



ART GUIDES FOR EDUCATORS:

GIROLAMO GENGA



Image credit: Genga, Girolamo, *Madonna Enthroned with Christ Child and Saints Pantaleon, Joseph, Prisca, and Anthony Abbott*. 1996.254. Oil on poplar.

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MEET THE ARTIST

Girolamo Genga (1476-1551) began painting at the age of 15. Genga learned his craft as an apprentice studying under master painters, learning painting technique by helping to complete their commissions. He also learned how to use perspective and line to create three-dimensional spaces on flat surfaces. This skill translated into his later career as an architect.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

This painting from the Italian Renaissance is a *sacre conversazione* (Italian for “sacred conversation”), an informal grouping that includes the Madonna (Mary), holding an infant Jesus, while surrounded by four saints. Paintings in this format provided a composition for figures to interact within a unified space. The saints, Pantaleon, Joseph, Prisca, and Anthony Abbot, are from different periods in history but are shown together here, each identified by the artist’s use of specific images and symbols, called “iconography.” Icons are symbols that hold shared meaning by a community and help to tell a story.

During the Renaissance most artists, including Genga, worked on commission; patrons would describe what they wanted artists to create and pay for the artwork. The Catholic Church was a major patron of the arts. Art that featured important religious figures was displayed in public or private chapels and churches.

Paintings such as this were widely used to convey belief in a religious context. Artists relied on conventions, or standardized and commonly understood methods, to identify characters in a story. For example, Mary, the woman in the center of the painting, is usually dressed in a blue robe. Each person in the painting has a halo above their head to identify them as being holy. Joseph, the figure to the left of Mary, is holding a budding staff, which alludes to a passage in the Bible recounting Joseph’s betrothal to Mary. Saint Prisca, standing between Mary and Joseph, is holding a cross, with an eagle, her symbol, at her feet. Paintings like this were used to remind people of religious beliefs associated with the saints and their stories. During the time in which this image was painted most people could not read; images were used to convey messages, stories, and beliefs.

LOOK CLOSELY

Encourage students to spend several minutes silently observing this painting. Have them keep a record of details they notice, and write down any questions they may think of. Have students share their observations.

- What is going on in the painting? What does the student SEE that makes them think this?
- How are the subjects positioned? What might this tell the viewer about their relationship to one another?
- Where is the focus of the painting? Where is the viewer’s eye drawn first?

- What details might be clues to help the viewer identify the figures?
- Why might these symbols have been more easily recognized in the past?
 - + What symbols do you see in daily life?
 - + Are these widely recognized within your community?
 - + What is the meaning behind these images?
 - + How does an image become a cultural symbol?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS

Cultural Symbolism

Symbols frequently change meaning over time. Many symbols from the past, which would have been easily known by many people, have become unrecognizable, or their meanings have drastically changed. The meanings of some symbols are limited to specialized audiences.

1. Have students identify the objects they think could be symbols or attributes in the painting. Brainstorm possible meanings for these.
2. Have students research these symbols, using a symbol dictionary or other tools. What do these symbols tell us about the saints the artist painted?
3. Have students select a contemporary symbol (for example: peace sign, pink ribbon) they are interested in learning more about and have them research it.
4. Have students write a short, persuasive essay explaining what the symbol communicates, making the case for why their chosen symbol is culturally relevant.

HISTORY/ENGLISH/BIOLOGY

Choosing our National Bird

The eagle at her feet helps historians identify Saint Prisca, the young woman standing over Mary’s left shoulder. The eagle, considered the “king of the skies” has symbolized courage, strength, and power, going back to Ancient Rome. The bald eagle was chosen as the emblem of America in 1782, when it was first used on the Great Seal. Not everyone agreed with the choice of a bald eagle as our national symbol. Benjamin Franklin wrote:

I wish that the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country, he is a bird of bad moral character, he does not get his living honestly, you may have seen him perched on some dead tree, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the labor of the fishing-hawk, and when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish, and is bearing it to its nest for the support of his mate and young ones, the bald eagle pursues him and takes it from him.... Besides he is a rank coward; the little kingbird, not bigger than a sparrow attacks him boldly and drives him out of the district. He is therefore by no means a proper emblem for the brave and honest . . . of America . . . For a truth, the turkey is in comparison a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of

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America . . . a bird of courage, and would not hesitate to attack a grenadier of the British guards, who should presume to invade his farmyard with a red coat on.

1. Have students research the physical traits of bald eagles, and those of another bird (Benjamin Franklin's choice to represent America was a turkey!).
2. Create a Venn diagram, comparing and contrasting these traits.
3. Have students write an essay to support either keeping the bald eagle as our national emblem, or changing it to another bird.
4. Have students debate their position, and then vote as a class to determine which side was most persuasive.
5. Ask students to consider a conversation between two historic figures they've previously studied (this might be a real or imagined conversation).
6. What attributes could be included to help viewers identify the subjects?
7. Draw these figures together, as though they were holding a private conversation. Pay attention to body language and posture.
8. Compare and discuss portraits and attributes as a class. Can classmates identify the subjects of the drawings? What might the figures be discussing?

ART STARTS

During the Renaissance, painters such as Genga were commissioned to create visual narratives the viewer could "read" and be reminded of biblical or historical stories. Attributes, or objects associated with a person, or their position, help viewers identify the subjects in the painting. Examples of attributes include the crown jewels of a king, the trident of Neptune, or the caduceus of a physician.

LEARN MORE

<http://www.symbols.com/>

<http://symboldictionary.net/>

<http://www.nwf.org/news-and-magazines/national-wildlife/birds/archives/2007/americas-first-bird-controversy.aspx>