

# Madonnas and Miracles: The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy

## The Fitzwilliam Museum 7 March - 4 June 2017

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The Fitzwilliam Museum opens a major new exhibition that reveals the central place of religion in the Italian Renaissance home from March 7 - 4 June 2017. 'Madonnas and Miracles' will show how religious beliefs and practices were embedded in every aspect of domestic life. Challenging the idea of the Renaissance as a time of increasing worldliness and secularization, the exhibition will show how the period's intense engagement with material things went hand in hand with its devotional life. A glittering array of sculptures and paintings, jewellery, ceramics, printed images and illustrated books will bear witness to the role of domestic objects in sustaining and inspiring faith.



Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi Botticelli (1444 - 1510), *Virgin and Child*  
© The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

The culmination of a four-year European-funded project, 'Madonnas and Miracles' will present the fruits of a ground-breaking interdisciplinary investigation carried out at the University of Cambridge by members of the Department of Italian, and the Faculties of History, Architecture and History of Art. Extensive research in neglected archives and collections across the peninsula has transformed our understanding of the daily lives of Renaissance Italians, and has uncovered hundreds of sources that allow us to tell a new story about the role of the divine in everyday life.

Coinciding with the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the exhibition will confound the assumption that Catholicism was a religion dominated by priests and ecclesiastical institutions, whilst Protestant families in northern Europe were urged to serve God in their homes. When we peer through the keyhole into the Italian Renaissance home, we find a world in which religion was domesticated in innumerable ways, inflecting every hour of the day and every stage of the life cycle. The intimacy between human and divine was everywhere visible and palpable: in streets and houses, on walls and furnishings, and on a wealth of objects that could be held in the hand. The humblest artisans and the most exalted artists were engaged in producing artefacts that promoted domestic piety.

The exhibition will present a domestic sphere that was supercharged with spiritual significance. Many different kinds of artefact—paintings and crucifixes, crockery and cutlery, jewellery, rosaries, statuettes, prayer books and cheap prints—will be brought together so that we can see how they worked

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collectively to shape the domestic religious sphere. Some of the most powerful items on display will be familiar items of daily life turned to divine purposes. An ivory comb from the mid-fifteenth century features a tiny Annunciation scene. A two-handled cup is decorated with the instruments of Christ's Passion. Conversely, some religious objects served worldly purposes. A rock crystal rosary, created for a wealthy patron, reveals delicate scenes in gilded glass within each of its thirteen beads; it would have functioned simultaneously as a potent religious tool and a breathtaking piece of jewellery.

The inclusion of some rare surviving items from Jewish homes – for example, a Hanukkah lamp or a spice-box used in a ritual to mark the end of the Sabbath – will remind visitors that Renaissance Italy was a multi-cultural society. At the same time, the juxtaposition of sacred objects and books from Jewish and Christian households will hint at some of the qualities of domestic devotion that are shared across different faiths.

Displaying almost fifty objects from the Museum's own collection, as well as over one hundred important loan works from Europe, the United States and Israel, 'Madonnas and Miracles' will explore a series of interlinked themes: family life, the physical experience of prayer, the role of the saints, miracles, pilgrimage and religious reform. The exhibition will demonstrate that domestic religion at the time was well attuned to the needs of ordinary lay-folk, as they experienced the crises and anxieties of everyday life. The point will be driven home by one of the highlights of the show: a selection of ex-voto images drawn from shrines across Italy and never before displayed in the UK. Thousands of these roughly painted boards, originally created to give thanks for miracles were produced in the period. Treasured for their spiritual significance rather than for their artistic value, sizeable collections still exist at many Italian shrines, and the practice of making ex-votos continues to this day. These images of worshippers at moments of extreme physical peril will provide moving testimony to the Renaissance fascination with the miraculous, in its intersection with everyday domestic life.

During the Renaissance, strong ties bound members of a family to their household Madonna, which might be embodied in painting, print, sculpture or figurine. The image of Mary, often displayed on the wall of a bedroom or above a threshold, provided comfort and security to residents of the home as well as offering them a focus for their devotions. The exhibition will show how the Madonna also functioned as a role-model for motherhood and parenting. This theme is intimately depicted in a favourite painting from the Fitzwilliam's collection, Pinturicchio's Virgin and Child with St John, which portrays Mary teaching Jesus to read. A polychrome wooden doll of the Christ Child from Camerino will leave Italy for the first time to be displayed in the exhibition. Many women in Renaissance Italy possessed similar dolls, which were dressed, undressed, handled and kissed, mimicking the Virgin's maternal bond with Christ. The Camerino doll continues to be an object of veneration, looked after and dressed by local nuns, and annually revered by crowds of people who queue up to kiss it on the feast of the Epiphany.

Alongside masterpieces by renowned artists such as Filippo Lippi and Annibale Carracci, 'Madonnas and Miracles' will feature domestic objects from the Museum's reserve collection rarely seen by the public. A number of little-known ceramic pieces from the Museum's stores have been renovated for the

exhibition by conservation expert Penny Bendall. They include a maiolica inkstand, sculpted with a scene of the Nativity, and another piece depicting the Adoration of the Magi. The latter has to be rotated to allow the complete story to be seen; thanks to the conservation of its original bright colours, visitors will be able to imagine how it would have captured the attention of children as they received religious instruction. Chips and missing paint have been left, in order to retain the evidence of well-loved domestic wear and tear.

The multi-sensory nature of devotion will be highlighted by the use of different media. While they admire rosaries made of rosewood and bone, visitors will be able to listen to the voice of an elderly Italian woman repeating her Ave Marias and Paternosters. A set of knives that bear the musical notation for a four-part grace will be brought to life by a newly-commissioned recording by members of the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge. The exhibition will be accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue, edited by curators Maya Corry, Deborah Howard and Mary Laven.

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### **About the Fitzwilliam Museum**

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

[www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

Free admission

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00; CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January and Good Friday

### **Business Partners 2017**

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