

TEMPTATIONS

The Temptation in the Wilderness · Briton Rivière · Painted 1898

At the end of the 19th century, Briton Rivière, a British artist renowned for his animal paintings, created a hauntingly beautiful painting of “*The Temptation in the Wilderness*”, now part of the collection at Guildhall Art Gallery in London.

This painting refers to the 40 days and 40 nights Christ spends in the desert being tempted to misuse His power by Satan. The painting is far more impressionistic than Rivière’s other works, perhaps even experimental. With a commanding use of color, and seemingly undefined brushstrokes, Rivière portrays a lone, contemplative and yet agonized Jesus. The painting is like an ascending accumulation of color from deep browns and slate blue, to the flaming bright, fiery, luminous horizon of dawn at the top of the canvas. A hunched Jesus sits off-center, caught squarely between the dark earth and the coming light of dawn. This is a Man utterly alone in His experience.

To His left a bird hovers, flying towards the horizon. On His right, a snake slithers towards His feet; perhaps symbolizing temptation.

A small white dot hovers directly over the head of Jesus. It could be mistaken for a stray splash of paint. This glimmer of white, or bright star overhead, seems to be the sole point of focused light, and may in fact be a covert reference to Lucifer, the literal meaning of the name being “light-bringer.” The presence of evil here is not literalized (there is no demon or devil depicted) but it is nevertheless tangible as a force.

In the drooping figure of Jesus, we might read the effort of resistance and the quiet dignity of His role as Savior of mankind; the impression given is perhaps of the devil as a voice in His ear. The red glow on the horizon evokes a sense of the transforming fires of a crucible; the wilderness as a place of transformation and reckoning.

But the soft light also represents a new day dawning, the renewal of hope, suggesting the role of Christ as the “light of the world” which will eventually render the star of Lucifer invisible.



THE GARDEN

The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane · Studio of El Greco · Painted in the 1590s

El Greco employed numerous assistants to help him produce enough works to satisfy the demand for his pictures. This one was probably painted by his studio after his original.

The scene shows Christ's struggle between His humanity and His divine mission. He has retreated to Gethsemane, an olive grove just outside Jerusalem, to pray; only a few olive tree saplings refer to the setting. Christ knows He will soon be arrested and killed. He fears death, but understands that His sacrifice will redeem mankind. El Greco expresses Christ's spiritual and emotional torment through His surroundings, where the natural and the supernatural do battle.

A full moon glows, illuminating the surrounding clouds, while another source of light – a much brighter, supernatural light – shines down on Christ.

A heavenly vision of an angel holding a chalice has appeared before Him. In the Gospel accounts, Christ prays that He will have the courage to drink from the "cup of suffering." In the distance we can see Roman soldiers making their way to arrest Him; the Crucifixion is inevitable. The picture touches on the celebration of communion – the cup representing the chalice that holds wine, Christ's blood – and points to His obedience to God's will. The cup could also symbolize the relief or strength that the angel brought to Him.

Three of Christ's disciples are shown cocooned in what could be clouds or a sort of cave. They visualize the ultimate sign of human weakness: they have not been able to stay awake to support Christ. Their unusual oval enclosure might be a reference to the Byzantine painting tradition which El Greco, a native Cretan, had been trained in, where figures are enclosed in abstract shapes to separate them from other parts of the narrative.



THE TRIAL

Christ before the High Priest · Gerrit van Honthorst · Painted in 1617

This large, atmospheric painting depicts a moment in the Passion: Christ's questioning before the high priest. Gerrit van Honthorst has used a muted palette with dramatic lighting, eliminating unnecessary details. The composition is symmetrically balanced around the lit candle on the central table: the shimmering flame illuminates the faces of Christ and the man facing him.

The identity of this seated figure has been a subject of debate. In the inventory from 1638, it is recorded as Christ before the priest, Caiaphas. Another argument suggests that it could be Christ before Annas, the old high priest before whom He was also brought for judgement.

The time of day rules out an identification as Pilate, who, according to biblical accounts, judged Christ during the day. The priest Caiaphas, however, interrogated Christ at night in the house of his father-in-law, Annas.

On the night He was betrayed...

In the ancient world, night time was dark. Here we see one candle lights two faces, the accusing finger, and not much else. The night evoked thoughts of the unknown, danger, foreboding. We can sense this as we look at the painting.

Furthermore, the account in the Gospel of Matthew mentions two false witnesses who came forward during Caiaphas' questioning of Christ, possibly providing an identity for the two men depicted behind the candlelit priest here. In their false testimony they accused Christ of saying that He could destroy God's temple and rebuild it in three days.


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CROWN OF THORNS

Christ crowned with Thorns · Jan Mostaert · Painted around 1516

The weeping Christ wears the crown of thorns; unusually, it still has some leaves on its stems. His hands are tied together with rope. In His right hand He holds the reed thrust on Him by the Roman soldiers who ridiculed Him as "King of the Jews"; in His left is the birch with which He was flogged. To a modern viewer His crossed hands might recall the imagery of the Egyptian pharaohs, who hold their regalia in a similar manner. But Christ, was only made to dress like a king so that He might be more thoroughly mocked.

In this picture He is the "Man of Sorrows" of Isaiah: *He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him* (Isaiah 53:3). Tears stream from His eyes in large crystal beads and He looks directly at us, lips slightly apart as if He is about to speak. The painter has employed all the artistic means at his disposal to induce feelings of compassion and contrition in the viewer. Even the drooping lines of Christ's shoulders reflect the plaintive character of the painting. Because of its small scale, this painting was most likely used for private contemplation and prayer.



It was likely painted by Jan Mostaert in the early 1500s, or by someone in his workshop in the Netherlands. The artist may have been influenced by a spiritual movement known as *Devotio moderna* or *modern devotion*, which sought to make faith more accessible to lay people and encouraged a greater spiritual and emotional engagement with the person of Christ.

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PIETA

The Laufacher Pieta · Tilman Riemenschneider · Painted around 1520

The representation of the sorrowing Virgin alone with the body of Christ lying across her knees is known as the Pieta (Italian for pity or mercy). It does not directly correspond with a scene recounted in the Gospels, but is a later invention, dating from the 12th – 13th centuries. Chronologically placed between Christ's deposition from the cross and His entombment, it provided believers a moment of contemplation and prayer.

This sculpture was carved by either Tilman Riemenschneider or by one of his students out of linden wood around 1520. The dead body of Jesus lies across Mary's lap. Although she holds the left arm of her son, her grip on Him looks so tenuous that you feel the body which twists away from her and towards us could slip to the ground at any moment.

All five wounds of Jesus are visible. Mary's eyes are lowered, the eyes of her dead son closed completely.

Mary's posture - perhaps especially her compressed lips - reveal how difficult the situation must be for her, physically and emotionally. This sculpture in the Thomas Morus Church in Laufach creates a sense of oppressive silence and anxiety. It is the moment at which *the sword* prophesied by Simeon has *pierced [Mary's] soul*. The artist does not only suggest sadness, but pain, which in the absence of any spoken utterance is physically registered in Mary's body, frozen in grief. This piece of art shows the intimate moment when a mother mourns her son, evoking in the observer the anguish a parent feels in losing a child.



EASTER MORNING

Noli Me Tangere · Fra Angelico · Painted in the mid-1400s

The title of this work, *Noli Me Tangere*, is Latin for - *Do not touch me*. A more precise interpretation of the Greek words in the Bible would be “*Stop holding me*” or “*Stop clinging to me*.”

This fresco is taken from the Dominican convent of San Marco, painted in the mid-1400s by Fra Angelico, and depicts the account in the gospel of John, where Mary encounters Jesus by the tomb and mistakes Him for a gardener.

Some commentators have noted that Angelico is a painter who includes small details that tell a deeper story. One has been suggested in the red “flowers” that appear in the grass – especially those by Jesus’ feet – they seem to mirror the wounds of His crucifixion (known as *the stigmata*).

We can additionally look at the three “flowers” that appear between Mary and Jesus; they form three crosses that could represent Jesus’ crucifixion.

The fact that this event takes place in a garden recalls the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Genesis. Mary's dress – pink, a shade of red – could be a reminder of her sin, while Jesus' enrobed in white reminds us of His purity and the washing away of our sin.

This juxtaposition stretches further when we take the full painting into account; the lost Eden and the redemptive empty tomb; the sacrificial blood of Good Friday and the blossoms of resurrection morning; the sinner and the Savior, human flesh and the victorious, risen body of Christ.

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EMMAUS

The Supper at Emmaus • Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio • Painted in 1601

Painted at the height of Caravaggio's fame, this is among his most impressive domestic religious pictures and perhaps his most famous. It was commissioned from him in 1601 and now hangs in the National Gallery. Caravaggio captures the dramatic climax of the story, the moment of revelation when the disciples suddenly see what has been in front of them all along. Their actions convey their astonishment: one is about to leap out of his chair, his elbow jutting out towards us, while the other throws out his arms in a gesture of disbelief. Typically for Caravaggio, he has shown the disciples as ordinary working men, with bearded, lined faces and ragged clothes, in contrast to the youthful beardless Christ who, with His flowing locks and rich red tunic, seems quite literally to have come from a different world.

Although the picture seems to capture a fleeting moment it is nevertheless carefully staged. The artist uses contrasts of light and shade (known as *chiaroscuro*) to heighten the drama. A strong light from the left falls on the faces of Christ and the disciple on the right. It casts a shadow on the blank wall behind Christ, almost like a reverse halo, and illuminates the hand which the disciple thrusts towards the viewer.

The geometric structure which underlies the composition helps guide our eye around the picture. The back view of the disciple on the left, thought to be Cleophas, and the other disciple's outstretched arms, act like tram lines focusing our attention on Christ's serene face. He and the disciples form an inward-facing triangle, united in the moment of miraculous revelation. Unmoved, and standing outside it, is the innkeeper: his thumbs are tucked into his belt and he looks on impassively with his face in shadow, implying that he has not yet "seen the light" – a metaphor for spiritual understanding. He sees, and yet he does not perceive. The same light illuminates the astonishingly detailed and realistic still life laid out on the crisp white tablecloth – loaves of rustic bread, a chicken, and a basket of fruit teetering dangerously on the edge of the table.

Closer comparison between Luke's account and Caravaggio's interpretation reveals a sequential and temporal disconnect. In the Gospel, after taking the bread Jesus blesses it, breaks it, and hands to the disciples (Luke 24:31). Only after all four actions are the disciples able to recognize the risen Christ, after which He immediately vanishes (v.32). In Caravaggio's picture, the disciples' abrupt, physical reactions of surprise - arms thrown open, chair hastily pushed back, eyebrows raised, brows furrowed, and gazes rapt - suggest their eyes have indeed been opened. But what do they see that incites this upheaval?

The beardless Christ, whose features Caravaggio subtly altered from conventional depictions of the time to account either for His unrecognizability or to honor the exquisiteness of His risen body, raises His hands in a gesture of blessing over the unbroken bread before Him. How, then, can they have recognized Him already? The loaf is cleverly concealed behind the roasted fowl painted in the same palette— which makes the viewer work to distinguish between the bird, the bread, and the hand. We have to take a moment to pick out the bread and the wine before the significance of this meal becomes clear. The eucharistic body, just like the risen body, is concealed and yet revealed. Together, all of these elements serve as a pictorial meditation on the dialectic between the visible and invisible. Caravaggio presents us with a scene which is both familiar and startling so that the viewer sees what the disciples have just seen (that this is Christ), but might also see why they could have overlooked what was right in front of them until this moment.

In Caravaggio's painting, the viewer stands on the fourth side of the table at which Christ is sitting with the two disciples. The painting breaks into the viewer's space with surprising ease. Christ's right hand draws the viewer forward. The outstretched arms of the disciple on the right reach out to the viewer and form a bridge between them and Christ. The chair of the disciple on the left is pushed backwards into the viewer's space as the disciple starts forward. Even the basket of fruit seems like it is about to topple to the floor. All these things pull the viewer in, inviting him to the communion table, to be alongside the disciples as their eyes are opened.



THOMAS

Doubting Thomas · Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio · Painted in 1602

According to the New Testament, after His crucifixion Christ appeared to His disciples and showed them His wounds. Thomas was absent and doubted what had happened: *"Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into His side, I will not believe."* Christ appeared again eight days later and invited Thomas to touch His wounds (John 20:19–27).

As with many of Caravaggio's paintings, *Doubting Thomas* is swamped in theatrical darkness, bringing to life the central figures of Jesus and His apostles as if lit upon a stage. They are tightly arranged, with Jesus and Thomas at the forefront of the image. Our eyes are drawn to Thomas's face first, which is at the very center of the painting. We then follow his gaze to the finger entering the wound of Christ.

Caravaggio's painstaking attention to mundane detail, for example, the realistically rendered ripped seam on the shoulder of Thomas's garment, sets his piece apart from his contemporaries. Although this was a popular subject throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Caravaggio's crude emphasis on Thomas's ruddy fingers sticking into Christ's wound and displacing the surrounding skin is a first. Before him, no other artists composed an image with such an intense focus on the wound. All four figures stare intently at the finger as it penetrates the flesh of Christ's side.

Christ is not distinguished by any of the conventional symbols such as a halo, His face is not even in the light, nor is His head placed hierarchically higher than the others. He grasps Thomas's dirty-nailed hand and guides it to poke the wound in His side. Thomas's expression of slow-dawning recognition and the open-mouthed astonishment of his two companions make vivid how like us the Apostles were. Even though the other apostles seemingly did not need this validation, they seem intensely interested in what is happening. We fail to notice consciously, perhaps, Caravaggio's subtle clue that Christ could not be as ordinarily human as He appears if He can walk around with a gaping wound in His side.

The setting of the encounter is darkness, where figures emerge or partially emerge into the light; signifying their enlightenment.

