The Nativity
between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

In this iconography, widely spread since the early Middle Ages, the presence of the Virgin Mary became almost constant from the 5th century onwards, following the decree published by the Council of Ephesus on 22 June 431. With this it was definitively established by the Catholic Church that Our Lady was *Theotókos*, or "Mother of God", having given birth not to a man, but to God as man. On the other hand, the presence of Saint Joseph, her husband, became customary from the late Middle Ages thanks to the widespread dissemination of his cult in Europe promoted in particular by the Franciscan Order.

The symbolism linked to the presence of classical ruins in the background of the nativity scenes or the scenes of the adoration of the shepherds or the Magi, i.e. the pagan world that through this sacred episode gave way to Christian Revelation, became established around the middle of the 15th century in Northern Europe, primarily in Flanders. It quickly reached Italy and imposed itself as one of the dominant iconographic motifs. Needless to say, among the innumerable examples that could be cited, the celebrated *Adoration of the Magi* by Sandro Botticelli, painted around 1475. It is scattered with portraits including, on the right, the artist's portrait; in its background landscape, on the left, some Roman ruins can be glimpsed already prey to clumps of grass and plants.

Since the late Middle Ages, mostly thanks to the model provided by Giotto's fresco in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, and later throughout the Renaissance and beyond, the nativity/worship scene was often associated with the episode of the annunciation to the shepherds, as can also be seen in the two Sienese tablets presented in this exhibition.

Between the 15th and 16th centuries, the most popular version was undoubtedly the adoration by the three Magi: there was no lack of original digressions on the theme. One example is Giorgione's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, a work that can be dated around 1505, which is dominated by a typical Venetian landscape that creates an almost protoromantic atmosphere. In Lorenzo Lotto's ingenious *Adoration of the Child*, signed and dated 1523, the Madonna and St. Joseph devoutly adore the infant Jesus, whose death on the cross already appears sadly foreshadowed by the crucifix in the half-light on the left. Even more complex is Botticelli's so-called *Mystical Nativity* , dated 1501 and the only work signed by the artist, in which apocalyptic themes and echoes

of Girolamo Savonarola's preaching appear summarized, not without implicit references to the dramatic events that shook Florence and Italy at the end of the 15th century.

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