

Leah Clark - Giovanni Bellini, Madonna of the Meadow

LEAH CLARK: Hi, I'm Leah Clark, and I'm a lecturer in art history at The Open University, and I specialise in the Italian Renaissance.

Today I'm going to be speaking about a painting by the Venetian artist Giovanni Bellini. It's called the Madonna of the Meadow, and it's in the National Gallery in London and it dates from about 1505.

The painting was originally painted in oil on wood, but it was transferred to canvas and has resulted in some damage. The composition is dominated by the Madonna and child. The Madonna is another word for the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ.

She's in a beautiful cloak, but she's not dressed as a queen of heaven as in some other representations. Rather, she's a humble Mary, and this is referencing a particular type of Mary, the Madonna of humility. And the reason being is that the viewer can actually identify with this mother as being their own mother or themselves.

The painting doesn't depict a particular narrative from the Bible, but it is a moment of the Bible. That is, it's the New Testament. It's quite the beginning of the New Testament because Christ is a child, and the New Testament follows the story of Christ from conception all the way to his crucifixion, and eventually, his resurrection and ascension into heaven.

So this is the relationship between the Virgin Mary and her young child. This painting would have brought to mind for viewers what was going to come in the story of the New Testament, that is, the crucifixion. And it would have recalled images of the Pietà, when an older Mary holds a crucified Christ - that is, the dead body of Christ - on her lap.

So where were devotional images viewed? Well, traditionally, they were in the church. That is, the Christian place of worship. You'd find them on the walls, recounting narratives, the lives of the Saints or the Bible. But the most important image was actually on the altar or behind it. It's called an altarpiece, and this could be a painting but it could also be sculpture.

And the reason why this is so important is it was the backdrop to the performance of the Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist, which is a really important rite for Christians, which is when they ingest the wine and the wafer or the bread, which represents the body and blood of Christ. So it's a reference to the crucifixion.

Increasingly in the late medieval period and into the Renaissance, we start to see more and more religious images in secular contexts. So for instance, in shops, on street corners, in public squares, as public statuary, and also in the domestic interior. They become the backdrop to everyday life.

The most ubiquitous religious image was the Madonna and child, particularly in houses or in homes. And why might that be? Well, if we turn back to Bellini's image, we can see that the relationship between Mary and her son is one that most people could identify with. Mothers or expectant mothers would see the Virgin Mary as a role model, and of course, the Christ child is a role model for the children in the home.

So the image encourages, in some ways, imitation. The Virgin Mary looks down in devotion to the Christ child and her hands are in a form of prayer. And in some ways, we are then encouraged to do exactly the same, as the viewer.

But it's a contemplative image, as well. There's a beautiful landscape in the background with the town and some agricultural work taking place. But if you look a little bit more closely, you'll also see that some of the animals are actually symbolic.

So for instance, there's a white bird that's attacking a snake. Well, this could be a symbol of good versus evil. The snake, of course, being linked to Satan, particularly in the Garden of Eden and this is why Christ, in the end, is crucified. He redeems the sins that occurred at that moment.

The background of the painting also alludes to a new genre that's emerging in Venice at this time, which is the landscape. This refers to a secular type of painting that is emerging out of intellectual interest in classical antiquity that talks about landscapes or the pastoral as an intellectual journey. So in some ways, it is connected also to the devotional function of the painting. This is a contemplative piece, but also the landscape allows us to go on a journey of our own.

So what is its relevance today? Well, as I've noted, the Madonna and Child image became a central focus for Renaissance viewers. That is, it was even in their own homes as a backdrop to everyday life. So perhaps the question is, what do we have today that's in our homes that reflects our own cultures or our aspirations of the 21st century?