

Christmas Day. 25th December

Because the early Christians, many with a background in Judaism, debated the use of images in worship, they tended to use symbols or signs, readily recognizable to the believer, but enigmatic to outsiders. Since they were the inheritors of over 1000 years of image making which narrated stories involving human figures, they were in fact sophisticated consumers of representations which were used in the Roman empire for selling, politics, decoration as well as worship.

The earliest phase is found in the catacombs – underground burial grounds – chiefly in Rome.

Left: Detail from the sarcophagus of Marcus Claudianus c 330

Right: Detail from the sarcophagus of Stilicho c 408



The indispensable element in these early Nativities, apart from the swaddled baby, was "the ox and the ass" so familiar to us from Nativity plays and hymns. However they do not appear in the accounts of Jesus' birth which we find in Matthew and Luke. Instead they come from the Old Testament

Isaiah 1

1 The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. 2 Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. 3 The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

This is an excellent example of how the images do not narrate/"teach" anything, contrary to popular views of Christian images as "the Bible of the poor" (ie, illiterate). You had to be "in the know", from hearing Scripture read and listening to sermons (which customarily went for an hour or more, so much information could be conveyed) and/or undergoing the lengthy teaching preparation for catechumens before baptism to understand the meaning of these scenes.

In fact the first more elaborate scenes do not focus on the birth at all, but rather on the visit of the kings/magi/wise men to the baby. This in fact was a perfect vehicle for expressing the simultaneous humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ, as affirmed in the Nicene Creed (325 and 381). How to demonstrate visually that this normal looking human baby in fact is the Son of God? The men who came to worship were themselves highly placed in human terms; they would worship no human below their own standing

Matthew 2

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

Although there is no mention in the Gospel of how many "wise men" there were, the fact that three gifts are mentioned has led to there being three in most representations. Very early the three gifts were seen as having symbolic significance – gold representing earthly wealth, frankincense the offering to gods, and myrrh for anointing the dead. The emphasis in images however was not on the gifts, but on the "bowing down", drawing also on Psalm 72

11 May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

- an emphasis found also in the usual descriptor for this scene "The Adoration of the Magi"

Again, the earliest versions are quite minimal, but also quite common. A representative example is the "Dogmatic Sarcophagus" (before 350)



The pointed caps worn by the Magi, and their un-Roman tunic and leggings garb immediately identify them as "from the East". Notice that the child acts like a human baby, touching the gift, but at the same time enthronement is suggested by his position on Mary's lap, and her position in a formal chair/trone.

By the 6th c - below, in S Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna c 565 the kings are already being shown as "three ages"; later they will acquire even more specific characteristics, and indeed names – Caspar, Melchior and Balthassar.



The emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, and hence on emotion which was part of the legacy of St Francis' influence, is clear in Giotto's fresco in the Arena Chapel (1304-6) with the king humbly kissing the baby's foot, a popular motif from this time on.



The "star", often understood to be a comet, is represented by Comet Halley, which had a particularly bright apparition in 1301. (For this reason the space probe to Comet Halley in its earth approach in 1986 was named Giotto).

The most spectacular version of the journey of the Magi is that painted by Gozzoli, which wraps around the chapel in the Medici family residence in Florence (1459-61)



Troops of animals and men in contemporary dress parade solemnly, with, at the head, a magnificently garbed figure – a portrait of the Emperor John VIII Paleologus,, who had attended the Council of Florence in 1438-9, an attempt to reconcile the Eastern and Western churches. Members of the Medici family are also portrayed.

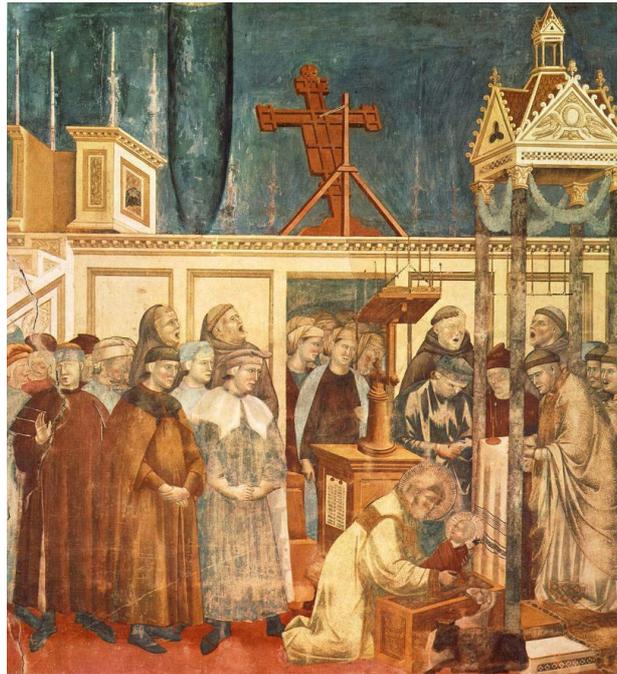


This tendency to represent the event as happening in a local landscape, and in contemporary dress, even with specific individuals, is connected to an understanding of the events narrated in the Gospels as eternally true, rather than historically distanced. 19th c attempts to provide “accurate” historical detail in fact indicate an erosion of faith, rather than a “truer” version of events.

In Botticelli’s Nativity of 1475 we also see members of the Medici family – but also the artist himself, the young man on the extreme right in a light brown robe who gazes out at us, inviting us to witness this wonderful Child for ourselves.



The use of a "live" creche set up in the church is also usually attributed to Francis of Assisi, and is memorably painted by Giotto in his cycle of the Life of Francis in the Upper Church of San Francesco in Assisi (1295)



In 1500-01, towards the end of his career, Botticelli painted an unusual Nativity, now in London, known as "The Mystical Nativity" following a comment by Ruskin about the artist's "mystic symbolism." This is of the type known as "The Madonna of Humility," very popular in the 16th c, which shows the baby on the ground, and the Mary kneeling.



The Greek inscription at the top translates as

This picture, at the end of the year 1500, in the troubles of Italy, I, Alessandro, (ie, Sandro Botticelli) in the half-time after the time, painted, according to the eleventh of Saint John, in the second woe of the Apocalypse, during the release of the devil for three and a half years; then he shall be bound in the twelfth and we shall see [him buried] as in this picture'.

It was a troubled period in and around Florence, and Botticelli had been influenced by the monk Savonarola, who powerfully denounced contemporary evils.

Overall, however, the mood is joyful, encompassing both Jesus' birth, his death (evoked by the white shroud-like cloth on which He lies) and the celebration of his coming again., for at the foot, we see a visual evocation of Psalm 85 in the angels embracing clad in the colours of faith (white), hope (green) and Charity (red) – embracing three men.

9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. 10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. 11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.



Above, a trio of angels in the same colours crown the stable, and above them a ring of angels exultantly dance in a golden heavens.



A baby born for all humanity.
This little ivory Nativity was carved in Sri Lanka between 1575 and 1625 after contact with Portuguese evangelists

