

2021 Columban Art Calendar

Art Guide



ST COLUMBAN'S MISSION SOCIETY

Front Cover



The Virgin and Child with a Pomegranate Tempera on wood
By the Workshop of Botticelli, Sandro, c.1480-1500
The National Gallery, London (Bequeathed by Lady Lindsay, 1912)

This beautiful depiction of Mary with her son Jesus is an intimate study of domestic motherhood and maternal love. The setting of a sandstone house with window views of the Florentine landscape suggests that the painting was commissioned for devotion within a family home. Jesus playfully teeters on the edge of the picture, as if about to walk into the devotee's living room.

Seeds of the pomegranate fruit are the playful and contemplative focus for both mother and child. By tradition, the pomegranate symbolised Christ's future passion where the glistening red seeds evoke droplets of spilt blood. The entire fruit held by the infant Jesus symbolises the hope of his Resurrection. Further, the many seeds enclosed within its hard shell, refers to the Church on earth, unified in the one body of Christ.

Sandro Botticelli was born in Florence at a time of great experimentation in the artistic language of religious art. Ever since Franciscan friars had preached on a new spirituality for ordinary people, some two-century earlier, paintings of Jesus and the saints became more naturalistic and accessible to emotion and experience. Thus the Christ child plays with his mother and his human physicality is revealed. Botticelli's initial training in a goldsmith's workshop is evident in the delicate precision of his brushstrokes along with the rendering of transparent golden haloes that conjure intricate metalwork. Yet the rich carmine red and ultramarine blue of the Virgin's garments continues to draw the eye back to the central figures.

January 2021



Christ and his Apostles on Lake Tiberias Greek Orthodox Icon | Thessalonica, Greece

This beautiful Icon is a contemplation on the miracle of Jesus calming the storm, recorded in the gospels of Matthew 8:23–27, Mark 4:35–41 and Luke 8:22–25. One evening when Jesus and his disciples were crossing the Lake Tiberias in a fishing boat, a sudden and furious storm developed. Jesus is identified by the Cross Halo along with the garments of dark blue and red. This juxtaposition of colours follows a long tradition in which the use of blue and red symbolise the divine and human nature of Christ, respectively. Christ is depicted twice in the unfolding narrative: asleep at the stern of the boat, then standing centrally beneath the unfurled sail with right arm outstretched. The swelling waters together with billowing sail convey the dramatic height of the storm and the moment of Christ's miraculous intervention. Afraid, the disciples woke him and asked, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" Mark's Gospel then states: "He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" The wind then ceased, and waters were calm'. The tiny naked figure to the upper left of the Icon is the antique deity of wind who blows the force of nature through a horn, thus controlling the fortunes of sailors and fishermen.



The gospel lesson is thus 'written' through the Icon, which meditates upon Jesus's words to all Christian disciples till the end of time: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40).

February 2021



Detail of the Christ Child from Madonna delle Ombre (Madonna of the Shadows) Fresco, 1450 by Fra Angelico (c1387-1455)

This enchanting detail of the Christ Child is part of a larger image depicting the Madonna and Child enthroned with eight saints. The Italian friar, Fra Angelico ("Angelic friar"), painted this picture as one in a series of monastic cell frescoes in the Dominican convent of San Marco, Florence, where he lived. Each fresco provided a spiritual focus for the monks during their private prayer.

Jesus is depicted as a child, yet he also bears the attributes of the iconic Salvator Mundi or Saviour of the world. The semi-transparent crystal ball he holds in the left hand refers to the celestial sphere of the heavens and is more often seen in icons of the adult Christ. Simultaneously Christ raises his right hand in a gesture of benediction for redeemed humanity.



Although Fra Angelico was painting during the fifteenth century Renaissance in Florence, his deeply spiritual works hark back to the contemplative tradition of medieval icons. Christ radiates divine luminosity; yet his face and curly golden hair are also modelled by soft directional light from a source to the left of the composition. Indeed this highly innovative work owes its name to the subtle effects of light and shadow, from a real light source within the convent setting of San Marco itself. Sun also filters into the architectural space that encloses Christ, creating a light-filled zone that is both transitory and eternal. This intent must have invited the friars into yet further consideration of the divine presence in their everyday lives.

March 2021



Christ's entry into Jerusalem Fresco (detail), 19th century | Church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris by Hippolyte Flandrin (1809–1864)

The French painter Hippolyte Flandrin is best known today for his monumental wall paintings in the churches of Paris, Nîmes and Lyon. Most notable are the frescoes in the sanctuary, choir, and nave of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris (1842–1861), where this monumental image of Christ's entry into Jerusalem is located on the north wall of the transept. Another massive restoration campaign for the church and the murals was completed in 2018-19.

Flandrin's painting style was strongly influenced by the Neo-classical movement, typified by his teacher and life-long friend, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867). Neoclassicism expresses nostalgia for a noble past, particularly in the light of the continuing upheavals of the French Revolution.



The depiction of Christ upon the donkey sets the biblical event outside the fortified holy city of Jerusalem. Poised in noble stillness at the centre of the composition, the figure of Jesus recalls equestrian statues of imperial figures from Antiquity. Christ is also larger in proportion and elevated above the crowd, who gaze towards him in silent awe and exultation. A golden halo frames the profile image of Christ, again echoing images of the Emperors found on antique Roman coins. Christ's steadfast gaze expresses determination and clarity of vision, reminding the faithful of the events to follow that will shortly lead to his passion and death. Poised above this vast frieze are painted figures of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, further enhancing its purpose as a reflective on the mystery of Christian redemption.

April 2021



Jesus Washing Peter's Feet Oil on canvas, 1876 by Brown, Ford Madox (1821-93)

The British painter, Ford Madox Brown, was drawn to moral and historical subjects and is also acclaimed for his sympathetic observations of modern working life in England. This painting of Christ washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper represents the artist's ongoing interest in this gospel story. It is an almost exact replica of another, now in the Tate Gallery, London (1852-6), which depicts Christ dressed in a green silk robe. This version portrays Jesus semi-clad with a towel tied around his waste, which caused an outcry when it was first exhibited and remained unsold until Brown reworked the figure in robes.

Brown's innovative study of the supper room in Jerusalem conveys a compressed and brightly illuminated space that hones the viewer's focus onto the humble action of Jesus, as he dries the feet of his apostle Peter. The unusually low viewpoint reinforces the moralizing theme of Christ as the humble servant of humanity. Brown's deep interest in the noble 'working man' is reflected in this painting, not only in his exploration of this moralizing biblical story, but also in the realistic depiction of the other apostles. Huddled together around the dining table, we see individual faces and characters who express emotions of shock, surprise and wonderment at the Lord's enactment of service towards them. Peter's concentration gaze upon Christ bathing ritual leads the viewer to also contemplate the future role of Peter as the 'rock' of the church – a leadership enacted in humble servitude.



May 2021



**Pentecost (detail) Oil on panel, c.1543
by Coecke van Aelst, Pieter (1502–50),
Flemish (Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo, Spain)**

The Flemish painter Pieter Coecke van Aelst the Elder worked in Antwerp and Brussels – the Low Countries of Belgium, during the cultural period known as the Northern Renaissance. Pieter was appointed court painter to Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, and was also an adept sculptor, architect, author and designer of woodcuts, stained glass and tapestries.

This detail of Pieter Coecke van Aelst's Pentecost or the Descent of the Holy Spirit shows the upper part of an oil painting on wood, now housed in the Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo, Spain. Following a long visual tradition in European painting of this subject, the figure of the praying Virgin Mary is emphatically the central focus of the composition, though Acts 2:1-4 makes no mention of the presence of women at Pentecost. The painting thereby overlays the biblical narrative with the teaching on the foundation of the Church with Mary as its pillar – Mater Ecclesia (Mother Church). This idea is stressed by the suggestion of the biblical upper room as a northern European church with stone piers, arches and a central rose window. Pieter also explores the visual dynamic of Renaissance perspective with the focal point culminating at the central window and the white dove of the Holy Spirit. The apostles gaze up in wonderment at the luminous manifestation of divine power and presence, and are transformed. Each individualised face expresses an awakening to the significance of the moment, and the calling to evangelize the four corners of the earth.



June 2021



Christ in the Temple Painted Ceramic Plaque (late 19th - early 20th century), Germany after Hofmann, Heinrich Karl (1824-1911)

This refined plaque of 'Christ in the Temple' is painted on porcelain, a vitrified pottery with a white body that is usually translucent and thus a suitable ground for painting. The work was produced by the prestigious German company known as KPM - Konigliche Porzellan-Manufaktur (Royal Porcelain Manufacture), founded 1763. The painted ceramic is considered to be a copy of an acclaimed painting on canvas of the same theme by the German artist, Heinrich Karl Hofmann (now in the Dresden Art Gallery in Germany).

Both the painting by Hofmann and this KPM plaque depict the scene described in the Gospel of St Luke.



Mary, Joseph and Jesus's relatives returned to the Temple in Jerusalem to find Jesus, whom they had lost for three days, discoursing with four theological authorities. All were astonished by the boy's wisdom and knowledge of scripture. The event is thus also known as the 'Finding in the Temple', 'Christ among the Doctors' or the 'Disputation'.



The composition shows the young twelve-year-old boy Jesus dressed in white robes and brightly illuminated by light that emanates from his being, a metaphor for his wisdom and a portent of his divinity. Jesus gestures to a book of Jewish scripture held by the seated Elder as the source of the 'disputation'. All listen intently to Jesus as he speaks. The painter has meticulously rendered the luminosity and sheen of satin, silk and velvet. Such fabrics reflect exoticism, anachronistic for the first century yet evocative of the European Renaissance interest in the trade of luxury fabrics.



The Magdalene kissing Christ's feet as he is taken down from the cross (detail: Christ and the Magdalene) Oil on canvas, 1904 by Prati, Eugenio (1842–1907)

The Italian painter Eugenio Prati was born in the province of Trentino, northern Italy and trained at the Academy of Fine Arts of Venice. This poignant detail of St Mary Magdalene conveys the moments after Christ's deposition from the cross at Calvary, as she moves to kiss and cradle the feet of her lord. The painting, in its entirety, has a wide horizontal format that renders Jesus lying upon the ground and partially shrouded in preparation for burial.



St Mary Magdalene's moving gesture echoes the gospel accounts of the anointing of Jesus's head or feet at a supper. While the four biblical versions vary in emphasis, the central message is similar and refers to the impending death of Jesus: "She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial". The 'sinful' woman also weeps tears to bathe Jesus' feet, using her unbound hair as a towel to dry them, and then kisses his feet. The gesture also recalls Christ's act of humble service and example in washing the feet of his apostles at the last supper.

Stylistically, Prati renders his subject with free and expressive brush strokes, using soft colour harmonies that are infused with the luminous light of dusk. The influence of the European art movement known as Romanticism is very apparent, with its characteristic emphasis on intense emotion such as apprehension, grief and sorrow, compassion, horror and awe. This was partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, population growth, and early urban sprawl in the cities of Europe.

August 2021



Noah sending forth the dove, during the Flood Chromolitho, French After Morris, Philip Richard (1838-1902)

This evocative image was inspired by the scriptural book of Genesis, which narrates the story of the Great Flood, and Noah and the Ark containing all forms of living creatures. Captured here is the moment of apprehension and hope for humanity in its history of yearning for peace and harmony with the divine creator. Genesis tells that Noah and his family, enclosed within the ark, finally came to rest atop Mount Ararat. In order to test if the waters had subsided sufficiently, Noah released three consecutive doves over a period of three weeks. The third and final dove did not return, thus affirming that the floodwaters had receded, and dry land was revealed for nesting. Humanity could then begin again to establish life in the world. 'Then God said to Noah, "Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along the ground, so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number upon it." (Gen. 8: 16-17). Which of the three doves is depicted thus becomes irrelevant in this picture, since each dove is released with a prayer to God of reconciliation of creatures with their creator.



Chromolithography is a multi-coloured printing method developed in the 19th century. This print is based on an original oil painting by the English painter, Philip Richard Morris, and is now held by the Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council, UK.

September 2021



The raising of Lazarus Illustration from a catechism 'L'Histoire Sainte' (published by Charles Delagrave, Paris), late 19th century Colour litho, French School.

The catechism known as 'L'Histoire Sainte' (Holy History), was designed to teach history to children through illustrated stories from the bible. Charles Marie Eugène Delagrave (1842–1934) was a French publisher and editor who specialized in producing these educational works. Printed books with colour illustrations were created using the new process of lithography, invented in the late eighteenth century, based on the chemical repellence of oil and water worked on a stone surface. It made colour printing easier because areas of different colours could be applied to separate stones and overprinted onto the same sheet.



SEPTEMBER 2021



After the French revolution (1789-99) the Holy History and religious education continued to be taught in denominational schools. However the law of 28 March 1882 suppressed 'L'Histoire Sainte' by reframing the history of the Jews as ancient history. Illustrated books of Holy History contain a complete narration of the Bible through its division into eight chronological eras: those of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Cyrus, followed by Jesus in the Gospels and finally, the Church.

This raising of Lazarus illustration is part of the Gospels era of the history. The rendering of Christ, the two Marys' and bystanders in brightly coloured robes and with dramatic gestures, contrasts with the static tonality of rock and stone. Jesus's miracle is revealed when he holds forth his hand and commands the tomb slab to be opened, revealing the dead Lazarus emerging alive from his tomb still bound in winding cloths.

October 2021



The Marriage of the Virgin (detail) Oil on panel, c.1500 by Perugino, Pietro (c.1445–1523)

This large and vibrant wall painting can be found in the Shrine of Our Lady of Miracles at Saronno in northern Italy. The artist, Bernardino Luini, was an acclaimed master of the Lombard school of painting, which was based on the style of Leonardo da Vinci during the High Renaissance. The frescoes in Saronno, painted towards 1525, represent the life of the Virgin Mary, to which this depiction of her “Marriage” belongs.

The four canonical Gospels make no mention of the espousal of the Virgin. However the narrative is introduced in early apocryphal writing on the life of Mary, and later amplified in the popular thirteenth century text, The Golden Legend. The latter provided artists with a rich imaginative source for narrative painting throughout the Renaissance period. The fresco focuses on the moment of espousal between the Virgin Mary and Joseph, when the Jewish high priest of the temple presents Mary’s hand to receive the ring. The group of young men to the left of the picture enact the breaking of their wooden rods, in anger at not winning the hand of Mary. Joseph’s rod, instead, has burst into flower. According to the Legend, *Joseph ... brought forth his rod, and anon it flowered ... so that it was clearly the advice of every man that he should have the virgin.*



Bernardino’s figures express grace and refinement; and along with the rich palette of blues, greens, ochres, reds and alchemic purples – a serene and harmonious sense of beauty.

November 2021



The Return of the Prodigal Son
Oil on canvas (c.1655) Timken Museum of Art.
San Diego CA by Barbieri, Giovanni Francesco (1591-1666)

Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, better known as Il Guercino, was from the Emilia region of northern Italy near Bologna. Barbieri painted this biblical scene on five separate occasions over his long career, the first in 1617, and the last being this version from around 1655. Captured here is the climactic moment in Luke's Gospel 15:30-32 when the wayward son – shown semi-naked and full of remorse and shame - returns to his father's home after wasting his inheritance. The father, identified by his luxurious apparel, receives him with a gesture of welcome and unconditional love.

Cowering to the left of the picture is either the older brother or a servant, perhaps both playing a singular role. For according to the parable, the brother objects to the father's compassion for the sinful son: "Behold, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed a commandment of yours, but you never gave me a goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this, your son, came, who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him." To cement the moral of the parable the father replied, "But it was appropriate to celebrate and be glad, for this, your brother, was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found".



Also unique to Barbieri's version of the parable in this painting are the moving gestures of reconciliation and forgiveness: father and son embrace at the wrist while the father wraps the boy's nakedness with his cloak.

December 2021



The worship and offerings of the Wise Men Colour litho, c.1880 Preceptive illustrations of the Bible (published by Thomas Varty)

This delightful hand-coloured lithographic print is part of book of illustrations depicting famous events in the Bible. According an inscription in the first edition published by Thomas Varty (c.1850), the illustrations were 'designed to aid scriptural instruction in schools, and as a help to home education'.

The subject of the worship or Adoration of the child Jesus by the Three Magi or wise men is inspired by the gospel of Matthew. A group of scholarly men from Sheba, Arabia and Egypt travelled to Bethlehem in



Judea asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" When they found Jesus, Mary and Joseph they would have been residing in a modest house, possibly still in Bethlehem, suggested in the picture by the crumbling brick wall and simple furnishings. By contrast, the Wise Men are depicted wearing oriental turbans and bright red and blue cloaks with gold trims and tartan ties. By this time Jesus would have been aged between one and two. Their opulent gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh also carry symbolic value in relation to the adoration of a divine king. Gold was anciently affiliated with kings, frankincense was used in temple worship, and myrrh - a sweet-smelling fragrance - was embedded on the deceased. Myrrh thereby referred to the sacrificial death Jesus would endure for humanity. The illustrator also conveys an ideal of motherhood and beauty in Mary's young face and baby Jesus's chubby, curious and amused response to the oriental visitors.

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