

## Epiphany and Baptism

The first two Sundays after Christmas are now devoted to celebrating first, the Epiphany – the “showing” of Jesus to the Wise Men from the East, representing the Gentiles and second, Jesus’ Baptism. In the past the “Theophany” or “showing” of Jesus was celebrated on 6<sup>th</sup> January – Epiphany, Baptism and Jesus’ first miracle at the wedding in Cana – all at once. In the Orthodox calendar the Epiphany and Baptism are both still on 6<sup>th</sup>.

Among the many images of the Adoration of the Magi two are particularly well known. Gentile da Fabriano painted a richly decorative panel, commissioned by a wealthy Florentine banker, Palla Strozzi, for his family chapel in Santa Trinita in 1423. The panel is now in the Uffizi Gallery. The style is often called International Gothic, suggesting the pan-European flow of goods and money during this period. The artist uses many details to establish the exotic “Eastern” origin of the Kings – the animals, the rich textiles, and even pseudo-Arabic script on the haloes. The painting is also particularly opulent in its use of blue pigment, derived by a long and laborious process, from lapis lazuli which is only obtainable from Afghanistan, and gold leaf from West Africa, applied over raised areas. This luxurious display is in marked contrast to early examples of the Adoration. (see 25<sup>th</sup> December)





Leonardo da Vinci is notorious for not completing many of his multiple projects. (Kenneth Clark noted a recurrent phrase in his notebooks; "Tell me was anything ever done".) His Adoration is an unfinished oil drawing on wood done in 1481 - although it was a commission from Augustinian monks he abandoned it on his departure from Florence to work in Milan. It too is in the Uffizi. Controversy rages as to how much of what we now see on the panel is Leonardo's own work, since after being kept in a storeroom for a long time it was apparently "finished" by another artist. Although the treatment of perspective and the interest in detailed observations of plants, poses and expressions are all consistent with Leonardo's style the actual brushwork is probably not his, although a six year long cleaning, completed in 2017 (seen below) makes some details much clearer.



Another early work with which Leonardo is associated is the **Baptism** of Christ by his master Verrocchio, painted between 1470 and 1475, when Leonardo was around 20. Typically in a workshop the master would paint the main figures – or perhaps only the heads and hands – and assistants would paint the rest. The difference between the two angels is so striking that the attribution of the left hand one to Leonardo is not surprising.



The very earliest images of the Baptism of Jesus by John occur in the Catacombs and on sarcophagi (coffins) and are typically minimalist – here from the Catacomb of Callixtus c 250 and the Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus c 270.

The association with burials strengthens the associations of baptism as a death and rebirth of the believer. Also typically the Spirit “like a dove” is seen descending diagonally, and John is much larger than Jesus. This fits with John 3:30 “he must increase, but I must decrease” and also with the idea that the baptized was a “little one” in the faith.



Piero della Francesca’s mysterious and beautiful Baptism – possibly c 1448 -1450- has been the subject of innumerable studies. Originally commissioned by a monastery in Sansepolcro in Tuscany (Piero’s home town) it is now in the National Gallery in London. While aspects of its iconography are quite conventional for its time – the dove with outstretched wings descending from above, the presence of other figures – other details are harder to comprehend. Even without understanding them, however, the harmonious geometry and cool palette of the painting stand out.

