



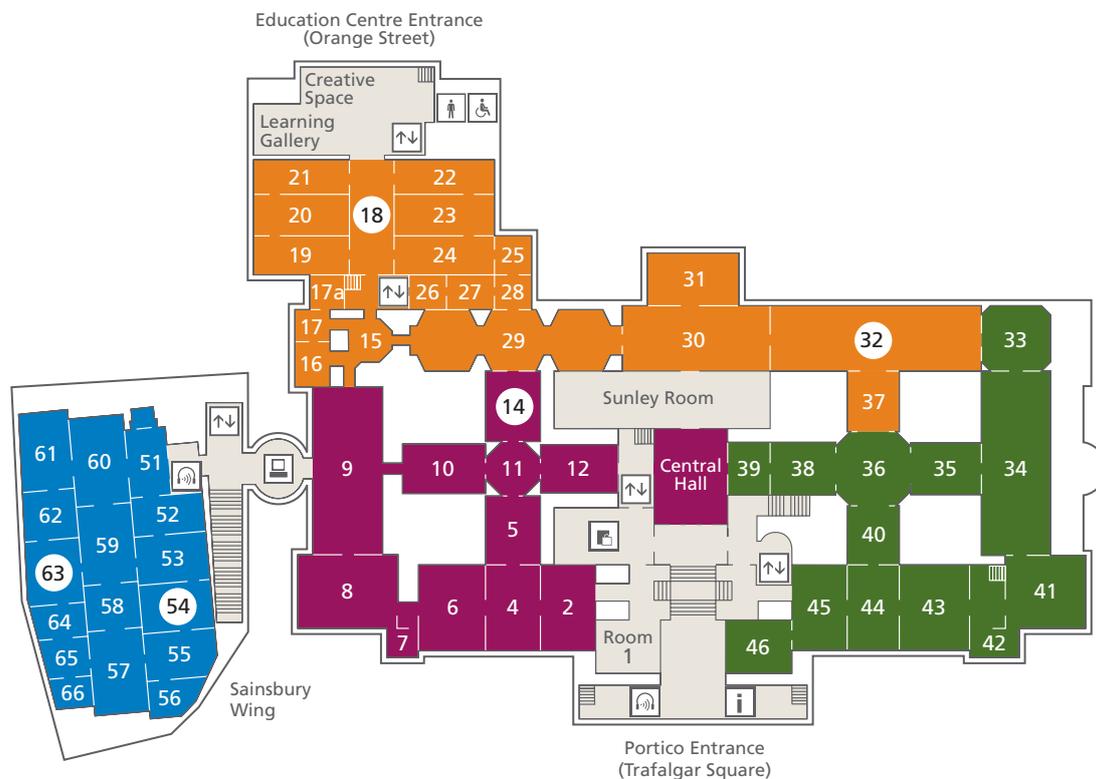
NATIONAL GALLERY NATIVITIES

A trail exploring the first Christmas story through exceptional works in the National Gallery's collection

The Christmas period is the time when Christians celebrate their joy at the birth of Jesus and their belief that his birth fulfilled the Old Testament promise that a Messiah, Christ, would be born. The story of the Nativity, first told in the New Testament gospels of Saint Matthew and Saint Luke, has inspired artists to create some of the most affectionate, gentle and intimate images, which can be enjoyed by everyone. The paintings help to bring to life the story of the family's struggle to deliver the child and keep him safe from harm and invite us to share the emotions and joyous celebrations of the figures present at the original 'Christmas'.

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We'll start our trail at the beginning, with some unexpected news, in Room 44



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The Annunciation

Fra Filippo Lippi, about 1450–3

In this beautifully symmetrical scene the angel Gabriel, on the left with peacock feather wings, has been sent by God to Nazareth to announce to the Virgin Mary the news that she will conceive in her womb the son of God, Jesus. It was traditionally thought that at the moment of

Gabriel's arrival, Mary was reading the prophecy in the Old Testament book of Isaiah that a virgin would give birth to a son. At the top of the picture the hand of God can be seen sending the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove towards an opening in the front of Mary's dress. The curved top of the panel indicates that it may have been intended as a furniture painting, or perhaps to be hung above a doorway, probably in a palace owned by the Medici family. Below the central urn containing lilies, a symbol of Mary's purity, is a carving of three feathers inside a diamond ring. This was an emblem adopted by several members of the Medici family.

While pregnant with the Christ Child, Mary and her husband Joseph travelled to Bethlehem to pay taxes, which the Emperor Caesar Augustus had declared that all citizens must pay. Moving on to room 63, we join them there.

The Nativity at Night

Geertgen tot Sint Jans, about 1490



Once in Bethlehem Mary gave birth to her son in a shelter for animals and used their manger for a bed because there was no room left at the inn. In this small devotional painting *Geertgen tot Sint Jans* ('little Gerard of the Brethren of Saint John') does not show the baby in traditional swaddling clothes. Instead, the tiny naked child exudes rays of supernatural light which illuminate the night-time scene, one of the first realistically painted night scenes in Northern art. It is so dark that we can barely make out Joseph standing behind to the right, or the faces of the ox and ass as they too look into their manger at the unexpected contents. The light emanating from the Christ Child lights up the faces of the little angels and emphasises their wonderment at his miraculous birth.

These events we imagine would have been a shock for Joseph, thrust into the role of earthly father to the Son of God. However in Room 18 we see him receiving some assurance.

The Dream of Saint Joseph

Philippe de Champaigne, probably 1642–3



This painting shows an event from Saint Matthew's gospel. Joseph is asleep on an elegant armchair, perhaps one he made himself. The tools of his trade as a carpenter are placed at his side and his sandals lie on the woven mat by his feet. The hefty angel who miraculously stays airborne has been sent by the Lord to appear to Joseph in his dream. He assures Joseph that he need not hesitate to take Mary for his wife as the child she has conceived is definitely the Son of God. The angel will appear to Joseph in a dream again at the end of our story. The artist deliberately chose a simple composition with blocks of vivid colour so that the painting, which was destined for a dimly lit chapel in the now demolished church of the Minimes in Paris, would be easily seen.

News of Christ's birth spread fast and it was not long before the first visitors came, as we see in Room 32.

The Adoration of the Shepherds

Guido Reni, about 1640



The painting shows one of the most popular stories in the New Testament. The shepherds had been keeping watch over their flocks at night when the angel of the Lord came to bring them news that Christ had been born. We see the shepherds, young and old, crowding around the baby. A host of angels bear a scroll with the words they sang to the shepherds to announce the birth – *Gloria In Excelsis Deo* (Glory to God in the Highest).

Humble shepherds were not the only visitors who travelled to see the special baby, as we shall see in Room 14.

The Adoration of the Kings

Jan Gossaert, 1510–15



The wise men had come from the East to Jerusalem following a star, which can be seen at the top of the painting. The star is also a symbol of God the Father, positioned directly above his son and the dove of the Holy Spirit. The wise men were sent by King Herod to find the new born 'King of the Jews' and to report his whereabouts under the pretence that Herod wanted to go and worship the child. The three men are shown presenting their precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, a fragrant resin used to embalm the dead and a symbol of Christ's future sacrifice. Caspar kneels before the Virgin presenting gold coins in a chalice. Melchior stands behind him and Balthasar, the Moorish King, stands on the left. Their luxurious clothes contrast with the surrounding ruins, a common setting for paintings of this subject symbolising the collapse of the old pagan order and the beginning of Christianity. Fortunately God warned the wise men in a dream not to return to evil King Herod and they departed another way.

The Flight into Egypt

Workshop of the Master of 1518,
about 1515



After the wise men departed, the angel of the Lord returned to Joseph in a dream, revealing Herod's wicked plan to seek out the young child and kill him because Herod saw the child heralded as the new 'King' and a rival to his throne. Joseph is shown following the angel's advice, fleeing with his family to Egypt. In the background we see the head and torso of an old pagan statue falling to the ground, referring to the legend that statues of pagan idols crumbled as the holy family, representing a new religious era, passed. Near the small houses in the background a more horrific breaking of real bodies is about to take place, the massacre of the innocents, a slaughter ordered by King Herod of all children under the age of two. We see the young children being taken from their distraught parents. Herod had hoped in this way to ensure that the baby Jesus would be killed. Fortunately the child remains safe, cradled in the arms of Mary who suckles him, while Joseph, with provisions and a straw hat where a halo might be, leads his family to safety.

Please note that a painting may occasionally be off display. If so, you can view a reproduction of it on ArtStart screens around the Gallery.

If you would like to find out more about the National Gallery's Nativity paintings you can visit our website at www.nationalgallery.org.uk.