproduce an original in many copies. His nephew Andrea della Robbia (1435–1525) continued running the business; in the 16th century, his son Giovanni successfully modified the shop production by introducing innovative coloured glazes.

BICCI DI LORENZO (Florence, 1373–1452)

ANNUNCIATION

Florence, 1440, tempera on wood, transferred to canvas

Scandicci (Florence), parish church Sant'Angelo a Legnaia

The painter Neri di Bicci ran a successful and well-connected painting workshop in Florence, which had been founded by his grandfather Lorenzo and continued by his father Bicci. The family business produced conservative and unspectacular but colourful and appealing paintings for a middle-class clientele. On this annunciation, Neri had likely already collaborated with his father Bicci. Cat. 39

NERI DI BICCI (Florence, 1419 – c. 1491)

ENTHRONED VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH SAINTS

Florence, 1473, tempera on wood

Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, Museo di Arte Sacra

The painting is part of a large-scale commission for the Tuscan Marian shrine Morrocco, which Neri di Bicci received in 1472. Still very conservative, painted against a golden background, the Virgin Mary with saints adorned one of the two side altars. St. Nicholas and St. Anthony kneel in front, St. Tobias stands beside the guardian angel Raphael on the left, and the local saints Julian and Domninus on the right. Cat. 40

NERI DI BICCI (Florence, 1419 – c. 1491)

LAMENTATION OF CHRIST WITH SAINTS

Florence, 1473, tempera on wood

Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, Museo di Arte Sacra

The great lamentation from the pilgrimage church Morrocco depicts Mary with the dead Christ and the biblical figures John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene, as well as other saints: Catherine, Luke, Margaret and Lucy – maybe the patron saints of the donor's relatives. Neri di Bicci collaborated with a carpenter's workshop for this commission and was thus able to supply the frames for the paintings. Cat. 41

NERI DI BICCI (Florence, 1419 – c. 1491)

PORTRAIT OF NICCOLÒ SERNIGI

Florence, after 1475, tempera on wood

Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, Museo di Arte Sacra

The portrait of Niccolò Sernigi, lord of the Corniolo castle and founder of the pilgrimage church of Morrocco, comes from the predella of the high altar. The preserved book of commissions (ricordanze) of Neri di Bicci attests to friendly terms between the two men. Numerous visits to the workshop, long conversations and important commissions have been recorded. Cat. 42

NERI DI BICCI (Florence, 1419 – c. 1491)

MARY IN VENERATION OF BABY JESUS

Florence, c. 1475/80, oil painting and gilding on wood

Collection Intesa Sanpaolo S.p.A. (on permanent loan in Arezzo, Casa Museo dell'Antiquariato Ivan Bruschi)

The painting depicts Mary and the Child behind a curtain dramatically opened by angels. Iconographically, the motif may be understood as a reference to the Incarnation: God reveals himself to humankind. The cornucopias at the base are an antique motif which the Bicci workshop often used as decoration. Cat. 43

in the showcase

GIOVANNI DELLA ROBBIA (Florence, 1469–1529/1530)

ADOLESCENT JOHN THE BAPTIST

Florence, c. 1500/1510, glazed and set ceramic

Florence, church Santo Stefano a Campi Bisenzio

This sculpture was made during a period when the leadership of the Della Robbia workshop passed down from father Andrea to his sons. With its large number of employees, the quality of the casts often varied, and old models continued to be produced. Under Giovanni Antonio della Robbia, the workshop finally experienced a new upswing. Cat. 49

GIOVANNI DELLA ROBBIA (Florence, 1469–1529/1530)
BLESSING CHRIST CHILD

Florence, c. 1510/1520, glazed terracotta

Fiesole, Museo Bandini

The infant Jesus, already holding nails and a crown of thorns, echoes a famous model: the blessing infant Jesus on the tabernacle in San Lorenzo of Florence by Desiderio da Settignano (1460). This sculpture was probably meant for a house altar. Such childlike figures of the infant Jesus or of the boy John are often mentioned in 15th-century bridal inventories.

Cat. 48

in the showcase

ANDREA DELLA ROBBIA (Florence, 1435–1525), WORKSHOP
VIRGIN AND CHILD

Florence, c. 1490, glazed terracotta

Florence, church Santa Maria a Settignano

Thanks to its large number of employees, the Della Robbia workshop was able to produce such devotional reliefs in wide variety. They were made as casts of an original. The client chose the motif, background and setting. Special requests such as coats of arms, garlands or various shapes of detail were also possible because of the elaborate postproduction process. Cat. 47

LUCA DELLA ROBBIA THE YOUNGER

(Florence 1475 – Paris 1548)

IDEAL PORTRAIT OF A BOY

Florence, c. 1500/1510, glazed terracotta

Fiesole, Museo Bandini

In the early 16th century, the Della Robbia workshop changed its product range and increasingly focussed on colourfulness. In this tondo, the boy's clothing and the wreath are glazed in various shades of green, blue, white, yellow and brown, similar to the majolica ceramics of the same period.

The head was originally painted with tempera colours, so to make it even more life-like. Cat. 45

ANDREA DELLA ROBBIA (Florence, 1435–1525)

MAN OF SORROWS

Florence, c. 1495, glazed terracotta

Florence, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio

The touching sculpture of Jesus suffering once adorned the door lintel of the Monte di Pietà in Florence, a church-run pawn shop sponsored by Franciscan monks. It provided loans despite the biblical prohibition of interest. The sculptor Andrea della Robbia frequently worked for mendicant orders, as his elegant, minimalist style and the simple material of terracotta matched their ideal of poverty. Cat. 44

GIROLAMO DELLA ROBBIA (Florence 1488 – Paris 1566)

IDEAL PORTRAIT OF A BOY

Florence, c. 1510/1515, glazed terracotta

Fiesole, Museo Bandini

Such unspecific images of boys, as well as many depictions of holy children (the infant Jesus, the boy John) from the Renaissance, are likely to be hidden portraits. They presumably were intended to preserve the memory of an heir who deceased at a young age. The evergreen fir branches in the wreath are also a symbol of eternity. Cat. 46

I 2.

SACRED OBJECTS – ART FOR THE HOME

Renaissance palaces contained a wealth of devotional objects, which were not only expensive pieces of art and status symbols, but also served to promote personal piety. Holy water wells, house altars and prayer stools are listed in inventories. But paintings and sculptures also frequently had a specific purpose: as contemporary educational books and sermons explain, images of the Virgin and child were intended to guide young wives in motherhood, and childlike saints like young John the Baptist were to serve as role models for children.

This piety culture was not limited to the elites. Reproduction techniques made great strides in the 15th century, and even notable masters had models copied in their workshops, which were made using inexpensive materials such as stucco, clay or papier-mâché. The colourful, tin-glazed majolica ceramics were of great importance. The material, originally used for making tableware, was also suitable for shaping small figures, shrines and reliefs; on house altars, they served the personal devotion of the middle class.

This close connection between everyday life and prayer becomes evident in objects that combine depictions of saints with a specific use. Some majolica sculptures are also containers for writing utensils or served as a top for domestic washbasins. Daily use was intended to promote devotion.

in the showcases

ANNUNCIATION

Emilia Romagna or Marche, late 15th/ early 16th century, glazed majolica
Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

The small devotional shrine depicting the Annunciation to Mary is a typical object for domestic worship, as were produced in great number and various materials around 1500. Made of inexpensive majolica (ceramic) and glazed in vibrant colours, the shrine is mostly aimed at a middle-class clientele: objects of piety are no longer luxury but available to (almost) everyone. Cat. 50

PATANAZZI-WORKSHOP (Urbino, active in the 16th/17th century) ASPERSORY WITH ANNUNCIATION AND ASSUMPTION OF MARY

Urbino, late 16th/ early 17th century, glazed majolica
Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

This early Baroque aspersory is a splendid example of this type of objects which had been an indispensable part of households since the late Middle Ages. Holy water fonts were mainly found in sleeping chambers and studies, in monastic cells and vestries, where people performed their daily prayers. Cat. 52

GIOVANNI DELLA ROBBIA (Florence, 1469–1529/1530) CHRIST AND JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE DESERT

Florence, c. 1520, coloured glazed terracotta
Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

The encounter between the childlike saviour and the chubby-cheeked prophet takes place in an idyllic landscape, where animals frolic between streams and moss-covered rocks. The colourful vibrance of the late Della Robbia workshop contributes to the charm of the group. Cat. 57

INKWELL WITH BISHOP (ST. AUGUSTINE?)

Emilia Romagna or Marche, late 15th – early 16th century, glazed majolica
Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

This small figure has an opening on the back of its base for a container for ink or quills, which has not been preserved. As a writing utensil, the little bishop served as a reminder at work at the desk, to completely immerse oneself in intellectual pursuits – just as he himself does. Cat. 54

INKWELL WITH NATIVITY SCENE

Faenza, first half of 16th century, glazed majolica
Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

This small object depicts the birth and adoration of baby Jesus under a tent-like firmament in a somewhat crude style. The figures have varying sizes, and two rural bagpipers add local colour. At the same time, the group does not only serve devotional purposes but also as a writing utensil with the integrated inkwell on the right. Cat. 51

THE EREMITES PAUL OF THEBES AND ANTHONY ABBAS

Marche, first half of the 16th century, glazed majolica
Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

The small group of figures shows the early Christian monastic father Anthony visiting the eremite Paul in the Egyptian desert. A raven miraculously brings them food, while nature and wellspring form an idyllic backdrop. As an object for domestic worship, the group may have belonged to a clergyman. Cat. 55

GIOVANNI DELLA ROBBIA (Florence, 1469–1529/1530)
CHRIST AND JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE DESERT

Florence, c. 1510, glazed terracotta

Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello

According to apocryphal accounts, John the Baptist grew up in the solitude of a desert as a child. The meeting with his cousin Jesus here already foreshadows their later roles in the baptism of Christ. As the outlet near the spring reveals, the group had a practical function as well: probably as a top for a water basin. Cat. 56

MADONNA WITH CHILD

Emilia Romagna or Marche, 1499, glazed majolica

Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

This sculpture of the Mother of God unusually bears the date 1499 on its base. The glazed ceramic figure shows that Madonnas on house altars were not a luxury during the Renaissance but available for less prosperous classes in simple renditions such as this one: private piety permeated all of society. Cat. 53

13.

THE DISCOVERY OF CHILDHOOD

In the 15th century, childhood was increasingly seen as a stage of life that had its own significance and deserved special attention. Special emphasis was placed on innocence and purity of an ignorant child, giving it a privileged position of particular closeness to God, according to Psalm 8: “Out of the mouths of babes thou hast perfected praise.” The angels gracing church altars therefore become more and more childlike. This culminates in the processions of children dressed in white, which reformist preacher Girolamo Savonarola had organised in 1497 in Florence to contrast their innocence with the debauchery of the wealthy citizens.

Specifically mendicant orders such as the Dominicans recognised very early on the importance of children and their education for catechesis. Many sermons and devotional writings on raising children were produced, such as Giovanni Dominici’s *Regola del governo di cura familiare* (1401), which sought to guide children towards faith in a remarkably child-friendly manner: children should be involved in daily prayers at the family altars, playfully imitating the priest’s gestures, taking on small tasks. Images of holy children in the home, such as boy John the Baptist or infant Jesus, were meant to serve as role models for identification and emulation.

Because of this, there are many Renaissance depictions of young John the Baptist. Many of them have strikingly realistic childlike features. These might be hidden portraits of real children whose memory was to be preserved in the family after their early death.

BENEDETTO DA MAIANO

(Maiano near Florence 1442 – Florence 1497)

JOHN THE BAPTIST AS A BOY

Florence, around 1470, set terracotta

Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

The sculptor depicts the biblical prophet with childlike innocence but already in stern consciousness about his future role. As patron saint of Florence, depictions of John the Baptist were very popular here. However, the bust could also have a personal connection, for the sparsely idealised facial features may suggest that it is a portrait of a child who died at an early age. Cat. 58

MINO DA FIESOLE (Poppi 1429 – Florence 1484)

JOHN THE BAPTIST AS A BOY

Florence, c. 1450/1460, moulded stucco

Florence, church Sant'Andrea a Rovezzano

This stucco sculpture of the young John the Baptist was originally painted in tempera colours with great detail, giving it a very animated appearance. During restoration work a few years ago, later layers of paint were removed, revealing the delicate colours of the original. Cat. 59

I4.

LOVE, RELATIONSHIPS, COMPASSION

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Renaissance art is the endeavour to depict emotional relationships between people. Especially in the numerous portrayals of the Virgin with baby Jesus, created by the Venetian master Giovanni Bellini from the 1460s onwards, there is an intense exploration of closeness, love and grief. Based on the types of Greek icons common in Venice, Bellini depicts an intimacy in the interaction between mother and child that is deeply melancholic due to the foreshadowing of their future fate.

Bellini's depictions of the dead Christ follow the same line of thought. Christ's body is not alone but held by angels who convey their condolences and compassion through physical proximity. Christ appears almost asleep, his suffering only subtly hinted at: closeness and touch create an image full of humanity and empathy.

These images seek to convey directly to their devout viewers how God sought closeness to humankind and became human. Care and compassion, love and closeness are what make us people in the first place, and exactly this is sought to be expressed by these Renaissance masterpieces. These images of God's humanity want to evoke compassion in us, to touch us emotionally, to shake us and lead us to faith. The divine beauty of art paves the way to God for us humans.

LORENZO Ghiberti (Florence, 1371–1455) and WORKSHOP
VIRGIN AND CHILD («MADONNA DI FIESOLE»)

Florence, c. 1420, moulded stucco

Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

This stucco sculpture captivates with its emotional depiction of the intimate mother-child relationship. It is a copy of a Ghiberti Madonna, which can now be found in Fiesole. The careful design and elaborate setting of the copy suggest that it was made in Ghiberti's workshop and under his tutelage. Cat. 60

DONATELLO (DONATO DI NICCOLÒ DI BETTO BARDI)
(Florence, c. 1386–1466) and WORKSHOP
VIRGIN AND CHILD («MADONNA DI VERONA»)

Padua, c. 1450, cartapesta relief on wooden base, framed

Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

It is not well known that Renaissance sculptor Donatello also had copies made out of lesser materials such as cartapesta (papier-mâché) in his workshop. This relief, showing Mary lovingly caring for her lively child, reiterates a Madonna image in Verona. Cat. 61

HANS MEMLING (Seligenstadt c. 1433/40 – c. 1490), FOLLOWER
VIRGIN AND CHILD

Oil painting and gold leaf on oak

Milan, Museo Poldi Pezzoli

This Flemish painting of the Madonna also evokes a new understanding of the relationship between mother and child. The opulently dressed Virgin Mary and the naked child interact in a lively and affectionate manner. At the same time, the painting is charged with symbolism in many ways, such as the carnation – a sign of betrothal referencing bridal mysticism. Cat. 62

«MASTER OF THE WINKING EYES»
(GALASSO DI MATTEO PIVA?)

VIRGIN AND CHILD

Ferrara, mid-15th century, tempera and gilding on wood

Cento, collection Grimaldi Fava

Named after the striking countenance of his figures, the master depicts Mary and the child in a spontaneous and lively moment of caring affection, almost like a snapshot for a family album. The coral jewellery is an actual accessory for children but also refers to the blood of the Passion. Cat. 63

GIOVANNI BELLINI (Venice, c. 1430–1516)

VIRGIN AND CHILD

Venice, c. 1470, tempera on wood

Rovigo, Pinacoteca dell'Accademia dei Concordi

The Venetian master Giovanni Bellini repeatedly explored the theme of the Madonna and Child. In this famous picture of the Virgin Mary, the infant Jesus seems to become aware of the scale of his destiny. Mary's sorrowful face also betrays a dismal foreboding. Cat. 64

GIOVANNI BELLINI (Venice, c. 1430–1516)

PIETÀ (DEAD CHRIST SUPPORTED BY ANGELS)

Venice, c. 1460, oil painting on wood

Venice, Musei Civici Veneziani, Museo Correr

Like an apparition, the dead Christ rises from the tomb, supported and bewailed by lamenting cherubs. Bellini's painting uses every means to evoke compassion in the devout viewer. This emotional, personal relationship with Christ is supposed to deepen faith and to lead to piety in the spirit of the *devotio moderna*. Cat. 65

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