

Intertextuality Information



Pseudo-Jacopino di Francesco (Italian, active 1320-1350)

The Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi, circa 1325-1330

Tempera and gold leaf on panel

20 3/4 x 31 5/8 in. (52.7 x 80.3 cm)

How do artists use written texts as a subject or inspiration?

This painting from an altarpiece, a painting or group of paintings placed at an altar in a church, depicts two events discussed in the New Testament of the Christian Bible—the nativity and the adoration of the magi following the birth of Jesus. The events as described in the gospels of Luke and Matthew and other writings became the subject of many paintings, and the specific details of the scenes became artistic conventions, or traditional modes of representation, that were absorbed by the culture of the time. Based on this familiarity, an artist would not need to read, or even know how to read, in order to depict a scene that was first described in writing. The practice of using another text, directly or through cultural familiarity, as a source for a written or visual work is an example of intertextuality. Intertextuality is a phenomenon that occurs when a work refers to other texts produced by a culture. In this painting, the depictions of the scenes from the text appear on the same panel, a tactic called simultaneous narrative. The nativity takes place on the far left. The second figure of Mary with Jesus (on the right) signifies the new scene of the adoration of the magi.

What tools does an artist use to tell a story without words? How does an artist tell a story differently from a writer? Compare the nativity scene to its

textual source in an English translation of the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible (this is the version of the Bible that people in 14th-century Italy probably used): "And she brought forth her first born son and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger: because there was no room for them in the inn" (*Luke, Chapter 2, Verse 7*). *What similarities and differences can you find between the painting and its source text?* The figures of Mary and Joseph pray in front of their tightly swaddled newborn son. He rests in a container that may or may not be a manger, a feeding trough for animals. Two animals, an ox and a donkey, peek at the baby from a crevice in between rocks, while three angels look on with bowed heads. The devotional aspect of the scene is not mentioned in the version of the text above, nor are the animals. Yet, the artist did not invent these details. Instead they come from the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, an eighth-century text that fills in details from the story of Mary's life and Jesus's childhood. The text from the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (Chapter 14) is as follows:

And on the third day after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the most blessed Mary went forth out of the cave, and entering a stable, placed the child in the stall, and the ox and the ass adored Him. Then was fulfilled that which was said by Isaiah the prophet, saying: The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib. [2] The very animals, therefore, the ox and the ass, having Him in their midst, incessantly adored Him. Then was fulfilled that which was said by Abacuc the prophet, saying: [3] Between two animals thou art made manifest. In the same place Joseph remained with Mary three days.

By the 14th century, the ox and donkey had become a conventional aspect of the scene when artists depicted the nativity. The depiction of the three wise men, or magi, as kings is another artistic convention, or standard mode of representation, that became popular by the medieval period. They wear crowns in this image, which implies they are kings. Compare the artist's depiction to selections of text from Matthew, Chapter 2:

When Jesus therefore was born in Bethlehem of Juda, in the days of King Herod, behold, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem ... And entering into the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they adored him: and opening their treasures, they offered him gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The text does not specify the number of wise men, but the Golden Legend, a 13th-century collection of traditional lore about saints, describes the men as three kings. Scholars have suggested that the naming of three gifts results in the inference that three wise men gave one gift apiece.

Why do artists use written texts as inspiration?

In this case, the subject matter of the paintings is just one aspect of the work that the artist's patrons dictated in discussions or a contract. The

amount of gold leaf and the use of specific pigments would also be included in the business agreement between artist and patron. In the medieval period, art was not created for its own sake; it had a purpose, or purposes. By commissioning an altarpiece, patrons told the rest of the world about their piety and their economic status. The particular scenes selected for an altarpiece had a devotional purpose and significance to the patron (an individual, family, or a religious order) and church organization where the altarpiece was found.

Were these images a substitute for or illustration of written text? In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great wrote, "What writing (*scriptura*) does for the literate, a picture does for the illiterate looking at it, because the ignorant see in it what they ought to do; those who do not know letters read in it." Over time, this quote was simplified and interpreted as "art is the book of the illiterate." The viewers of this painting would have had prior knowledge about scripture to help them interpret this painting; it once belonged to one of the most prominent families in Bologna, Italy. The images of a person kneeling in prayer, a halo surrounding heads, and a child wrapped in swaddling clothes would be familiar signifiers, or clues, about the scene depicted. The image reinforced what they already knew and helped focus their worship.

While it is likely that the well-to-do patrons of this work were literate, it is not necessary to suggest that the value of art pales in favor of writing because the viewers had knowledge of written scripture. In the 13th century, the Venetian historian Martin da Canal said, "events live, thanks to paintings and oral accounts and writing." Each medium has strengths in how it communicates. Refer to the comparisons of scripture and the work of art above. *How does each medium tell the story of the nativity and adoration? When is writing more effective, and when is art more effective?*