

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

PUBLIC DOMAIN



The central panel (and whole triptych below it) of the Portinari Triptych, circa 1475, by Hugo van der Goes; 19 feet by 10 feet. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

FINE ARTS

The Triptych

A MASTERPIECE IN THREE PARTS

Skill and spiritual insights produce a three-in-one work of art

YVONNE MARCOTTE

In the Early Renaissance, a rich, spiritually minded merchant would often want to honor God for his good fortune. As a devout believer, he prayed at home and would commission a triptych, which was a small, three-paneled painting to be placed in a niche as his personal shrine. The panels, compact and mobile, were often hinged so they could be closed when not in use.

A triptych is three panels that work as one. It can tell a story going from one di-

rection to another, or have the side panels further embellish the story depicted in the center.

Later, churches commissioned larger triptychs to be positioned above their main altars. Accomplished artists accommodated these requests with beautiful paintings on each panel that told an important religious story. The back of the piece was also painted and, when closed, could display more of the story on the back of the panels.

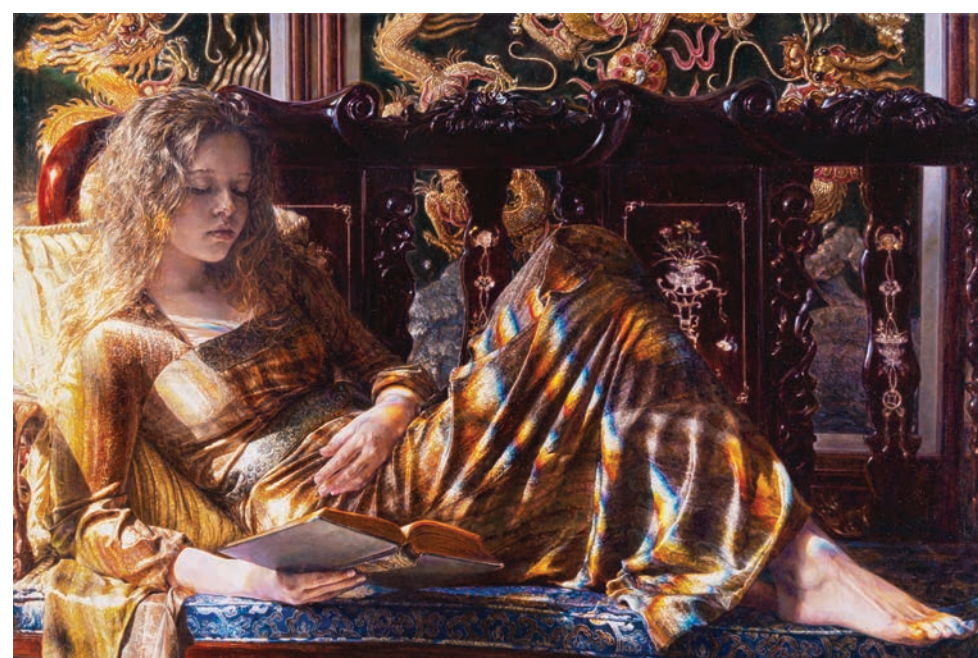
The triptych's central panel would generally be larger, often twice the size of the two side panels, so the hinged side panels

could close and meet over the central panel for safe storage.

Robert Campin's Mérode

When visitors see the Mérode triptych (named for the previous owner, comtesse Marie-Nicolette de Mérode) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Cloisters in New York, they are astonished at its small size: only 2 feet by 4 feet when open to full size. The beauty of the colors and skillful detail of the figures and objects show a master at work.

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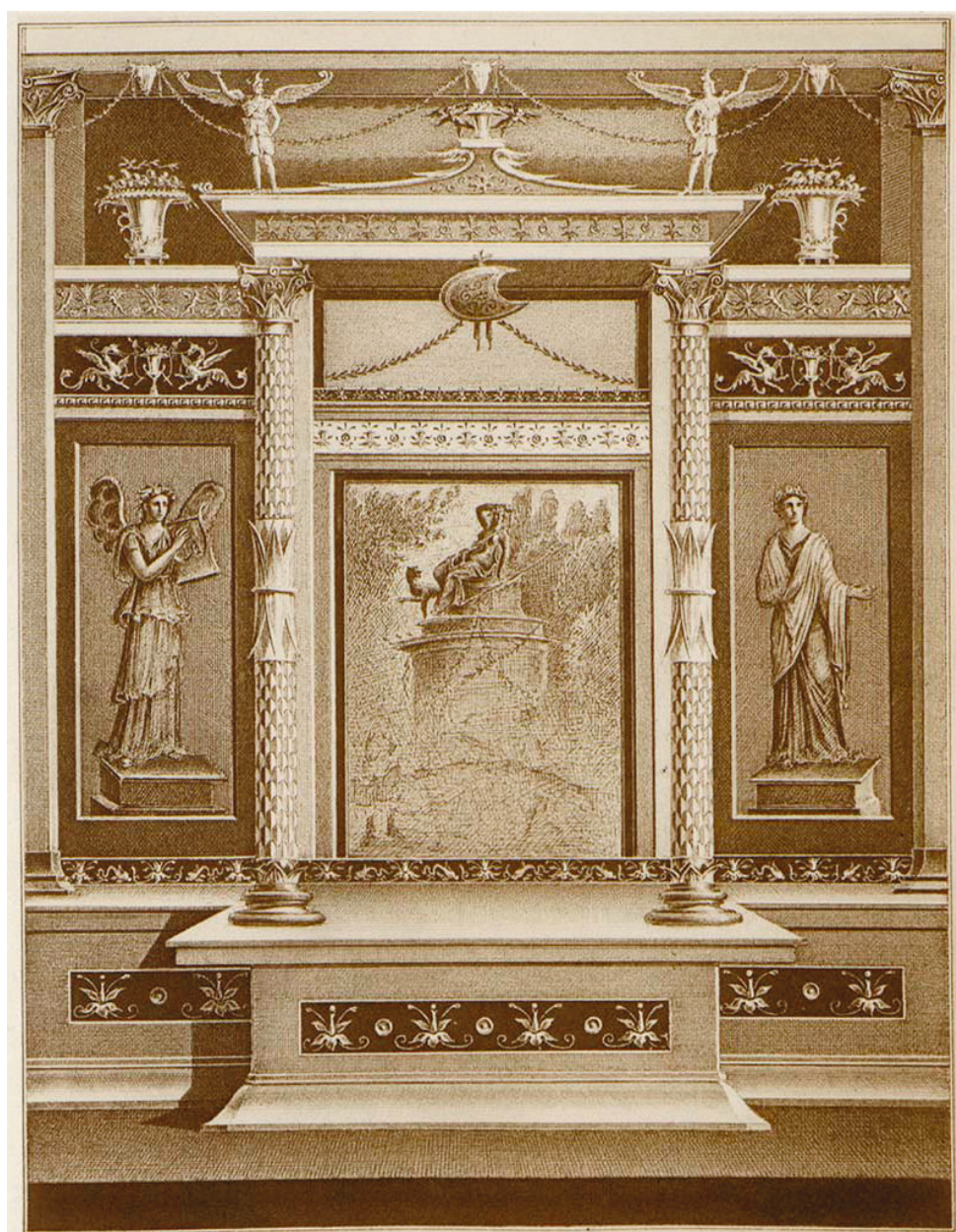


Ying and Yang by Sandra Kuck

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A reconstruction of a painting on the east wall at the House of the Epigrams (named so for its wall paintings with inscriptions from Greek epigrams) in Pompeii, by August Sikkard. From the "History of Decorative Wall Painting in Pompeii," 1882.

LITERATURE

The Epigram: A Champagne Cocktail of Words, Wit, and Wisdom

JEFF MINICK

"I can resist everything except temptation." So wrote Oscar Wilde, perhaps unsurpassed in English in the art of the epigram. This particular example perfectly illustrates the definition of this word: "a pithy saying or remark expressing an idea in a clever and amusing way."

Certain poems are also regarded as epigrammatic. Here's "Ironist" by American poet Bruce Bennett:

I mean the opposite of what I say.
You've got it now? No, it's the other way.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge even wrote an epigram defining this form by demonstration:

What is an Epigram? A dwarfish whole,
Its body brevity, and wit its soul.

Epigram derives from the Greek "epigraphēin," meaning "to write on, to inscribe," and from the Latin "epigramma," which carries the same basic meaning. Sometimes users of the word confuse it with "epigraph," which refers to a brief inscription on a building or a coin, or to a short statement at the beginning of a book, usually summing up its theme. "Epithet" may also cause a mix-up, but this word refers to terms of abuse, such as your thoughts when the driver ahead of you goes 30 miles an hour down the on-ramp leading to the interstate.

Distinguishing an epigram from an aphorism, a short statement expressing a general truth, can be more difficult. "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence" and Ben Franklin's "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise" are both aphorisms. Most users of these terms often overlook the differences and use the terms interchangeably.

Writers have long enjoyed the word play possible in the epigram, as well as the fact that these sayings are often memorable and certain to enhance an author's reputation as a person of wit and intelligence. These motives were surely among the reasons that Marcus Valerius Martialis, known today as Martial, wrote 1,561 of these short verses.

The Father of the Epigram
Born in Spain around A.D. 40, in his mid-20s Martial traveled to Rome, where he remained for some 30 years before returning to his homeland. For a part of his

time in that city, he appears to have led a bohemian existence, and even when he had gained a little wealth, money remained a primary concern.

Martial derived a part of this income from his poetry, particularly the epigrams, many of which offered a devastating and often vulgar take on his fellow citizens. These gossipy, acerbic verses often snap at their subjects, as in these lines about a man who likely set his own house on fire to collect what we today would call insurance:

Tongilianus, you paid 200,000 sesterces for your house.
An accident, too common in this city, destroyed it.
You collected 1,000,000 sesterces.
Now I ask you, is it not possible that you set fire to your own house, Tongilianus?
Here's an example from the original Latin:

Cur non mitto meos tibi, Pontiliane, libellos?
Ne mihi tu mittas, Pontiliane, tuos.
Why do I not send you, Pontilianus, my little books?
Because, Pontilianus, you will send yours to me.

Over a millennium later, the revival of ancient literature in Europe led to a renewed interest in the verses of this man who is today regarded as the "Father of the Epigram."

The Form Resurrected
British poets like Shakespeare, Dryden, and Donne's rampage epigrams in their verse. Here, for example, is a part of Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism," in which he assails some of the poetic devices of his day:

Where'er you find the "cooling western breeze,"
In the next line, it "whispers through the trees";
If "crystal streams with pleasing murmurs creep,"
The reader's threaten'd (not in vain) with "sleep."

In a more famous, stand-alone poem, "Epigram Engraved on the Collar of a Dog Which I Gave to His Royal Highness," Pope offers this splendid example of the form:

I am his Highness' dog at Kew,
Pray tell me, Sir, whose dog are you?

Of course, epigrams occur in prose as well as verse. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a flowering of these garlands of humorous, and sometimes scathing, witticisms.

American Made

In the United States, two writers of this period were standout epigrammatists. Known mostly for his short stories and "The Devil's Dictionary," the world-weary pessimist Ambrose Bierce often gave way in his writing to the darkness with which he apparently lived. Here are just three examples from his "Epigrams of a Cynic":

The only distinction that democracies reward is a high degree of conformity. True, man does not know woman. But neither does woman.

Death is not the end; there remains the litigation over the estate.
For "The Devil's Dictionary," Bierce concocted such definitions as these: Cabbage, n. A familiar kitchen-garden vegetable about as large and wise as a man's head.

Comfort, n. A state of mind produced by contemplation of a neighbor's uneasiness.

Coward, n. One who in a perilous emergency thinks with his legs.

Not quite as bleak as the epigrams of Bierce are those left us by novelist, humorist, and speaker Mark Twain:

Always do right. That will gratify some of the people, and astonish the rest. It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress.
A classic is something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read.

Across the Pond

Great Britain also produced writers who were masters of the epigram.

Though he could turn a jaundiced eye to topics like politics—"It is terrible to contemplate how few politicians are hanged"—G.K. Chesterton's witticisms tended to take a more positive direction than those written by many of his contemporaries. A Christian, gener-

ally optimistic, and an advocate of the ordinary person and the ordinary life, Chesterton's epigrams and aphorisms reflect his buoyant personality. "I regard golf as an expensive way of playing marbles," is about as acerbic as Chesterton gets. More typical of him is this observation, which still brings a smile and encouragement to many of his readers: "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly."

But the grand champion of the epigram in the English-speaking world during that time, or any other time for that matter, is Oscar Wilde.

When entering the United States for a visit, Wilde was asked by Customs if he had anything to declare. "Only my genius," he supposedly replied, and that remark, though immodest, demonstrates his natural penchant for the epigram.

Wilde's aphorisms and epigrams are often effervescent, sparkling like a glass of Champagne in candlelight. "Some cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go," "Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about," and "A good friend will always stab you in the front" are just a sampling of Wilde's wit.

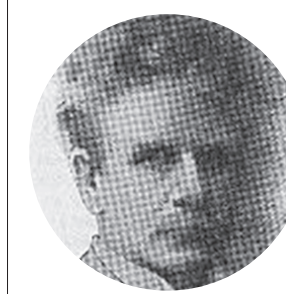
Many of his humorous pronouncements were focused on himself in a mix of braggadocio and deprecation. "I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train" may contain more truth than we know. "I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying" is false—Wilde knew exactly what he was saying—but it's still funny.

Try It Yourself

We live in an age particularly conducive to the writing of epigrams. Sound bites and slogans and our communications via such platforms as Twitter or text are ideal vehicles for unleashing terse, amusing remarks via our electronic devices. Yet most of the memes and observations that appear, while they may make us laugh, are quickly forgotten.

It seems, then, that we have more than enough conveyances but few drivers. Given our age of hustle and hurry, this is understandable. To speak and write memorable epigrams requires time and

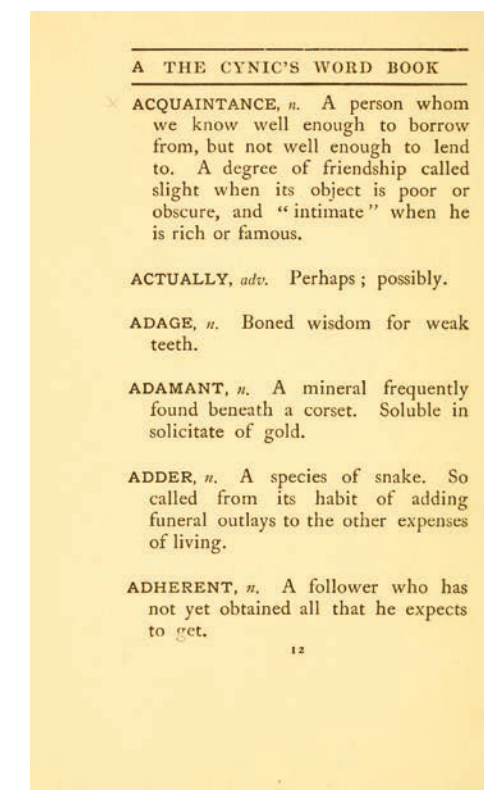
These sayings are often memorable and witty.



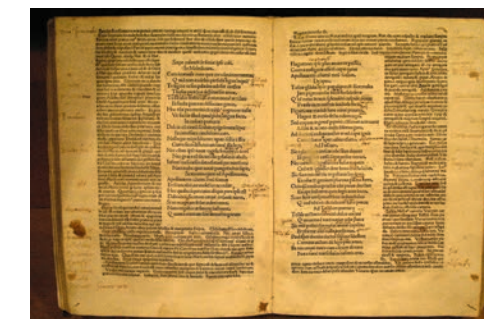
Detail of Ambrose Bierce, 1896, by Frances Soule Campbell. An illustrated plate from "The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce," 1909.



Detail of "Alexander Pope," circa 1727, by Michael Dahl. Oil on canvas. National Portrait Gallery, London.



Page 12 from "The Cynic's Word Book" by Ambrose Bierce, 1906. Library of Congress.



Latin text of the "Epigrammata," 1490, written by Marcus Valerius Martialis (Martial).

effort, a formidable sense of paradox, an ability to balance and compare contrasting thoughts in a short statement, and above all, a sophisticated sense of humor. Wilde, for example, polished his epigrams, both the ones in his plays and the ones he spoke, and refurbished them as time passed.

So for you readers who wish to try your hand at the epigram, that field is wide open. All you need do is read some examples to get the idea, then step up to the plate and start swinging for the fences.

Jeff Minick lives and writes in Front Royal, Virginia. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust on Their Wings," and two works of nonfiction, "Learning as I Go" and "Movies Make the Man."

TRUTH and TRADITION

In Our Own Words

For Our Parents, for Our Children, for Generations to Come

Dear Epoch VIP,

I'm Channaly Philipp, your editor for Life and Tradition. But not just that: I'm also the daughter of a Khmer Rouge survivor, a former liberal arts college student, and now a mother.

Each one of these identities gives me one more reason why I must keep doing what I do at The Epoch Times every day. You see, my father, like many other fathers, has a story.

Only 45 medical doctors survived the killing fields and death camps of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and he, Dr. Nal Oum, was the only doctor lucky enough to have escaped one of the Khmer Rouge camps.

But what he saw before he walked 22 arduous days through the jungle to Thailand, leaving him on the brink of death, left a mark on his psyche like no other: he had seen humanity at its absolute worst. He had seen what people were capable of when performing under a system that enabled their worst vices—the communist system.

The Khmer Rouge's rampage left 2 million Cambodian corpses in its wake, a faceless statistic to many. To my father, however, around 100 of them will always have names and faces, because they belonged to the sick children and infants that the Khmer Rouge forced him to abandon as they drove the populace from the city to the countryside in pursuit of a doomed agrarian utopia.

He remembers their tiny faces, their tiny beds. He remembers them every day.

At gunpoint, he was forced to leave his hospital and the lives of his patients to the Khmer Rouge, to communism—to death.

He's never forgotten what he had to do on that fateful day, and even now, he's unable to forget the pain in the eyes of these children formerly under his care.

His life now is dedicated to ensuring that the rest of the world never forgets, either.

Twenty years later, and half-way around the world, as I embarked to enroll in one of our nation's elite colleges,

I was met on campus and in some classes with—what else? Socialism, cloaked in the ideals of social justice, and as an impressionable young mind, it saddens me to admit that because I was young and well-intentioned, I fell for it.

It wasn't until years later, after leaving the hallowed halls of American academe, and then becoming a parent, I realized all of it was a lie. A beautiful lie, and probably the same beautiful lie that was told to the youths who had held my father at gunpoint.

I saw how subtly the indoctrination began at my daughter's public elementary school, as early as kindergarten. Looking ahead, I could see the gears of the machine turning. Mass public schooling churning out generation after generation of youth perfectly calibrated to these new, false definitions of kindness, equality, truth, and righteousness.

This is why The Epoch Times' motto of "Truth and Tradition" has always spoken to me; today, it's a guiding principle for me in how I run my small corner of the paper.

In the Life and Tradition section, I aim to preserve and protect the best of what's been left to us by the generations who came before: their values, their traditions, their stories—history as our families lived and experienced it, so that we can learn from their wisdom and their sacrifices as we create our future.

And perhaps most importantly, I want to give hope to anyone that's still looking for a beacon of light—of real truth, of real goodness—in our modern society.

It is admittedly a lofty goal, but for all the children—for those in my father's memory, for my own, and for yours—I have no choice but to at least try.

In Truth and Tradition,

Channaly Philipp
The Epoch Times



Channaly Philipp
Editor for Life and Tradition Section

THE EPOCH TIMES

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THE EPOCH TIMES



This early 20th-century triptych demonstrates the power of the art form for storytelling. "The Pioneer," 1904, by Frederick McCubbin. Oil on canvas; 7 feet, 4 inches by 9 feet, 6 inches. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



The Stefaneschi Triptych front side, circa 1320, by Giotto di Bondone. Tempera on wood, 70 inches by 35 inches (central panel); 66 inches by 32 and 1/2 inches (side panels). Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome.



Mérode Altarpiece, circa 1427-32, by Robert Campin, Oil on oak panel triptych, 2 feet by 4 feet. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Cloisters, New York.

FINE ARTS

The Triptych

A MASTERPIECE IN THREE PARTS

Continued from Page 1

Attributed to an artist of the Netherlands, Robert Campin, the painting was made circa 1425 during a period known as the Northern Renaissance.

This triptych shows a mastery of color, light, and perspective. The central panel tells the story of the Annunciation, when God sent the angel Gabriel to announce to Mary that she would bear a son, Jesus. It is a homey setting, where Mary in a shimmering red gown is in her home reading from a sacred text. At first, she is not aware of her winged heavenly visitor who wears a white robe with a blue tie. The colors on

the main figures stand out against the neutral browns of the furnishings and walls. A lily symbolizing purity is on the table. The ceiling beams and the bench that Mary leans on are painted in perspective as they diminish to an unseen vanishing point in the background.

The side panels enrich the story unfolding in the center. The left panel portrays the painting's donor and his wife, wealthy merchants who reverently kneel in an enclosed garden space with a high stone wall. A door is open to the main room of Mary's home where they witness the miracle taking place. Also on this panel, the colors are muted, in browns, so as to not take

Churches commissioned larger triptychs to be positioned above their main altars.

away from the brilliant colors of the central panel. The natural scene continues on the left panel with birds on the wall and violets in the foreground that both symbolize Mary's modesty, faithfulness, and spiritual wisdom.

The right panel shows Joseph working with the tools of a carpenter on his worktable; on the floor is an ax on a log and wooden shavings. He is seemingly unaware of the world-shaking event taking place in another room of his home. The open windows show a prosperous Northern European town. Here, too, Joseph's clothes are in shades of brown, except for his blue turban and red sleeves poking out

from his brown work clothes.

Giotto's Stefaneschi

Much earlier than the Mérode, Giotto di Bondone—a titan of the Early Renaissance—painted a large triptych for a side altar in Old St. Peter's Basilica. Each panel comes to a point, with the central panel being slightly taller. The artist painted both sides of this triptych so that the front could be seen by the public and the back could be seen by priests as they undertook their official duties at the altar.

This triptych painted in tempera lacks the brilliance achieved by oil paint, but it shows Giotto's beautifully designed presentation of St. Peter, as Jesus's earthly ambassador. The triptych was first installed in Old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and is now at the Pinacoteca Vaticana gallery, a Vatican museum.

In the center panel, St. Peter sits on a throne surrounded by saints and the donor of the piece, Cardinal Stefaneschi. The left panel shows Sts. Paul and James, and the right shows Sts. Andrew and John the Evangelist.

This triptych is made with a predella, or lower set of connected panels, which was popular at the time.

The back of this triptych shows Jesus en-

throned and surrounded by angels, with Cardinal Stefaneschi sitting at his right foot. The death of St. Peter is depicted on the left and the death of St. Paul on the right. The predella on the back panel displays the Madonna and Child with an angel on each side of the throne, and the 12 apostles on each side of the center panel. Both the front and the back center panels depict the cardinal. On the front, he is in full ceremonial costume and is introduced to St. Peter by St. George. On the back, the cardinal wears modest dress to identify with the church officials and to remind them of their humble place as servants of God. Artist and art historian of the Renaissance Giorgio Vasari cited Giotto's ability to depict a true likeness as one of his greatest strengths, as shown in the cardinal's portrait.

The cardinal holds a smaller depiction of the triptych he is on, a technique called the "droste effect," whereby the painting is shown in the painting as a smaller version of itself.

Martini and Memmi's 'Annunciation'

The triptych by celebrated artists of the Late Middle Ages Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi depicts the Annunciation and two saints. The piece is actually one of a series of four grand triptychs made for Siena Cathedral to honor Sts. Ansanus, Sabinus of Spoleto, Crescentius, and Victor, the four patron saints of the city of Siena, Italy. Reminiscent of Byzantine icons that used a gold background to symbolize a heavenly realm, the piece incorporates decorative wood elements for each section. The panels are divided by swirling pillars. The central section is double the size of each side panel.

The saints depicted are St. Ansanus on the left panel and St. Margaret, also known as St. Maxima (who is said to have converted Ansanus), on the right panel. Above the decorated arches are small depictions of the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel in tondi (circular paintings).

In the center panel, Gabriel holds an olive branch, symbolizing peace, and points to the dove of the Holy Spirit above, as it descends from a mandorla (a large circle symbolizing paradise) of angels. The words he speaks to Mary are written in Latin, from Gabriel to Mary: "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." Showing the extent of trade in exotic fabrics with the Far East, Gabriel's garb is made in a tartar cloth pattern, of fabric from the Mongol Empire. A vase of lilies in the center signifies Mary's purity. With its depiction of the pavement receding toward the back wall, the painting was about 150 years ahead of its time in its use of perspective painting.

The triptych's back was also painted and, when closed, could display more of the story.

Van Der Goes's Portinari

Banker Tommaso Portinari commissioned the Early Renaissance Flemish artist Hugo van der Goes to paint a hinged triptych around 1475 for the church in the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence, Italy. This triptych shows the moment of the Nativity as shepherds adore the newborn king.

The artist's figures are proportioned to represent their importance. In the central panel, the newborn child Jesus is worshiped by Mary, Joseph, and angels, as three shepherds fall to their knees. Said to be based on visions of St. Bridget of Sweden, the scene shows the child Jesus not in a manger but on the floor.

In the central panel's background, the artist takes us through time, showing Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem. Under a beam, an angel announces the Prince of Peace to shepherds in the hills. Also, in the right panel, the three Magi travel to Bethlehem.

Portinari himself is depicted on the left panel with his two sons, Antonio and Pigiello, and their patron saints: Sts. Thomas (with the spear) and Anthony (with the bell). On the right panel are portraits of Portinari's wife, Maria di Francesco Baroncelli, and daughter Margarita, with their patron saints: Sts. Mary Magdalene (with the pot of ointment) and Margaret (with the book and the dragon). The portraits are smaller than those of their patron saints.

As it was a hinged triptych that could be closed, van der Goes painted the back of the panels. The artist used grisaille, the technique whereby a figure is painted to look like a sculpture. In this instance, the

paintings are of Gabriel and Mary at the Annunciation.

McCubbin's 'Pioneer'

Even today, the triptych can inspire with its three-paneled format. In Australian artist Frederick McCubbin's triptych "The Pioneer," each panel tells a story of a family in the Australian bush. The figures represent the family of a "free selector," a farmer who has chosen land to clear and farm.

This piece tells a story from left to right. The left panel shows the couple deciding on the piece of land to farm. The wife in the foreground is deep in thought about their selection. In the background, the husband is making a fire. Their travel wagon, which is their temporary home, is behind him. They sit in a beautiful old-growth forest.

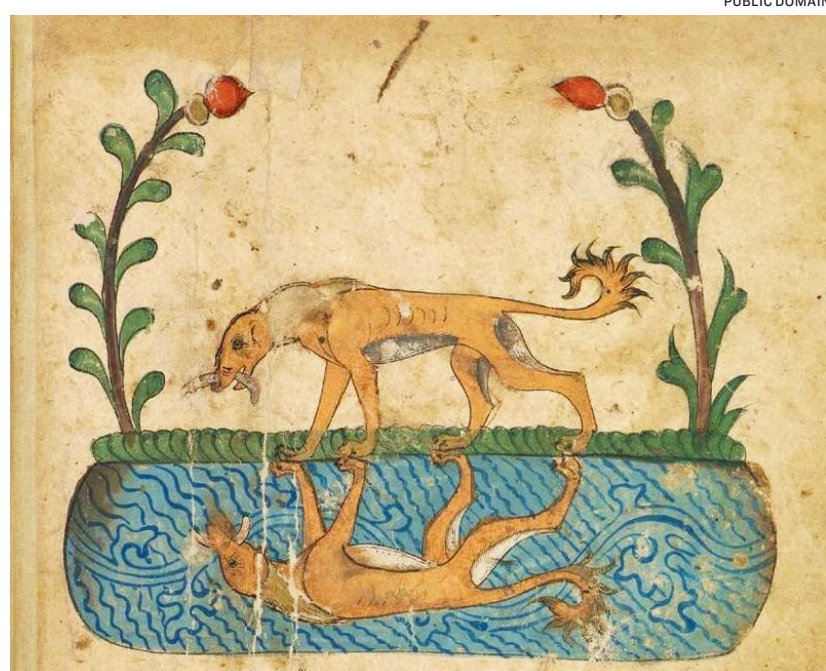
The central panel shows them taking a break from their labors of building their home. The man has been clearing land and time has passed. The wife carries their child to her husband, and they discuss mundane things related to their new farm. The family home is in the background, in a clearing.

The third panel shows a man kneeling over a grave. Again, time has passed, and the viewer can speculate whether the man is the pioneer, the baby who has grown to manhood, or a young stranger who has stumbled across the lone grave. The background shows a city, possibly Melbourne.

The artist painted en plein air, or outside in nature, in the bush on Mount Macedon, which is near the artist's home. The tone is one of quiet optimism, of a prosperous future obtained through hard work.

Three may be better than one when artists use their skill and spiritual insight to tell a broader story, and that's what a triptych does.

An illustration of the story "The Dog and His Bone" from an ancient Arabic collection of fables "Kalila and Dimna."



PUBLIC DOMAIN

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Gratitude and Generosity Are Antidotes to Greed

KATE VIDIMOS

Greed is such a powerful, domineering vice. When we are greedy, we become so consumed by a never-ending need for something more. Our unquenchable desires change us, and we become unrecognizable even to ourselves.

In his fable "The Dog and His Bone," Aesop reveals how easily and drastically greed can transform us. He tells of a dog so overcome with greed that he does not recognize himself and loses what he

should have enjoyed.

This dog walks home from the butcher's shop, where the butcher had given him a bone. The dog is very satisfied with his prize and hurries away as fast as he can with it.

A Better Bone

However, as he passes over the river on a small bridge, the dog notices his reflection in the river. This new dog he sees in the water has, what appears to be, a bigger bone! He is so overcome by greed and a

desire for a better bone that he does not recognize that dog to be himself.

Believing this reflection to be a luckier dog with a better bone, he plunges into the river after this new bone. Yet as Socrates says, "He who is not contented with what he has, would not be contented with what he would like to have." Not only did he drop his own bone, but nearly drowned trying to reach the shore.

The dog does not stop to contemplate who that other dog is, or to realize the good bone he already has. He is so enveloped by his own greed that he cannot see himself or the bone for what they truly are.

Aesop shows, as psychologist Erich Fromm says in his book "Escape From Freedom," that "greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction." With greed, we will never be pleased with the wonderful gifts that we

already have. We will continually look at yet another, better thing we do not have.

If we do not work to overcome it, greed will very easily rule us. With greed as our ruler, there will always be a bigger house, a better car, nicer clothes, and more money. All these goals will continually be out of reach.

With greed, we will never be pleased with the wonderful gifts that we already have.

Nothing will ever be good enough, and we will never be able to sit and truly enjoy what he have. A greedy heart and mind is a restless heart and mind. We will be miserable.

Thankful and Generous

Yet we can overcome and challenge the greedy forces and desires inside of us through thankful and generous practice, for thankful and generous hearts reflect on what we do have rather than what we do not have.

Practicing gratitude and generosity allows us to see the world outside of ourselves clearly. We see the many things that we should appreciate. Rather than always taking and receiving, we see how much we can give to others. We free ourselves from the dependence of wanting and needing more.

When we count our blessings, we will see ourselves and our lives as they truly are—wonderful and beautiful.

Kate Vidimos is a 2020 graduate from the liberal arts college at the University of Dallas, where she received her bachelor's degree in English. She plans

PUBLIC DOMAIN



An illustration of "The Dog and His Bone" from a 1564 edition of Aesop's fables in Latin verse by Hieronymus Osius.

on pursuing all forms of storytelling (specifically film) and is currently working on finishing and illustrating a children's book.

THEATER REVIEW

A Chance for Redemption: To Change or Stay the Course

JUDD HOLLANDER

NEW YORK—Eternal damnation and ultimate redemption often go hand in hand. So it is with Charles Dickens's 1843 novella, "A Christmas Carol," a sparkling adaptation of which can now be seen at the Nederlander Theatre on Broadway. Featuring a tour-de-force performance by actor Jefferson Mays, it's a spellbinding experience from start to finish.

The Dickens story introduced the world to Ebenezer Scrooge, someone who is, quite simply, the most miserly man in London. Scrooge is so stingy, he even deplores the idea of letting his overworked clerk Bob Cratchit have Christmas day off—or, God forbid, making a financial donation to help those less fortunate. Unsurprisingly, Scrooge regards any sort of Yuletide frivolity as nothing more than pure humbug.

Though Scrooge may be happy with his lot in life, with only his gold to keep him company, there are those who would see him change his ways. For it is on this particular Christmas Eve that Scrooge finds himself visited by the ghost of his late business partner, as well as visits from the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet To Come. These spirits take Scrooge on a journey that forces him to reexamine his life, and gives him a glimpse of the foreboding future he has laid out for himself.

One-Actor Wonder

This tale of hope, loss, despair, and second chances is told by a solitary Mourner (Mays); Mays assumes approximately 50 separate roles in the play. The only other cast member in the company is Danny Gardner, who plays a mysterious shrouded Spectre. Gardner also turns up now and then to give some extra presence to Mays's narration, sometimes to an enjoyable effect. (Look for it in the scene introducing the Ghost of Christmas Present.) However, this is clearly Mays's show, and he does not disappoint in the least.

Mays relates the tale (co-adapted with Susan Lyons and director Michael Arden) in a firm and authoritative voice, while being able to effortlessly switch from one character to another with nimble alacrity. This is especially evident in a scene between Scrooge and his nephew Fred. Fred is just about the only person who wants anything to do with him, and is also his uncle's complete opposite in tempera-



The tremendous talent of Jefferson Mays and brilliant projection work bring the Christmas spirit alive, in this New York production of "A Christmas Carol."

Mixed in with Jefferson Mays's delivery is an underlying tone of wonder.

ment. The rapid contrasts of Scrooge's "humbug" attitude and Fred's holiday merriment prove to be quite amusing.

Mixed in with Mays's delivery is an underlying tone of wonder. This is quite evident as he describes the wide range of sensations that Scrooge experiences, from rooms overstuffed with food and festive lights, to his having the chance to revisit some joyous moments from his past. Many of the verbal pictures are created at an almost breakneck clip as Mays and the rest of the creative team bring the different parts of the tale vibrantly to life.

An important point to remember is that Scrooge is not irredeemable, something Mays makes clear via several small moments throughout. Rather, he has forgotten the joy his life once held. Yet once Scrooge is forced to take this spectral trek, he gets the chance to rediscover what he has ignored for so long, as well as to understand the responsibility that he has to others.

Great Production Support

The audience gets to share in this experience not only by way of the story itself but also through some brilliant projection work by Lucy Mackinnon. These effects are on full display when Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Past begin their particular journey. Mackinnon's efforts also are central to the background during a rather animated description of a Christmas party Scrooge attended as a young man. You're

hard pressed to believe that Mays is the only person continually on stage.

Credit must also go to Arden's directorial work, which keeps the entire presentation on an even keel. The scene and character changes all take place with the precision of a well-oiled machine. Dickens purists may note certain lines and sequences condensed or otherwise slightly altered, but it's nothing that detracts from the tale's overall message.

The scenic design work by Dane Laffrey, with a first scene rather ominous and a last one quite hopeful, is excellent. Efforts by lighting designer Ben Stanton, sound designer Joshua D. Reid, and costume work by Laffrey also play a vital part in making the entire piece come beautifully together.

It should be pointed out that while this show may be a wonderful holiday treat, it is also a ghost story and, as such, not suitable for very young children. This is something that more than a few parents came to realize during the matinee performance I attended. While there are many iterations of the Dickens work that will delight the very young among us, this production is not one of them.

That one caveat aside, this particular adaptation of "A Christmas Carol" offers a stirring and soulful take on a timeless classic and should definitely not be missed.

Judd Hollander is a reviewer for stagebuzz.com and a member of the Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle.

PROFILES IN HISTORY

Creators of Christmas Classics: Arthur Rankin Jr. and Jules Bass

DUSTIN BASS

It is practically impossible to think of Christmas without thinking of Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman, and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. In many ways, the memories that many of us have of those fictional characters come from two individuals: Arthur Rankin Jr. (1924–2014) and Jules Bass (1935–2022).

Arthur Rankin Jr. grew up in show business. Both his father and stepmother, Arthur Rankin and Marian Mansfield, were actors, as well as his grandfather, Harry Davenport. Rankin began his career in the late 1940s with ABC, first as a graphic designer and then as an art director. In back-to-back years (1950 and 1951), he won art direction awards. The following year, he started his own advertising company, Videocraft International, which is how he came to meet his future business partner, Jules Bass.

Bass, 11 years Rankin's junior, did not grow up in show business; his father, Max Bass, was a beer salesman, and his mother, Bernice, was a homemaker. At the time Rankin launched his advertising company, Bass was studying marketing at New York University. He dropped out in 1954.

Rankin and Bass met in Manhattan through Rankin's client, Gardner Adver-



"Frosty the Snowman" (1969) has become a holiday classic.

The duo's first production was in 1960 with the TV series 'The New Adventures of Pinocchio.'



ALL PHOTOS BY MOVIESTILLSDB

In 1964, Rankin/Bass Productions hit it big with the now Christmas classic "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

tising. Bass joined Videocraft, and the two shot commercials for clients, often using animation. Eventually, Rankin and Bass surmised that their creative potential was being stifled by solely producing commercials. The two turned their attention to the film industry.

Bass had studied the work of Japanese animators who created tiny figurines out of wood, wire, and wool, and animated them through stop-motion—the craft of shooting thousands of photos of the figurines' movements and playing them at 24 frames per second. The duo's first production was in 1960 with the TV series "The New Adventures of Pinocchio," followed by another series in 1961 called "Tales of the Wizard of Oz." It was not until 1964 that Rankin/Bass Productions hit it big with the now Christmas classic "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

Rankin and Bass knew they had hit on a formula and followed it for numerous hit films. The creative formula was to take a famous Christmas song or songs and create a script from them. The two would create numerous memorable characters as well

as additional songs to go into the films. A few years after "Rudolph," Rankin and Bass produced three holiday hits in succession with "The Little Drummer Boy" (1968), "Frosty the Snowman" (1969), and "Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town" (1970). Along with the catchy tunes, entertaining story lines, and the exhaustively detailed artwork, the films' characters were often voiced by the biggest names in Hollywood, like Jimmy Durante, James Cagney, Fred Astaire, Mickey Rooney, Shirley Booth, and Andy Griffith, and Angela Lansbury.

Together, Rankin/Bass Productions produced more than 50 films, TV specials, and TV series, including "The Hobbit," "The Last Unicorn," and "ThunderCats." Several of the Christmas films are shown annually on the major television networks, like ABC and CBS. When asked about the importance of the Rankin/Bass films on the holidays, George Schweitzer, the former president of marketing for CBS, said: "They're the fabric of our Christmas hearth, the wood in the Christmas fire. You knew Christmas was coming when Rudolph and Frosty showed up on CBS."



ALL PHOTOS BY NETFLIX

Widower-woodcarver Geppetto (voiced by David Bradley) and his creation, the wooden boy Pinocchio (voiced by Gregory Mann), in Guillermo del Toro's "Pinocchio."

FILM REVIEW

Slightly Dark But Still Kid Friendly

MARK JACKSON

"The Adventures of Pinocchio" by Carlo Collodi and "Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up," among others, are "evergreen" fables for boys that circle back around in movie form at least once per generation. They carry big archetypal themes about the hero's journey, boyhood, and coming of age.

But the iterations are accelerating due to the American showbiz juggernaut's need to churn out more and more product, due to the expansion of viewing formats, and due to an insatiable, easily bored worldwide viewership.

To wit: Robert Zemeckis just offered up a rather flaccid, live-action remake of "Pinocchio" for Disney+ that basically cloned the original, famous Disney 1940 animation. Then there's also the recent "Pinocchio: A True Story," a Russian animation version voiced by "SNL" alum Pauly Shore and Jon Heder of "Napoleon Dynamite." In this review, we've got Guillermo del Toro's version.

Del Toro's Rendition

This latest version by "The Shape of Water" Oscar-winner Guillermo del Toro is more artistically ambitious than Zemeckis: He aligns Collodi's dark vision with his own of-ten somewhat dark perspectives.

Del Toro is one of modern cinema's notable visual stylists. He revamps Collodi's 1883 fable of puckish puppet Pinocchio and his adopted father, Geppetto, as a stop-motion animation tale situated in fascist Italy between the wars, which includes an amusing cameo appearance by a pint-sized, dim-witted-to-the-point-of-being-"special," gargantuan-jawed Benito Mussolini.

The broad strokes of the tale are familiar: Grieving widower and woodcarver Geppetto (voiced by David Bradley) carves a puppet (voiced by Gregory Mann) from the pine tree under which his slain son, Carlo (voiced by Alfie Tempest), is buried.

The puppet comes to life when the strange blue Wood Sprite (Tilda Swinton), who looks like a slightly demonic del Toro interpretation of a cherubim with a two-toned voice suspiciously like the dark, mighty version of Galadriel in "The Lord of the Rings," breathes life into it.

Pinocchio, as Geppetto names the puppet, has many adventures in which he learns lessons about life and death, obedience, and truth-telling. His goal, of course, is to become a "real boy."

No movie version to date has been completely faithful to Collodi, and del Toro's is no exception. In fact, his omissions, additions, and tweaks are probably more pronounced than most. However, it's safe to say that overall, it's a darker version than previous takes on the tale, and that should come as no surprise since this is del Toro we're talking about.

The del Toro darkness gives it, in part, a pervasive sense of loss. There's a sweet prologue in which Geppetto and his 10-year-old son Carlo enjoy small-town Italian village life together, until the boy is blown to smithereens by a randomly

jettisoned World War I bomb detonating on the parish church where he and Geppetto are working to install a giant, carved crucifix for the altar.

Along with the church, Geppetto's heart explodes in grief. And after burying Carlo beside the perfectly shaped pine cone he'd once instructed Carlo to find, he lingers by the gravesite, like Arwen grieving for Aragorn in "The Lord Of The Rings," until the pine cone has grown into a tree.

Cricket

It's here that the story's narrator, a cricket, pops up. It's not Disney's Jiminy, but one Sebastian J. Cricket (voiced by Ewan McGregor). This is not just any cricket, he would have us know, but a world-traveling author of some renown (having been in the waistcoat pockets and sat on the windowsills of numerous famous people), who takes up residence in a well-appointed crevice situated in Carlo's pine tree to write his autobiography.

When Geppetto chops down the tree to manufacture himself a replacement son, Sebastian is still holed up in his pine-tree writer's retreat cabin when they arrive back at Geppetto's wood shop. Sebastian's cabin turns out to be right where Pinocchio's heart would be (a nice touch), if, like the Tin Woodman, only he had a heart. The crickets in these stories always represent Pinocchio's conscience.

Rough Hewn

Geppetto leaves the puppet in an unrasped, unsanded, unvarnished, and unpainted state. Very primal and wood-spritley, it's a knotty, gnarly, gangling sentient stick figure who terrifies the congregation when Geppetto brings him to church.

As every child knows, Pinocchio's nose grows whenever he lies, and the nose growth of del Toro's Pinocchio includes branches, twigs, and even leaves, depending on the egregiousness of the untruth.

Pinocchio Joins the Circus

Pinocchio is ordered to attend school but cuts class and soon falls in with sleazebag carnival barker Count Volpe (voiced by Christoph Waltz) and his simian minion Spazzatura (voiced by Cate Blanchett), who force Pinocchio into starring in their puppet act by threatening Geppetto with some legal "abracadabra." Count Volpe is a very similarly foppish, affected, limpwristed, twirling, and grand-gesturing drama queen to Ben Kingsley's carnival barker in "The Boxtrolls."

When Pinocchio rebels by insulting Prime Minister Mussolini (Tom Kenny) with a scatological parody of a patriotic song during a command performance—he's immediately shot dead.

Except Pinocchio can't really die. He's sent to the afterlife where he meets the Black Rabbits, who manage death logistics (like stacking coffins and such) and who play cards on their breaks.

Pinocchio then meets Death (Tilda Swinton), a sphinx-like figure in the underworld, and sister to the Wood Sprite. She informs

FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

While it covers historical events that will make sense only to adults, it's solidly a children's movie.

Pinocchio of his immortality, explaining how he will return to the mortal realm once an hourglass has finished flowing, and cautioning that time spent in the afterlife will always increase each time he returns.

Will Count Volpe have a much-deserved comeuppance? Will Pinocchio reunite with Geppetto and Sebastian, who have been swallowed up by a giant Dogfish? Suffice it to say, he might have to die a few more times before things work out. And even if they do, as Death tells Pinocchio, he might (again like Arwen of "The Lord of the Rings") outlive all of his loved ones. And should that come to pass, it might be the case that Pinocchio decides to travel off to parts unknown for new adventures.

All in All

As mentioned, McGregor's cricket is the heart of the movie as the conscience. And pretty funny. Christoph Waltz's manipulative Count Volpe is a character you love to hate, and Cate Blanchett's nonverbal hench-monkey is lots of fun.

The lighting and Italian exteriors are transportive; Tilda Swinton's Wood Sprite and Death are mildly unsettling, and Geppetto and his twiggy-brown title-character son are fairly adorable.

It's well crafted and eye-catching for sure. But who's it really for? Matteo Garrone's fantasy version of "Pinocchio" (2019) was wildly imaginative yet faithful, and it appealed to all ages. Del Toro's broody musical captures an achingly innocent elemental boy creature, veering from utter purity to primal wants and ambitions, to middle school mischievousness and disobedience. He repeatedly gets slammed into the underworld but reincarnates, like a twanging rubber band, right back into a time of mankind's darkest history.

While it covers historical events that will make sense only to adults, it's solidly a children's movie. Maybe slightly too dark for tiny ones; then again, I'm extremely conservative about what very small children should be exposed to. I'm continually shocked and appalled at the cinematic fare parents drag their children to nowadays.

And then, some of the good messages are offset by curious reversals of tradition, such as showing that sometimes disobedience can be a positive virtue, and that sometimes lying can be a good thing. Excuse me? Hello? Isn't that almost overwhelmingly the main theme of "Pinocchio," ever since it came into existence? What child doesn't know that if you lie your nose will grow? This is the essence of this story, and to undercut it in this way and muddy the waters is sacrilege as far as I'm concerned.

I was also disappointed by the elimination of the original Pinocchio theme of growing donkey ears when moving to the big city, which indicated that a downside from human to animalistic hedonism was an incipient danger.

Ultimately, though, the injunction to be oneself rings true, as do the multiple acts of self-sacrifice. All in all, this iteration, arriving as it does in a veritable Pinocchio flood, is a pretty decent little piece of entertainment.



The film's narrator of Sebastian J. Cricket is voiced by Ewan McGregor.

'Pinocchio'

Directors: Guillermo del Toro, Mark Gustafson

Starring: Ewan McGregor, David Bradley, Gregory Mann, Burn Gorman, John Turturro, Ron Perlman, Finn Wolfhard, Cate Blanchett, Tim Blake Nelson, Christoph Waltz, Tilda Swinton

MPAA Rating: PG

Running Time: 1 hour, 57 minutes

Release Date: Dec. 9, 2022

★ ★ ★ ★ ★



The Christmas tree inside The Metropolitan Museum of Art, December 2018.

FINE ARTS

O Christmas Tree: Reflecting on a Long Tradition

ERIC BESS

During this holiday season of giving, many of us put up a Christmas tree. We decorate it with ornaments and place gifts for our loved ones underneath. What is the origin and evolution of this long tradition?

A Transcendent Symbol

Evergreen trees—the type often used for Christmas trees—have been used symbolically all throughout the world. For instance, ancient Egyptian, Chinese, and Hebrew cultures associated evergreen trees with eternal life.

Before the 16th century, early Christianity appropriated these customs and originally used Christmas trees to represent the Garden of Eden and to scare off the devil for the new year. Apples, wafers, and candles were added to the tree to represent, respectively, the religious feast day of Adam and Eve, the body of Christ, and the light of Christ.

After the 16th century, the Christmas tree became a deep cultural tradition in Lutheran Germany before being adopted in England during the early 19th century. It was first documented in America in the 1830s by German settlers. By the late 1800s, Edward Hibberd Johnson, a business associate of Thomas Edison, was the first to put lights on a Christmas tree, and the modern Christmas tree was born.



"Angel," second half of 18th century, by Giuseppe Sanmartino. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. PUBLIC DOMAIN

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Christmas Tree and Neapolitan Baroque Crèche

Recently, I was able to see The Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Christmas Tree and Neapolitan Baroque Crèche," on view until Jan. 8, 2023. Positioned in the Museum's Medieval Sculpture Hall, the 20-foot tree provides a home for the many angels and cherubs that hover over a Nativity scene.

The crèche figurines that depict the Nativity scene are from the second half of the 18th century and were provided by the donor Loretta Hines Howard. The figurines are possible figurines are between 12 and 15 inches tall and are composed of wood and terracotta. Some of these are believed to be from the workshop of the Italian master Giuseppe Sanmartino.

The angels and cherubs float majestically above the Nativity scene, where many figurines representing all nationalities come to witness the birth of Christ. Museum-goers can walk 360 degrees around the whole tree while listening to choral music that sets the mood for the Christmas season.

While I walked around the whole museum, it was the "Christmas Tree and Neapolitan Baroque Crèche" that seemed to draw the most people. And they stood, looked, and reflected for the longest amount of time.

Reflecting on the Symbolism of Long Traditions

When traditions are centuries-old like this, we can sometimes lose track of the deeper meanings associated with them. This rich history of the Christmas tree can give us pause. We can stop and reflect on what it represents for us now.

The rich history of the Christmas tree can give us pause to reflect.

Do we return to considering it a symbol of a paradise without sin? Or maybe—as an emblem of Christian virtue—we reflect on its use to ward off the devil, demons, or bad luck at the beginning of the new year? Or maybe its presence can help us reflect on eternity or heavenly beings who watch over us from above? Maybe it's simply a symbol of the togetherness and hospitality shown to family and friends during the season of giving.

Whatever we may decide for ourselves, may we continue to associate a positive and righteous meaning with this long cultural tradition.

Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist and is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA).

PROFILES IN HISTORY

The First Department Store Santa Claus

DUSTIN BASS

James Edgar (1843–1909) was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. As a young boy, he apprenticed for a Scottish cloth merchant and worked hard, long hours only to make \$50 a year. When he was 22, he immigrated to St. John, New Brunswick, in Canada. His financial returns, however, were not to his liking, which led him to believe that he would fare better in America. He pawned his watch for a ticket to Boston, where his fortunes immediately changed. Earning \$12 a week, he had never made so much money.

And after enduring long hours and low pay early in his life, he vowed to take care of his employees if he ever had the opportunity.

In 1878, after working in Boston and in Providence, Rhode Island, he and a friend opened a dry goods store (known now as a department store) in Brockton, Massachusetts. He paid all of his employees well and closed early four nights of the week so employees could spend more time with their families. He eventually earned the reputation as the city's "grand old man" who not only loved and appreciated his employees, but also his customers, his city, and those who lived in it by providing jobs for teenagers, paying for children's medical bills, and sponsoring local homeless shelters. Year round, Edgar exuded the Christmas spirit.

Every Christmas, he would dress up

**Inspired by a drawing of Santa Claus, James Edgar showed up in full red-and-white garb.**

A 1955 Sears ad with the misprinted telephone number that led to the creation of the NORAD Tracks Santa program.

like a clown and walk through his department store, greeting customers and handing out a gift or two to children. But in 1890, he decided to dress a little differently. Taking inspiration from Thomas Nast's 1862 drawing of Santa Claus, he showed up in full red-and-white garb. Word quickly spread throughout the city and neighboring areas that Santa had officially come to town and that he was located at The Boston Store in Brockton. Soon, parents were bringing their children all the way from Boston, Providence, and even New York.

Edward Lowery Pearson remembered the day he met Santa Claus at The Boston Store as a little boy. "You just can't imagine what it was like," he told *Modern Maturity* magazine in 1976. "I remember walking down an aisle and, all of a sudden, I saw Santa Claus. I couldn't believe my eyes, and then Santa came up and started talking to me. It was a dream come true."

Edgar had become the first department store Santa Claus, and the success it brought to business and the joy it brought

to children encouraged numerous other department stores in the area to follow suit. By the turn of the 20th century, department stores across the country had a department store Santa. Ever since, the department store Santa Claus has remained a holiday tradition.

"Without his persona, the millions and millions of happy memories may have never been a reality," John Merian, president of the Boston Store in Brockton Association, said in an online newspaper *The Enterprise*. "He captured the very essence of Christmas."

In 2008, Edgar was remembered by the City of Brockton with a bronze plaque that was placed at the intersection of Main and Crescent streets. Two years later, he was inducted into the inaugural class of the International Santa Claus Hall of Fame.

Dustin Bass is the host of EpochTV's "About the Book," a show about new books with the authors who wrote them. He is an author and co-host of The Sons of History podcast.

FINE ARTS

Life's Most Precious Gifts

A realist's window into 19th-century Austrian family life

LOUISE ROTHMAN

In the painting "Christmas Morning," a humble Austrian family gathers together while the children discover their modest presents. In Austrian tradition, children put their shoes on the windowsill in hopes that St. Nicholas will leave them simple gifts if they've been good. A realist painter, Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller shows us an intimate family scene.

Waldmüller (1793–1865), was one of the most influential Austrian painters of the 19th-century Biedermeier style. The Biedermeier style emerged in Central Europe between 1815 and 1848 to cater to the growing middle class; artists depicted common people, and themes of harmony and piety.

Waldmüller learned artistic traditions by studying the old masters and achieved acclaim for his landscapes and scenes of rural life.

In "Christmas Morning," the austere setting, the clothing, and the scrawny Christmas tree with a few homemade ornaments show that these are common folk. The grandmother is in the center of the painting. Three of the children come close to her, eager to show her their gifts and share their delight in their little treasures.

The gifts are simple pieces of fruit as well as ribbons for two of the girls. The boy on



"Christmas Morning," 1844, by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller. Oil on canvas; 25.4 inches by 33.3 inches.

the left holds an empty shoe and hangs his head, with an unhappy expression on his face. Perhaps Santa passed him by because he was naughty. Two of the girls look toward their sister who is about to retrieve her shoe, curious to see what she may find.

To the right of the grandmother, the mother looks on wistfully. Is she saddened by the fact that she cannot pro-

vide more for her children? Perhaps she's worried about her son who didn't receive a gift. Her husband seems to be trying to explain away her concerns.

All the adults show their love for the children. In our modern age, with its material abundance, we can also feel gratitude for the most precious gifts—the simple things in life, family bonds and, of course, the children.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

Practicing the Presence of God

RUDOLPH LAMBERT FERNANDEZ

Is a church or chapel just a building, or is it a place to practice the presence of God? Ralph Nelson's film asks, and answers, that question. And how.

Handyman Homer Smith (Sidney Poitier), driving through the Arizona desert, finds himself suckered into helping a clutch of nuns construct a church—from scratch. The East German nuns, having weathered hardships in crossing the Berlin Wall, then emigrating, are obviously used to sparse living. Less obvious, especially to Smith, is their insistence that everyone emulate their frugal style.

The imperious Mother Superior Maria (Lilia Skala) embodies that austerity and, thanks to her strict upbringing, has a hard time expressing generosity, warmth, flexibility, and common courtesy. Smith, for his part, is used to being transactional: If you offer your skills to someone, they must pay you or the deal's off.

In spite of himself, Smith's kindness sees him indulge the nuns. He starts out as site foreman but quickly finds himself committing to being a full-blown building contractor and supervisor. First, Mother Maria and Smith wrestle with their egos. Maria's too proud to thank him, and he's too proud to accept help from locals who cheerfully offer it. Then, both learn.

What ensues is a comedic fencing match as Smith tries to get paid for his work, while Maria tries to extract more work out of him, without paying. She insists that he's God's answer to their prayers. Who'd pay for a blessing, she wonders! Of course, Maria stretches to the breaking point the Sermon on the Mount symbol of trusting lilies who "toil not."

For all his huffing and puffing, Smith is a personification of warmth. Watch him in that opening scene. The nuns are at the table, imitating a drab, disembodied voice droning German-to-English try-out phrases from a phonograph. Smith's expressions morph from annoyance at having to stay on (in the hope of getting paid), to shock that they don't understand English, to amusement at their

The most sacred churches are built not with wood or brick or cement, but with love.

'Lilies of the Field'

Director:
Ralph Nelson

Starring:
Sidney Poitier, Lilia Skala, Stanley Adams, Ralph Nelson

Not Rated

Running Time:
1 hour, 34 minutes

Release Date:
Oct. 3, 1963

★★★★★



Homer Smith (Sidney Poitier) talks with Mother Maria (Lilia Skala), in "Lilies of the Field."

predicament, and finally to a sense of play as he has a bit of fun trying to teach them rudimentary phrases. Later, he sways merrily, teaching them a hymn, and they chorus "Amen" to his verse "See the baby/ wrapped in a manger/ on Christmas mornin'."

Skala is so convincing as Mother Maria that it's easy to see the character exploiting Smith's labor. Equally, her childlike faith is hard to dismiss as calculating, even if it is stubborn. She's much like an infant that demands—as a right, not a favor—to be fed and clothed and comforted by a loving parent, rich or poor, tired or rested.

Nelson's film draws on William E. Barrett's novel. Nelson was so moved by the story that he produced and directed it himself. Financiers were wary of a film without the box-office ingredients of violence or romance, so he stayed economical, even playing one role himself (Ashton, the local contractor). Poitier too, swept away by the charm of the script, agreed to work for a fraction of his usual pay and went on to become the first black to win a Best Actor Oscar.

Unselfish Giving and Grateful Receiving

Thematically, Barrett's story is a barely veiled cinematic allusion to the biblical episode of the woman at the well, which celebrates difference and oneness at the same time.

In the film too, it's the man who asks the woman for water. The woman in the Bible is a Samaritan; she's East German on the screen. The man in the Bible is a Jew; he's black on the screen. The man in the Bible wants wa-

ter because he's thirsty; the man in the film, because his "car is thirsty." The man in the film, too, leaves the woman transformed by his profound words and actions.

Smith's no architect or engineer and has meager resources as it is, yet he ends up offering the nuns everything he has: his toil, his car, his language skills, even his earnings from side-hustle construction work with Ashton.

Through Smith's emptying of self, Barrett is saying that the most sacred churches are built not with wood or brick or cement, but with love: an unselfish giving of it and a grateful receiving of it. Seen that way, a church isn't redundant but vital. It's a reminder to keep building selfless habits and demolishing selfish ones.

Both Maria and Smith learn, but he turns out the better student because he learns to give without expecting in return. Maria learns to be grateful, even if she's so used to being unrelenting and has a tough time showing it.

Homer is as devout as the nuns, only differently. Unlike them, he prays not so much with words or special attire or prayer beads or holy books, but with his kindness.

In a sense, he builds a church of sorts wherever he goes by practicing the presence of God. Saluting that spirit, Nelson ends his film with the word "Amen," instead of Hollywood's typical "The End."

Rudolph Lambert Fernandez is an independent writer who writes on pop culture.



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