



In the footsteps of Ottaviano discovering 15th century Art in Gubbio

Ottaviano Nelli is Gubbio's most important painter and even now, walking around the town, many examples of his work can be encountered. Ottaviano was an artist who worked in many places, continually on the move in Umbria, the Marches and Romagna carrying out different works commissioned from him by important dignitaries and nobles, rich merchants and lawyers, confraternities and religious orders.

He was active as a painter in the first half of the 15th century and worked tirelessly all his life. His workshop produced paintings on wood panel, frescoes as well as decorations and ornamentation for hangings, flags, blazons, canopies and funerary furnishings. He was also an important political figure in his day, holding the office of Consul in Gubbio several times. Soon enough, he was appointed personal advisor to the Counts of Montefeltro, the Overlords of Gubbio and Urbino and gained official recognition as their most trusted artist.

The technique he preferred was fresco painting and it was in this medium that he produced his most beautiful and significant works. It is this aspect of the artist's production, in fact, that the lesson shines most light on, stressing the painter's profound attachment to Gubbio, his native town.






The Madonna del Belvedere

Celebrated for its extraordinary beauty, the *Madonna del Belvedere* (fig.1) is the name by which Ottaviano Nelli's masterpiece is known. The work dates from 1403 and was painted on a wall in the ancient Church of Santa Maria Nuova, located in the district of Sant'Andrea. It depicts the *Madonna and Child* surrounded by *Saints Anthony Abbot* and *John the Evangelist*, with *angel musicians* and the two *kneeling figures* of the donor on the right and his wife on the left. The man, who was deliberately placed near St. Anthony Abbot, as his name was Antonio di Mucciolo Angelucci, was a wealthy dyer of cloth by trade. He had requested the work from Ottaviano in commemoration of his deceased wife, who is portrayed alongside her guardian angel. It is therefore a votive painting like many others in the Church.

The Madonna is seated on a cushion in a field of flowers and behind her a group of angels are holding up an ornate drapery which seems to form a throne. The garments worn by the figures are also of exquisite refinement, brightly coloured and with gold decoration. This attention to the details of the clothing is a reference to the donor's occupation as well as to the fashion of the day, in particular, the courtly fashion that the painter was so familiar with.

On each side of the scene a twisted column (fig.2) is represented featuring strange figures in human form but which lack the grace and elegance of the main characters. Like many painters at that time, Ottaviano delighted in including some comic elements, typical of popular culture, in works of a sacred nature.

The wall painting was created using the fresco technique: the artist applied the colour to a still damp coating of plaster and then filled in certain details by painting on the dry surface with tempera and gold.

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1. Why do you think some of the figures have a halo and others do not?
 2. Some angels (fig.3) are playing typical instruments of that time: the portable miniature organ, the psaltery, the vielle and the rebeck. Which modern-day instruments do they resemble?
 3. Gold decoration is a hallmark of Ottaviano Nelli's art. Which details does the artist highlight with this colour? Observe the painting closely and try to make a list of them.







The Street Shrine in via Dante

In the 15th century, during the lifetime of Ottaviano Nelli, it was extremely common to find so-called **votive shrines** (fig.4) along the streets in towns as well as in the countryside. Don't confuse these *edicole* of the past with the modern kiosks, also called *edicole* in Italian, where you can buy newspapers and comic books! The former kind were small constructions in the shape of a niche with a sacred picture inside in front of which people would stop and pray.

In Gubbio, there are still lots of these painted by Ottaviano the most famous one being in via Dante. In the niche there is a fresco representing the **Madonna and Child** (fig.5) seated on a throne and surrounded by angel musicians. This lovely picture once adorned the façade of the ancient hospice of Sant' Agostino which used to be located on this site. The people who needed help and treatment at the hospice would stop and pray in front of the shrine. In fact, as you can see the Baby Jesus is looking downwards and the gesture He is making with His hand seems, to this day, to offer blessing and protection to the passers-by below.



1. The throne on which the Madonna is seated has a very elegant form similar to the ones that could be found in the palazzi and churches of Gubbio when Ottaviano Nelli was alive. Look at the angel musicians on each side of the throne: in which other work by the artist have you seen them already? Are you able to identify some of the musical instruments?
2. Take a close look at the lower section of the painting: unfortunately, the passage of time and the action of the wind and the rain have damaged the fresco. The coloured plaster has fallen off but this has brought into full view the preparatory drawing that painters would sketch on the wall as a guide to follow when applying colour to the painting. The name given to this kind of drawing is **sinopia** because it was done using a red earthen pigment coming from the town of Sinope in the Orient.
3. Out of curiosity: in via XX Settembre, close to Piazza Grande, you will find an *edicola* closed by a wooden door which contains a painting of the **Coronation of the Virgin** (fig.6). It isn't very well-known but it is important because it is placed on the corner of the house where Ottaviano once lived.

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The Frescoes in the Church of Sant'Agostino

The Church is situated outside of the city walls and is renowned for the frescoes which Ottaviano Nelli painted there in 1420. In the rear of the Church, near the main altar the walls are decorated with scenes from the **Life of Saint Augustine** (fig.7). It's none other than a real story in pictures of the Saint's life from childhood until his death. Just as in a comic book, each scene is accompanied by written words explaining what is happening. Particularly beautiful are the scenes representing Augustine's sea voyages together with those depicting ancient towns full of towers and crenellated buildings. The two scenes representing the **Departure from Carthage** (fig.8) and the **Arrival at Ostia** (fig.9) describe Augustine's journey from Africa to Italy. Try to locate them in the cycle of frescoes. Remember that the journey was by sea.



1. In this cycle of frescoes the artist has frequently depicted crowds of people including many portraits of the people of Gubbio in his day: noblemen, merchants and ordinary townsfolk. You can see some of these faces in the scene depicting the **Death of Saint Augustine** (fig.10) and in the one featuring the **Transfer of the Saint's Body to Pavia** (fig.11) which are in the lowest row of the cycle on the right. In the scene of the Death, the person dressed in red who stands out from among the group of friars, is the painter, Ottaviano himself. Why do you think he included a self-portrait in his painting?
2. In the vicinity of the altar, around the great triumphal arch, Ottaviano painted the bizarre scenes of the **Last Judgement** (fig.12). In the centre is God the Justicer surrounded by angels with the Apostles seated on either side and a procession of the Just below which includes the Madonna, St. John the Baptist, as well as some cardinals and popes. A white cloud separates them from the strange creatures in the throes of agitation underneath: these are the souls resurrected from the dead as we can see from their nude bodies issuing forth from their tombs. Some of them (the souls of the saved) are heading towards Paradise, while others (the souls of the damned) are going in the direction of Hell.



3. Look carefully at the scene. Which of them do you think are the "souls of the damned" on their way to Hell? Are they at the bottom on the right or on the left of the centrally-placed figure of God? Which "diabolical" detail helps you to recognize them?





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The Frescoes in the Church of San Francesco

This church is in the square called Quaranta Martiri which was an important place in Gubbio in ancient times. Large fairs and markets were held here and most importantly many trades were carried on here, among which the production of woollen cloth. In fact, it was a cloth merchant (Giacomello Spadalonga) who donated the land for the construction of a church dedicated to St. Francis, after which the task of decorating the Church was left to artists whose paintings enabled everyone to know about the Saint's life, as well as those of other holy people.

Between 1410 and 1415, Ottaviano was asked to paint a chapel on the left of the main altar, where a sisterhood devoted to St. Francis and the Madonna would come to pray. So the painter created his famous cycle of frescoes telling the stories of **the Life of the Virgin Mary** (fig.13). The cycle begins on the left-hand walls and continues towards the right starting at the top and proceeding downwards. The presence of numbers next to the paintings facilitates the correct reading of the stories depicted by the painter.

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2. In the scene representing the **Birth of Mary** (fig.15) the painter has depicted the interior of a house in great detail, in particular, a bedroom where a baby girl has just been born. Try and describe orally what each of the different figures is doing.
-  3. Look carefully at the lower part of the interior of the chapel: Ottaviano has painted some female figures (fig.16), dressed in long robes with very wide sleeves, in a curious and unusual pose. What are they doing?





