Religion, Ritual and Performance in the Renaissance

On view through June 2013
Allen Memorial Art Museum

Religion, Ritual, and Performance in the Renaissance

Teacher Resource Packet

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Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest of Maitland F. Griggs, B.A. 1896, 1943.265
Introduction

*Religion, Ritual, and Performance in the Renaissance* brings together more than 80 works, sacred and secular, spanning the late 13th to early 17th centuries, from both Northern and Southern Europe. The objects—which include paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts—are from the collections of the AMAM and Yale University Art Gallery.

The exhibition was made possible by a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, as part of a collection-sharing initiative. It presents works used in private devotion, public worship, religious processions, and other rites and rituals, such as marriages, alongside those of a more secular nature, including portraits and chests, which nevertheless perform functions related to self-fashioning and display. Among the many exceptional works in the exhibition are two portable altarpieces that would have been used in private devotion: one, a painted triptych (the earliest on view, from ca. 1280-90), is discreet and intimate, while the other, a lapis lazuli- and coral-encrusted work complete with its case (one of the latest works, from 1608), is a masterpiece of craftsmanship. The exhibition allows the AMAM to supplement its rich Renaissance collection with superb paintings from Yale by Taddeo and Agnolo Gaddi, Sano di Pietro, Ridolfo Ghirlandaio, Lucas van Leyden, and Jacopo Tintoretto, among many others, as well as sculptures from France, Germany, and Italy.

An exciting aspect of the exhibition is the opportunity it presents to see works by well-known artists such as Apollonio di Giovanni, Neri di Bicci, Mariotto di Nardo, and Barthel Bruyn the Elder from both the AMAM and YUAG collections. Also reunited are six enigmatic paintings from a series of twelve by Maerten van Heemskerck. An enormous early 15th-century Florentine altarpiece is seen in its full glory, emphasizing the fragmentary nature of so many other Renaissance paintings whose original surrounding works have been lost. The exhibition will be used extensively in teaching, research, and public programs during the 2012-13 academic year.

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The Renaissance

Generally speaking, the art historical period known as the Renaissance spanned from the beginning of the 1300s to the end of the 1500s, or the 14th through 16th centuries.

This was an era of renewed interest in Classical sources and a more naturalistic style of representation emerged in the arts at this time. With the advent of Humanism, artists, scientists, scholars, and statesmen looked to the art and literature of Classical antiquity for solutions to modern intellectual problems. In art, Roman forms were considered the most authoritative and worthy of imitation (Greek art as well, but to a lesser extent). Scholars emphasized the importance of studying history for truth and meaning, not just to support Catholic doctrines. An interest in learning stretched across fields, with leading thinkers and creators exploring the natural sciences, architecture, math, painting, and sculpture. They often explored these fields together and utilized ideas or techniques from one discipline to inform another.

The development of linear perspective, first demonstrated by Brunelleschi, revolutionized the depiction of space, and artists made creative use of the new technique. In the mid-15th century, they began to set their figures in an environment that seemed to extend the real space of the viewer. Another notable development was the introduction of natural landscapes as settings for religious scenes. By the late 13th century, artists were already depicting light falling on drapery as a network of gilded lines, while painting figures with dimension and monumentality for dramatic expression.

Italian, Creto-Venetian School

*Virgin and Child*, ca. 1500
Tempera on softwood panel
AMAM, Gift of Robert Lehman, 1944.34
**Iconography**

Iconography refers generally to the use or study of images or symbols in the visual arts. The study of iconography can illustrate how a given culture establishes a visual language: associating certain themes, teachings, and stories with specific characters who can be identified by their attributes, or material objects which help the viewer determine the identity of the individual. The study of iconography allows for art historians to trace trends in art as well as ideas or things valued by a given culture.

For example, the AMAM has a number of art works representing St. Sebastian in the exhibition: Giovanni Boccati’s *St. John the Baptist and St. Sebastian*, of ca. 1460, the Italian sculpture of St. Sebastian, of ca. 1500, and in the permanent collection (Willard-Newell Gallery), Hendrik ter Bruggen’s *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*, of ca. 1625. Each presentation of the Saint differs stylistically and the mediums used vary. Still, these images make common references to the major elements of the story of St. Sebastian. He is identifiable as a figure in all three works because he maintains a youthful appearance, is pierced with arrows or has visible wounds, and is bound or restrained. When a viewer recognizes the story of St. Sebastian in a work of art through recognition of these elements, they have read the work iconographically. Through a visual comparison of iconographic details in painting and sculpture, we are able to trace the innovations and stylistic developments that occurred during the European Renaissance.
Public versus Private Devotion

From the 13th century in churches throughout Florence, as in other Tuscan cities, there was an increased demand for religious panel painting, especially for the decoration of altars. The reasons for the emergence of the altarpiece are not clear; from the first decades of the 14th century, however, elaborate, multi-paneled structures with complicated carved wooden frames were produced by the most innovative Tuscan painters and woodworkers. Their work had a direct influence on Florentine painting until the mid-15th century.

Contracts show that clients often had a woodwork shape in mind when they employed a painter, and they discussed with painters the holy figures to be depicted in the main panels of the work. The subject matter of the narrative scenes that were to appear in the predella panels are rarely mentioned in contracts, and may have been left to the discretion of the painter.

The size of a painting or sculpture often indicates a lot about its original function and intended location. For example, close study of the Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints, like many of the other wood-panel paintings in this exhibition, would have resided in a church on display for public viewing and veneration. These works are better known as altarpieces, as they frequently rested on top of the altar, where the priest stood during mass to lead prayers and deliver sermons. Many churches also contained smaller, side chapels (or family chapels), which had their own altars adorned with personalized altarpieces. It was also common for churches to commission larger paintings, like the Painted Crucifix to hang on screens, called rood screens, above or directly behind the main altar, visible from a distance to devotees entering the church or large audiences sitting during Mass. Paintings of this size were also commissioned to decorate church walls.

Italian, Florence
Painted Crucifix, ca. 1330
Tempera on panel
AMAM, R. T. Miller Jr. Fund, 1942.129
The depictions of the saints in the painting *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints* are almost life-sized. The differences in scale between the enthroned Virgin and the dwarfed angels at her feet reinforce the elevated status and importance of the saintly figures, while encouraging devotees to relate to them through their sheer physical presence.

In the final third of the century such artists created compositions in which elegant figures inhabited a space often defined by Classical monuments and physically bound by decorative surrounds based on antique forms. These surrounds were developed in the mid-15th century as a new form of altarpiece structure reflecting the widespread interest in antiquity. Gothic woodwork forms were eschewed in favor of Classical architectural elements.

The three-dimensionality of the sculpted, arched frames in the *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints* altarpiece exemplifies a popular artistic trend in early Italian Renaissance religious imagery, and offers another way for devotees to relate to the painted subject matter/figures. Carved from wood, these frames exhibit architectural elements reminiscent of Classical Greek and Roman structures, including columns that support a rounded arc (architrave) above each Saint’s head. The shape of the three scalloped and pointed domes at the top of the frame reflect the gabled entryways of contemporary Gothic style churches, which dominated the urban landscapes of Northern Italy. These architectural frames, like the churches they resemble, distinguish the outside space from the sacred interior, yet welcome devotees to enter and view the heavenly spaces where Christ and the Virgin reside. Other architectural elements are also incorporated into many of the painted panel scenes in the exhibition, providing the viewer a realistic entryway into the image.
A fine example of a private devotional object is the *Portable Altar in a Carrying Case (Christ on the Mount of Olives)*. This piece highlights the mobile nature of private altars, allowing the owner to pray and connect with God in many different settings, not just one location. The elaborate materials incorporated into the *Portable Altar in a Carrying Case* indicate it was a luxury item, affordable only to the wealthiest patrons.

**Jacopo Ligozzi** (Italian, 1547–1626)

*Portable Altar in a Carrying Case (Christ on the Mount of Olives)*, 1608
Ebony, ebonized wood, and hardstones; oil on copper; silver mounts; case of painted wood with metal fittings
AMAM, R. T. Miller Jr. Fund, 1958.1

However, personal devotional objects like the *Virgin and Child with Saints Dominic and Francis*, with fewer expensive materials, may have been owned by a merchant or patron belonging to the middle class. The two side panels of this small painting (a triptych, meaning, in three parts), are hinged. Thus they are able to fold over the central section, rendering it easily portable, and also give it the ability to stand on its own. It would have been used for devotion probably in a domestic setting. This object is also the oldest work on view in the exhibition.

**Italian, Florence**

*Virgin and Child with Saints Dominic and Francis*, ca. 1280-90
Tempera on panel
Yale University Art Gallery, University Purchase from James Jackson Jarves, 1871.4
Focus On: Florence

Florence’s prominence began in the late Middle Ages with the success of painter and sculptor Giotto. His monumental figures evoked a dramatic realism and, through the use of mathematical perspective, were placed in a convincing pictorial space. Florence became established as the foremost center of Renaissance culture during the 15th century.

While there was no special artists’ quarter in Florence, artistic methods were handed down in workshops throughout the city in which master artists trained apprentices. Apprentices, with other assistants, aided the master with projects. The size of a shop depended on the personality and business requirements of individual artists, and the number of people employed might depend on the number and type of projects undertaken. Techniques and recipes for gesso and painting pigments developed in the workshops were maintained through the 15th and 16th centuries. Florentine workshops were usually competitive and individualistic. Florence’s artists maintained a high degree of originality, and clients valued their innovation.

Between 1400 and 1500, most painters trained in Florence seem to have been able to command higher fees than artists trained elsewhere. By the early 16th century, however, while Florentine artists continued to be in demand, those trained in other cities were equally sought after and well paid.

Agnolo Gaddi (Italian, ca. 1369-1396)
Saints Julian, James, and Michael, ca. 1390
Tempera on panel
Yale University Art Gallery, University Purchase from James Jackson Jarves, 1871.20

Agnolo Gaddi was, through his father Taddeo Gaddi, an heir both to the training of Giotto in early Renaissance Florence, and to a successful family business. He worked for many years on projects for the Cathedral in Florence, and for some of the most important churches and civic spaces in that city. In this painting, the three saints are shown with their attributes, richly clothed and rendered in bright colors. The painting was one wing of a larger altarpiece, whose other sections are not known.
Guilds

In order to be recognized as a professional artist in Italy and Northern Europe (notably France, the Netherlands, and Germany) during the 13th through 16th centuries, artists needed to belong to groups called guilds. Guilds existed for almost all professions; from doctors to bankers to artisans (painters were officially recognized as an independent guild in Italy in 1378 AD). In Italy, which was geographically divided into a collection of smaller city-states, each individual guild participated in the political decision making for their specific city. Under the regulation and supervision of each guild, master artists trained apprentices in workshops that focused on a specific medium or craft (i.e. painting, carpentry, metalwork). During the early Italian Renaissance, men traditionally adopted their father’s profession, so it was common for artistic styles and techniques to be passed down and maintained within the familial lineage and workshop for multiple generations.

Although workshops developed their own styles and techniques that reflected artistic innovations distinct to their specific city (i.e. Florence, Siena, Venice, etc.), workshops commonly produced artworks for patrons in other Italian cities, as well, spreading these innovations and styles to new regions.

Taddeo Gaddi (Italian, ca. 1300-1366)

*Virgin and Child Enthroned*, ca. 1350

Tempera on panel

Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest of Maitland F. Griggs, B.A. 1896, 1943.205

Taddeo Gaddi (the father of Agnolo Gaddi, a work by whom is also included in this exhibition) was considered by the famed 16th-century biographer Giorgio Vasari to have been the most talented of the students of the renowned Florentine painter Giotto.

Christ’s gesture here, caressing his mother’s cheek, gives a touching sense of naturalism to this work, even as his mother’s intense gaze – and protective hands – engender complicity with the viewer, in their tacit understanding of Christ’s later sacrifice.
Artists also traveled independently, seeking inspiration from regional styles and architecture. In Germany and the Netherlands, apprentices were encouraged to travel for a year after training with a master artist in order to discover new ideas and techniques, many traveling through the Italian city-states during the 15th and 16th centuries (to discover developing Byzantine and Gothic styles). With new insight, apprentices would construct a “masterpiece” to be submitted for review by a local guild, frequently in the city or the same workshop in which they were trained. Only upon approval was the apprentice accepted as a licensed artist into the guild.

Until the middle of the 15th century, workshops produced works almost exclusively for religious organizations, specifically churches, and always on commission. It was the responsibility of these patrons to pay for the production of the artwork and the necessary materials, and the patrons frequently decided the subject matter (i.e. iconography) and general design of the painting or sculpture they requested. Toward the end of the 15th century, wealthy individuals (most notably the Medici family), as well as members of the increasing merchant class, began commissioning works for personal use.

**Neri di Bicci** (Italian, 1419 – 1492/93)
*Altar Wing with Five Saints*, ca. 1445
Tempera and gold on poplar panel
AMAM, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1961.78

An altarpiece fragment from SS. Annunziata, one of the most prominent churches in Florence, Neri di Bicci’s *Five Saints* documents a moment of transition between late Gothic and early Renaissance style in Florentine painting. It is among the earliest known works by this prolific artist, who would come to dominate the more conservative trends in Florentine art patronage during the third quarter of the 15th century.

This work was identified from surviving fragments of the altarpiece formerly in the Villani di Stoldo chapel in Santissima Annunziata, Florence. Identification was based on the provenance of the identities of the saints with the names of the patron and his family, as well as the dedication of the chapel specified in the will of the chapel’s patron, Jacopo Villani.
Saints

Saints are figures acknowledged and venerated for their virtuosity in Catholic and Orthodox religious traditions. Any given saint can maintain a number of origin stories with either historical or folkloric roots. Saints who maintain more verifiable historical origin stories became canonized, or officially declared as saints by clerical bodies following their death.

**Mariotto di Nardo** (Italian, 1394-1424)

*Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, ca. 1400-10
Tempera on panel
Yale University Art Gallery, University Purchase from James Jackson Jarves, 1871.25

This small panel is part of a *predella*, or the bottom section of an altarpiece. Such works are known for their small scale and horizontal format. Here, St. Francis, accompanied by Brother Leo, receives the *stigmata* (wounds reminiscent of those Christ received when crucified) while praying outdoors.

**Attributed to: Baldassare Peruzzi** (Italian, 1481–1536)

*The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine*, 1502–3
Tempera and oil on panel
AMAM, Mrs. F. F. Prentiss Bequest, 1944.51

The mystic marriage of the 4th century martyr, Catherine of Alexandria, to the Christ Child is a symbolic reference to her unwavering devotion to Christianity. Catherine is also depicted in the landscape in the background, standing between two spiked wheels, the instruments of her torture. Although the wheels were miraculously destroyed, she was subsequently imprisoned and beheaded for her faith.
**Materials Glossary**

**Carved wood** - Wooden sculptures were a common component of ecclesiastical decoration in Renaissance Italy. Wood was a popular material not only because it was cheaper than marble and bronze, but also because its malleability permitted the artist to make highly naturalistic and affective works. These sculptures were often polychromed and more or less life-sized, which added to their naturalism.

![Northern Italian](https://example.com/northern_italian_lamentation.png)

**Northern Italian**

*The Lamentation*, ca. 1470
Wood
Yale University Art Gallery, Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund, 1965.55

**Cassone** - *Cassoni* (the plural of *cassone*) are large, elaborately decorated wooden chests. They were usually created in celebration of important weddings and often contained the bride's trousseau - a collection of her personal possessions. *Cassoni* were produced in Italy from the 14th to 16th centuries, with the majority being made in 15th-century Florence.

![Cassone](https://example.com/cassone.png)

**Italian**

*Marquetry Chest with Geometric Pattern and Architectural Perspectives*, ca. 1500
Chestnut
AMAM, R. T. Miller Jr. Fund, 1954.62

**Gold/Gilding** - “Gilding” refers to the decoration of works of art with gold, silver, or other metals. The term is most often used to describe the application of gold leaf to a surface by means of an adhesive, though it is also possible to use the metal in powdered form. In Renaissance art, gilding was most often used to embellish religious works such as altarpieces, illuminated manuscripts, and devotional sculptures. Gilding serves to glorify its subject matter and, because of the cost and effort involved, indicates the devotion of the patron or artist.
Grisaille - The term *grisaille* refers to monochrome painting executed mostly or entirely in shades of gray. During and after the Renaissance, the *grisaille* technique was often deployed to imitate the appearance of statues.

Oil - A painting medium in which pigment is bound to oils that dry gradually. Though oil painting is discussed in manuscripts dated as early as the 12th century, it was refined and popularized by Jan van Eyck and other Northern European painters of the 15th century. By the 16th century, oil paint had superseded tempera as the favored medium of most painters across Europe.

Oil on Copper - The technique of oil painting on copper dates from the 16th century and gained popularity during the early 17th. Oil paintings on copper are characterized by their minute details, smooth finish, and luminous colors. The technique was difficult to master, and was most often used for portrait miniatures. These works have remarkable durability.

Polychromy (polychromed marble, polychromed poplar) - A great amount of sculpture produced in Renaissance Europe was originally polychromed. The term “polychromy” refers to the decoration of a sculpture’s surface with paint or other materials and techniques, including gilding, glass, incised decoration, and other punched effects.

Plaster/Stucco - Plaster is a soft mixture of lime and water with sand or other substances. Stucco is a similar material, though somewhat harder and slower to set. Both have been used in architecture and decorative arts. Stucco was invented by the ancient Romans, and its use for works in low relief was revived by Roman artists of the 16th century. During the Renaissance it was a common practice to use molds for the production of relief sculptures in multiples, and plaster and stucco were popular choices as the materials for these multiples.

Predella - *Predella* is an old Italian word literally meaning “step.” The term refers to a horizontal band, usually cut from a single plank, below the main panels of an altarpiece. The small scenes painted on *predelle* (the plural of *predella*) are generally related to the iconography of the altarpiece of which it was a part. *Predelle* often had a structural function; they increased the visibility of altarpieces by adding to their height.

Tempera - Tempera is a type of paint that was widely used in Italian panel paintings from the 13th to the 15th centuries. The term ‘tempera’ may refer to any combination of pigment and binding medium, but since the 16th century has been generally understood to mean egg tempera - paint made by combining egg yolk with a paste made of pigment and water.

Veneer and Marquetry - Veneer is a technique of furniture decoration developed in the 17th century in which very thin pieces of various fine woods are used to embellish the surface of furniture. Marquetry is a type of veneer in which these pieces interlock to create mosaic-like effect, often in the form of floral or arabesque patterns.
**General Glossary:**

**Attribute** - A material object which helps one identify an individual in a given work of art.

**Crusade** - A religiously driven military expedition.

**Commission** - The act of granting certain powers or the authority to carry out a particular task or duty. A patron can commission artworks from a workshop of artists, architects, or a single artist in exchange for money or some other kind of compensation.

**Guild** - A medieval association of craftsmen or merchants who generally maintain social clout.

**Patron** - In the context of art, a patron is an individual who finances an artist’s work. In the context of saints, a patron saint is a saint who advocates for a person or group of people in heaven.

**Sacra Conversazione** - When saints communicate with one another in the same space (typical of altarpieces).

**Schism** - A rift, tear, or divergence of beliefs in a church. (i.e.. The Protestants and the Catholics are both Christian, but Protestants broke away from the Catholic tradition to follow their own beliefs.)

**Scholasticism** - A method for teaching philosophy and/or theology in western universities during the Middle Ages. This method was based on the teachings of Aristotle.

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**Ridolfo Ghirlandaio** (Italian, 1483-1561)

*Portrait of a Lady with a Rabbit*, ca. 1515

Oil on panel

Yale University Art Gallery, University Purchase from James Jackson Jarves, 1871.72

Although the name of the lady in this painting is not known with certainty, she may be a princess from the Vitelli family of Città di Castello in central Italy. The rabbit she holds is associated with fertility, sensuality and vitality. Ridolfo Ghirlandaio was the son of Domenico Ghirlandaio, and nephew of Davide Ghirlandaio, who ran one of Florence’s most active workshops. Here he has mixed a pose reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa with the bright colors of Raphael. Raphael was in Florence from 1504-08, and according to the biographer Vasari, became friends with Ridolfo, influencing his work.
Acknowledgements

This teacher resource packet was written during the summer of 2012 by AMAM Education Department student assistants Nicole Alonso (Oberlin College ‘13) and Briggin Scharf (OC ‘12), with assistance from Hanna Exel (OC ‘12). Revisions and editing were done by Curator of Education Jason Trimmer, along with Emma Kimmel (OC ‘15).

The exhibition Religion, Ritual and Performance in the Renaissance was on view in the museum’s Stern Gallery from August 28, 2012 through June 30, 2013. More information and resources on this show can be found at: http://oberlin.edu/amam/RRP_Renaissance.html.

Francesco Botticini (Italian, 1446-1497)
The Resurrection, ca. 1480-90
Tempera on panel
Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest of Maitland F. Griggs, B.A. 1896, 1943.231