

The National Gallery

Primary Teachers' Notes 2009-10

TOBIAS AND THE ANGEL, 1470–80 BY THE WORKSHOP OF ANDREA DEL VERROCCHIO TEMPERA ON POPLAR, 83.6 x 66 CM

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Andrea di Michele di Francesco Cioni, or Verrocchio as he was known, was born in Florence, Italy, in about 1435. Verrocchio, meaning 'true eye,' does not refer to the artist's vision, but to the Florentine family who were his early patrons.

Verrocchio was a successful painter and sculptor during his lifetime. He began painting in the 1460s, when he worked alongside Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli. During the second half of the Quattrocento (Italian for 400 and an art historical term for the 15th century) his reputation as a sculptor predominated. He was particularly revered for his exploitation of facial expression, gesture and use of clothing to create drama and emotion.

Documentation suggests that Verrocchio did not leave the environs of Florence until the early 1480s, when he moved to Venice. He died there in 1488. The artist never married; he left his workshop and possessions to his favourite pupil, the painter Lorenzo di Credi.

WORKSHOP

Verrocchio maintained a successful workshop, known as a bottega, endorsed by the wealthy Medici family in Florence. Art was considered a craft during the Renaissance and the bottega was where an artist carried out his work with the help of apprentices and paid assistants. An apprentice could begin training at the age of seven or eight with the financial backing of his family. Women were not allowed to join workshops in the Quattrocento, although there is evidence that some artists employed female family members: Paolo Uccello and later Jacopo Tintoretto are known to have trained their daughters as painters.

Once the workshop and patron agreed on the specifications and price of a commission, assistants and apprentices might carry out a painting or sculpture under the instruction of the chief artist. A painting made in this context is referred to as a workshop piece.

Several well-known artists trained in Verrocchio's workshop, including Leonardo da Vinci, who may be responsible for elements in *Tobias and the Angel*. Studio assistants who adopted features of Verrocchio's style include Michelangelo's master, the mural painter Domenico Ghirlandaio; Raphael's teacher Pietro Perugino; and Lorenzo di Credi.

FLORENCE AND THE RENAISSANCE

Florence, or the Florentine Republic, was at the centre of the Renaissance. The Renaissance, French for rebirth, was a period that saw a shift in the way the world was perceived and therefore experienced and valued, bridging the Middle Ages and the modern era.

Patronage was no longer dominated by the Church. Instead, wealthy individuals steered commercial, political and cultural life. This enabled the proliferation of art and architecture for which Florence and the Renaissance are celebrated. An interest in ancient Greece and Rome was revived, in which outer beauty and proportion were associated with inner spiritual greatness. Artists broke new ground in depicting space with linear perspective, light and shadow, and anatomy, attempting to bring painting, architecture and sculpture closer to the world inhabited by their publics.

Verrocchio's rise to artistic prominence was owed chiefly to encouragement by Piero de' Medici and his son Lorenzo, the leading art patrons of Florence. Verrocchio's presence was only felt after the death of Donatello in 1466, the leading Florentine sculptor who had been the Medici favourite. Enter Verrocchio.

ABOUT THE PAINTING

WHAT CAN YOU SEE?

A young man called Tobias walks arm in arm with the archangel Raphael, who is identifiable by his wings and halo. A small dog accompanies them. They are crossing the ancient lands of Media in Persia, desert terrain punctuated with rocks and plant life. Rolling hills greet the banks of the river Tigris, which flows under a bridge beside a castle or fortified city.

Raphael looks at a small metal box, while Tobias watches him intently; they appear to be engaged in discussion. Tobias's left shirtsleeve is unlaced, possibly from catching the fish he carries on a string. As they stride along, the wind rolls their drapery and catches Tobias's curls.

GUARDIAN ANGELS

Deriving from the Greek word *archangelos*, archangels or guardian angels are messengers and protectors. They are found in a number of religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Raphael is considered to be an archangel like Michael and Gabriel.

These archangels are venerated in the Roman Catholic Church, the predominant religion in Florence in the Quattrocento. They are also named as archangels in Islam. In the Islamic tradition, Raphael (or Israfil) is the angel responsible for signalling the coming of Judgement Day by blowing a horn.

In the tradition of this painting, Raphael is the archangel related to healing and medicine, and a venerated protector of the young, travellers and the blind. His name comes from the Hebrew meaning 'God heal'.

Saints and angels are commonly identified by an attribute or emblem. Raphael is usually depicted with wings, sandals and a staff, with Tobias as his travelling companion. In Renaissance culture, this painting was a devotional work focused on Raphael, rather than Tobias.

HEALING AND MEDICINE

Tobias has been sent by his father, the merchant Tobit, to collect a debt. In his left hand Tobias carries a scroll across which is written *ricordo*, meaning memorandum, a notice of this debt. Raphael, Tobias's guardian angel, accompanies him on the dangerous journey from Nineveh, an ancient Assyrian city in modern Iraq, to Media in Persia, now Iran.

Tobit had suffered a curious accident: sparrows' droppings had fallen into his eyes resulting in an inflammation that blinded him. In the story Tobias bathes in the river Tigris, and a giant fish leaps from the water. Raphael instructs Tobias to harvest the fish's gall bladder, liver and heart in order to concoct a cure for his father. Raphael is shown in the painting holding a small box containing the remedy.

The story comes from the Book of Tobit, which is an apocryphal book, meaning that the text's authenticity or authorship is uncertain. It is included in the Catholic canon of the Bible, but is not in modern Protestant versions or the Jewish Torah.

Verrocchio's workshop took artistic liberties in telling the story of Tobias and the angel. In the original story, the fish was large enough to devour Tobias and Raphael was a mortal. Raphael reveals his true identity only after Tobias cures his father's blindness: he makes himself known as, 'the angel Raphael, one of the seven, who stand before the Lord'. (Tobit 12: 15)

Verrocchio departed from the text so that the audience could identify the characters and therefore understand the narrative. The workshop also gave Tobias and Raphael fashionable Florentine clothing and hairstyles, a common practice to help audiences to relate to the story. Consequently, this trend has assisted contemporary research in establishing the date of the painting.

The story of Tobias and the angel was common in Florence between 1450 and 1480, where a Confraternity of Saint Raphael flourished. Confraternities were devotional organisations that came together in order to pursue charitable works. The city's legion of superstitious merchants commissioned paintings of Raphael before they sent their sons abroad on business. Over a dozen related works are known.

DISAPPEARING DOGS

It is probable that several artists collaborated on *Tobias and the Angel*. Verrocchio was experienced in depicting human anatomy, therefore the mechanical hands of both Tobias and Raphael in this painting suggest the work of someone else. Contemporary scholarship agrees that some parts were executed by Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps the dog which is fading, the translucent fish and Tobias's curly hair.

Tobias and the Angel is painted using egg tempera, a medium in which ground colour pigment is suspended in an emulsion of egg yolk and water. It is applied to a smooth, wood panel that has been coated with a protective layer called gesso. Egg tempera is one of the oldest means of panel painting and dominated during the early Italian Renaissance until oil paint gained popularity. It dries quickly, unlike oil paint which is manipulated more easily and affords greater opportunity to make changes throughout the painting process.

In egg tempera painting, the artist conventionally works from dark to light. The dog has been painted in thinner layers on top of the background. Over time, such layers become transparent as pigments are affected by light and wear. Looking closely you can see cracked paint on the surface, which is a result of subsequent layers of paint drying before those beneath it. This demonstrates either an immature understanding of the medium by an apprentice or the use of inferior materials, which is unlikely for an established and successful workshop such as Verrocchio's. All clues point to collaboration of many artists in the completion of this painting.

USING THE PICTURE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

TAKE ONE PICTURE

Since 1995, the National Gallery has been promoting the use of a single image for cross-curricular work in primary schools through the Take One Picture scheme. The scheme enables teachers to share good teaching and learning practice and the principles of cultural enrichment using a holistic approach that highlights how subject areas support and inform each other. This way of working gives pupils considerable opportunities for engaging with arts and culture within and outside the school day. Further information on the scheme can be found at www.takeonepicture.org.uk.

RESOURCES

A digital image of the painting is available at www.takeonepicture.org.uk. This can be used in the classroom on an interactive whiteboard or by individuals on PCs. It has a zoom facility that enables the viewer to see details in the painting that are sometimes difficult to see with the naked eye. A printed reproduction of the painting can be purchased from National Gallery shops, by mail order at mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk or by telephone on 020 7747 5958. A copy will be given to teachers attending the Gallery's Continuing Professional Development courses 2009/10, which introduce the Take One Picture approach. Details of these courses, and availability, can be found at www.takeonepicture.org/cpd/schedule.html or by telephoning 020 7747 2844.

A Take One Picture DVD, bringing together over 10 years' experience of the Take One Picture scheme, is also available from Gallery shops or to buy by mail order at mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk or by telephone on 020 7747 5958.

SOME IDEAS FOR CROSS-CURRICULAR WORK

The following ideas are no more than a starting point. As you begin to explore links within the painting and make connections between these and your own context, projects with the potential to enrich and transform learning will emerge.

Use the picture as a springboard for initiating dialogue to develop both creative and critical thinking by asking open-ended questions, such as:

- If you could jump into the painting, what would you see/hear/smell/touch?
- Where are these people? What words could you use to describe the landscape?
- What do you think is happening? Why?
- What are the two people doing/holding/wearing?
- What might this tell you?
- What can you say about these people? Why do you think that?
- If you could ask one of the people one question, what would it be?
- What do you want to know or find out? Why?

Another episode from the same story is depicted in the painting *Anna and the Blind Tobit* (about 1630) by the Dutch artist Rembrandt. This painting is also in the National Gallery's collection. Consider both of these works, their techniques, their social and historical contexts, and their narratives.

Art/History/Literacy

The artist used egg tempera to paint the picture. Research different recipes for making egg tempera and use these as a starting point for your own investigations and artwork. What happens when you use egg tempera on different surfaces, e.g. paper, wood, cardboard?

Art/Science

Verrocchio and his workshop were located in Florence, Italy. The painting however depicts a scene from a story that takes place between present-day Iraq and Iran. Tobias and Raphael walk along the Tigris river which also runs through Turkey and Syria. Use the Internet to locate these places on Google Earth. Compare and contrast them and consider why the artist has sited the story in an Italianate landscape.

Geography

One of the themes of the story is charity. What are your local charities and how could you get involved?

PSHCE

Explore the theme of journeys. What journeys have you been on in the last day/week/month/year? What other famous journeys have you heard about? Why are they famous? Did any of them have guardian angels? How did they stay safe?

Geography/Maths/RE/Literacy

Research medicine and health in history. Explore how blindness has been treated through history.

Science/PSHCE

Tobias is delivering a message by hand, a much slower route than modern communication. Explore and evaluate methods of relaying messages, from the printing press to the Pony Express to texting. Investigate sending a message in different ways to someone/a school on the other side of the world.

Literacy/Maths/ICT/PSHCE

Create your own story inspired by this one, perhaps taking the theme of healing or a journey. Can you capture it in a single image/tell it orally/write it down/animate it? Decide on your criteria to evaluate which is most effective.

Literacy/ICT

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