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Teaching Support Sheet

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Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna of the Meadow*, c. 1500, National Gallery, London

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-giovanni-bellini-madonna-meadow-c-1500-national-gallery-london>

What function did devotional images serve in the Renaissance?

In this short film, Leah Clark explains the role of devotional images in the Renaissance by exploring a well-known work by Giovanni Bellini. By looking closely at the painting, Leah discusses how the work can shed light on the cultural approaches to images in the Renaissance. Rather than a religious painting depicting a narrative or story from the Bible, this work functioned as a contemplative piece. Such images were used for devotion, but they were also integral to everyday life. The Madonna and Child became the most ubiquitous religious imagery in the Renaissance. Found in the home, such images would form the backdrop to the everyday activities of the family; mothers and expectant mothers could look on the Virgin as a model of piety, a good wife and mother, while children would look to Jesus as an example of good behaviour.

Before watching the film

Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work here that you can use to show to your class: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-bellini-madonna-of-the-meadow>

Questions to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. What do you know about devotional images? How would you define secular vs religious space?

Some useful discussion on religious images in the Renaissance can be found:

<http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/units/unit-1/>

See further resources below.

2. What do you think this work depicts or represents? Describe what you see on the screen. (you might think of things like scale, how a viewer might interact with the object, or even use it) Can you identify any recognisable elements (plants, humans, animals, landscape features, architectural details, forms)?
3. Where do you think this work would have been viewed originally?
4. What function do you think this work might have served?

Questions to ask your students after watching the film.

1. What effects do you think the artist was trying to achieve in this work?

This work is a Christian devotional image, meant to inspire devotion from the viewer. It's a contemplative piece, so not recounting a particular story from the Bible but asks the viewer to reflect on the birth of Christ. In the film, it's suggested that Renaissance viewers would have been reminded of *Pietà* images as well, asking them to contemplate the role of Christ's life on earth. In addition, the landscape also points to a new movement in secular paintings in Venice, where a new genre of paintings emerges: depicting landscapes as contemplative devices in humanistic practices. This references classical authors who discussed the pastoral as a journey in the mind. So it's a devotional image, but it was also an aesthetic work too.

2. Has the film helped you define some of the formal elements of the work? Consider scale, subject matter, medium, and other formal elements

The painting is dominated by the Madonna and Child in a landscape. It draws on what's called the Madonna of Humility; this is not a depiction of Mary as a queen-like figure, rather she looks in devotion to her son, Jesus Christ, and it represents the relationship between these two. (You might consider bringing in some other images of the Madonna to compare-see comparison below too)

Unlike other images, which might depict a particular story or narrative from the Bible, this one is contemplative; it asks the viewer to contemplate the relationships between Christ and his mother. Mary looks down towards Christ with her hands closed as if in prayer, and this could also allow the viewer to contemplate what this foreshadows, Christ's death or crucifixion. Viewers would have been familiar with similar images called the *Pietà*, which depicts Mary holding the dead body of an adult Christ.

Finally, there is an odd juxtaposition between the figures and the background. The scene depicts similar landscapes found on the Venetian terra firma or mainland. We see a rural setting with animals but also buildings, which suggests a small town. Taking a closer look at some of the animals, these have symbolic meaning. For instance the bird under the tree is actually attacking a snake; perhaps a sign of good vs evil, referencing the snake in the story of Adam and Eve, which represents Satan, and therefore sin. It also makes a thematic tie to Christ, as it is His crucifixion, in Christian belief, that redeems the sin in the world, that had begun with Adam and Eve.

3. Does it have a recognisable purpose or function? Does this relate to the time period in which it was made?

Religious images in the Renaissance could be found in a number of locations.

Catholic churches in the medieval period and the Renaissance housed numerous images of holy figures and the saints. This could take the form of altarpieces: the main panel (painting or sculpture) placed upon the altar or behind it that acted as the setting for the Mass (where the blood and wine was taken as a sign of remembrance of Christ's crucifixion on the cross). Such images often featured biblical narratives of characters from the Bible.

But religious images could also be found in more secular contexts. One thing that might be useful for students is to convey that the religious and secular spheres were much less distinct than they are today. Spaces such as public squares, places of business, shops, the home (where daily life takes place) can be

called secular spaces. And by religious spaces, I mean those spaces such as churches or buildings that are dedicated to religious worship.

In the Renaissance, religion infiltrated most aspects of daily life; so a merchant might have an image of a saint in his workplace; for the merchant the presence of that saint might be seen as helping him in his business and bringing prosperity to him and his family.

Increasingly in the Renaissance we see religious images in the home, in a domestic context. Probably the most ubiquitous of religious images for the home, are images of the Madonna and child, like this one by Bellini.

4. How has this film helped your understanding of devotional images?

Hopefully students can reflect here on what they have learned-covered in the points above. They may pick up on the secular and religious contexts in which works of art could be viewed.

5. What is its relevance for today?

This sort of image brings to the fore the cultural practices around images in the Renaissance. Such images were used for devotion, but they were integral to everyday life. Found in the home they would have in some ways become part of the family; mothers and expectant mothers could look on the Virgin as a model of piety: a good wife and a good mother. Children would learn by example.

It might be useful to urge students that the next time they're in a museum, to see how many images they can find of similar composition, of the Madonna and Child and reflect on how artists convey this scene in rather different ways. The film at the end asks students to consider what they might have in their own homes that conveys something about 21st-century culture.

6. Comparative analysis

Compare this image with an earlier *Madonna and Child* by Duccio in the National Gallery:

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/duccio-the-virgin-and-child-with-saints-dominic-and-aurea>

For a catalogue entry as a downloadable pdf see:

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/national-gallery-catalogues/duccio-di-buoninsegna-the-virgin-and-child-with-saint-dominic-and-saint-aurea-and-patriarchs-and-prophets>

This will allow students to compare a more queenly version of the Madonna with the Madonna of Humility genre in Bellini's painting (see comparative table below)

You could also consider another religious image meant for a church for example, or compare it with the Open Arts Objects films on Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* or the Este Diptych.

Online Activity

1. Searching the image/collection of database of a museum to look for other images of the Madonna and Child and see how the format and rendering of the composition and relationship between Jesus and Mary has changed over time.
2. Watch some of the films from the Madonnas and Miracles exhibition at the Fitzwilliam and have students take down notes on the different types of objects associated with devotion in the home: <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/madonnasandmiracles> Or have them consider how an exhibition sets out to support a particular argument through the examples of works of art they choose.

3. Read the catalogue entry on the suggested work for comparison at the National Gallery by Duccio to discuss the technical evaluations of the painting:
<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/national-gallery-catalogues/duccio-di-buoninsegna-the-virgin-and-child-with-saint-dominic-and-saint-aurea-and-patriarchs-and-prophets>

Further Info:

On Renaissance devotional paintings:

<http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/units/unit-1/>

For an OpenLearn course (free and open access) at the Open University with a section of Bellini's devotional images:

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/visual-art/art-renaissance-venice/content-section-0>

Art and religion at the National Gallery in London (link to a variety of resources):

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/art-and-religion>

The Domestic Devotions project at Cambridge: <http://domesticdevotions.lib.cam.ac.uk/>

Renaissance Resources online

<http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/> : This is a comprehensive site on a number of different issues related to the Renaissance provided by the National Gallery in Washington, DC

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/r/renaissance/> : This is a comprehensive site on a number of different issues related to the Renaissance provided by the Victoria and Albert Museum

Bibliography

Giovanni Bellini and the Art of Devotion, edited by Ronda Kasl and Keith Christiansen, Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2004

Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World, edited by Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin, Intersections (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming)

Maya Corry, Deborah Howard, Mary Laven eds, *Madonnas & Miracles: The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy* (London: Philip Wilson Press, February 2017)

Bibliography at the Domestic Devotions site, with an open access article:

http://domesticdevotions.lib.cam.ac.uk/?page_id=846

Comparative analysis:

Works of art	Giovanni Bellini, <i>Madonna of the Meadow</i>, c. 1500, National Gallery, London	Duccio di Buonisegna, <i>The Virgin and Child with Saint Dominic and Saint Aurea, and Patriarchs and Prophets</i>, about 1312–15(?), NG, London
date	1500	1312-15?
What is it?	Religious image	Religious image
material	Oil and egg on synthetic panel, transferred from wood	Egg tempera on wood,
Size/scale	67.3 x 86.4 cm	central panel 61.4 × 39.3 cm, left wing (with Saint Dominic) 45.2 × 19.3 cm, right wing (with Saint Aurea) 45.2 × 20.6 cm
Subject matter	Madonna and Child in a meadow	The Virgin and Child with Saint Dominic and Saint Aurea, and Patriarchs and Prophets,
Original location in the Renaissance	Domestic space; for family/personal devotion	-may have been made for the private devotion of Cardinal Niccolò da Prato (died 1321), a high-ranking Dominican who was Cardinal of Ostia
How are the figures depicted?	-Virgin is in devotion to Christ in a blue mantle that is nice but not royal, she is the Virgin of Humility -fairly realistic -largely dominate the composition	-Virgin is depicted as Queen of Heaven in beautiful cloak and with a halo suggesting she is Holy -less realistic with stylised 'squinty' eyes typical of this period -while it's formal, Christ is playful, playing with Mary's headdress
Composition	-large scale, taking up most of the composition -while pastoral scene in background relates to landscape genre emerging in Venice while also providing a contemplative space; also full of symbolisms	-the gold background makes the altarpiece appear more 'holy' and heavenly -less relatable and accessible (less earthly) -stark contrast between Mary & background -less realistic composition
Condition	The painting has been transferred from panel to canvas and is damaged in places.	Some replacements of wood: see technical notes in the catalogue entry here
Function	Devotional image in the home; to instruct and demonstrate a good example	Devotional image that is highly luxurious probably for personal devotion for an official of the church
