

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

Teaching Support Sheet

Presenter: Leah R. Clark

Ercole de' Roberti, Este Diptych (*The Adoration of the Shepherds and The Dead Christ*), c. 1490, National Gallery, London

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-ercole-de%E2%80%99-roboti-este-diptych-adoration-shepherds-and-dead-christ-c-1490>

In this short film Dr Leah Clark examines a small devotional image belonging to Duchess Eleonora D'Aragona of Ferrara from the fifteenth century. Once covered in velvet with clasps to close it, the painting is examined as a luxury object in the art collections of Eleonora d'Aragona but also as a devotional work. The painting drew on contemporary religious practices in Ferrara and Eleonora's close ties with the Corpus Domini convent. Painted by the court painter Ercole de' Roberti it is also discussed in terms of its complex composition, which spoke to humanist and religious practices at the court of Ferrara. Although very small, the painting inspired copies by artists in the Renaissance as well as today, including Michael Landy.

Before watching the film

Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the two panels here that you can use to show to your class: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/ercole-de-roboti-the-este-diptych>

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

1. What do you know about devotional images?

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. How big do you think it is? (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 but it was also part of the collections of Eleonora d'Aragona, where it would have been appreciated as a work of art. The complex imagery meant that the viewer might spend quite a considerable amount of time making out the various narratives depicted in the image. Its 'book-like' form also added an extra effect to the work, with the velvet covering and its reference to book-binding.

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 diptych (two panels put together), now in the National Gallery in London, is described in Eleonora d'Aragona's 1493 inventory, taken after her death, 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.'¹

This description is important for a number of reasons—it points to the very complex nature of this small object: first the reference to a book, describes how it was opened and closed like a book, but the fact it was covered with this purple/reddish velvet with gilded fasteners also alludes to contemporary binding practices—we know Eleonora's library had books with similar coloured bindings. So when closed and put on a shelf, it would've looked like a book with traces of velvet still survive on it today. This creates an element of surprise. Viewers might open it up expecting it to be a book and reveal this extraordinary work.

-its small size and the ability to close it also meant that it could be easily transportable

The reference to a book is also alluded to the viewing practices that would have been required to 'read' this diptych. That is multiple textual stories, that speak to one another throughout the panels. The painting depicts numerous stories and different stages, some related, others not.

The central story is that of Christ's birth and death. The left panel depicts the Nativity of Christ, accompanied by Mary, Joseph, and a shepherd, with the annunciation to the shepherds in the background. The right panel portrays Christ at the Sepulchre accompanied by two angels, with Saint Jerome to the left of Christ, Saint Francis receiving the stigmata on the distant plane above Christ's head, and Calvary further in the background.

The two panels mark the beginning and the end of Christ's life, from the Bible:

On the left panel, we have the baby Christ in a manger-like structure; a humble abode, with Mary and Joseph and some shepherds. In the background we have the angel announcing the birth of Christ to the shepherds

On the right panel we have Christ after he has been crucified, sitting on the edge of the tomb, before he ascends into Heaven. But there are other people in the image; beside him we have St. Jerome and behind him we have St. Francis receiving the stigmata; these two people were not part of the biblical story, but were saints who came after; they were both highly regarded in the Renaissance. The depiction of Saint Francis, an event that occurred in the thirteenth century, is depicted alongside the narrative of Saint

¹ 'una anchoneta che se assera a modo di libro coperta di veluto morello cum broche e azulli di argento dorati da un lato il persepio e dal altro un christo nel sepulchro.' Archivio di Stato di Modena, Guardaroba 114,133V

Jerome's vision of Christ that occurred in the fourth century. St. Francis was for Renaissance viewers, a recent medieval saint.

Here Saint Jerome is depicted as the ascetic saint; he's sometimes seen as a scholar in a study, but here he carries a rock, which he beats his breast in a form of devotion to God. St. Jerome in Ferrara had a particular following and these practices were well known to many religious orders in Ferrara at the time.

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. This one is particularly tied to personal devotion, as it is small. It would have been viewed by Eleonora and used as an altarpiece, but it likely was also viewed as an aesthetic work of art. Placed in her collections and showed off to visitors and artists.

The focus of the body of Christ is an important element to the painting: Eleonora had a special relationship with the Corpus Domini convent in Ferrara. The convent was made up of nuns who took the body of Christ as their central devotion. Eleonora worshipped here regularly—she is recorded as sometimes spending the night in the convent, and it was here that she was buried. Every year there would be a large Corpus Domini procession in Ferrara, where numerous dignitaries would carry a large baldachino over the sacred host as they walked through the city.

The painting also references other paintings and demonstrates that it was seen as an example of good artistic practice:

-it copied certain motifs from Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* at the Met, likely in the Este collections (the fence, the poor shepherd) <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436966>

-It was also the source of imitation; there were numerous copies of this composition—it was thus a model for artists such as this copy in Rotterdam of the left panel: <http://collectie.boijmans.nl/en/maker/11602/Gian-Francesco-de-Maineri>.

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?

In 2013 the contemporary British artist Michael Landy exhibited large-scale interactive sculptural works of saints influenced by the National Gallery's collections in an exhibition he named *Saints Alive*. Among these was an interactive work, *Saint Jerome Beats his Breast*, which was inspired by representations of Saint Jerome in the gallery's collections, two of which were by Quattrocento Ferrarese artists—Cosmé Tura and Ercole de' Roberti. Significantly, early preparatory drawings (in particular *Chest Beater*, 2012 and *Sin Bin Machine (Saint Jerome)*, 2012) drew specifically from the right panel of Roberti's diptych.

The diptych's ability to reference religious activities and performance outside its small form was evident in the fifteenth century when it spoke to the religious concerns of duchess Eleonora as well as the larger city of Ferrara. In 2013, in a much more secular world of the art gallery, it was still able to engender such provocations, as the final sculpture that was erected asked viewers to step on a large red button, which activated a device that resulted in Saint Jerome to beat his breast in a rather violent manner.

You can view Landy's exhibition here (including teachers notes):

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/michael-landy-saints-alive-23-may-2013-0100>

A film of the sculptures can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLlEXJSRfi4>

Comparative analysis

Compare the diptych with Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* at the Met, NY as well as a contemporary copy of one of the panels of the diptych in Rotterdam: <http://collectie.boijmans.nl/en/maker/11602/Gian-Francesco-de-Maineri>.

Another possibility for comparison would be to compare the painting with Landy's contemporary sculpture.

Alternatively compare it with another devotional image from the Open Arts Objects film series such as Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* at the Getty or Bellini's *Madonna*:

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-mantegna-adoration-magi-c-1495-1505-getty-museum-la>

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

Online Activity

1. Watch the film of Landy's sculptures and contemplate how the artist has conveyed the ascetic practices of saints in his works.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLlEXJSRfi4>

2. The diptych was recently featured in an exhibition on *Building the Picture* at the National Gallery. Contemplate how the painting was situated within that exhibition with the emphasis on architecture: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/building-the-picture-architecture-in-italian-renaissance-painting-30-april-2014-0000>

3. We know the diptych was in Eleonora's collections because of an inventory. This could be an opportunity for students to consider the importance of primary sources. You can find primary sources and resources for teachers at the National Archives online here: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/sessions-and-resources/?time-period=early-modern>

Resources online

On Renaissance devotional paintings:

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

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

Clark, Leah R. 'Replication, Quotation, and the 'Original' in Quattrocento Collecting Practices.' In *The Challenge of the Object / Die Herausforderung des Objekts*, edited by Georg Ulrich Großmann and Petra Krutisch, 136-140. Nuremberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum Press, 2014. [specifically on the Este diptych and downloadable free here: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/38040/>]

———. *Collecting Art in the Italian Renaissance Court: Objects and Exchanges*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. [Chapter 3 specifically deals with the Este diptych]

Amanda Lillie, 'Building the Picture: Architecture in Italian Renaissance Painting' Online exhibition catalogue: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/exhibition-catalogues/building-the-picture>