

Madonna and child shown on Yule stamps

Early Renaissance paintings from the collection of the National Gallery of Canada have been chosen to illustrate the three stamps in this year's Christmas series by Canada Post. Only the focal point of the paintings, mother and infant, appears on the stamps which are reproduced here.

The Madonna and Child has been a favorite subject of painters down the centuries. No other subject captures so well the spirit of reverence and joy we experience anew each year as we celebrate the birth of the infant Jesus.

If Saint Luke had not written his unique account of the birth and first years of Jesus from the Virgin Mary's side of the story, she would have remained almost unknown. However, because of his presumed direct access to the mother of Jesus, the Gospel of this holy historian/painter became the source of inspiration for generations of artists seeking to represent one of the most prevailing and poignant images of Christianity — the Madonna and Child.

The earliest work is a triptych of the Florentine school dating from the second half of the 14th century. The Virgin and Child with Saints, the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Crucifixion. The whole piece is identified with Jacopo di Cione, although only the side panels can be directly attributed to him. But then who actually painted the centre panel featuring the Virgin Child? Because

Jacopo was the younger brother of Andrea Orcagna, a leading Florentine architect, sculptor and painter, and because one of the distinguishing features of the Orcagna family's work was the placing of a flowered background curtain behind the principal figures, perhaps Andrea, or some other relative of Jacopo's, was also involved in working on the central portion of the triptych. In the detail shown on the 30 cent stamp, the infant holds a goldfinch in his left hand. In the symbolism associated with Christian art, the bird represents the passion of Christ.

"Perhaps" is a word only too familiar to art historians attempting to identify the unsigned paintings of the past. The only firm designation that can so far be given to The Madonna of the Flowering Pea, on the 12 cent stamp, is that it is an early 15th century work of an

anonymous master of Cologne. Unfortunately this painting, like so many other early masterpieces, was subjected at one time to "restoration", which involved superimposing extraneous colour and accessories according to the whims of the touch-up artist. In this case the overpainting has been removed, so that the Madonna has been returned — although showing some injury — to its original beauty and simplicity. The flowering pea (or any other flowering plant) is the sign of birth and regeneration.

Of course, identification is much easier for the more proclaimed and prolific artists of any school. There is little dispute about attributing The Virgin and Child with Saint Anthony and Donor to Hans Memling, a leading figure of Flemish painting in the last 15th century. This painting, a detail of which appears on the 14-cent stamp, is

immediately signaled by the composition, style, colours and poses which Memling made his own. Another interesting characteristic of his paintings is that Memling usually pictured the Virgin against a brocaded fabric background. The fact that di Cione's family in Florence was also fond of this treatment a century before is only one small indication of the spread and interaction of artistic tastes and treatments throughout Europe during the flowering of the Renaissance period. The golden apple in the Christchild's hand symbolizes redemption and salvation, underlining the Child's mission as the new Adam who would reopen the gates of Paradise.

Jean Morin, who heads his own graphics communications firm in Montreal, is responsible for the layout and typography of these three stamps.

