

Italian
Renaissance
Learning
Resources

In collaboration with
the National Gallery of Art



Virgin and Child:
Activities

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

1. An Icon Painter in Venice

In this activity, students look at three paintings by El Greco, who was initially trained as an icon painter in his native Crete. He studied Western-style painting in Venice and Rome before moving to Spain. The artist probably painted two of the works under discussion while he was in Venice.

PURPOSE: to prompt students to use what they have learned about the styles of Byzantine icons and Venetian Renaissance paintings to identify those characteristics in a work of art.

MATERIALS: reproductions of El Greco's *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin* icon [fig. 1], *Christ Cleansing the Temple*, and *The Miracle of Christ Healing the Blind*

PROCEDURE: Project the three images in class and initiate a discussion of the works' style. Have students identify elements of Byzantine and/or Renaissance style painting in each.

Byzantine qualities might include: abstraction, use of gold, "unreal" space, formal pose of the infant, frontal Virgin, striated highlights in drapery

Renaissance qualities might include: believable recession of space, evocation of ancient Roman architecture, rich color and bold brushwork (*Cleansing the Temple*), bodies with natural mass and movement.

GLOSSARY: **El Greco**

RESOURCES (about El Greco's time in Italy):

Hadjinicolaou, Nicos, ed. *El Greco in Italy and Italian Art: Proceedings of the International Symposium*. Rethymno: University of Crete, 1999.

Hadjinicolaou, Nicos, ed. *El Greco in Italy and Italian Art*. Athens: National Gallery Alexandros Soutzos Museum, 1995.

Hadjinicolaou, Nicos, ed. *El Greco: Byzantium and Italy*. Rethymno: Crete University Press, 1990.

1. An Icon Painter in Venice:
Image Reference



Fig. 1: El Greco
Saint Luke Painting the Virgin, before 1567
Tempera and gold on canvas attached to panel, 41.6 x 33 cm (16 3/16 x 12 7/8 in.)
Benaki Museum, Athens
© 2012 by Benaki Museum, Athens

2. How Does That Strike You?

In this activity, the class creates word clouds for three devotional pictures: one Madonna in the Byzantine style and two others created by Giovanni Bellini and Raphael.

PURPOSE: to prompt students to see and describe stylistic differences and to reflect on how they affect viewers' responses.

PROCEDURE: After projecting each image in class, have each student submit five words that characterize its style, then another five words that describe his/her own reaction to the painting. Use these responses to create six word clouds: one set for the style of each of the three paintings, one for students' responses to them. Discuss the results.

MATERIALS: images of the Hodegetria [fig. 2], Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna and Child* [fig. 3], and Raphael's *The Alba Madonna* [fig. 4].

Other images can be substituted; these are offered as suggestions only.

A Smart Board, if available, will facilitate collection of the word banks and display of the results.

GLOSSARY: Giovanni Bellini, Raphael

RESOURCES: Word clouds can be created at wordle.net and other sites. (Note that wordle and other sites may include posts with objectionable content, **but there are ways to address this.**)

2. How Does That Strike You: Image Reference



Fig. 2 Russian, 16th century?
Icon with the *Virgin Hodegetria*
Silver-gilt, brass, and enamel painting,
74 x 52 cm (28 13/16 x 20 5/16 in.)
British Museum, London
© Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 3 Giovanni Bellini
Madonna and Child, c. 1510
Oil on panel, 68.9 x 73 cm (27 1/8 x 28 3/4 in.)
High Museum of Art, Atlanta,
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation



Fig. 4 Raphael
The Alba Madonna, c. 1510
Oil on panel transferred to canvas,
diameter 94.5 cm (37 3/16 in.)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC,
Andrew W. Mellon Collection
Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees,
National Gallery of Art

3. Icon vs. Iconic

This activity is a classroom discussion about what we mean when we use the words *icon* and *iconic* today.

PURPOSE: to prompt students to consider what in today's iconic images is or is not like the icons produced for devotional purposes

PROCEDURE: Ask students to bring in reproductions of media images or works of art they consider iconic. Discuss their relation to the icons presented in this unit. Consider the images' origin, authority, appeal, impact, and universality. Do elements of their visual style resemble those of devotional icons (frontality, simplicity, or other qualities)?

GLOSSARY: **icon**

4. Signs and Symbols

ELEMENTARY / ADVANCED

In this activity, students research the iconography commonly employed in Renaissance images of the Virgin and Child.

PURPOSE: to familiarize students with the symbols used in the devotional images under study.

Procedure: In class, project a selection of images presented in parts II and III of this **unit's essay**, asking students to write down elements that they think might be used symbolically. Have them research these to learn the various meanings attached to plants and fruits, shells, books, bare trees, birds, vases, stars, the sleeping infant, and any other items they identify. Extend the activity by asking them to research how and why these symbols acquired the meanings they have.

GLOSSARY: **iconography**

RESOURCES: Several print and online sources describe Christian symbols. You might start with:

Pierce, James Smith, and H. W. Janson. *From Abacus to Zeus: A Handbook of Art History*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

Hall, James. *A History of Ideas and Images in Italian Art*. New York: Harper & Row, 1983.

5. Portraits vs. Devotional Pictures

In this activity, students compare portraits by Giovanni Bellini and Raphael to the “portraits” they painted of the Virgin.

PURPOSE: to prompt students to consider how devotional images of the Virgin and Child are like and unlike conventional portraits and to consider the reasons for the similarities and differences

MATERIALS: images of the Virgin and Child by Giovanni Bellini and Raphael presented in this unit (select from the **unit images**), Bellini’s *Portrait of the Doge Leonardo Loredan*, and Raphael’s *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione*.

PROCEDURE: After showing the latter two portraits in class, have students research the two subjects. Return to discuss the portraits’ formal similarities to the devotional images of the Virgin and Child (e.g., half-length, frontal or three-quarter poses, and other characteristics). Question whether one portrait is more like an icon than the other. Ask how the identity of the sitter and his relationship to the artist might have affected the way the portrait looks.

GLOSSARY: Giovanni Bellini, Raphael, Baldassare Castiglione, Leonardo Loredan

6. The Procession

In this activity, students explore the spectacle and public role of devotional images in Florence. Specifically, students will imagine what it would be like to participate in or witness a public procession of the Impruneta virgin or another devotional image they research and identify.

PURPOSE: to prompt students to explore the use of sacred images in public life during the Renaissance and write creatively.

MATERIALS: image of the Impruneta [fig. 5].

Students may also search for additional devotional images used in Florentine public processions.

PROCEDURE: Show the image of the Impruneta and ask students to read “A Florentine rails against an image of Saint John the Baptist” and “Savonarola on images.” Then ask them to imagine themselves as a witness to (or even a participant in) her procession to the city. Ask the students to record their “experience” in a journal entry or letter. They can also compose a tweet about it

6. The Procession



Fig. 5 Florentine, 11th century
Tempietto della Madonna with “The Impruneta”
S. Maria, Impruneta, Italy
Scala/Art Resource, NY