

= Doni Tondo =

The Doni Tondo or Doni Madonna , sometimes called The Holy Family , is the only finished panel painting by the mature Michelangelo to survive . Now in the Uffizi in Florence , Italy , and still in its original frame , the painting was probably commissioned by Agnolo Doni to commemorate his marriage to Maddalena Strozzi , the daughter of a powerful Tuscan family . The painting is in the form of a tondo , or round frame , which is frequently associated during the Renaissance with domestic ideas .

The work was most likely created during the period after the Doni 's marriage in 1503 or 1504 , as well as after the excavation of the Laocoön about 1506 , yet before the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes were begun in 1508 , dating the painting to approximately late 1506 or 1507 . The Doni Tondo features the Christian Holy family (the child Jesus , Mary , and Saint Joseph) along with John the Baptist in the foreground and contains five ambiguous nude male figures in the background . The inclusion of these nude figures has been interpreted in a variety of ways .

= = Description = =

The Virgin Mary is the most prominent figure in the composition , taking up much of the center of the image . Mary sits directly on the ground without a cushion between herself and the ground , to better communicate the theme of her relationship to the earth . The grass directly below the figure is green , which sharply contrasts to the grassless ground surrounding her , although the green is now darker and less visible than it was originally . Saint Joseph has a higher position in the image compared to Mary , perhaps as the head of the family , although this is an unusual feature in compositions of the Holy Family . Mary is located between his legs , as if he is protecting her . There is some debate as to whether Mary is receiving the Christ child from Joseph or vice versa . Saint John the Baptist , the patron saint of Florence , is very commonly included in Florentine works depicting the Madonna and Child . He is in the middle @-@ ground of the painting , between the Holy Family and the background . The elements around the family include plants and perhaps water .

The painting is still in its original frame , one that Michelangelo might have influenced or helped design . The frame is ornately carved and rather unusual for the five heads it contains which protrude three @-@ dimensionally into space . Similar to the nudes of the background , the meanings of these heads has been subject to speculation . The frame also contains carvings of crescent moons , stars , vegetation , and lions ' heads . These symbols are , perhaps , references to the Doni and Strozzi families , taken from each one ' s coat of arms . As depicted on the frame , the moons are bound together with ribbons that interlock with the lions , possibly referencing the marriage of the two families .

There is a horizontal band separating the foreground and background , whose function is to separate the Holy Family from the background figures and St. John the Baptist . The background figures are five nudes , whose meaning and function are subject to much speculation and debate . The Holy Family is much larger in size than the nudes in the background , and there appears to be water in between the land where the Holy Family and the nudes are situated . The Holy Family all gaze at Christ , but none of the nudes look directly at him . The far background contains a landscape .

= = Technique = =

The Doni Tondo is believed to be the only existing panel picture Michelangelo painted without the aid of assistants ; and , unlike his Manchester Madonna and Entombment (both National Gallery , London) , the attribution to him has never been questioned . The juxtaposition of bright colors foreshadows the same use of color in Michelangelo ' s later Sistine ceiling frescoes . The folds of the drapery are sharply modeled , and the skin of the figures is so smooth , it looks as if the medium is marble . The surface treatment of the massive figures resembles a sculpture more than a painting

. The nude figures in the background have softer modeling and look to be precursors to the ignudi , the male nude figures in the Sistine Ceiling frescoes . Michelangelo ' s technique includes shading from the most intense colors first to the lighter shades on top , using the darker colors as shadows , a technique called cangiante . By applying the pigment in a certain way , Michelangelo created an " unfocused " effect in the background and focused detail in the foreground . The most vibrant color is located within the Virgin ' s garments , signifying her importance within the image . X @-@ rays of the painting show that Michelangelo incorporated every known pigment used at the time . The masculinity of Mary could be explained by Michelangelo ' s use of male models for female figures , as was done for the Sistine Chapel .

Michelangelo used a limited palette of pigments comprising lead white , azurite , verdigris and few others . He avoided ochres and used very little vermilion .

= = Influences = =

The composition is , most likely , partially influenced by the cartoon (term referring to a two @-@ dimensional preliminary drawing) for Leonardo da Vinci ' s The Virgin and Child with St. Anne . Like this earlier ' cartoon ' , Michelangelo ' s figures seem to be compacted into very little pictorial space and a similar bilaterally symmetrical triangular composition is employed . Michelangelo saw the drawing in 1501 while in Florence working on the David .

The Doni Tondo is also associated with Luca Signorelli ' s Medici Madonna in the Uffizi . Michelangelo probably knew of the work and its ideas , and he wanted to incorporate those ideas into his own work . Signorelli ' s Madonna similarly uses a tondo form , depicts nude male figures in the background , and displays the Virgin sitting directly on the earth .

Three aspects of the painting can be attributed to an antique sardonyx cameo and a 15th @-@ century relief from the circle of Donatello , available to Michelangelo in the Palazzo Medici : the circular form , the masculinity of Mary , and the positioning of the Christ Child . The Virgin ' s right arm mirrors the arm of the satyr in the cameo , and the cameo also depicts an infant located on the shoulders of the satyr , a position similar to the Christ Child on Mary ' s shoulders .

Additionally , some scholars suggest that Michelangelo was inspired by the famous Greco @-@ Roman group of Laocoön and His Sons , excavated in 1506 , which Michelangelo would have seen . The body positioning and muscular syle of the nude figures in the background of the Doni Tondo resemble the twisting contortions of the figures captured by the serpent in the Laocoön .

Furthermore , the inclusion of the five protruding heads in the paintings frame is often seen as referencing a similar motif found on Ghiberti ' s Porta del Paradiso , the bronze doors of the Florence baptistry which Michelangelo was known to greatly admire .

= = Plant symbolism = =

The plant in front of John the Baptist has aspects of both hyssop and cornflower , yet is most likely a hyssop because it grows from a wall . Cornflower is an attribute of Christ and symbolizes Heaven while hyssop symbolizes both the humility of Christ and baptism . There is a citron tree in the background , which represents the Cedar of Lebanon . Michelangelo uses the hyssop and tree as a visual representation of a quote by Rabanus Maurus , " From the Cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop which grows on a stony wall we have an explanation of the Divinity which Christ has in his Father and of the humanity that he derives from the Virgin Mary . " The clover in the foreground represents the Trinity and salvation . The anemone plant represents the Trinity and the Passion of Christ .

= = Scholarly theories = =

There are a multitude of interpretations for the various parts of the work . Most interpretations differ in defining the relationship between the Holy Family and the figures in the background .

Paul Barolsky argues that the Doni Tondo is a " devotional image [?] more than an example of style , symbolism , [or] iconography " . Barolsky bases much of his thesis on the language used by

Giorgio Vasari in his work *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times*. His support for the idea of devotion comes from Christ being presented in the painting like a gift, which he links to the painting's patron due to a perceived pun on the Italian word for "gift," "donare," and the patron's name, Doni. Furthering the Christ-as-gift metaphor, Mary's holding of Christ in the painting is seen to reference the elevating of the host during mass.

Mirella D'Ancona argues that the image reflects Michelangelo's views on the roles of the members of the Holy Family in human salvation and the soul's immortality. The Virgin's placement and emphasis is due to her role in human salvation. She is both the mother of Christ and the best intercessor for appealing to him. Michelangelo, who had been strongly influenced by the Dominican Fra Girolamo Savonarola in Florence, is using the picture to defend the Maculist point of view, a philosophy of the Dominican order rejecting the idea of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The Maculist view is that the Virgin did not receive her sanctification at birth but at the moment of the incarnation of Christ; thus, the image depicts the moment of Mary's sanctification by showing the Christ Child blessing her. Michelangelo depicts Christ as if he is growing out of Mary's shoulder to take human form, one leg hanging limply and the other not visible at all, therefore making him a part of Mary. Moreover, his muscles and balance convey an upward movement, as if he is growing out of her, although he is above Mary, asserting his superiority to her. Furthermore, she argues that the nudes are to be interpreted as sinners who have removed their clothes for cleansing and purification through baptism. The water, which separates the sinners from the Holy Family, just beyond the horizontal band in the middle of the painting, can therefore be seen as the waters of separation mentioned in the Bible. She also argues that the five figures may represent the five parts of the soul: the higher soul (soul and intellect) on the left and the lower soul (imagination, sensation, and nourishing faculty) on the right, a visual depiction of the views of Marsilio Ficino, whom Michelangelo references in other works. Additionally, in looking at them as separate groupings, she suggests that the two figures on Mary's right represent the human and divine natures of Christ, while the three on her left represent the Trinity.

Andrée Hayum argues that the commissioning of the tondo by the Doni family helped to emphasize the "secular and domestic ideals" of the painting rather than seeing it as a "devotional object." In choosing a tondo as the format for the picture, Michelangelo is referencing the form's long association with depicting the "Adoration of the Magi, the Nativity, [and] the Madonna and Child." Hayum also finds many allusions to Noah throughout the work. She posits a referencing of the Madonna to Noah's daughter in law, a sibyl, which thus makes Joseph an embodiment of Noah himself. Hayum further supports this by acknowledging the direct link between Joseph and Noah as depicted in Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling paintings. This link to Noah also gives an explanation to the nudes in the background, whose forms may have inspired the sons in the Drunkenness of Noah. The allusion to the Noah story also brings up themes of baptismal water, thus giving rise to an interpretation of the nudes similar to D'Ancona's: "catechumens awaiting baptism" from John the Baptist, whose "isolation within a pit-like space" indicates his special role as baptizer.

Roberta Olson states that the painting depicts the "importance of the family" and is related to Doni's hoped-for descendants. "One of the ways in which the painting depicts a 'good marriage' is by the seemingly 'reciprocal action' of the handling of Jesus between Joseph and Mary. Much importance is given to Joseph by way of the colors of his clothes: yellow, indicating the divine aspect of the family as well as 'truth,' and purple, standing for royal lineage tracing from the House of David. Additionally, Joseph is important to the painting by referencing the middle name of the Doni's third child who lived beyond infancy." Themes of baptism also are referenced by the influence of Ghiberti's *Porta del Paradiso* on the paintings frame. Located on the doors of the Florentine Baptistery, these sculptural reliefs give reference to the rite of baptism, important for the Doni's and their desire for a child as a product of the good marriage exemplified by the Holy Family, perhaps one reasoning behind the commissioning of the work.