

Universal in meaning, and deeply moving, Nativity touches heart, soul

In the course of two millennia, countless millions of people have lived their lives in accordance with the teachings of Christ. To all of them, the story of the birth of Christ is of great significance. It is at once the history of the Mother and Child whose lives are at the heart of Christianity, and the moving tale of a mother and her infant.

The story of the Nativity is both glorious and tender, infinitely complex and profoundly simple, universal in significance and deeply personal in tenor.

With a meaning that is truly for all time because it transcends it, the Christmas story is as integral a part of thought and belief in the 20th century, as it was in the third or thirteenth. Perhaps no other occurrence has touched so many lives in so many ways, fulfilling vastly different needs while remaining itself untouched.

The mystic bent of the medieval mind, for instance, envisioned the Christ child as a miniature adult, crowned with a golden halo. Perched rather stiffly on the Madonna's lap, He sits enthroned and surrounded by an honor guard of angels and saints.

Even in infancy, the painters of the Middle Ages seem to say, Christ was already the man who would die upon the Cross for our sins. The paintings of Madonna and Child which date from the Middle Ages are intensely devout celebrations of the glory of God and Christ, His Son.

In contrast, the paintings of the Italian Renaissance, when the philosophy of Humanism was current, depict the Madonna and Child as a very real mother and son. As painted by Leonardo da Vinci, Masaccio, Botticelli, Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi, for example,

the infant Christ is truly a child, pudgy and squirming on His loving mother's knee. The setting is realistic — a landscape or light-bathed interior — rather than a stiff throne floating on a golden background. The saints and angels of Renaissance art are as likely to be teasing the infant Christ as solemnly adoring Him. The playfulness of the artist's conception in no way dims the glory of God and Christ, but rather enhances it, emphasizing love rather than awe.

At the same time, the Italian Renaissance conception of Christ was a glorious one. Paintings such as Gentile da Fabriano's Adoration, with its air of regal courtliness, illustrate that, to the Renaissance mind, Christ was a king as well as a child and a man.

The Flemish painters of the 15th century see the Nativity from a different perspective. The emphasis is on the personal in such paintings as Hugo van der Goes' *Portinari Altarpiece* (whose central panel depicts the Adoration) and Geertgen tot Sint Jans' *Nativity*.

The homely virtues the Flemish admired are represented in the many true-to-life details, as well as in the attitude of the Madonna watching over her Babe, the epitome of loving motherhood.

Mystic, regal, touching, awe-inspiring, loving. That the Nativity can be so many things at once, is in some way a measure of its immeasurable significance.

That it has meant so many things to so many people indicates its infinite power to reach disparate lives, in centuries and continents far removed from one another, touching both heart and soul. As the eternal leaves its indelible mark upon the temporal, it repeats the lesson of its ultimate, essential universality.



A TENDERLY EVOCATIVE RE rendition of a Madonna and Child by Sandro Botticelli. The Madonna is loving and stately; the infant Christ, the image of a real babe. Illustration courtesy: The New York Public Library Picture Collection.



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Be a "safe" holiday host

The holiday season—and at every party you host—give your guests the gift of true friendship by considering those that must drive home.

That's the advise of the Hamilton Automobile Club, which is launching its annual "First A Friend... then A Host" holiday campaign.

The idea behind the campaign is to place the best interests of driving guests one step ahead of efforts to entertain lavishly at the bar, anyway.

Recognizing that it's impractical to discourage drinking altogether, especially during the Christmas and New Year's season, the club suggests subtly de-emphasizing the liquor.

The low-key methods HAC proposes won't dampen the spirit of the party and guests are more likely to be in a condition to drive home safely.

The basic point is to simply center attention on food and fun rather than bottled spirit.

Here are the Club's suggestions on how to be "First A Friend... then A Host":

—Mix the first drink for guests, if you wish, but consider setting up a self-serve bar so guests may pace themselves. If you plan on playing bartender yourself, always measure moderate amounts of liquor.

—Include a variety of low and non-alcoholic beverages for those who may wish to abstain.

—Never push drinks on driving guests.

—Center attention on food. Have an attractive and generous display of rich and starchy foods and serve plenty of them throughout the evening. Here's where your culinary talents can be displayed. Such foods will help slow down the absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream, too.

—Set an example and don't overindulge in drinking.

—Keep guests circulating with dancing, games or conversation, diverting attention from the bar.

—Make sure coffee is that "one for the road". While coffee won't sober anyone up, it gains time—and time is the only factor that leads to sobriety.

—As the evening wears on, serve a rich dessert or sweets along with a non-alcoholic beverage. Sweets aren't too compatible with alcohol and may lead a guest to choose coffee instead.

Tactfully make have had one too many. Suggest a ride home with a sober guest or have someone else do overnight accommodations for the guest if all calling a cab or offering these steps should ensure a successful party, yet may lessen the chance of some "morn-ing after" bad news about a friend /

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