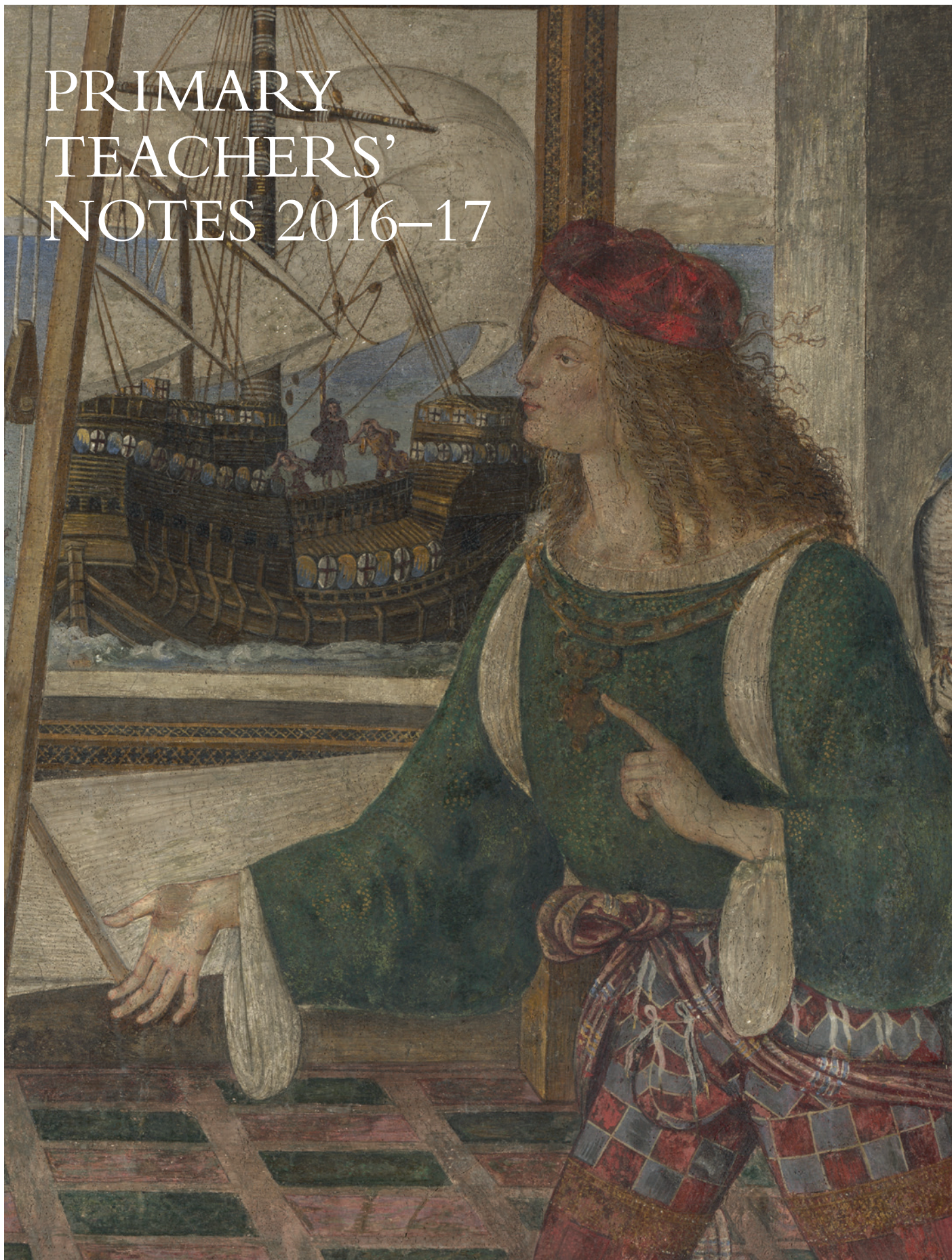


PRIMARY
TEACHERS'
NOTES 2016–17



‘PENELOPE WITH THE SUITORS’,

about 1509

PINTORICCHIO

about 1456/60 – 1513



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ABOUT THE ARTIST

The artist Bernardino di Betto, known as Pintoricchio, was probably born in the Umbrian city of Perugia between 1456 and 1460. Little is known of his early life, but he may have received some training in the studio of a local artist.

ARTISTS' TRAINING

Boys would be apprenticed around the age of 14 and would need to train for some years. As well as learning to draw and paint they needed to master various practical and craft skills. Once trained, they could join the painters' guild and set up as independent masters with their own assistants and apprentices and hope to gain prestigious commissions.

Pintoricchio enrolled in the painters' guild in Perugia in 1481. By this date he had already been working professionally with Perugino, one of the most respected artists of the period. He may even have been Perugino's apprentice. The National Gallery has a painting by Pintoricchio, *The Virgin and Child*, which shows the decorative qualities and leafy landscapes of his early style.



Rome

Under Perugino's direction Pintoricchio contributed some of the frescoes for the walls of the Sistine Chapel in Rome 1481-2. As head of the church, the Pope at this period was hugely powerful and ruled over an extensive territory in what is now Italy. He and his court were wealthy and prestigious patrons of the arts.

Pintoricchio went on to receive further important commissions in Rome, including the decoration of the Vatican apartments for Pope Alexander VI (1492-5), a huge task which required the supervision of several assistants. Artists and their educated patrons were becoming increasingly interested in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. Ancient works were being excavated in the city and Pintoricchio, along with other artists, immersed himself in their influence.

Siena

In 1502 Pintoricchio was summoned to Siena to decorate the Piccolomini library in its Cathedral. This led to several other commissions in the city, including the series of frescoes for Pandolfo Petrucci that included 'Penelope with the Suitors'.

Pintoricchio died in Siena in 1513 having enjoyed considerable success and high praise throughout his career.

THE COMMISSION

Siena had been a stable republic until the mid-14th century, but by the time Pintoricchio was living there, power was divided among a number of families or factions between whom there was considerable strife. During the 1490s Pandolfo Petrucci had become increasingly powerful and by the 1500s he virtually ruled the city. Petrucci created an impressive palace, the Palazzo del Magnifico (still standing

but now a hotel) which he refurbished in 1508. In 1509 he created a sumptuous seven-room apartment within it to celebrate the marriage of his son Borghese to Vittoria di Andrea Piccolomini, niece of Pope Pius III.

The *Camera Bella* ('beautiful room') contained eight large frescoes, including 'Penelope with the Suitors' by Pintoricchio. (Two others by Signorelli are also in the National Gallery collection). The room had an elaborately decorated ceiling and walls as well as painted floor tiles, two of which are in the collection of the Victoria and Albert museum. (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/6214>)

ABOUT THE PAINTING

What is a Fresco?

A fresco is a picture painted directly onto a wall using a special technique. The vast majority of the paintings in the National Gallery are oil paint on canvas, most of the others are egg tempera on wooden panel and a tiny minority are frescoes.

The reason why so few of the collection's paintings are frescoes is that to be in the gallery at all, the painting has to be physically removed from the wall on which it was originally painted.

Fresco means 'fresh' in Italian. The paint (pigment dissolved in water) is applied to fresh plaster while it is still damp – Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel being a famous example.

The artist must calculate how much of the painting can be achieved in a day ('giornata' in Italian), and only this much plaster is applied. Over successive days the painting is added to. When dry, the paint is absorbed into the plaster and will retain its brilliant colours for centuries. The technique can be traced back to the ancient cultures of Greece, China and India.

Applying the 'Cartoon'

Before painting can begin, the artist will need to make a cartoon (from *cartone*, the Italian for a large sheet of paper). The cartoon is a full-sized drawing that acts as a guide. The design is transferred to the wall, either by pressing heavily along the outlines with a pointed metal implement called a stylus, or by rubbing powdered charcoal through a series of pinpricks – a process called 'pouncing'.

Centuries-old cartoons rarely survive into modern times because they were usually damaged during the transfer process. An outstanding exception is the famous cartoon by Leonardo da Vinci, which is in the National Gallery collection.

Removing a Fresco

On rare occasions, to preserve an important fresco, the decision is made to remove it from the wall on which it was painted. Pintoricchio's 'Penelope with the Suitors' was

originally one of eight frescoes painted for the *Camera Bella* in the Palazzo del Magnifico. Three of these are now in the National Gallery and two are in the main art gallery in Siena. The last three were 'obliterated' – meaning they were too badly damaged to preserve and so were painted over.

Removing frescos is technically extremely challenging. Sometimes the entire wall has to be cut out.

On this occasion it is likely that the 'Strappo' technique has been used. ('Strappo' is Italian for 'tear or rip'.)

Layers of paper or fabric are glued to the surface of the painting and when this is pulled away, the top layer of plaster with the fresco on it can be carefully detached from the wall. This is then attached to a new support, usually a panel or a canvas. The fabric or paper covering is then gently removed to reveal the painting. This painstaking process took place in around 1842-1844.

A modern example of technicians removing artworks from walls is the preservation of works by the contemporary street artist Banksy, whose spray-painted graffiti murals are very popular and extremely valuable. (It should be noted that these are not frescoes.)

THE SUBJECT MATTER

The story of Penelope is drawn from Homer's *Odyssey*, probably written around the end of the 8th Century BC. Odysseus (known by the Romans as Ulysses), King of the Island of Ithaca, has been fighting in the Trojan War. Troy falls, but only after ten long years and Odysseus and his fleet must then find their way back to their homeland. All sorts of perils beset them on the voyage which takes yet another ten years, and he is gone so long that all but his faithful wife Penelope assume he must be dead. It is the story of the journey and Odysseus's return to Ithaca that is told in the *Odyssey*.

The woman in her fine blue dress seated at a huge loom is the faithful Penelope. Assuming that Odysseus is dead, a vast number of suitors move into the palace, eating and drinking and pestering Penelope to marry one of them. She sets up a loom and begins to weave a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes and claims that she cannot consider marriage until it is complete. Every night she secretly unpicks the previous day's work, successfully managing to keep them at bay for several years. In Pintoricchio's image, a maid sits spinning at her feet while a cat plays with a ball of yarn.

The central figure may be one of the suitors pressing his case rather forcefully. The man behind him with a hawk on his wrist is showing off his fancy attire. The story tells us that there are many suitors from different lands which may account for the turbaned figure behind them.

It is possible that the central figure is Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and Penelope who has been sent by his mother on a journey to discover news of his father. He does in fact find

him, but Odysseus wishes to return in disguise to discover what is happening in the palace. Telemachus agrees to go back and tell Penelope that he has had no luck and causing her to despair. (With younger children you could stick to the simplest version but with older pupils it might be interesting to discuss alternative versions and ambiguities in paintings.)

Odysseus is the figure coming through the door disguised by the Goddess Athena as an old beggar with his staff. On the wall above Penelope's head are his bow and quiver of arrows. Penelope sets up an archery contest saying she will marry the suitor who can string the bow and win the contest. No one is strong enough to string the bow except Odysseus himself. He reveals his identity and the couple are reunited. Through the window the artist has shown us two episodes from Odysseus's journey. On the left, two men – perhaps Odysseus and Hermes, the messenger of the gods – stand with a group of pigs. The enchantress Circe bewitched a group of Odysseus's men who were sent to explore her island and turned them into swine. Hermes gave Odysseus a herb which made him immune to spells so that he was able to overpower Circe and force her to return his men to their human form.

In the water to the right of the island, Sirens are seen ensnaring men with their songs. Odysseus's men fill their ears with wax while he himself can be seen tied to the mast of the ship to prevent himself from succumbing to their temptation. The scenes are set in a beautiful seascape with a castle, cliffs and distant mountains.

TELLING THE STORY

By using foreground and background to depict different episodes, the artist cleverly gives us a sense of the whole narrative, from the journey that led to this moment, to the archery contest that is yet to come. In fact, Penelope kept her husband's bow hidden away until just before the competition, which happened years after the suitors had forced her to finish her weaving. Pintoricchio has included it to help us recognise and understand the story.

It is important to remember that this painting isn't just a narrative, it is a decoration for a home. The loom is barely described in the *Odyssey* other than to indicate its size, but the artist has lovingly rendered this huge contraption, and shown Penelope working it with both feet and hands. The boat and the costumes too are painted in beautiful and meticulous detail.

COSTUME

The costumes are fashionable clothes of the artist's own time, but given a Greek 'twist' with sandals and decorated greaves (lower leg armour). Young men wore short, close-fitting doublets with brightly coloured hose beneath. Some added a tunic or cloak, and a variety of hats were worn over

long hair. Many of Pintoricchio's works required crowd scenes and he developed established types and poses which recur in different paintings. The turbaned figure, for example, who may indicate a traveller from the East, appears in other paintings.

THE ROLE OF MYTHOLOGY

The period we now call the Renaissance, was characterised by a fascination with the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. Important families like the Petrucci sometimes claimed to be descended from ancient Roman forbears. Famous classical heroes and heroines became popular in the decoration of Sieneese palaces.

The stories represented in paintings often carried an additional allegorical message. The eight frescoes in Pandolfo Petrucci's *Camera Bella* cycle deal with virtuous acts that could be taken to stand for Petrucci's own civic and political virtues. The three in the National Gallery are specifically concerned with female virtue – Penelope is a model of patience and fidelity.

The connection with Siena and the Petrucci is made in some of the tiniest details. The pigs in the distant scene have a white stripe which indicates they are a Sieneese breed called *cinta senese*, and the ship bears the blue and white arms of the Petrucci family, colours which are picked up in the blue and gold colour schemes of the other frescoes.

LOCAL CONNECTIONS

Look at related paintings in other collections eg. [Penelope and her Suitors](#) by J. Waterhouse, Aberdeen Museum and Art Gallery
[Ulysses and the Sirens](#) by H. Draper, Leeds Art Gallery
[Odysseus and the Sirens](#), W.Etty, Manchester Art Gallery

[The British Museum](#) has great displays of artefacts from the time of Homer and Greco-Roman culture generally including mythological stories painted on vases.

You could visit one of the many museums of weaving around the country.

[Pickering Parish Church](#) in North Yorkshire has some fabulous 15th Century wall paintings on religious themes. These are very rare in Britain. The church has a useful website: <https://pickeringchurch.com/gallery/>

Visit a public artwork location. [Banksy](#)'s wall-based works are mainly in London, Bristol and Brighton, but there are many examples of public artworks painted on walls throughout the country and usually found in city centres. (It should be noted that these are not frescoes.)

STARTING POINTS

Look figure by figure

Before revealing the whole picture, cover it and reveal one figure at a time. Find words to describe them and imagine what kind of person they might be and what they are thinking or saying. Reveal the whole painting and see if ideas change once the figures are seen in context

Create your own puzzle

Using the zoom tool on our website to create crops of the picture. Working together in groups, pupils can piece together the picture. Differentiate by varying the crop size

Start with the soundscape

Ask pupils to draw the picture as they imagine it to be, considering placement and scale of the figures, colour and tone, pattern, costumes of the figures and weather.

Klee line drawing

For the first activity, ask the pupils to create a continuous line drawing of the focus picture, while keeping their eyes on it. For the second activity ask the pupils to create a continuous line drawing, but this time they can look at their drawing as well as the focus picture. Give 30-60 seconds for each activity. Ask the pupils what they noticed and use these initial observations as inspiration for further lines of enquiry

Speaking and listening exercises

Drawing descriptions

Working together in pairs, one pupil describes the picture and another draws, then swap roles. Look at each other's drawings and find differences and similarities, picking out things that they found interesting and would like to investigate further.

Listen to the Odyssey

Read pupils the story of Odysseus or listen to the audio resources provided by BBC school radio. Select certain characters from the story that we can see in the picture e.g. Hermes, Penelope or Telemachus. Pupils can start by drawing their own representation of the characters and thinking about what they might be wearing and what they might be doing.

Crops and words

Start with crops of the painting accompanied by a word; e.g. a crop of the sail, accompanied by the word 'sail'. Divide your class into groups and ask them to match the crops with the word and think of a word to describe it. To extend the exercise they could decide how they would position each crop if they were doing their own painting.

Object box

Collect objects that represent different parts of the picture e.g. bow and arrow, ball of thread, floor tile, weaving shuttle. Divide the class into groups and ask each group to identify their object, what it's used for, when it might have been made and what it's made of etc. Match the objects to those in the picture and explore.

LINES OF ENQUIRY

- Look at other paintings about Odysseus in the National Gallery. For example '[Ulysses deriding Polyphemus](#)' by Turner, or '[The Procession of the Trojan Horse](#)' by G. Tiepolo.
- Paint a small section of a painting, then add to it over a few days to build up a complete picture.
- Make your own large cartoon. This could be cut up into several sections and each section used as a painting guide. Learn traditional transfer methods. (See **Applying the 'Cartoon'** above.)
- The floor in the painting is made of patterned tiles. See if you can design your own patterned tiles.
- Are there textiles in your family or community that are valued? These could be weavings, rugs, patchwork quilts, or clothes. Try making your own. (Simple weaving can be done with paper strips.)
- Tell a story using only visual means – no words! This could be done in any medium including photography and animation as well as more traditional methods.
- As a class or school create your own version of a chosen part of the Odyssey – this could be as a play, a dance, or a film.
- Create a soundscape for the painting – there is a lot going on!
- Design a room with a theme. This could be created in a box or on the computer, for example. Coordinate the decoration of floor, walls and ceiling.
- On a modern map, trace Odysseus's journey from Troy (in modern Turkey) to the island of Ithaca.
- Odysseus's journey was long and perilous. Read other stories about long journeys or compare it with real journeys made today.
- Explore other stories about 'disguise'. Odysseus is disguised as a beggar in the painting. Do we sometimes underestimate people because of their appearance? Appearances can be deceptive.
- On a modern map, trace Odysseus's journey from Troy (in modern Turkey) to the island of Ithaca.