

## **Leah Clark - Ercole de' Roberti, Este Diptych** **(Nativity and Christ at the Sepulchre)**

LEAH CLARK: Hi. I'm Leah Clark, and I'm a lecturer in the Department of Art History at The Open University. And I specialise in the Italian Renaissance with a particular focus on the collection and exchange of art objects at the end of the 15th century in the Italian courts.

Today, I'm going to be speaking about a painting by the court artist Ercole de' Roberti, who painted at the court of Ferrara in northern Italy. The painting is usually referred to as the Roberti diptych or the Este diptych. The Este were the ruling family at the court of Ferrara. And a diptych is an art historical term to reference a work that has two panels or two paintings that compose the work.

The painting today is housed in the National Gallery in London. And it dates from the early 1490s when Roberti was working at the court of Ferrara. It's an extremely small painting. It's just a little bit bigger than 2 hands together. So it's a small devotional image that would have been for personal worship rather than a large altarpiece in a church.

We know that the painting was in the collections of the Duchess of Ferrara, Eleonora d'Aragona, because of a description in an inventory that was taken after her death in 1493. The inventory describes the work as a small altarpiece that closes like a book. Covered in morello velvet with gilded silver fasteners and clasps, on one side a nativity, and on the other a Christ at the sepulchre.

This description is interesting because it reveals some fascinating things about the object. For one, it was covered in this morello velvet. Morello is a purplish colour which was associated with royalty. And velvet was an expensive fabric at the time. So the painting in some ways becomes a luxury object through the covering of velvet.

The description also tells us that it had clasps so that the object could be closed and could be portable. What's also interesting is that Eleonora's inventory of her library shows that some of her texts were actually bound in a similar purplish colour. So if the painting was placed on a shelf, the viewer wouldn't actually know if it was a book or a painting until they opened it up and revealed the fascinating images inside. This creates a kind of mysterious quality to the work.

The complexity of the painting is revealed when you start looking at the images a little bit more closely. On the left-hand side, we have the birth of Christ. And on the right-hand side, we have the death of Christ. So it's really the two bookends of the New Testament and the story of Christ's life.

So in the upper right-hand quadrant of the painting, you can see sketch-like figures. These are the shepherds who are watching their flocks by night, if you know the biblical story. And the angel is announcing to them the birth of Christ.

We then follow the narrative to the foreground of the painting, what makes up most of the composition. That is the birth of Christ. He is depicted in a manger-like structure with his mother Mary and his father Joseph looking down upon him.

But he's also accompanied by a shepherd. This is not one of the three Magi or a regal king. Rather, it's a humble shepherd. And if you look closely at his trousers, you can see that the knees are ripped.

The narrative then continues to the right-hand panel. And again, we start with the sketch-like figures in the background. If you can look closely, you'll see three crosses. This is Calvary where Christ is crucified. And you can see his body is either being taken off the cross or put on it.

The narrative then continues again to the foreground of the painting where we have Christ. He is sitting on his tomb, and he is upheld by two angels. If you look closely, you'll see that he has the stigmata. That is, the wounds of his crucifixion. So this is after his crucifixion (he is dead) but before he ascends into heaven.

You'll also notice, though, that there are other characters in this painting. And they are not part of the biblical narrative. To the left, you'll see a man with a stone in his hand and accompanied by a lion. This is St. Jerome. St. Jerome is known as one of the desert fathers who went to the desert to renounce all worldly goods and to find a spiritual connection to God. He holds a stone in his hand, which he is known for using to beat his breast as a form of devotion to God.

In the upper right corner, we see another saint. And this would have been a familiar saint to Renaissance viewers. This is St. Francis of Assisi, an Italian saint who lived in the 13th century. If you look closely at the image, you can see St. Francis holds his hands up.

And in the distant sky, there is a seraphim attached to a cross. And there are lines that descend down to St. Francis' hands, which give him the stigmata. So he is like Christ in his reception of Christ's wounds.

The altarpiece speaks to contemporary religious practices in Ferrara. We know that there were religious groups that followed St. Jerome as well as St. Francis. And there were processions in the streets, for instance, where groups of monks would flagellate themselves in the streets. So they really responded to this kind of ascetic way of worshipping Christ.

The emphasis on Christ, both as a child and as a dead Christ in the tomb, also references the Corpus Domini convent in Ferrara, which was a group of nuns who took the body of Christ as their central focus for devotion. Every year, there was a large procession throughout the streets of Ferrara where dignitaries and the ruling family would carry the sacred host, that is, the wafer that represents the body of Christ, through the streets.

So the diptych references contemporary religious practices in Renaissance Ferrara. We also know that Eleonora de d'Aragona, the Duchess of Ferrara, had a close relationship with the Corpus Domini convent. She was known to sometimes spend the night there. And she was also buried there.

So what was the function of the painting? Well, it was certainly a devotional image that could be portable. So Eleonora may have taken it with her as she travelled.

But the painting was also an important work of art. Ercole de' Roberti was the court artist. He was a well-known painter. And we also know that Eleonora had a large collection of art objects. She had paintings by some of the most famous painters of the time, such as Andrea Mantegna and Bellini.

The left-hand side of the painting copies motifs from a work by Mantegna, an 'Adoration of the Shepherds', that was probably in the Este collections. We also know that the diptych itself was a source of copies by various artists. So it was really a source of inspiration.

In 2013, the National Gallery commissioned the contemporary British artist Michael Landy to compose new contemporary works based on the collections. And this diptych influenced one of the large-scale sculptures of St. Jerome. So the diptych today still inspires, 500 years later, artists to create new works of art.