



When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. **Matthew 2: 10 – 11**

Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi,
The Adoration of the Magi
(detail), c. 1440/1460, tempera
on panel, National Gallery
of Art, Washington, Samuel H.
Kress Collection

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1 What's the story?

As told in the New Testament Gospels, Jesus' life on earth began with an extraordinary birth that was soon followed by visits from shepherds and three Magi (wise men from the East). The Gallery's colorful and complex *Adoration of the Magi* depicts the moment when the gift-bearing Magi arrive in Bethlehem and kneel before the infant. For Christians, this event is marked by the holiday Epiphany, celebrated on January 6, or Twelfth Night, the last of the twelve days of Christmas. The Magi were particularly popular in fifteenth-century Florence, where there were Epiphany processions

through the city to reenact the Magi's journey. The subject was also pervasive in Florentine art.

In Renaissance Italy, religious images were the mainstay of an artist's workshop. They ranged from large altarpieces for churches to small paintings for private devotion in the home. At the time, literacy was rare outside monasteries and aristocratic circles, so biblical stories were visualized through artworks that were full of symbols that would have been readily understood by viewers.



2

Look around

This painting is one of the first examples of a *tondo* (Italian for “round painting”), a popular form for religious paintings in the 1400s. All elements of the composition—figures, cityscape, landscape—are arranged to use the panel’s round shape to its best advantage. A joyful procession of more than one hundred people winds its way down a steep path from the upper right, wrapping around the rocky outcropping and entering through the city gate.

MOVE YOUR EYES AROUND TO FIND

- *Horses, pheasant, cows, camels, a dog, and a peacock:* Which creature caught your eye first? Perched on the roof of the stable, the magnificent peacock was a symbol of immortality.
- *A bearded man in red:* Although the star that guided the Magi to Bethlehem is not shown in the painting, its presence is indicated by the bearded man on a black horse who gazes upwards and raises his arms in awe.
- *A pomegranate.* Sitting on his mother’s lap, Jesus raises his right hand to bless the Magi. In his left hand he holds a pomegranate—its numerous seeds represent the many people brought together by the Christian Church.
- *Gold:* Artists used precious gold leaf to indicate the most significant figures in a story. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus have gold halos. The Magi can be identified by golden embroidery on their rose, blue, and red robes as well as by the glistening aura around their heads.

3

Who painted it?

The Adoration of the Magi was painted by more than one artist. Although it is unsigned, scholars generally agree that it bears the marks of two masters of Florentine painting—the Dominican friar Fra Angelico (c. 1395–1455) and the Carmelite monk Fra Filippo Lippi (c. 1406–1469)—but it is not known how the two artists came to work on the same painting. The tondo was in the collection of the Medici, a wealthy family of art patrons in fifteenth-century Florence, for whom both artists worked regularly.

One hypothesis suggests that the commission went to the older artist, Fra Angelico, who designed the overall composition and began the painting. But for some reason, he was unable to complete the project, perhaps because of other, more pressing work. The painting was then turned over to Lippi to complete. It is very likely that the painting sat in the studio of one of the artists for several years and was also worked on by workshop assistants. Art historians studying the unique style of each artist believe that the Magi were painted by Lippi, while the face of the Madonna is closer to the style of Fra Angelico.

book nook

These books about Italian Renaissance art can be found at your local library or bookstore.

A Boy Named Giotto

By Paolo Guarnieri, illustrated by Bimba Landmann | ages 4–7

With illustrations inspired by Giotto's style, this book tells the story of a shepherd boy who realizes his dream of becoming a painter.

The Painter's Cat

By Sharon Wooding | ages 4–7

Tabby cat Micio feels neglected but soon discovers that his master Lorenzo Lotto toils away night and day over a painting.

Antonio's Apprenticeship: Painting a Fresco in Renaissance Italy

By Taylor Morrison | ages 8–10

In first-person narrative, Antonio describes his exciting arrival in Florence and his first days of apprenticeship as he learns the technique of fresco painting.

Pippo the Fool

By Tracey E. Fern, illustrated by Pau Estrada | ages 8–10

A fictionalized story of architect and engineer Filippo Brunelleschi that tells the tale of his most magnificent work, the dome of the cathedral of Florence.

Renaissance Artists Who Inspired the World (Explore the Ages)

By Gregory Blanch and Roberta Stathis | ages 8–12

A non-fiction introduction to important Renaissance artists and their work

Eyewitness: Renaissance (DK Children)

By Alison Cole | ages 8–12

A guide to understanding the art of the Northern and Italian Renaissance, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century

learn more!

If it glitters . . . it might be gold!

Gold, the most precious of all metals, has been used by artists around the world. In Renaissance Italy, gold was incorporated into religious paintings to indicate a holy presence or figure and to symbolize the timeless realm of heaven.

When visiting the museum's galleries of Italian art from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, you will find that most objects have religious themes. It is important to remember that these works were not intended to be hung in a museum—instead, they were made for devotional purposes and decorated churches, private chapels, and homes. In their original context, they would have been viewed by candlelight (and not electric light or sunlight). When gold was illuminated by candles, the effect was dazzling. The metal reflected the light and created a shimmering surface.

How? Panel painting in Italy, 1200s–1400s

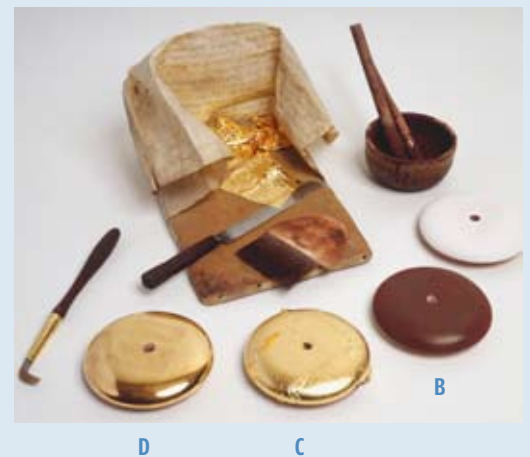
Tempera paintings were mostly executed on *panel* (a wooden support, often white poplar). The panel was covered with size (glue made from animal skin), which kept the paint from absorbing into the wood. The surface was then covered with a brilliant white *gesso* (a plaster ground) upon which the artist could paint. *Pigments* (powdered color) were ground in water and then bound in egg, which resulted in brilliant color.

For the gold areas of a painting, thin layers of diluted *bole* (a reddish brown clay) were brushed onto the gesso surface, providing a cushion for the delicate *gold leaf* (thinly hammered pieces of gold). Gold leaf was then applied in layers and then smoothed and polished with a *burnisher* (a tool with a tip of hard stone), giving it brilliance and shine. The gold could be *tooled* (punched with a metal stamp) to create designs and patterns.



above: Giotto, *Madonna and Child*, probably 1320/1330, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

Made by the Florentine artist Giotto, this painting was the central part of a multipaneled altarpiece. The background is gold leaf.



- A Step 1: Gesso ground
- B Step 2: Bole
- C Step 3: Gold leaf, applied in layers
- D Step 4: Gold leaf, smoothed with a burnisher