SAINT NICHOLAS OF TOLENTINO SAVING A SHIPWRECK

This small panel painting shows Saint Nicholas of Tolentino (to-len-TEE-no) in the miraculous act of saving a ship wrecked in a storm. Made in 1457 by Giovanni di Paolo (jo-VAH-nee dee-POW-lo), the panel was part of a large altarpiece that was dedicated to Saint Nicholas of Tolentino and consisted of a central image of the saint flanked by smaller paintings depicting events in his life and miracles he performed.

The altarpiece was in a church in Montepulciano (a town south of Siena) at which Augustinian friars worshiped daily. Saint Nicholas was himself an Augustinian, a member of the religious order of friars dedicated to following the monastic rule established by Saint Augustine. As they prayed in front of this altarpiece, the friars could enjoy the beauty of the paintings and feel proud that Saint Nicholas of Tolentino also came from the Augustinian order. Each panel reminded the monks of a different miracle or virtue attributed to the saint they revered and may have encouraged them to live by his example.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Although Giovanni di Paolo was a popular artist in his time, we know little of his early life and training. His birth date has not been firmly established, nor can the artists with whom he apprenticed be confirmed. It is known, however, that by 1417 he was working in Siena.

Giovanni di Paolo excelled in portraying religious stories, and his interpretations of such themes are highly imaginative and personal. His dramatic and mystical depictions of fantastic worlds set his work apart from that of other artists of his generation. This highly expressive style seems to have been particularly appreciated by local monastic communities, from whom Giovanni received numerous commissions, including this painting of Saint Nicholas.
ABOUT THE STORY

This panel painting tells the story of one of the many miracles that Saint Nicholas of Tolentino reputedly performed after his death. Nine passengers kneel on the decks of a wrecked ship, praying for Saint Nicholas’s aid. He appears in the sky, radiating golden light and wearing the black habit of the Augustinian order. With his right hand he quells the storm. In his left hand he holds a lily, one of his attributes (identifying symbols). In the sky the ship’s broken sails blow about on a furious wind. In the turbulent waters below, a mermaid—the supposed cause of the storm—swims amid mountainous waves.

The painting portrays this miraculous salvation as recorded by survivors of a shipwreck in the fifteenth century. The artist included in his composition many of the details described in the survivors’ written testimony: brackish, dark-green water, hill-like waves, and a flash of light around Saint Nicholas of Tolentino.

ABOUT SAINT NICHOLAS OF TOLENTINO

Nicholas of Tolentino devoted his life to preaching and good works. Born in the town of Sant’Angelo around 1246, about two centuries before this painting was made, he lived—and is said to have worked many miracles—in and around the city of Tolentino, in eastern Italy. In 1446, one hundred forty years after his death, Nicholas was canonized (officially designated a saint by the Roman Catholic Church) by Pope Eugene IV. At the hearings for his canonization, at least 371 people gave witness to miracles performed by him. Survivors of the shipwreck portrayed in the painting were among those who testified.

THE ROLE OF SAINTS IN RENAISSANCE ART

Stories from the lives of saints (real people upon whom the Church conferred special status for their holiness) were popular subjects for artists in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Some saints were martyrs, individuals who died for their religious beliefs. Others, like Nicholas of Tolentino, were credited with good deeds and miraculous events, such as healing an invalid or saving a ship at sea. All saints were venerated for their commitment to God and to the Church. Looked to both as inspiring examples and as intercessors between the faithful and God, saints were adopted as patrons of kingdoms, cities, professions, crafts, institutions, and as protectors against disease and disaster.
ITALIAN ALTARPIECES

Altarpieces—works of art made to decorate the area above and behind the altar—became common in Italian churches in the early thirteenth century. There could be a number of altarpieces in any one church, adorning the main altar as well as those in the small private chapels. Altars were also found in private homes as well as hospitals and other institutions.

Various factors determined the size, shape, and content of an altarpiece, including the budget, personal tastes, and interests of the patron, the intended location, and, of course, the artist. Moreover, if an altar contained a relic (an object venerated for its association with a saint or martyr), this would be reflected in the subject matter and design of the altarpiece.

WHY THE PAINTING IS NO LONGER PART OF AN ALTARPIECE

From the late 1790s to about 1860, Italy underwent a series of political upheavals, at which time the property of churches and other religious institutions was confiscated. Many works of art were acquired by Italian museums or redistributed to the churches themselves, but others were purchased by private collectors. These altarpieces were often cut apart. This fragment was purchased by John G. Johnson in 1914 and came to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1933.

DIRECTED LOOKING

• Where do you think this event is occurring? How do you know?

• What is the weather like? How do you know?
  
  The event is taking place during a storm—note the large waves, snapped masts, torn sails, and dark sky.

• Where do you see people? What are they doing?
  
  There are people kneeling and praying on the deck of the ship, flying above the ship, and swimming below the ship.

• This painting illustrates an event that survivors recounted in the 1400s. Can you think of a story to fit this picture?
  
  Tell students the story of Saint Nicholas saving a ship. Point out the details that Giovanni di Paolo included.
Giovanni di Paolo was known for creating highly dramatic paintings of religious stories. What elements of this painting seem dramatic?

The dramatic elements of this painting include the dark sky and wildly fluttering broken sails, Saint Nicholas bursting through the clouds, praying passengers, mountainous waves, and the mysterious mermaid. The use of dark colors—deep greens in particular—contrasted against the bright gold surrounding Saint Nicholas, the yellow deck of the ship, and the streak of yellow across the horizon all add to the drama of this painting.

What did the artist do to make this painting seem three-dimensional? Look for diagonal lines, which suggest distance, and shading, which suggests rounded forms.

Note, for example, how the waves move in diagonals towards the horizon.

COMPARING

Find other paintings depicting supernatural events. How are they different? How are they similar?

Find other paintings portraying storms at sea. How are they different? How are they similar?

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Giovanni di Paolo had to choose one moment of the story of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino saving a ship. Does the moment he chose do a good job of telling the story? Why or why not?

Discuss this work as part of a large, multi-paneled altarpiece. How would seeing this work along with other paintings about Saint Nicholas affect the way you viewed it?

Discuss the idea of a miracle. Are miracles still being reported today?

ACTIVITIES

Just as Giovanni di Paolo chose one moment of a story to illustrate, have students choose a story and tell it with only one picture.

Giovanni di Paolo based this painting on the accounts of witnesses. Have students choose a newspaper article about an event or a description of an historical event in a book and illustrate it. Or, have students describe an event in their lives to one another to illustrate.
• Talk about how this painting was originally part of a large altarpiece that had a central image of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino surrounded by smaller paintings depicting some of the miracles he performed. Have students create a group of pictures that tell about themselves or an historical figure of their choice.

**TIMELINE**

1412  
Italian architect Filippo Brunelleschi sets down the rules of linear perspective

1415  
Henry V defeats the French Army at Agincourt, enabling England to conquer much of France

1431  
Joan of Arc is burned at the stake in Rouen, France

1438  
Incan ruler Pachacuti establishes the dynasty that prevails until Spanish conquistadors vanquish the empire a century later

1444  
Kidnapped Africans sold at Portuguese slave markets

1453  
Turks conquer Constantinople, ending the Byzantine Empire

1455  
Gutenberg Bible is the first large book to be printed from movable metal type

1457  
Giovanni di Paolo paints the panel from an altarpiece Saint Nicholas of Tolentino Saving a Shipwreck

1477  
Japan’s ten-year civil war ends indecisively, century of internal wars ensues

1478  
Spanish Inquisition is established by Pope Sixtus IV at the request of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella

1488  
Portuguese navigator Bartholomeu Dias rounds the Cape of Good Hope, advancing European exploration of Africa

1492  
Ferdinand and Isabella conquer Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Spain  
Christopher Columbus reaches the Americas

1498  
Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama establishes a sea route from western Europe around Africa to India, opening India to direct trade with Europe
c. 1504  Leonardo da Vinci paints Mona Lisa
         Michelangelo carves David

1513   Spanish explorer Vasco Nuñez de Balboa sights the Pacific Ocean

1514   Portugal establishes trade with China

1521   Spanish commander Hernando Cortés conquers the capital of the Aztec empire and
        establishes Mexico City

This painting is included in Images of the Middle Ages, a set of teaching posters and resource
book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from the Lila
Wallace—Reader’s Digest Fund.