

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Nativity by Domenico Ghirlandaio



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| Title: | The Nativity |
| Maker: | Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449 - 1494) |
| Medium: | Tempera with oil glazes on wood |
| Date: | c. 1492 |
| Dimensions: | h. 85.7 x w. 62.5 cm |
| Museum No: | M.54 |
| Gallery: | 6 |

The Artist

Domenico Ghirlandaio was born in Florence to a family of prosperous artisans and businessmen and was the eldest of six children. His early training as a painter may have been in the studio of Fra Filippo Lippi, but we know that, like many of the great artists of the 15th century, he also trained as a goldsmith. He and his younger brothers, Davide and Benedetto, went on to establish what was to become one of the most successful *bottegas* or workshops in Florence.

The brothers worked together on commissions ranging from large scale fresco schemes and panel paintings to illuminations, mosaics and objects such as candlesticks and lamps. Domenico was by far the most important and talented member of the family; his balanced compositions, clear spatial organisation and use of naturalistic detail made his work very popular in his own day. In 1490 the Duke of Milan's agent in Florence described Domenico Ghirlandiao as *'a good master on panels and even more so on walls. His things have a good air and he is an expeditious man and one who gets through much work'*. Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists* (1568) wrote: *'Domenico di Tommaso del Ghirlandaio ... can be called one of the principal artists and one of the most excellent masters of his age because of the merits, grandeur and multitude of his works'*.

The Ghirlandiao workshop provided works of art for the rich merchants of Florence at a time when the city, under the dominance of Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492), became the intellectual and artistic centre of Europe. When Domenico completed his 'Life of St John the Baptist' frescoes in Santa Maria Novella in Florence in 1490, he dated them proudly: *'In the year 1490, during which this most beautiful city, famous for its victories, arts and buildings, enjoyed great prosperity, health and peace'*.

The Painting

For many years this painting was thought to be by Sebastiano Mainardi, Domenico's brother-in-law, who also worked in the Ghirlandiao workshop. The recent re-attribution, after cleaning, to the master himself, illustrates how difficult attribution can be in the context of the 15th century workshop traditions. When working on a panel the artist would first prepare the surface by applying layers of gesso. The composition would then be transferred from the preparatory sketch onto the panel by a series of pin pricks onto the surface. This meant that the same composition could be repeated or reversed several times. Some pictures may have been worked on by the master himself, whereas others were completed by other artists in the workshop at the time. Please look at the Making Art section of our webpage on Pharos for more information about the technique of panel painting - www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos

The painting shows Mary kneeling in prayer beside her newborn son, with Joseph and the animals in attendance. The scene is set in the sort of Tuscan landscape with which Domenico would have been familiar and like many pictures from this period, illustrates several episodes from the story. Above the animals on the right hand side, the angel announces the 'good news' of Christ's birth to the Shepherds, whilst along the winding road behind the figure of Joseph are the Magi, travelling from the East.

The main requirements of religious paintings in the 15th century were that they should be clear, attractive, memorable and finally stirring registrations of the holy stories. Domenico's composition is carefully constructed to meet these criteria. The series of triangles is common to many religious Renaissance paintings. As well as a compositional device, the triangle can also be seen as a metaphor for the Holy Trinity.