

The Holy Family resting on the flight to Egypt

Side chapel painting in the Basilica of Saint Frediano, Lucca, Italy

Artist unknown

16th Century



Introduction: Begin by spending time just looking at the image. Who is depicted, what might the story be and are there interesting details.

The content of the image: This painting depicts the Holy Family resting on their journey to Egypt taken from the Gospel of Matthew: “When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.’ Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt.” (Mt 2: 13-15) We see in this painting Mary resting with the child Jesus in her arms.

Symbolism of Colors: Mary is wearing her classic colors of red and blue, with red signifying the interior suffering at the foot of the cross when her son is being crucified and blue for her status in heaven and the mother of the Divine King. Joseph is seated next to her in his classic colors of shades of brown; the color of wood, as he is a carpenter.

Perspective and mood portrayed: The artist put the Holy Family seated in the foreground of the painting and at our eye level as if we were sitting just across from them. This is done on purpose, because you are invited to be part of the scene and sit by them. The donkey and the distant city in the background gives us a clue as to the narrative of the story. They are obviously traveling and we conclude it might be to Egypt to escape Herod and his massacre as the Gospel story tells us. There is a calmness to this scene; the donkey is eating grass or weeds, the palm tree giving shade and the tree stumps giving a place to sit and rest. So this scene invites us to sit with the Holy Family to rest and contemplate.

Follow the eyes: This is one of the few depictions of the Holy Family traveling to Egypt where Joseph is so prominently placed in the center of the picture. Usually he is in the background. But if we are invited to sit and ponder with them, what is it we are supposed to ponder? Since Joseph is front and center, we should follow his eyes. Do you notice he looks at Mary and Jesus; therefore, we are asked to do the same.

Body movements speak their own language: Our eyes move over to Mary who sits with her head lowered toward her son as the child Jesus touches his hand to his mother’s heart. This shows the close and intimate relationship between mother and son. Her other hand is gently placed alongside her body but also in an open gesture. This is meant to show us that we are also invited into her intimate embrace with her son. Joseph looks on this tender moment in a loving gaze.

The Great Mystery: We ponder the great mystery of the Incarnation with Joseph. We may also ponder the role Joseph has to play here. Notice he is sitting, but not in a position of relaxation or exhaustion from the journey, but in a position, that if needed, he could spring to his feet. He is their protector and must be ready to act in this regard. He is ready at any moment to act on whatever is needed to fulfill the role God has given to him. We then could ponder how ready we are to spring to our feet when God calls us to a task.

How can St. Joseph help us: Not only is the message of the painting telling us that Joseph will spring to his feet to protect his family entrusted to him but also he will spring to his feet to help us. Remember the perspective, we are sitting there with the holy family. His job is to help and protect us as well. Pray to St. Joseph.

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