

The Power of Faith and of Art to Educate

Go to the North Pavilion, Upper Level, Gallery N201, and find the image identified below.



Title: St. Catherine of Alexandria: Scenes from Her Life

Artist: Donato D' and Gregorio D' Arezzo (Italian)

Date: About 1330

Material: Tempera on panel

An altarpiece like this one would have hung at the eastern end of a medieval church, facing the congregation. Such objects not only provided something for the congregation to look at but also educated the largely illiterate population about important religious figures and stories. This altarpiece tells the story of Saint Catherine, princess of Alexandria, Egypt. She became a Christian and devoted her life to worshipping God. She was martyred for refusing to marry the Roman Emperor Maxentius, who was not a Christian. The episodes of her life are represented in the rectangular compartments and are meant to be interpreted by the viewer. The legend of Saint Catherine had only recently been written when the brothers Donato and Gregorio D'Arezzo painted this altarpiece. This painting helped to illustrate and popularize the story of her life.

1. Look carefully at the altarpiece and try to read the scenes from Saint Catherine's life. Can you figure out what is happening in any of the episodes just based on your observations? How did she die? (DON'T READ BELOW, JUST TAKE A GUESS AND DISCUSS YOUR IDEAS WITH A PARTNER.)
2. Here is a list of what is shown on the altarpiece, according to the chronology of St. Catherine's life. Match the scenes with the corresponding panels on the altarpiece. Can you figure out how to "read" the altarpiece?
 - a. Saint Catherine, Princess of Alexandria, holds her attributes of a book and martyr's palm.
 - b. Catherine and her mother visit a holy man, who gives Catherine a special gift: a picture of Mary and her son, Jesus.
 - c. Catherine dreams about Mary and Jesus. Hanging her head, Catherine is sad because Jesus won't look at her.
 - d. Catherine returns to the holy man for advice. He tells Catherine that Jesus will notice her only if she is baptized.
 - e. Catherine has a happier dream. In it, Jesus not only looks at her but also gives her a ring and wants her to be his heavenly bride.
 - f. The Emperor says he will kill anyone who does not worship the gods he believes in. Brave Catherine argues with the Emperor against his beliefs.
 - g. Catherine convinces the Emperor's wise men to become Christians. The price for those turning against the angry Emperor is steep: they are burned at the stake.
 - h. The Emperor has Catherine jailed and beaten for her beliefs. Jesus sends a white dove to bring her food and comfort.
 - i. Catherine convinces a visitor—the Emperor's wife—to become a Christian. The Emperor is furious with both women and wants revenge.
 - j. Jesus and his angels, wearing golden halos, comfort Catherine in prison.
 - k. The Emperor tries to hurt Catherine with a giant spiked wheel. Catherine is saved by angels, who break the spikes off the wheel with long swords.
 - l. A group of soldiers admire Catherine's courage and faith, and they decide to become Christians. The Emperor has them beheaded.
 - m. The Emperor has Catherine beheaded, and angels carry her body off to Mount Sinai. There she is made a saint.

3. Write the letter that corresponds to the scene in the diagram below. Each box in the diagram is intended to represent a scene from the altarpiece. Three matching answers have already been provided for you as an example. The complete answers are at the end of the activity.

	C	A		I

Answers

B	C	A	H	I
D	E		J	K
F	G		L	M