



The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine, 1502-1503
 Baldassare Peruzzi (Italian, 1481-1573)
 Tempura and Oil on panel, transferred to masonite
 Diameter: 24 ½ in. (62.2 cm)

- Why might the artist chose to depict the story of Saint Catherine as a tondo?
- What is the effect of the extreme distance between the foreground and the background of the painting?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

The circular framing of this painting is known as a **tondo**. This style was popular in Renaissance Tuscany especially for portraying the Madonna and Child and portraits of younger children. As such, tondo scenes were especially popular as wedding presents. There are also many circular features within the painting that echo this larger framework, such as the haloes of the three figures in the foreground and the wheels seen in the background. The skin of the figures is pale and cool, an effect created by the layering of white, green, and pink paint. This coloring, along with the composition

of the figures, which Peruzzi constructed with **isosceles** triangles built into three parts, serves to separate the figures as a unique grouping.

The painting shows scenes from the life of Saint Catherine, including her “marriage” to Jesus and her **martyrdom**. The foreground depicts Saint Catherine, adorned with a jeweled crown, and dressed in dark red and white, with Mary and the baby Jesus, who are also dressed lavishly.

The background depicts other scenes from Saint Catherine’s life, specifically that of an attempted martyrdom by crushing between spiked wheels. The smaller figure of Saint Catherine is seen in the middle background between the wheels, surrounded by the henchmen who are trying to take her life. Additionally, the background shows a set of ambiguous religious figures in the river underneath the imagined cityscape of Alexandria.

FUNCTION/Form & Style

For the overall composition, Peruzzi combined the styles of the Umbrian and Siense painters of the 15th century. One of the more extraordinary components of this painting is its background, depicting the imagined harbor of **Alexandria**. As an architect and draftsman, Peruzzi understood intimately the proper way to portray a building in two dimensions, and all the buildings in the background are perfectly rendered, down to the last detail. While this scene is an imaginary view of the ancient harbor, there are a few recognizable buildings and architectural types inserted by Peruzzi including the triumphal arch, a feature common to Italians of the time, and the Torre delle Milizie and Pons Fabricius, both recognizable landmarks found in Rome.

The depiction of multiple scenes from a narrative in a single painting was a common practice during the Middle

- How does this painting function as a narrative? Does the structure of the painting convey a clear story?

Ages and Renaissance. Peruzzi chose to show two of the most important and identifiable moments in Saint Catherine's life—her spiritual marriage and subsequent martyrdom. The importance of the two scenes would have been commonly understood at the time, and would help to illustrate a favorite story.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

As told in the '*Golden Legend*,' Saint Catherine was a learned and aristocratic girl of 3rd or 4th century Alexandria who, when faced with having no worthy

suitors, was told by a hermit that she would marry Jesus. After the hermit baptizes her, Mary and the baby Jesus appear to her in a vision, and Jesus slips a ring onto her finger committing her in matrimony. This mystic marriage is the essence of Saint Catherine's commitment to Christianity and the teachings of Jesus. At the same time, the Emperor Maxentius desired Catherine to be his wife and when she refused on the grounds of her religious beliefs, he sent fifty philosophers to debate religion with her. She won the argument and subsequently, the Emperor, in his rage, sentenced her to

VOCABULARY

Alexandria: The second largest city in Egypt, it is located on the coast of the Mediterranean and was founded in 331 BCE by Alexander the Great. This city was once home to the Lighthouse of Alexandria (one of the seven wonders of the world) and the Library of Alexandria (at one time the largest library in the world), neither of which still exist: the destruction of the Library of Alexandria was one of the largest intellectual losses in history.

Golden Legend: An encyclopedic work detailing the lives of saints, first compiled by the Archbishop Jacopo da Voragine around 1255-1266. As the main purpose of the work was to inspire devotion, the compilers frequently altered historical facts, added fictional material as embellishment, and placed a heavy emphasis on miraculous or extraordinary events.

Isosceles: A triangle with two sides of equal length, as well as two equal angles (the angles opposite the two equal sides)

Martyr: In this context, people who have given their lives for their belief in Christianity. It is not, however, a concept limited to the Christian faith.

Oeuvre: The works of a writer, painter, or the like, taken as a whole.

Pintoricchio: Italian artist from Perugia who lived from 1452 to 1513. He was active during the Italian Renaissance, and assisted with such projects as the painting of the Sistine Chapel and a series of frescos for the Piccolomini Family Library in the Cathedral of Siena.

Saint Peter's Basilica: First erected in the fourth century CE by the Emperor Constantine, it is the most important and popular basilica in the Christian world. It was founded in honor of Saint Peter, a disciple of Jesus who became the first pope.

Tondo: The circular framework of a painting.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Mathematics:** Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes
- **Sciences:** Physical Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

die by placement between two spiked wheels that would crush her. Before the wheels could hurt her, however, the heavens parted and a lightning bolt destroyed the wheels and injured the tormentors. The Emperor ordered her death a second time, this time by beheading. He was successful in taking her life, but another miracle occurred: instead of blood, milk poured from her wounds, signifying her purity.

The tradition of using the tondo as the framework for representations of the Madonna and Child is rooted in the tradition of the ‘*deschi da parto*’—a circular tray of sweetmeats brought to a new mother after birth.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Baldassare Peruzzi was an artisan during the Italian Renaissance known

primarily for his work as an architect, painter, and draftsman. He was born in Siena in 1481 to a poor family who discouraged his artistic inclinations for more lucrative work. Not much is known of his early life or *oeuvre*. The first record of his architectural and fresco work was that of the Duomo, or cathedral, of Siena in 1501, where he painted the chapel of San Giovanni with the artist *Pintoricchio*, to whom *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine* was originally attributed.

In 1503, Peruzzi traveled to Rome to work on paintings in the Vatican and to assist with the construction of *Saint Peter's Basilica*, working in the meantime on independent architectural commissions. He returned to Siena following the Sack of Rome by Charles V and became the “Architect of the

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: Have a class discussion about folklore. How is it different, if at all, from literature? What specific characteristics make it separate from other written pieces of work? Have each member of the class bring in a specific piece of folklore from a separate assigned country—are there common aspects of the stories that overlap, even though they may be from different parts of the world? (*All Ages*)

MATHEMATICS: The buildings in the back of this painting are painted as true to form as possible. How do you go about building a stable structure? What things do you need to consider? Break your class into groups and plan the construction of a bridge made from toothpicks. Assign each member a specific role and give each group a specific amount of “money” that they can use to purchase materials (glue, toothpicks, and popsicle sticks). Each group should design and create a bridge that will hold weight suspended underneath the span of the bridge. The budget and the organization of the group should also be taken into account when awarding marks for the project. (*Middle and High School*)

SCIENCE: Investigate what environment existed around the ancient city of Alexandria. How would the land be described? Would it resemble the setting in which Alexandria is seen in this painting? (*All Ages*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Part of Saint Catherine’s story includes a debate with 50 philosophers. Have an “election” in class, where every class member is given a political or philosophical platform and must participate in a series of debates in which the students try both to prove their point logically and prove their ability as a persuasive speaker. (*Middle and High School*)

Republic of Siena,” bringing Roman architecture and design elements to the art and buildings of the region. While primarily an architect, one of his great loves was drawing, and he was especially

well known for his “extraordinary studies of antique buildings,” as seen in this painting. Peruzzi died in 1536, after returning to Rome.