

# **Renaissance Painting Art Cart**

**The Minneapolis Institute of Arts  
Department of Museum Guide Programs  
Education Division  
2400 Third Avenue South  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404**

## **Art Cart Inventory**

### **Art Cart Interpreters:**

The docents/guides for each Art Cart shift should inventory the contents of the cart before **and** after the shift. If this is not done and objects are missing or damaged, the lead guide may be held responsible. (The lead guide is the first guide listed on the tour confirmation form.)

If an object is missing or damaged, make a notation on the inventory and report it to the Tour Office.

If an object is suddenly missing during your shift, notify security immediately by alerting the guard in the gallery or by calling x3225.

## INVENTORY SHEET: ART CART – RENAISSANCE PAINTING

Date:

Guides/Docents:

**Objects**

**Comments**

	In	Beginning of Shift	In	End of Shift
<b>Bole</b>				
<b>Bole brush (short handle)</b>				
<b>Book of Hours</b>				
<b>Burnisher</b>				
<b>Fra Angelico painting copy</b>				
<b>Gesso</b>				
<b>Gilder's pad</b>				
<b>Gilder's tip (flat, wide brush)</b>				
<b>Gold leaf</b>				
<b>Muller</b>				
<b>Pigments (6)</b>				
<b>Prop showing panel, prep, gold, paint layers</b>				
<b>Rabbit skin glue</b>				
<b>Tempera paint brushes (3)</b>				
<b>Quills for writing (3)</b>				

Check to see if you are low on any supplies (paper, pencils, etc.). Let the Tour Office know if you need anything replenished.

Please share! Record visitor questions that “stumped” you and comments or observations you would like to share with fellow guides and staff. If you know the answer to someone's question, please record the answer! Staff will also periodically review questions and assist with finding answers.

## INTRODUCTION

### **WHAT IS THE THEME OF THE RENAISSANCE PAINTING ART CART?**

The Renaissance Painting Art Cart explores panel painting and gilding techniques used in Italy during the 14th and 15th centuries (Gallery 343). The related paintings in the Institute's collection represent a transitional period in painting between the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance. (This period is sometimes called the Proto-Renaissance.)

### **HOW DO THE OBJECTS ON THE ART CART RELATE TO THE THEME?**

The Art Cart features many of the tools and materials used by Renaissance artists to create gold-ground and tempera panel paintings like those in Gallery 343. Included are brushes, dry pigments, gold leaf, preparatory surface materials, tools for using and finishing gold leaf, and a reproduction of the Institute's painting *Saint Benedict* by Fra Angelico.

These items set the stage for discussions about the techniques employed by Renaissance artists. The creation of panel paintings, like the Fra Angelico, took place in a workshop environment. This means several skilled specialists were involved in different stages of the process of creating the finished work of art. The patron also played an influential role in determining what the completed work of art would look like, what quantity and quality of materials were to be used, and the subject, composition and size of the painting.

### **WHAT WAS THE RENAISSANCE?**

The term Renaissance is French for "re-birth." After the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, Italy experienced a period of economic and political decline that lasted until about 1100. The Renaissance, which began in Florence around 1400, was a time of new prosperity and growth—a deliverance from the medieval feudal system and grip of the Black Death (bubonic plague) that killed 40% of Europe's population. Economic and population growth created urban centers that thrived, a new class of wealthy merchants, and fresh patrons for the arts. This new-found prosperity fostered a new sense of pride in humankind and their achievements here on earth. There was intense interest in the much-admired achievements of the ancient Greeks and Romans. However, despite the growing interest in nature, science, and humankind, the church remained a major influence and most art remained religious in content. There was little or no separation between church and state and the Catholic Church dominated life in urban centers like Florence. The Renaissance spread throughout Europe during the 16th century.

**WHAT  
CHARACTERIZES  
EARLY ITALIAN  
RENAISSANCE  
ART?**

In the early part of the Italian Renaissance, it was not so much the subject matter that changed in art, but rather how it was interpreted. With their renewed interest in the humanism of the classical past, artists exhibited increased interest in depicting the natural world accurately. Images of people began to have more volume and physicality than they did in the religious paintings of the Middle Ages. Gradually, some Renaissance artists made attempts to depict space accurately and rationally, developing a system of mathematical perspective (also called linear perspective).

Beginning in the 13th century, Italy comprised a series of independent city-states. Until the unification of Italy in the 19th century, most people thought of themselves as citizens of their city-states (i.e., Romans, Florentines, Sieneese, etc.) rather than as Italians. Competition was often fierce among the city-states, and is reflected by the two rival artistic centers that emerged at the prosperous cities of Florence and Siena.

The Florentine painter Giotto di Bondone (about 1277-1337) is considered by many to be the “father” of Italian Renaissance painting. Giotto is credited with developing a style that integrated earlier Gothic and Byzantine elements with a new interest in humanity and nature, considered central to Renaissance ideals. Duccio di Buoninsegna (active 1278-1318) led the development of the Sieneese style of painting, recognized for innovations in technique and complex multi-paneled altarpieces called polyptychs.

**WHAT WAS THE  
ROLE OF THE  
RENAISSANCE  
ARTIST?**

Renaissance artists were skilled specialists associated with a particular medium (painting, sculpture, gilding, etc.) in which they had received training in an apprenticeship system. Sculptors and painters were probably considered to be of the same social standing as those we would today think of as craftsmen (carpenters, jewelers, clockmakers, etc.) Many times, more than one specialists’ workshop was involved in the process of producing a commission if a number of media/techniques were required.

To become a painter, one was required to apprentice with a master, who typically owned and operated a workshop. The more recognized the master, the more apprentices he was likely to have working for him. Apprentices spent variable amounts of time with their masters, ranging from a few months to decades.

**WHAT WAS THE  
ROLE OF THE  
RENAISSANCE  
ARTIST?, CONT.**

The master's role was to look out for the apprentices' well-being and training as well as to oversee the business of obtaining and carrying out commissions. Most art was produced on demand and to meet the specifications outlined in a detailed contract with the patron. Apprentices performed many of the menial tasks associated with commissions, from mixing materials (pigments, plaster, etc.) to painting or sculpting parts of the composition that were of lesser importance than the focal areas (figures' faces, etc.) that the master might paint or sculpt himself.

**WHAT IS PANEL  
PAINTING?**

Panel painting refers to paintings made on wooden panels instead of directly on the wall, canvas, or some other surface. Panel painting was not new to Renaissance Italy. The ancient Greeks, Romans and Egyptians painted on panels. The earliest examples that remain today are funerary paintings made in Egypt when it was under Greek and Roman rule (332 BCE – CE 642).

To Renaissance artists and patrons, panel painting was desirable because of the medium's versatility – panels are portable (unlike frescoes or mosaics applied directly to the walls) and a wide range of brilliant colors can be achieved. They can also be created at a more relaxed pace because panel painters do not share some of the worries or time pressures of fresco painters or mosaic artists (namely, the fast rate at which the plaster bound the pigments and *tesserae*, or the individual pieces that make up a mosaic, to the wall). Medieval and Early Italian Renaissance painters most often applied tempera paint on poplar panels, but what most distinguishes their paintings is the application of gold leaf to the unpainted surfaces.

**WHAT IS  
GILDING?**

“Gilding” refers generally to the application of gold leaf to a support surface. Because of this, these paintings are often called “gold-ground paintings.”

**WHAT FUNCTION  
DID GOLD-  
GROUND PANEL  
PAINTINGS  
SERVE IN EARLY  
RENAISSANCE  
ITALY?**

The main function of Italian panel paintings was religious – as altarpieces for churches and paintings for civic buildings, where religious images were also commonly found. Changes in the Catholic Church in late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy contributed to increased demand for altarpieces. Instead of facing the congregation as in the past, priests came out from behind the altar to celebrate mass facing it. As a result, rather than continuing to adorn the now-observed front of the altar with painted images, altar cloths were used and multi-paneled altarpieces were painted

**WHAT FUNCTION DID GOLD-GROUND PANEL PAINTINGS SERVE IN EARLY RENAISSANCE ITALY?, CONT.** and placed behind/above where both priest and congregation could contemplate them during mass. Gold-ground paintings flickered brilliantly in the candlelight of Italian churches, giving the space and painted images an aura of sacredness and beauty. Not as common to the Early Renaissance were small-scale diptychs (two-paneled paintings) and triptychs (three-paneled paintings) commissioned for use in private chapels and homes.

**WHAT IS THE IMAGE ON THE FRONT OF THE RENAISSANCE PAINTING ART CART?** The image on the front of the Art Cart is a detail from the 1408 panel painting *The Coronation of the Virgin with Five Music-Making Angels* by Florentine painter Mariotto di Nardo (Mar-ee-ōttō dee Nar-dō). The coronation scene is the central panel from a polyptych (multi-paneled painting) painted for the Church of Santo Stefano near Florence. The central panel shows the Virgin being crowned Queen of Heaven by Christ. This detail shows the five music-making angels that occupy the lower foreground of the painting.

Like many large Renaissance altarpieces, di Nardo's was broken up and sold in pieces to museums and private collectors. In 1986, the Institute organized an exhibition that brought together many of the panels from di Nardo's altarpiece and proposed a possible arrangement in their original church setting. A panel showing the proposed reconstruction is hanging next to the painting in Gallery 343.

**WHERE IS THE RENAISSANCE PAINTING ART CART STORED, AND HOW DO I ACCESS IT?** The Renaissance Painting Art Cart is stored in the Museum Guide Programs costume room/Art Cart room on the third floor. It is located across the hall from the Tudor Room. To access the storage area, pick up a key from the Tour Office. The keys are kept on a hook in the top drawer of the low filing cabinet just inside the tour schedulers' office door.

**WHERE SHOULD THE RENAISSANCE PAINTING ART CART BE SET UP IN THE GALLERY?** The Art Cart should be set up facing the south wall of Gallery 343 (the Daddi hangs on this wall), to the right (west) of The Master of the St. Lucy Legend triptych. Please leave ample space between the cart and the display cases for visitors to circulate safely and comfortably. Be aware of the traffic flow behind you as well, and do not get too close to the north wall of the gallery.



## ARTIST'S TOOLS

*Visitors are welcome to handle all the artists' materials included on the Art Cart. However, none of the jars containing pigments, glue, bole, etc., should be opened by volunteers or visitors at any time. Not only could they create a mess in the galleries, but also some of the materials can be hazardous to one's health if they are ingested.*

### WHAT ARE THEY?

The Renaissance Painting Art Cart features some of the many materials used to create tempera-painted and gilt panels like those in the Institute's galleries.

### HOW DO WE KNOW ABOUT RENAISSANCE PAINTING TECHNIQUES?

Cennino d'Andrea Cennini, commonly referred to as Cennini (chĕ-nee-nee), is the author of a famous treatise from 1437 that exhaustively details the materials and techniques used in panel painting and other media of the day. Entitled *The Craftsman's Handbook (Il Libro dell'Arte)*, Cennini intended his book to be used by aspiring artists as a practical guide in the study of painting. An enormous amount of what we know today about Italian Renaissance painting comes from Cennini's writings.

### HOW WERE GOLD-GROUND PAINTINGS MADE AND BY WHOM?

Because of the variety of materials and techniques involved in the creation of a gold-ground painting, a number of individuals with special skills were involved in the process – typically including painters, gilders and carpenters.

A master painter would be the person contracted by a patron to oversee the design and creation of a painting. Because of the time, materials and labor involved, most paintings were made only on commission. Contracts between artist and patron were often very detailed, specifying the amount of gold and pigments to be used, the size and composition/subject, all of which affected the price. He, in turn, contracted some of the work out to individuals with expertise in certain areas and utilized the apprentices in his own workshop to complete the commission. Usually, a carpenter or cabinetmaker was hired to construct the panels, especially in the case of polyptychs (multi-paneled paintings) with complex designs. The panel was then aged for a time. Upon being delivered to the painter's workshop, the preparatory layers of linen, gesso and bole were put down by the apprentice. (See below and photo props on the cart for details of the process and materials.) The panels were next sent to the gilder, who applied gold leaf and decorative punch work in the appropriate areas in the quantities and areas specified in the contract with the patron. Finally, the panels returned to the painter's workshop where the tempera paint was applied in the areas not already covered with gold leaf. Less important components of the painting would be carried out by the apprentice, with the master painter devoting his attention to the central images.

**WHAT  
MATERIALS AND  
TECHNIQUES  
WERE USED TO  
CREATE  
GOLD-GROUND  
PAINTINGS?**

The information below pertains specifically to the materials included on the Art Cart. For additional information, consult Cennini's *The Craftsman's Handbook* and *Art in the Making: Italian Painting before 1400*, available in the docent/guide study.



**PANELS  
(CREATED BY  
CABINETMAKER/  
CARPENTER)**

**Painted and gilded copy** of the Institute's *St. Benedict* by Fra Angelico

**Panel painting prop** showing all layers from raw panel to gold leaf

- White or black poplar
- Aged/seasoned to proper dryness (not too dry)
- Narrow planks joined together to desired panel size (problems with splitting and warping with fluctuations in humidity and temperature)
- Carpenter crafted panel according to artist's design
- Back sometimes finished with gesso and sometimes painted, but not always (our Fra Angelico copy has been finished on the back)



**PREPARATORY  
LAYERS (DONE  
AT THE  
PAINTER'S  
WORKSHOP; AS  
SEEN IN FRA  
ANGELICO COPY  
AND PANEL  
PAINTING PROP)**

**Rabbit skin glue (small pellets)**

- Also called “size”
- Traditionally parchment clippings (made from sheep and goat skins) soaked and boiled in water to produce glue
- Other animal skin glues, such as rabbit, also used
- Layers applied to treat panel to reduce wood’s absorbency
- Layer(s) of linen (canvas) usually soaked in glue and applied to panel to create smooth surface and reduce cracking and splitting of the panel (our Fra Angelico copy and panel prop do not include this step)

**Gesso (white powder)**

- Italian for *gypsum*
- Combined with animal skin glue to form a paste
- Rough *gesso grosso* (grōs-sō) layer applied first
- More refined *gesso sottile* (sōt-tē-lā) applied in second layer and scraped smooth using straight-edged tool. (This tool is not included on the cart because it is too sharp for use in the galleries.)

**Preparatory drawing (as seen on Fra Angelico copy and panel painting prop)**

- Charcoal drawing on smooth gesso ground
- Subject and composition largely dictated by patron



**Bole (thick red liquid)**

- Red-brown (iron-oxide) clay
- Comes as soft clay cone and is mixed with glue or egg white to create a smooth substance that can be painted on (the example on the cart is bole pre-mixed with glue)



**PREPARATORY  
LAYERS, CONT.**

**Brush for bole** (round brush; our example has very short quill handle into which a longer wood handle would be inserted)

- Used to apply bole to further smooth gesso surface and provide warm color over which gold leaf will be applied
- Made of squirrel hair



**GILDING (PANEL  
SENT TO GILDER)**

**Gold leaf** (23¾ carat gold leaf in narrow tube on Art Cart)

- Comes in thin, flat squares placed between the pages of a small “book” of parchment paper to keep it flat and smooth
- Originally derived from gold coins hammered to extreme thinness
- Very delicate
- Not handled with fingers; rely on static electricity between gold leaf and gilder’s tip to pick up and move to gilder’s cushion

**Gilder’s tip** (thin, flat brush between two pieces of white cardstock; see photo at top of page)

- Used to pick up gold leaf and transfer to gilder’s cushion and to bole surface of panel
- Bole surface is wetted before gold leaf is applied (gold leaf instantly sticks to panel)



**GILDING (PANEL SENT TO GILDER) CONT.**

**Gilder's cushion** (brown padded leather)

- Used as surface for cutting gold leaf to size
- Sheet of parchment usually placed upright at one end to keep drafts from blowing away gold leaf (see photo prop)

**Burnisher** (wooden handle with L-shaped agate tip)

- Used to burnish (polish) gold leaf, which appears wrinkled after applied to wet bole surface
- Agate most common for burnisher tips today, traditionally other stones, teeth, bone and precious gems used
- After gold leaf was burnished, it could be embellished with subtle lines and patterns by tooling or punching designs into the gold with metal tools much like modern leather-working tools (none available on the Art Cart because of their sharpness)



**TEMPERA PAINTING (DONE BY MASTER PAINTER AND APPRENTICE)**

**Pigments** (colored powders in jars on the Art Cart)

- Mineral- and chemical-based pigments were widely available in the Renaissance
- Pigments could be obtained from apothecaries (pharmacies), provided by the patron or prepared by the artist
- Ground in water and then mixed with egg yolk to create *tempera* paint



**TEMPERA  
PAINTING,  
CONT.**

**Muller** (lead crystal)

- Used to grind pigments on a stone slab (like a mortar and pestle and/or the process of grinding ink for Asian ink painting)
- Some pigments came pre-ground, others were ground by the artist

**Sable brushes** (long-handled, flat and round examples of various sizes on the Art Cart)

- Traditionally minever or ermine hair brushes were used
- Today, Russian sable is farm-raised for making brushes (sable is a relative of the minever and ermine)
- Varied sizes create different widths/heaviness of lines
- Flat brushes create “harder” lines; round brushes create “softer” lines

**DRY PIGMENTS  
ON ART CART**

Six of the most popular Renaissance pigments are included on the Art Cart.

**Ultramarine** (Fra Angelico blue)

- Extracted from lapis lazuli
- Most valuable of all Renaissance pigments; cost more than gold (Cost today is still high at about \$30/gram)
- Only known source until 19<sup>th</sup> century discoveries elsewhere was present-day Afghanistan (site visited by Marco Polo in 13<sup>th</sup> century; mineral imported to Italy)
- Very stable pigment that retains its brilliant blueness over time

**Azurite** (blue)

- Less valued than ultramarine
- Natural copper ore
- Less stable than ultramarine, fades and disappears over time

**Vermillion** (red)

- Red mercuric sulphide
- Brightest red available at the time

**DRY PIGMENTS  
ON ART CART,  
CONT.**

**Green earth** (terre verte)

- Mineral pigment from glauconite or celadonite
- Only true green pigment available to Renaissance artists
- Often used as underpaint (a paint layer underneath the pigment seen in the finished work) for flesh tones; underpaint impacts the way the color painted over it appears to the viewer's eye

**Lamp black**

- Carbon-based pigment (one of many suitable choices for black pigments)
- Sometimes used for preliminary drawing on paper and on gesso surface

**White** (Bianco di Titiano – Titanium white)

- During the Renaissance, lead white was the white pigment of choice
- Because of the health risks associated with lead particulates, titanium white has been substituted on the Art Cart

**Beeswax**

- Applied in a thin coat to over the finished painting to protect it and to heighten the colors' intensity
- Not done in Fra Angelico copy or supplementary panel prop on Art Cart

**QUESTIONS AND  
ACTIVITIES**

1. Look at the Fra Angelico reproduction on the Art Cart and at other panel paintings in Gallery 343. What color pigments did the artists use most generously? Most sparingly? Which colors appear to have faded most? Which colors seem to retain their brilliancy?
2. Panel paintings are often made in sections that are hinged together as an ensemble of two (diptych), three (triptych) or more (polyptych) sections. Find examples of each of these configurations in Gallery 343. Keep in mind Renaissance panel paintings were sized according to the space where they would be displayed. How might the number and arrangement of the panels affect the painting's impact on the viewer?
3. Look at the Northern Renaissance paintings in Gallery 343 from outside of Italy (Southern Renaissance). How do they compare to the Italian gold ground paintings? What do you see that makes you say that?

**QUESTIONS AND  
ACTIVITIES,  
CONT.**

4. Using the wooden panel prop provided, encourage visitors to think about how and why paintings were made in this format (portable, free-standing, protect painting when closed, etc.). Panel paintings like this were made with the help of several specialists (carpenter/cabinet maker, gilder, painter). Ask children to replicate these roles by having a different child perform each task. The carpenter chooses the diptych or triptych and gives the wooden panel he/she has “made” to the painter. The painter (or his/her apprentice) applies the gesso (white) and bole (red) layers. The painter then sends the panel(s) to the gilder. The gilder applies the gold leaf. (Children put the gold foil onto the panel.) The gilder gives the panel(s) to the painter. (Children choose images and arrange them on the gilded panel.) How would the painting be different without only one of these three people involved? Why? Which job would you like to do most? Why?

**COLLECTION  
CONNECTIONS**

Punchwork/Tooling

1. Nardo di Cione, *Standing Madonna and Child*, about 1348 (Gallery 343)
2. Fra Angelico, *St. Benedict*, about 1440 (Gallery 343)

Renaissance Humanism (note affection between mother and child)

1. Segna di Buonaventura, *Madonna and Child*, about 1310 (Gallery 343)
2. Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, about 1339 (Gallery 343)

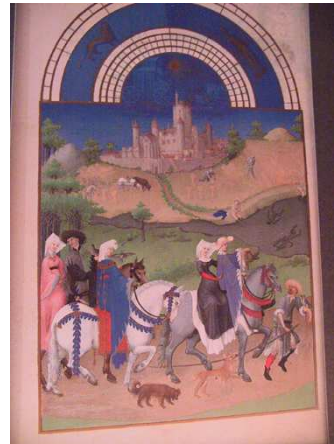
Diptychs, Triptychs, Polyptychs

1. France, *Diptych with Scenes from the Life of Christ*, about 1375 (Gallery 343)
2. Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, about 1339 (Gallery 343)
3. Master of the St. Lucy Legend, *Lamentation with Panels of St. John and St. Catherine*, about 1490 (Gallery 343)
4. Mariotto di Nardo, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, 1408 (Gallery 343)
5. Max Beckmann, *Blind Man’s Bluff*, 1945 (Gallery 355)
6. Giovan Battista Crema, *Trittico (Prisoners of the Mountain Mist)*, 1905-12 (Gallery 322)
7. Ethiopia, *Icon Polyptic*, 18th-19th century (Gallery 250)



## REPRODUCTIONS OF PAINTINGS BY THE LIMBOURG BROTHERS FROM *LES TRÈS RICHES HEURES DU DUC DE BERRY*

*The reproductions are to be handled by visitors and volunteers within the clear plastic sleeves provided to protect them from wear and tear.*



### WHAT ARE THESE PICTURES?

These pictures are reproductions of two illustrated calendar pages from an unfinished fifteenth-century manuscript called *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, or *The Duke of Berry's Very Sumptuous Hours*. The “sumptuous hours” of the title refers to a Book of Hours painted with rich story-telling imagery and colors. Such books, produced in Europe in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance before the development of the printing press, are called illuminated manuscripts. A manuscript, which literally means “written by hand,” was decorated with images in colorful pigments and applied gold and silver that illuminated or “lit up” the pages. The original painted calendar pages, among the most lavish and famous of their time, are found in the Musée Condé in Chantilly, France.

### WHO PAINTED THE ILLUSTRATIONS FOR *LES TRÈS RICHES HEURES*?

*Les Très Riches Heures* is the major work of the Limbourg brothers, Paul, Herman, and Jean, the most acclaimed Netherlandish illuminators of their day. After serving as apprentice goldsmiths in Paris in the late fourteenth century, they entered the service of Jean, Duke of Berry, about 1404. They created this illuminated manuscript for him between 1413 and 1416, the year all three brothers and the duke died. This book is so rare because many of the Limbourg brothers' works were destroyed when one of the duke's castles was burned to the ground. Jean of Berry was one of the wealthiest and most cultivated art patrons in France. His collection eventually included 15 different Books of Hours, along with other magnificent works, created by the most illustrious artists and artisans of his time.

**WHAT IS A BOOK OF HOURS?**

A Book of Hours is a selection of prayers and readings, usually embellished with supporting illustrations, that corresponds to the various rituals of the church year. It is used to perform private daily devotions at eight designated hours of the day, and is modeled after the prayers conducted by members of religious orders and the clergy. The lay person uses this shorter version in a desire to emulate the prayer-life of the religious.

The Book of Hours took on a standardized text and form during the thirteenth century and was a best-seller up to the sixteenth, when changes in the church calendar and additional readings interfered with the original structure. It was particularly popular in France and Flanders. Of all books surviving from this period, none surpasses the number of Books of Hours that remain. Despite the fact that most Europeans could not read, these books were produced in large numbers, principally for members of European society whose occupations required literacy: the nobility, who were involved in legal and political affairs, and the emerging urban middle class, who required written documents for conducting matters of trade. While ownership often reflected genuine religious piety, carrying about richly adorned books also signaled a certain level of wealth and status.

**WHY DOES A BOOK MEANT FOR RELIGIOUS USE HAVE A CALENDAR?**

The calendar section of a Book of Hours comes first, before the devotional readings and prayers. A quick consultation allows the reader to locate the prayers appropriate to a given day. But why was the calendar, a human convention, so important to a book that was meant for spiritual use? While today we generally refer to a day of the year by a sequential number within a given month, in the Middle Ages every day was a feast day, identified by an event in the life of Christ or a saint, usually the day he or she died. It was this religious significance that gave the day its meaning. In these reproductions, the feast days are listed on the back of the illustrations. The calendar identifies each day by name, using different colors to highlight important feasts, such as Christmas (called red-letter days). In order for these beautiful calendars to remain perpetually useful, they were often accompanied by devices and tables for calculating the date of movable feasts, especially for Easter, the church's most important day.

**WHAT DO THE  
PICTURES  
REPRESENT?**

Calendars, when illustrated, had pictures representing the signs of the zodiac and the labors of the months. This was the part of the Book of Hours that had to do with life in the present, visible world. Many calendar pages were decorated with small or half-page images, borders, or vignettes in the margins. The illustrations painted to introduce each month for the calendar section of *Les Très Riches Heures* are unique for their time. Not only are they full-size, but they employ rich colors, including ultramarine (made with the precious mineral lapis lazuli), gold, and silver. The subjects of the images alternate between the labors of the peasants and the pleasures of the aristocracy. Peasants are shown in a way that the nobility would find favorable, happily working for the benefit of their master.

In the reproduction of the painting for May, young aristocrats are celebrating the first of May with an outing to the countryside, festively dressed and adorned with leafy crowns and garlands. The illustration for August also depicts an aristocratic pleasure in the foreground: a group of nobles going hawking. The labor of the month, harvesting wheat, is shown in the middleground. After the wheat is cut and bound into sheaves on the right, the peasant on the left side collects it on a cart for storage during the fall and winter months. The image also shows peasants enjoying their own pastime: four figures are taking a break from their labors by undressing and cooling off in a stream.

The Gothic-styled architecture in the background of both images has identifying features that link it to actual people and places of the fifteenth century. The buildings seem to be associated with important events in the lives of the people depicted. For more information, see the attached written explanations of the images.

The only part of the image that alludes to a spiritual realm is an unfinished calendar device above the principal scene. Here we see the sun god crossing the sky in an elaborate chariot pulled by winged horses. Symbols of the zodiac appropriate to the time of year also float through the arched, star-filled sky. May shows Taurus, the Bull, and Gemini, the Twins; August's signs are Leo, the Lion, and Virgo, the Virgin. Zodiacal signs were thought to govern specific areas of the body and influence one's personality. Therefore, the zodiac was often consulted when performing certain medical procedures.

**HOW WERE THE ORIGINAL PAINTINGS MADE?**

Like Fra Angelico, the Limbourg brothers employed skilled artisans to help complete their paintings. They used a wide palette of colors obtained from plants and minerals mixed with gum arabic (from the acacia tree), a binder that made the paint stick to the surface (like the egg used as a binder in tempera paints). Materials similar to those used in gold ground paintings, such as gold leaf and ultramarine, were painted on manuscript pages made of vellum, a very smooth, fine-grained writing or drawing surface made of lambskin or calfskin. The Limbourg brothers were especially known for their precise details, which required extremely fine brushes and, most likely, magnifying lenses.

**QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

1. What's going on in these pictures? Look carefully and describe the events that are taking place. What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?
2. Look at the central image in one of the reproductions; it depicts an event taking place in the earthly realm. Pick a gold ground painting in the gallery with which to make comparisons. How are the images similar? How are they different? (Notice colors, setting, people included, the story being told.)
3. The images in the arched sky above are part of an unfinished calendar. Why do you think these figures were included? How is that heavenly realm different from the earthly one?
4. If you made a calendar depicting the labors or pleasures of the months in your life, what images would you use?

**COLLECTION CONNECTIONS**

Portable artworks for personal devotion

1. Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, 1339 (Gallery 343)

Similar materials (ultramarine and gold leaf)

1. Fra Angelico, *Saint Benedict*, about 1440 (Gallery 343)

Images of falconry

1. Flemish or French, *The Falconers*, 1435-1445 (not on view)

Illuminated Manuscripts

The Institute has several illuminated manuscripts in its collection of prints and drawings. Periodically, some of these will be on view.

MUSEUM GUIDE PROGRAMS  
European Painting Art Carts  
Renaissance Painting Art Cart  
REPRODUCTIONS OF PAINTINGS FROM  
*LES TRÈS RICHES HEURES DU DUC DE BERRY*

**DESCRIPTIONS OF THE IMAGES**  
**REPRODUCTION OF FRA ANGELICO'S *SAINT BENEDICT***

*The painting is to be handled by visitors and volunteers with gloved hands only. We have provided a small supplementary prop showing the steps of the gold-ground painting process that may be handled with bare hands.*



**WHAT IS IT?**

This small painting is a reproduction of an original 15<sup>th</sup>-century panel painting of Saint Benedict by Fra Angelico (Frah Ahn-gel-ee-co) in the museum's collection. The reproduction was made by Rollin Alm, a local artist schooled in panel painting incorporating tempera and gold-ground painting techniques. The original Fra Angelico painting is from the high altar of San Marco in Florence and was made in about 1440 during the Italian Renaissance.

**HOW WAS THE ORIGINAL PAINTING USED?**

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a tremendous number of churches were being built, each requiring a high altarpiece. Altarpieces were placed in the front of dark chapels where the glow of candlelight would illuminate their brilliant colors and burnished (polished) gold. It may seem curious that this very small painting, approximately 5 x 15 inches, would be an altar painting placed at the front of the church for all to see. However, it is just one small part of a polyptych (poh-lip-tik), or many-paneled painting, that when placed together with other panels would form a large image meant to inspire religious feelings. The central and largest panel of the high altar was an

image of the Madonna and Christ child with saints and angels. (See photo prop of central panel.)

**HOW WAS THE ORIGINAL PAINTING USED?, CONT.**

The central panel would have been flanked with images of other important figures in Christian iconography, such as our Saint Benedict. The church likely sold the individual panels from the altar sometime after 1745 to help alleviate financial difficulties. The painting eventually went on auction in London in the 1960s, where it was purchased by a New York collector and subsequently sold to the Institute.

**WHO WAS SAINT BENEDICT?**

Also known as Benedict of Nursia, Saint Benedict was born in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the Umbria region of Italy. Saint Benedict was the founder of the Benedictine Order of monks. He is depicted here with some of his saintly attributes, or objects that identify him to literate and non-literate viewers alike as Saint Benedict. As here, he is often depicted as an older man with a white beard. He wears a Benedictine cowl (part of a monk's habit) and holds a staff symbolizing his role as Abbot of Monte Cassino (Mōn-tay Ca-see-nō), where he wrote his Rule of the Benedictine Order. The book he holds refers to the Rule, which became the basis of Western monastic law. The Rule required vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and an obligation to perform manual labor. In addition to his attributes, Fra Angelico painted the saint floating on a cloud and enveloped by the golden glory of heaven.

**WHO WAS FRA ANGELICO?**

Fra Angelico, a Dominican monk whose name means Angelic Brother, was born as Guido di Pietro (Gwē-dō dē Pē-ā-trō) northeast of Florence in about 1400. As a young man, Guido became a Dominican friar and took the name Fra Giovanni (Jō-vahn-nē), the name he was known by during his lifetime. Truly devoted to the church, he earned his Fra Angelico nickname posthumously because of his humility and piety as well his "angelic" painting style. By the age of 30, he was considered one of the leading artists in Florence. Around 1443 he received one of his most important commissions, the Altarpiece for the monastery of San Marco in Florence, of which the original Saint Benedict painting was part. In addition to the altarpiece, Fra Angelico and his assistants painted fifty frescos for the individual monks' cells in the monastery of San Marco (now the San Marco Museum). He used his art to teach the stories of the life of Christ, and his style is simple and direct. He died in Rome while painting for the Pope in 1455.

**WHAT CHARACTERISTICS MAKE THIS A RENAISSANCE PAINTING?**

Fra Angelico was one of the first artists to adopt 15<sup>th</sup>-century naturalism into his painting style. Saint Benedict appears to be a real figure, fully modeled in the round. He is a real man expressing human sentiments. The figure is given weight through modeling, or use of light and shadow to create the illusion of a three-dimensional figure (face, body and robes). Lest we forget that Saint Benedict is not of this world, Fra Angelico has employed the medieval gold background to depict this saint in his heavenly realm. In this way, Fra Angelico has perfectly fused the traditional medieval gold background with the naturalism of the Renaissance.

**HOW WAS IT MADE?**

Both the reproduction and the original panel paintings were constructed in the same manner. A poplar wood panel was prepared with a smooth gesso ground, gilded with thin sheets of gold leaf, and painted in egg tempera. (Note how the layers are applied as exposed on the upper corner of the painting and on the accompanying panel painting prop showing each layer. For more detailed information on gold-ground technique, see “The Artist’s Tools.”)

**HOW DOES THE COPY DIFFER FROM THE ORIGINAL?**

Rollin Alm, the local artist who painted the copy for the Art Cart, did not put down a layer of linen between the wooden panel and the gesso ground. Otherwise, it is true to the 15<sup>th</sup>-century technique employed by Fra Angelico and his contemporaries.

**WHAT ARE PUNCHING AND TOOLING?**

Once the gilded surface was burnished (see “The Artist’s Tools”), the gilder (gold leaf specialist) added incised decorations into the gilded surface to create a patterned halo around St. Benedict’s head. Tooling, or engraving lines into the surface of painting, was done with a sharp, pointed metal tool called a stylus (like a metal pencil). Punch work was done with a small metal punch, or stamp, that was gently hammered into the surface of the painting to create patterns. It required a skilled hand to indent the gilt gesso ground without breaking through the surface, but the effect of flickering candlelight catching on the decorative surface patterns enhanced the shimmering and sparkling effect of the gold ground. (See photo prop of punching process.)

**WHAT IS FRA ANGELICO BLUE?**

Within the golden heaven, Saint Benedict stands on a floating cloud of blue. Fra Angelico used his trademark color, known today as Fra Angelico blue, to paint this cloud as well as the book Saint Benedict holds. Fra Angelico blue, or ultramarine, is made from the mineral lapis lazuli. (See sample of Fra Angelico blue pigment on Art Cart.)

**WHAT IS FRA  
ANGELICO  
BLUE?, CONT.**

Lapis lazuli was imported to 15<sup>th</sup>-century Europe from mines in Badakshan, modern day Afghanistan. Due to the extremely high cost of obtaining the mineral, lapis lazuli was even more costly and valuable than gold at the time. The beautiful bright blue pigment retains its color when mixed with egg tempera and has a very high stability when exposed to light, which is why the blue on the 15<sup>th</sup>-century original looks as fresh as that of the reproduction.

**QUESTIONS AND  
ACTIVITIES**

1. Look carefully at the reproduction and/or the original (if on view). Refer to the upper corner to discuss panel-painting techniques, including each layer of the process: the poplar panel, gesso, bole, egg tempera and gold ground. Be sure to turn the painting over and examine the treatment of the back. With gloved hands only, have visitors hold the painting and discuss its weight. This is a good time to briefly discuss touching, and why it's harmful to handle works of art with bare hands. Once you have explored the panel ask one or more of the following questions.
2. What words would you use to describe the panel-painting process? What words would you use to describe the painting itself? Do you like it? Why or why not? What surprises you about this painting?
3. Panel paintings were generally produced in a workshop, with many people working on one painting or altarpiece. Carpenters, gilders and painters would have worked on a painting like this one. Some of the workers were apprentices, or artists in training. Others were considered Master artists, extremely skilled in their trade, such as Fra Angelico. Generally the apprentices painted the less important or prominent parts of the painting while the master focused on the most significant elements of the composition. Based on this, which parts of the Saint Benedict figure do you think might have been painted by Fra Angelico? By his apprentice?
4. Fra Angelico painted this picture to inspire spiritual feelings. This painting has parts that are made to look like they came from the spiritual, or heavenly, realm. It also has parts that remind us that we are human, living in a natural world. What parts do you think look heavenly? What parts look real to you, from life here on earth? What do you see that makes you say that?
5. If you were going to paint a picture of heaven or a spiritual place, what would it look like? What colors would you use? Who would be in it? Why?



**QUESTIONS AND  
ACTIVITIES,  
CONT.**

6. Compare the original Fra Angelico to the copy. How are they similar? Different? What do you see that makes you say that? Find other images of saints in the museum. How are they similar or different? What do you see that makes you say that?

**COLLECTION  
CONNECTIONS**

Azurite vs. ultramarine blue pigments

1. Nardo di Cione, *Standing Madonna with Child*, 1350-60 (Gallery 343)

Cleaned in 1983, this painting was found to be in excellent condition except for the blue of the robe, which had all but disappeared. The robe, now restored with modern pigments, had once been painted with pigment made from the mineral azurite. Azurite was often used instead of ultramarine (lapis lazuli) because it was less expensive, but over time it tends to disintegrate and turn black. The blue paint in the bottom section around the Madonna's feet was painted with ultramarine and still remains perfectly preserved.

Fra Angelico works in our collection

1. Fra Angelico, *St. Benedict*, about 1440 (Gallery 343)
2. Fra Angelico workshop, *The Nativity*, about 1400-10 (not on view)

Tooling and punchwork

1. Fra Angelico, *St. Benedict*, about 1440 (Gallery 343)
2. Nardo di Cione, *Standing Madonna with Child*, 1350-60 (Gallery 343)

Images of saints

1. Master of the St. Lucy Legend, *Lamentation with Panels of St. John and St. Catherine*, about 1490 (Gallery 343)
2. Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, 1339 (Gallery 343)
3. Bolivia, *Saint Isidore*, 18th century (Gallery 367)
4. Austria, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, about 1450-60 (Gallery 340)