



*Altarpiece with Five Saints, c. 1445*

Neri di Bicci (Italian, 1419-1491)

Tempera on wood | 48 5/8 x 32 1/4 in. (123.5 x 81.9 cm)

- How does the artist indicate the importance of these figures?

### VISUAL ANALYSIS

Neri di Bicci's *Altarpiece with Five Saints* is one of the artist's earliest known works. Like many 15th century altarpieces, the medium is *tempera* on hardwood panel. This painting features five saints standing in two rows, and all are oriented towards their left and face that direction, except for Saint James

Major, in the lower right hand corner, who gazes down to his right.

The saints exist in an ambiguous space—while there is some indication of a tilted plane in foreground of the work, the attempts at perspective are not yet sophisticated. Rather than creating a true illusion of depth when indicating the two rows of saints, the artist has kept the figures the same heights, and has simply placed the second row higher in the picture plane. However, the artist has clearly placed one row in front of the other, which was a widespread innovation of the early Renaissance.

The heavy use of gold leafing in the background suggests a spiritual realm far removed from earthly reality. The gold leaf was imprinted with designs to indicate halos around each saint.

The artist has also depicted each saint wearing heavily folded clothing, though there still is not a clear sense of mass about the figures.

### FUNCTION/Form & Style

The painting itself is framed as if seen through the archway of a *Gothic* cathedral. Such allusions to this earlier Gothic style indicate that this work was created during the transitional period into the Renaissance.

Overall, it is relatively conservative, retaining the flat gold background and limited perspective of Medieval painting. There is little sense of depth, with no real indication of where the floor ends, or what kind of space the figures stand in. Again, these are characteristics typical of art from the Middle Ages.

The piece as a whole was meant to serve as encouragement for chapel visitors to partake in worship. It is not a narrative scene, as the saints depicted lived at different times and are not engaged in one linear scene. This is another function of the gold

- The use of real gold leaf in this work is especially important. List some reasons the artist may have used it so widely. (It suggests a heavenly realm; it was a literal depiction of the wealth of the donor who commissioned it; also, it served the practical function of reflecting light in often dimly lit chapels.)
- What is the Renaissance? Define what the term means and what areas of the human experience it affected.
- Why would someone want to commission this painting for a church? What function would it serve?

background, to imply the collective divinity of the saints meant to evoke religious inspiration in others. The work is an **iconic** portrayal, which is partly why the figures have no need to be completely realistic or life-like; its purpose is to inspire devotion.

The saints are identifiable according to the clothing they wear or by the accessories or props around them—these identifiers are known as **attributes**. For instance, Saint Margaret is featured standing on top of a dragon and holding a cross in her hands. According to legend, Margaret was a devoted and pious Christian despite the ridicule and scorn of others. In one miraculous incident, Margaret is said to have been swallowed by Satan in the form of a dragon, but the cross she carried cut the inside of the dragon, saving her life.

She became a **martyr** after being put to death in 304 **CE (Common Era)**. Other attributes identifiable in the work: Saint John the Baptist is depicted wearing a fur or hair cloak, which is how he is usually identified, and he holds a scroll that says “Ecce Agnus Dei,” or “Behold the Lamb of God.” Saint James Major is identifiable by his pilgrim’s attire, and carries a pilgrim’s staff with a cockleshell tied around it. Saint Bernard is dressed in the traditional white habit of the order of the Cistercians. Finally, Saint Matthew stands holding a book opened to the Gospels, or New Testament.

### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

Neri di Bicci was one of a number of professional painters active in Florence during the 15th century. His style was

### VOCABULARY

**Attributes:** A pictorial image, abstract or representational, that represents a person. Similar to an emblem, but known as an attribute when shown carried by or in close proximity to a saint in art.

**Common Era (CE):** Terminology used in art history to refer to the years also known as AD (Anno Domini, or “after death”). Also, BCE: Before Common Era—for BC (“before Christ”).

**Gothic:** Pertaining to or designating the style of painting, sculpture, etc. produced between the 13th and 15th centuries, especially in northern Europe, characterized by a tendency toward realism and interest in detail.

**Iconic:** An image, in any material, representing a sacred figure or event in the Catholic church, and created specifically for veneration by the faithful.

**Martyr:** In this context, people who have given their lives for their belief in the Christianity. It is not, however, a concept limited to the Christian faith.

**Tempera:** A painting medium created by blending egg yolks with water, pigments, and sometimes glue. Widely used during the 14th and 15th centuries, especially on wood panels.

**Transept:** The arm of a cruciform (cross shaped) church, running perpendicular to the nave.

**Triptych:** A work of art composed of three panels.

## OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Communications: Oral and Visual; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Research; Writing Applications
- **Mathematics:** Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes; Measurement
- **Sciences:** Physical Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities; Economics; Geography; History; People in Societies; ; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Analyzing and Responding; Connections, Relationships, and Applications; Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection

well served to its specific function, however. His simple paintings adorned in gold were in high demand throughout his career, as indicated by the historical records. Thus, he was able to satisfy a wide variety of patrons with his work. This particular work was commissioned by Jacopo di Giovanni Matteo Villani, a Florentine merchant, for the Villani di Stoldi family chapel in the left *transept* of Santa Stanza Annunziata. Jacopo Villani did not specifically name the altarpiece; however, his wife Margaret and their six sons are all represented by the patron saints seen in both wings of the work.

This piece is the left wing of the original *triptych* from the Church of SS Annunziata in Florence, where it resided until 1688. The centerpiece, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*, is now in the Museum of Fine Arts,

Boston. The right wing, representing Saints Francis, Philip, Catherine, Albert the Great, and Jerome, is in the collection of the Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Neri di Bicci was born in 1419 in Florence. His father, Bicci di Lorenzo, was a painter and owned a workshop in Florence. Di Bicci inherited his father's business, as well as his artistic talents. His earliest signed work dates from 1452, but he most likely was creating works at least a decade before then. His contemporaries, including the Renaissance masters Fra Filippo Lippi and Fra Angelico, likely had a great influence on the art he produced.

Di Bicci kept a written account of the inner workings of his workshop between 1453 and 1475. This record is extremely

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**MATHEMATICS:** Di Bicci worked at a time when artists were just beginning to accurately depict perspective. Map the receding plane in Di Bicci's work, and analyze if it has the proper perspective, relative to the figures in the painting. Later, such works as Perugino's *Delivery of the Keys to Saint Peter* made expert use of a geometric grid to achieve the illusion of perspectival recession. Compare the two works, and see what advances have been made. (*High School*)

**SOCIAL STUDIES:** Pick one of the saints shown in Di Bicci's altarpiece and research his or her story in more detail. A good source for this might be *The Golden Legend*. Find other images that have been painted or sculpted of them in Medieval or Renaissance art (There should be a lot). Compare these images with Di Bicci's altar wing. Why might certain saints become popular at different times through history? (*Middle and High School*)

**VISUAL ARTS:** Create an in-class altar wing, or triptych. Materials could include: heavy cardboard, paperboard, or poster board; markers; crayons; glue; fabric; glitter; scissors; other various craft supplies.

Fold the cardboard into three panels, with the sides equaling the same length, but both smaller than the middle. The central panel could include an important event that has been studied. The two side panels should visually support the central panel and refer to the event, literally or metaphorically. (*Elementary School*)

significant to our modern understanding of the production of paintings during the 15th century. This detailed document reveals that he produced an average of three altarpieces a year, and had no fewer than nineteen assistants working for him.

His last signed and dated painting is an altarpiece in Siena from 1484; however, it is likely that he continued to work after that. Scholars have surmised that he died in 1491, as no traces or records of him exist past that point.