

Glory Be to God: Diary of a Monk

Francesco Granacci
Madonna and Child, ca. 1520
Oil on wood
34 1/8 x 25 3/8 in. (86.7 x 64.5 cm)
Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York



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AH 424

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Excerpts from DIARY OF BROTHER LORENZO, ORDO SANCTI BENEDICTI

12 April, 1519

Glory be to God. This morning I walked to our small monastery the Santa Maria alle Campora di Marignolle, just outside of the Porta Romana gate.¹ Oh, I would so rather pray than traipse all over Florence looking for the perfect painter. Father, I said to my Abbot, we have a painter just down the street, and he even looks like Dante! My dear old Abbot, Lord bless him, shook his head with a grin and said, Nay! Ah, well; Glory be to God and obedience.

My abbot has commanded me to look at four or five different works, record my impressions, and then we shall choose an artist. But Dear Father, I said, some of these artists are in heaven. Fra Lippi is not in heaven, murmured the abbot.² I didn't agree but kept silent. Anyway, I still had to examine the different works, as if I were wise enough to know; I am merely a monk who wants to pray. Yes, I like to doodle too, but does that make me an expert or a critic? Nay, I say, but glory be to God and obedience.

My brothers at the Campora, who live in fear for good reason,³ welcomed and fed me: warm leek soup, gruel and green beans with fish, [which is] so far superior to meat.⁴ A novice led me to the altar, where I felt compelled to kneel. Paid for by Piero di Francesco del Pugliese,⁵ the *Apparition of the Virgin to St Bernard* (fig. 2) is one of Filippino Lippi's most beautiful

¹ Dennis Geronimus and Piero Di Cosimo. *Piero Di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. Pg. 196.

² Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) was a monk who kidnapped a young female novice who became his muse for many portraits of the Virgin Mary. They were in love and had a child who also became an artist, Filippino Lippi (1457-1504). Despite this, the elder Lippi did not have to renounce his clerical identity.

³ The Campora was outside of the city walls of Florence and always in danger of attack.

⁴ Joan Fitzpatrick, "Body and Soul." In *A Cultural History of Food in the Renaissance*, edited by Ken Albala, 161. The Cultural Histories Series. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. Accessed April 18, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350044531-ch-008>.

⁵ Jill Burke and Ames-Lewis, Francis. "Changing Patrons: Social Identity and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Florence (review)." *Renaissance Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2005): 597.

paintings, made around 1485. He certainly learned from his father, Fra [“father”] Lippi. How well this *Apparition* conveys the holy life of monkhood: a life usually quite rough but accented with bright splashes of color; demons occasionally gnaw on the chains of faith, and the Virgin visits unexpectedly or when we truly need Her. The lines of this painting are sharp and well drawn, unlike those soft Venetian palettes with their amorous ladies. O Lord, make me pure in heart.

Fra Lippi’s painting of the *Apparition* was large, but my abbot says we may want a smaller portrait of the Virgin and Child. Alas, Filippino is dead; we cannot hire him. Why am I here? I asked the angels; “to learn different styles,” they whispered through my conscience. I wish our Lord would resurrect *either* of the Lippis. After evening Vespers with the brothers, I returned to our Badia Fiorentina (Fig. 1), safe behind city walls. Night prayers, candles out, thoughts of heaven. Glory be to God.

13 April, 1519

After morning mass in chapel, I paused to admire Giotto’s polyptych⁶ (fig. 3). Painted *anno domini* 1300, this golden vision of the Virgin with four saints is very nice but with an outdated Byzantine style. I daresay, monks in the old days really had faith if this was all they had to reflect on! Good heavens, look at those keys on St. Peter! When I go on fire watch,⁷ I have to carry a heavy set just like that. I wonder if our abbot made them so large so as to improve our mindfulness. A careless fire would be a great sin.

Before I could ask him, however, the abbot reminded me that our desired painting is to be (i) an oil on wood panel with (ii) the Virgin and Child in the center, She holding Him lovingly as

⁶ Giotto, “The Badia Polyptych (1267-1337),” Virtual Uffizi Gallery, online. <https://www.virtualuffizi.com/the-badia-polyptych.html>

⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*. Harvest Book: Orlando, 1979. Pg. 349.

the Virgin holds every monk, (iii) the environment should have a structured interior that reflects our satisfaction with the monastic life in God's mansion, and (iv) although we admire Raphael, said the abbot, we cannot have Our Lady cavorting outdoors; too many monks desire to run free. I sighed inwardly with agreement: look what happened to Fra Lippi, who ran off with that maiden! The abbot spoke further on Savonarola's dictum that devotional art for monks (and everyone else) should be simple and austere, without superfluous adornment.⁸

I responded by saying that the *Apparition* by Lippi junior is an ideal example of busy-ness, because the rumbling landscape, I felt, gives cause to mental wandering.⁹ My dear Abbot asked me to sketch a concept for whomever we commissioned.¹⁰ I crossed myself, crossed the cloister and paused to admire the fountain¹¹ (fig. 1). Water is so pure. I am not a Franciscan, but I am so thankful for Blessed Francis and his *Canticle to the Sun*. Gathering my hood, for it rained today, I ventured to my next destination, the ducal palace.

I gave my note of introduction to the doorman and waited patiently in the vestibule. I felt calm; no monk (other than Savonarola) need fear the Duke. A Russian slave took me to the small library, there to view a work that took my breath away. *Virgin and Child with Two Angels* by the elder Fra Lippi was magnificent. The Virgin is said to be modeled after a nun named Lucrezia Buti whom Fra Lippi kidnapped. Well, no wonder; a true Venus is she, and methinks the Christ child is modeled after Lippi himself. How funny yet appropriate, for they say he truly loved her. The artist's humor and formal realism harken back to earlier times; the bodies of the Virgin,

⁸ A. Richard Turner, *Renaissance Florence: The Invention of a New Art*. Perspectives (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.). New York: H.N. Abrams, 1997. Pgs. 157-58. Giralomo Savonarola (1452-1498) was the fiery prophet-priest who led Florentines to the "bonfire of the vanities." Eventually they tired of his radical austerity and led him to the stake.

⁹ Turner, 158.

¹⁰ Turner, 49.

¹¹ Anonymous, "Badia Fiorentina; museums's plan" (map), The Museums of Florence, online. http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/Badia_Fiorentina.html

Child and *putti* [angels] lack the physicality of *maestros* Da Vinci and Michelangelo, whose strength of body our commission may require. Still, I am glad to have seen this work and thanked my abbot, who wondered aloud if I had my eye on any nuns. I laughed softly at his joke.

For comparisons sake, I went to the Hospital of the Innocents to see Botticelli's ~~poor~~ very different imitation of Lippi's masterpiece.¹² Painted between 1465-67 using tempera on panel, the *Madonna and Child with an Angel* bears a fascinating mix of *disegno*¹³ with traces of Leonardo's smoky softness (*sfumato*). Botticelli's work looked nothing like Lippi's, and the tempera colors were a bit stale in comparison to Leonardo's rich oils. However, Botticelli creates tenderness between Virgin and Christ. His background is sparse with two Ionic pillars and a poorly crafted archway. The Greeks never made anything like that! We missed Botticelli by ten years, but maybe we are getting somewhere. Dinner with my brothers was wonderful. Rumors of plague in Venice. We prayed for her people.

14 April, 1519

Today I saw a Leonardo. The Abbot gave me another note, this time for a wool merchant named Antonio la Pecora, which is a funny name, considering his profession.¹⁴ He is a wealthy and powerful member of the Arte di Calimala confraternity, who support singers and musicians at the Duomo and San Giovanni Battista.¹⁵ Pecora's boy opened the large doors and ushered me in to his master's presence. The merchant, a jolly rotund fellow, complimented me on my critical taste in art; he knew because my abbot is a friendly gossip. This big ram also had a sense of humor. The Leonardo was behind a heavy dark cloth to protect it from light; with a

¹² Barbara Deimling. *Sandro Botticelli 1444/5-1510*, Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2007. p. 12.

¹³ *Disegno*: strong lines and formal composition favored by High Renaissance artists in Florence.

¹⁴ *Pecora* is Italian for "sheep."

¹⁵ Tim Carter and Richard A. Goldthwaite. *Orpheus in the Marketplace*. I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013, pg. 9.

flourish, Pecora threw aside the garment, said “Voila!” and watched my stunned reaction. Indeed, there were no words at first, for I beheld one of *maestro* Leonardo’s earliest unfinished works. I did not care, however, for the Madonna laughed with true humanity! I had before never seen such realism. The Christ child was too large. As Alberti says (and we all believe), the child focused his “centric ray”¹⁶ of sight onto an object in his hand, some kind of herb and definitely not a bird. I am not sure if we want our Christ child recoiling from a goldfinch as a sign of his future Passion,¹⁷ but God sees all things in all ways. May our painting have the verve of Leonardo, God rest his soul. This may be another clue as to what we need for our chapel. The merchant poured me a glass of fine wine, saying he wanted to see a drunken monk; that Machiavelli considered Christians submissive and effete. How rude. One glass, but I did not oblige him any further.¹⁸

15 April, 1519

I have a slight cold. Woke this morning, gargled with salted water from the kitchen. No rain today. I think I will go to the infirmary.

20 April, 1519

Only now writing again after five days in bed. Terrible cold, some of the other brothers had it too. In fact, Brother Sylvester went home to the Lord last night. He coughed most badly. Took communion, last rites. Somehow he knew, but he went cheerfully. I was in the bed next to his. He gestured to me and said, My mother awaits. Of course he meant the Virgin, but I wonder.

¹⁶ Larry J. Feinberg. *The Young Leonardo : Art and Life in Fifteenth-Century Florence*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pg. 83. <https://search-ebshost-com.csulb.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=400584&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁷ Feinberg, 86.

¹⁸ Turner, 33.

Well, both of his mothers are in heaven, surely. I drew him a funny picture of a monk asleep at choir. He chuckled and pointed at me. Yes, it was a self-portrait.

22 April, 1519

Alive, praise be to God! My abbot kicked me out of bed, so I went on my rounds to see more samples of art. This time it was to the Convento di San Francesco de' Macci, a home for Poor Clares very close to the Badia,¹⁹ to see a Madonna and Child by Andrea del Sarto. My abbot seems to know everyone. The Mother Superior Ionnis de Meleto²⁰ took my note, smiled warmly and guided me to the chapel. We chatted quietly about my project and her eyes lit up at my description of Leonardo's *Madonna*. We halted before the altar, where my eyes grew wide. Del Sarto's work is magnificent. The moment was all the more wonderful because a small group of Clares were in the choir chanting a piece by Von Bingen, *O Clarissima Virga*, "a response to the Brilliant Virgin,"²¹ Mother Superior told me in a whisper.

Del Sarto's painting is called *Madonna delle Arpie*, painted in 1517 (fig. 7). The Virgin holds Christ as a child while standing on a small pillar decorated with winged creatures known as "harpies." To the Virgin's right and left stand Saints Francis and John the Evangelist. Mother Superior said that for good reasons, Del Sarto added the pillar and made other changes not in the contract. She continued by giving me quite an education about the painting, and Franciscan nuns in particular.

¹⁹ "Badia Fiorentina to Via dei Macci 9-11, 50122, Firenze, Fl, Italy," Googlemaps, and Sailko, "Ex convento di San Francesco de' Macci, portale chiesa," photograph, 8 May 2008, Wikipedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San_Francesco_de%27_Macci_portale_chiesa.JPG

²⁰ S. Cohen. "Chapter Nine. Andrea del Sarto's Madonna Of The Harpies And The Human-Animal Hybrid In The Renaissance." In *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art*, 242. Vol. 169/2. Brill's Studies on Art, Art History, and Intellectual History. 2008.

²¹ Hildegard von Bingen, Katelijne Van Laethem, Bart Coen, and Liam Fennely. "O Clarissima Virga, Responsorium," *Von Bingen: The Dendermonde Codex*, Etcetera Records, Lummen: Belgium, 2008. Track 9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQFP4H3JotE>

Mother Ionnis began by saying, *quos evae culpa damnat; mariae gratia solvit.*²² Then, with a sober expression, said that nuns embrace the cloister for redemption from Original Sin of Eve. They cannot ever be free of it save through the Virgin, who advocates especially for those enclosed. The harpies represent treachery, and warn we Sisters to never forget our sinful natures ready to snare men (or ourselves) at any moment.²³ I lowered my eyes in humility, for I knew little of Poor Clare doctrines. Blessed Clare and Saint Francis, she continued, have shown us a pathway to redemption for others and ourselves. We purify our hearts through penance and prayer, and perhaps through our works a few more souls may attain to the grace of Mary, She who is divine and conceived in the mind of God, as St John the Evangelist told us in his vision of the Apocalyptic Woman. Thus can She save us all.²⁴

Seeking to lighten the moment I said, Look, some cherubs are gently caressing the Virgin's legs; what does that mean? Mother Superior smiled, sensing I was inquisitive, not crude. In the contract, she said, Del Sarto was to paint celestial angels crowning the Virgin; instead, and with astute intuition, he made the angels caress her calves; this depicts our ecstatic embrace of and soul identification with our Holy Mother.²⁵ Ah, said I, only the Religious can appreciate this. Indeed, she replied, and even few of those; you are one of the rare brothers to do so. I blushed, not for myself but with a humble pride and thanksgiving that the Clares have such a wise Mother Superior... and that they found a wise artist in Del Sarto.

We stood quietly, hearing the last lilting notes from the *O Clarissima* that enveloped us with a silent absorption of peace. Altar candles flickered like the small fires within our souls, happily and patiently burning with faith.

²² "Those whom He condemns [of] the sin of Eve, Mary [of] Grace resolves."

²³ Cohen, 256-57.

²⁴ Cohen, 256.

²⁵ Cohen, 255.

I will recommend Del Sarto to the abbot, but the structure of his work is a bit course. The triangular composition is too forceful, the Saints and baby Christ too distant. I feel my brethren need a softer image drawing us close to the Virgin, where we do not have to leap so high to be caught by Her. My earthy and practical brothers often say, let contemplatives do the contemplating; thus, we need a Mother only a finger's breadth away.

I felt blessed in meeting the saintly Mother Superior Ionnis. I made the sign of the cross as she bowed to me, but I should have been the one down on one knee.

23 April, 1519

This morning after gruel I told the abbot about Del Sarto. Pleased yet noncommittal, he gave me another scrip of paper with an address to Ghirlandaio's studio along with a different name famous in certain circles. Yes, said the abbot at my arched eyebrow, he was once Ghirlandaio's student. Find him please, see his work, and let us know what you think.

I found a shop busy even these many years after the maestro's passing by plague.²⁶ I asked for the person named on the scrip and was directed across town to another *studiolo* near the river. There, I found Francesco Granacci. He is famous for ending a scandal involving a bad artist and some nuns. In 1508, the nuns at the convent of San Giorgio sulla Costa commissioned an altarpiece from one Bernardo di Leonardo.²⁷ Sister Piera signed the contract and paid Bernardo fourteen florins. Six years prior, in 1502, this devil Bernardo was expunged from the roll of the Artist's Confraternity, the Compagnia di San Luca;²⁸ thus, he had no right to practice

²⁶ Giorgio Vasari, "Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448-1494)," *Lives of the Artists*, Wayback Machine online, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150310211118/http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariGhirl.html>.

²⁷ Costa S. Giorgio, 32, 50125 Firenze FI, Italy. Googlemaps.

²⁸ Louis A. Waldman, "'HE RAN AWAY TO ROME AND DEFRAUDED THE SAID NUNS': BERNARDO DI LEONARDO, FRANCESCO GRANACCI, AND THE SAN GIORGIO SULLA COSTA ALTARPIECE." *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 26, no. 1 (2006): 22-23. Accessed April 19, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23207959.

art! This foul wretch began to paint the alterpiece... then absconded to Rome. His brother had to repay the nuns and our dear Granacci was hired to paint over the devil's artwork. In place of such perdition, Granacci brought forth, like a miracle, the *Virgin in Glory with Saints Bernardo degli Uberti, George, Giovanni Gualberto, and Catherine of Alexandria*, which sits on the high altar in the chapel of San Giorgio sulla Costa²⁹ (fig. 9).

My recent encounter with the Mother Superior Ionnis and her Poor Clares gave me a natural liking for this heroic Granacci. For some reason (perhaps the Virgin or her angels were whispering to me), I knew he would be our man.

I looked around Granacci's shop and saw a very lovely image of *The Birth of John the Baptist*³⁰ (fig. 10). It is a wide piece, oil on wood, made about eight years ago. There is a quaint simplicity most appealing; the buildings have an austere geometry that leads the eye without distraction. The forms are not as sharp or delineated as in the works of Fra Lippi or his son, nor are they mixed with the heavy *sfumato* of Leonardo. At the same time, the figures have the distant rigidity I found in Del Sarto and clearly lack the *jour du vivre* of Leonardo. I wondered if Granacci could create a divine portrait of Our Lady and Child with a sober yet warm liveliness with a simple figuration akin to what I saw in his *John the Baptist* and Filippino Lippi's *Apparition*.

I showed Granacci my sketch. He looked carefully and listened politely as I explained what we were hoping for and what I had gleaned from my journey around Florence. He did not smile or frown, but his eyes seemed to glow with a confident sobriety that reminded me of Mother Ionnis. Yes, he said, I think I can help you. I felt good about this, but said I had to report

²⁹ Waldman, 22-23, and Giorgio Vasari, "Francesco Granacci," *Lives of the Artists*, Wayback Machine online, <http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariGranacci.html>.

³⁰ M. E. D. Laing, "Francesco Granacci and Some Questions of Identity." *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 24 (1989): 154. Accessed April 19, 2020. doi:10.2307/1512876.

to my dear abbot first. Fine, Granacci said, I am busy and not going anywhere. Come back next week if you can; we can talk about more art, as you seem enthusiastic. I only pray it is so.

In my excitement to get home, I stubbed my toe on a broken cobblestone but limped along with a soaring heart. Oh, what a blessing my abbot had given me. I hoped he would be pleased, but was out of town when I returned to the monastery. We brothers had dinner, sang the matins, and I went to rest happily, toe still aching, heart and soul uncaring.

(One year later) 07 May, 1520

We swept the monastery, washed the floors, walls and ourselves spotless to receive the holy image. Granacci arrived with our Lady and Christ, hidden beneath canvas. We monks were not allowed to see it yet; only Granacci and his assistants, as stated in the contract, until she was safely ensconced in the small yet custom marble frame. When all was ready, we filed in, each brother holding a candle and singing an hallelujah for the Virgin. The abbot, bless him, laid a mantle of deep blue cloth before the image; he sprinkled holy water on the covering then signaled Granacci, who drew back the curtain with a humble smile.

Everyone gasped in awe. It is not a large painting, more the size of a devotional, say, 87cm x 64cm. Yet the size did not matter. Oohs and ahhs wafted like incense from a brazier as my brethren sighed lovingly. Only brother Odo had a grimace. He prefers the works of Michelangelo, whom I love too... but one day Odo shall see why this work is perfect for us.

In this year of our lord 1520, the *Madonna with Child* (fig 11), oil on panel, rests in our humble home. The Madonna is mantled in green like the meadow; she wears a red blouse and deep blue skirting; her halo bristles with rays of energy; her golden hair is like my own mother's. Mary sits in a small room, like our cells, with a single window on the left that looks out onto pine trees and mountains. Our Lord is in her lap, one hand caressing her neck, another hand playfully

tugging on her shirt strings. His little manhood is appropriate for his age, and his childlike gaze falls gently upon us. We are like He, in the lap of the Madonna, our Holy Mother. She is not sharply delineated or stark, but soft and welcoming. Granacci seems to have painted an ever-so-light version of *sfumato* but with a color palette akin to Raphael and in an older style of human form. I was reminded of the artistic developments from the post-Byzantine style of Giotto up to our recently departed Raphael; Granacci is not on that master's level, but this painting is perfect for us. We renunciates do not need the brightest or most expensive images. We value what moves the heart, as the Madonna and Child moves us.

We congratulated Granacci, offering him a feast of thanksgiving: meat, which we so rarely have, fruits, cheeses, bread and fresh figs. So much for austerity, said Brother Odo, grumbling over his soup. I did not agree at the moment and kept silent; one day he shall know that the Lord loves those who can enjoy without greed, as does the abbot, who sipped his wine, looked at me and winked.

Appendix of images

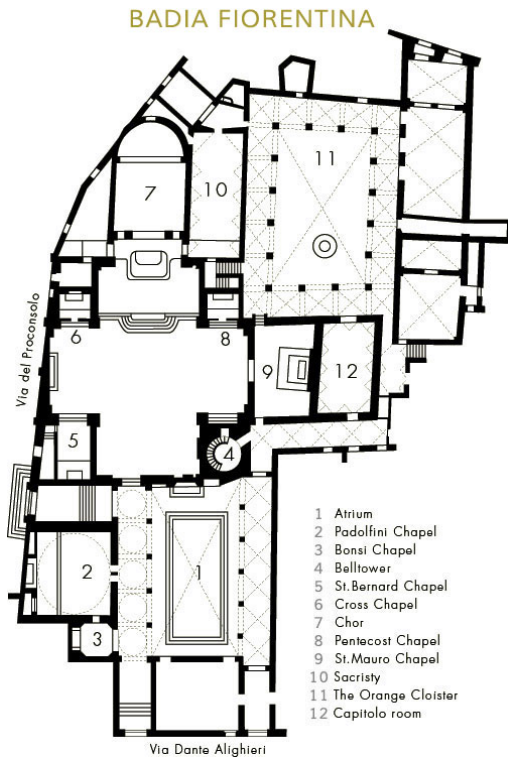


Fig. 1. Floor plan of the Church and monastery of the Badia Fiorentina, Via del Proconsolo, 50122 Firenze, Florence, Italy.



Fig 2. Filippino Lippi (son of Fra Filippo Lippi), *Apparition of the Virgin to St Bernard*, 1485-87. Oil on panel, 210 cm × 195 cm (83 in × 77 in) Badia Fiorentina, Florence.



Fig. 3. Giotto. *The Badia Polyptych*. c. 1300. , Tempera on panel, 91x340cm. Uffizi, Florence.



Fig. 4. Fra Filippo Lippi
Madonna and Child (with two angels),
c. 1450-65, t/o, 92 cm × 63.5 cm
(36 in × 25.0 in), Uffizi Gallery,
Florence



Fig 5. Sandro Botticelli,
Madonna and Child with an Angel, c. 1465-67
Tempera on panel, 87 cm × 60 cm (34 in × 24 in),
Spedale degli Innocenti, Florence



Fig. 6. Leonardo da Vinci
Benois Madonna, 1478
o/c, 49.5 cm × 33 cm (19.5 in × 13 in)
Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg



Fig. 7. Andrea del Sarto
Madonna delle Arpie (Madonna of the Harpies), 1517,
oil on wood, 208 cm x 178 cm,
Galleria degli Uffizi



Fig. 8. Doorway of the “Ex-convento di San Francesco de' Macci,” Via dei Mecci 9, Florence. The photograph shows a sign by the door with the words, “Ex convento di San Francesco de' Macci.”



Fig. 1 Francesco Granacci, *Virgin in Glory with Saints Bernardo degli Uberti, George, Giovanni Gualberto, and Catherine of Alexandria*. After 1505. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence

Fig. 9. Francesco Granacci
Virgin in Glory with Saints Bernardo degli Uberti, George, Giovanni Gualberto, and Catherine of Alexandria. After 1505. Galleria del' Accademia, Florence.

From Waldman, Louis A. ““He ran away to Rome and Defraided the Said Nuns”: Bernardo di Leonardo, Francesco Granacci and the San Giorgio Sulla Costa Alterpiece.” *Notes in the History of Art* 26, no. 1 (2006): 22-26. Accessed April 19, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23207959.

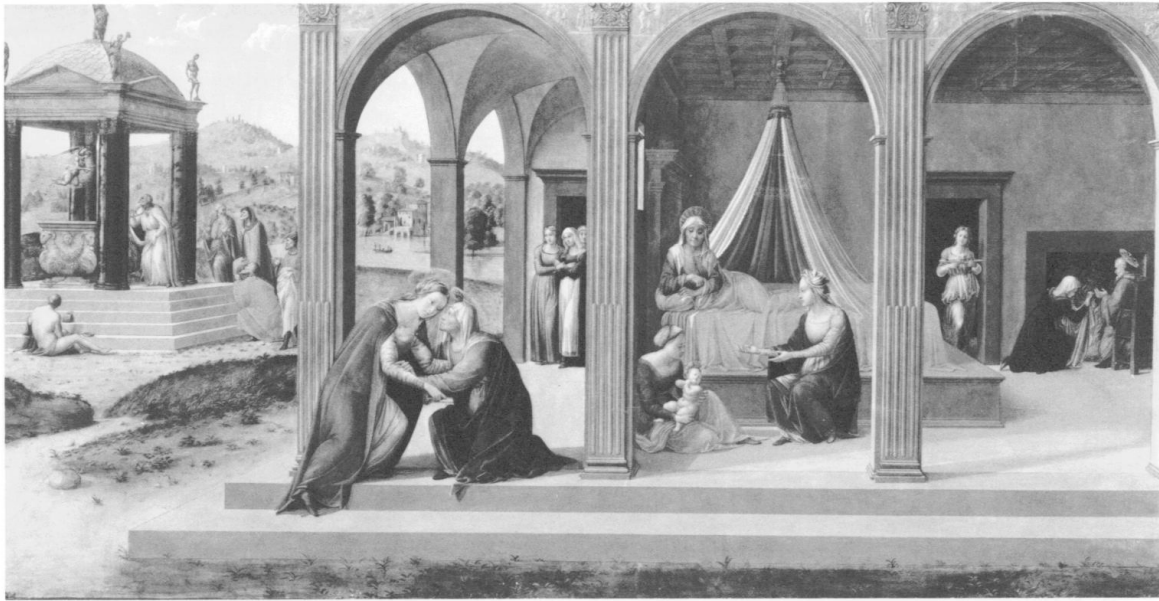


Fig. 10. Francesco Granacci, *The Birth of St. John the Baptist*, ca. 1500-1510.
Oil on wood, 31-1/2 x 60 in (80 x 152.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1970.134.1.



Fig. 11. Francesco Granacci
Madonna and Child, ca. 1520
Oil on wood
34 1/8 x 25 3/8 in. (86.7 x 64.5 cm)
Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Von Bingen, Hildegard and Katelijne Van Laethem, Bart Coen , and Liam Fennely. "O

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQFP4H3JOtE>

Waldman, Louis A. "'He ran away to Rome and Defraided the Said Nuns": Bernardo di

Leonardo, Francesco Granacci and the San Giorgio Sulla Costa Alterpiece." *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 26, no. 1 (2006): 22-23. Accessed April 19, 2020.

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