



(DETAIL)

## TEACHER NOTES

### MUSEUM COLLECTION

# Nardo di Cione *Madonna and Child*

**TITLE** *Madonna and Child*

**LOCATION** Gallery 1, Collection Galleries

**ARTIST** Nardo di Cione (Italian, ca. 1320–1365 or 1366)

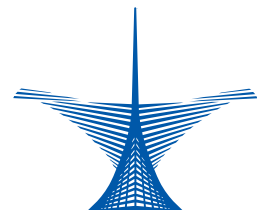
**DATE** ca. 1350

**MEDIUM** Tempera and gold leaf on panel

**SIZE** About 2 ½ feet tall and 1 ½ feet wide

**ACCESSION NUMBER** M1995.679

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**FOR CLASSROOM USE ONLY** Nardo di Cione (Italian, ca. 1320–1365 or 1366), *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1350. Tempera and gold leaf on panel. Purchase, Myron and Elizabeth P. Laskin Fund, Marjorie Tiefenthaler Bequest, Friends of Art, and Fine Arts Society; and funds from Helen Peter Love, Chapman Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. James K. Heller, Joseph Johnson Charitable Trust, the A. D. Robertson Family, Mr. and Mrs. Donald S. Buzard, the Frederick F. Hansen Family, Dr. and Mrs. Richard Fritz, and June Burke Hansen; with additional support from Dr. and Mrs. Alfred Bader, Dr. Warren Gilson, Mrs. Edward T. Tal, Mr. and Mrs. Richard B. Flagg, Mr. and Mrs. William D. Vogel, Mrs. William D. Kyle, Sr., L. B. Smith, Mrs. Malcolm K. Whyte, Bequest of Catherine Jean Quirk, Mrs. Charles E. Sorenson, Mr. William Stiefel, and Mrs. Adelaide Ott Hayes, by exchange M1995.679



**Find me in the galleries!**

LAKE

← COLLECTION ENTRANCE

## Discussion Starters

Take your students to the *Madonna and Child*. Give them a few minutes to look closely and silently at this painting. Encourage them to look at it from close up (but not less than a foot away), and from farther back. Use the following questions to guide your class discussion in the galleries.

- If you already saw an image of this work in the classroom, what do you notice now that you didn't notice when you looked at the photograph?
- What is the very first thing you notice about this work of art? What drew your eye to this aspect of the painting? Do you think the artist intentionally wanted you to see that first? Why or why not?
- What do you think each figure is thinking? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Where do you think this might have been displayed? Describe the space you imagine this in.

## Who made this?

This work of art was made by Nardo di Cione, a painter who lived in Florence, Italy, in the mid-1300s. Nardo worked with his two brothers, Andrea and Jacopo, who were also artists, in a **workshop**, where the three often collaborated on **commissions**. Nardo is most well known for three large **frescoes** painted on the walls of one of the most famous churches

in Florence, Santa Maria Novella. However, artists during that time painted not only works of art for churches, but also smaller works of art, such as this piece, for individual customers, or **patrons**.

## When was this made?

Nardo worked during a time of fear, sickness, and unrest, when the Black Death, a **pandemic** of the bubonic plague that devastated Europe in 1348, killed between one-third and one-half of the entire population of the country in only two years. Though the plague happened quickly, its effects lasted much longer. With so many workers lost, farms and businesses failed, and the economy throughout Europe suffered. Because they were unable to explain the cause of the Black Death, the government and the upper class lost much of their power over the general population. Trying to understand what had happened, many of the survivors turned to their faith, praying that another catastrophic outbreak would not happen. As a result, much of the Christian art made in Europe during this time, such as this *Madonna and Child*, reflects a return to an older, more traditional style of art, a time when people turned to prayer as their primary source of comfort.

## How was this made?

Nardo created this work of art using **tempera** paint (a mix of egg yolk, water, and colored pigment) and **gold leaf** applied on a wooden panel. The **incisions**, or slightly carved lines still visible along the forms of the figures, were part of his sketching process. Nardo built up the deep blue, soft oranges, and peach tones of the figures' clothes and skin in tempera. The blue pigment was even more expensive than gold, because it was made from **lapis lazuli**, a rare blue stone imported from Afghanistan. After Nardo painted it, a goldsmith applied extremely thin sheets of gold leaf to the background and fabric trims, and incised them with elaborate designs. Lastly, where white dots are now visible, small, expensive jewels were affixed to the gold surface; at some point during this painting's six-hundred-plus years, those jewels were removed and likely sold.



Nardo paints in a way that incorporates aspects of two distinct styles of art. The earlier Byzantine style is known for its straightforward, front-facing figures, dressed in clothes whose folds fall in angular patterns, situated against a flat expanse of gold. Nardo incorporates all of this here, bringing back the idea of a more traditional time of Christianity. At the same time, the influence of Giotto (ca. 1267–1337), an artist working slightly earlier than Nardo who gave his weighty figures depth through shading, is present. Giotto's style signaled a move into the Renaissance, where realistic representation was heralded. Nardo softly shades the hands, shoulders, and face of the Madonna and Child with delicate brushstrokes, hinting at his knowledge of the change, while still infusing his work with the Byzantine tradition.

### Who are these people?

The Virgin Mary (Madonna) and her son, the Christ Child, are present in many different scenes and narratives throughout the history of art. Here, the Christ Child gazes at his mother, who props him up above her hip, looking straight at us. She makes a sign of blessing with her right hand, her two forefingers brushing her son's chest. They sit in a divine space made entirely of gold, separate from the real world; their halos, created completely out of incised patterns on the gold leaf, remind us of their holiness. This scene—of only Mother and Child, against a sumptuous background—is commonly known as a depiction of Mary as the Queen of Heaven.

### What was this used for?

Although you cannot see it while you are in the galleries, on the backside of this painting are fragments of the original frame. These fragments suggest that this may have been the central image of a small three-part altarpiece, or **triptych**, with two panels to either side that folded over this image of the Madonna. But the altarpiece would not have been in a church; instead, it was used in the home for individual devotion, perhaps in a private chapel. This image of the holy figures was a window into their divine world, and a tool for aiding sincere,

serious prayer. A patron commissioned this work from Nardo for exactly that purpose. Although we do not know the patron's name, he (or she) was rich enough to afford a painting covered in gold and jewels, executed by a well-known artist. In light of the uncertainties of the European world just after the plague, studious faith was an important part of individual life for all social classes.

### Ideas for the classroom

- **LANGUAGE ARTS** Have students write each letter of the alphabet in list form on a piece of paper. As they look at the *Madonna and Child*, ask them to write a descriptive word that starts with each letter. Encourage students to use their most flourishing and precise vocabulary. This exercise can be used as a warm-up for writing a poem or short story using these words as inspiration.
- **SOCIAL STUDIES** What was it like to live during the time of the Black Death? With students, read all or part of the introduction to the “First Day” from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a novella written just after the Black Death (<http://bit.ly/9FuuCv>; see also Resources). Discuss ways in which the Black Death affected society: economy, religion, government, and individual life. How do we see these effects reflected in both the description from the *Decameron* and this painting of the *Madonna and Child*? Have students choose an aspect to research, incorporating primary source material from the *Decameron* and observations about the painting, and give an oral report.
- **SCIENCE** Have students make an element profile of gold, detailing its properties and uses. You may also want to ask them to research the many variations of gold using the *Conservation & Art Material Encyclopedia Online* (see Resources). What qualities make this element good as a material for art making? If you had gold to experiment with in science class, what lab report might you devise to explore its properties?
- **ART** Discuss the purpose of this altarpiece as a tool of meditation, and then have students create their own image of inspiration—a sort of window

into their imagination. Have students sketch a person or place that makes them feel calm and at ease; then use paint or ink to create a more finished image of their inspiration, and cut this image out. Affix this image to gold craft foil or heavy aluminum foil, mounted on foamcore or cardboard. Students can use the end of a thin paintbrush to “incise” designs into the aluminum foil, creating designs of an imaginary, otherworldly place.

## Resources



### On the Web

- Watch a video comparing two *Madonna and Child* paintings, one in the Byzantine style and the other from the Early Renaissance at <http://www.smarthistory.org/proto-renaissance.html>
- Learn more about the Black Death and life in Florence from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* at [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/index.php](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/index.php)
- Watch videos about the Black Death (appropriate for middle to high school students) at <http://www.pbs.org/teachers/connect/resources/823/preview/>
- Explore the Conservation & Art Material Encyclopedia Online (CAMEO) from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, with your students, especially the many different kinds of gold used in art, at <http://cameo.mfa.org/>
- See the links between the Black Death and genetic immunity in this lesson plan for high school students at <http://www.pbs.org/teachers/connect/resources/2953/preview/>



### Books

- Corrain, Lucia. *Masters of Art—Giotto and Medieval Art: The Lives and Works of the Medieval Artists*. New York: Peter Bedrick, 1995.
- Osborne, Mary Pope. *The Life of Jesus in Masterpieces of Art*. New York: Viking, 1998.

## Vocabulary

- Commission** To hire an artist to create a work of art
- Fresco** A method of painting using pigment (color) on plaster; can be dry (pigment applied onto already hardened plaster) or wet (pigment applied in layers onto plaster that is still drying)
- Gold leaf** Wafer-thin layer of gold
- Incision** Cutting into a surface
- Lapis lazuli** An expensive stone imported from Afghanistan that was used to make a bright blue pigment
- Pandemic** An outbreak of a disease that affects a large geographic area and a high number of people
- Patron** Someone who pays an artist to create a work of art for him/her
- Tempera** A type of paint consisting of pigment, water, and egg yolks
- Triptych** A three-part altarpiece
- Workshop** The studio and/or business of one or more artists

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