



THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

TEACHERS' NOTES

2025–26

Sponsored by



Take One Picture is generously supported by
Columbia Threadneedle Foundation

A Muse (Calliope?)

Cosimo Tura,
probably 1455–60



A young woman sits with an air of confidence on a marble throne, wrapped in richly coloured fabrics. The throne, crowned by a scallop shell hung with coral and crystal beads, is guarded by fierce dolphin-like creatures. Her proud pose and serious expression demand attention. She must be someone important. But who is she? A queen, a judge, a divine protector? Created during a time of change in 15th-century art, this painting transports us beyond the everyday into the realm of myth and mystery.

Who might she be?

The woman sitting on the throne is probably one of the nine Muses – divine sisters from Greek mythology who inspired people to create art and literature. These sisters were the daughters of Zeus, king of the gods, and Mnemosyne (ni-moz-i-nee), the goddess of memory. In ancient times, the inspiration they gave was thought to be essential for achieving greatness in the arts. Each Muse was associated with a different art form, for example, Terpsichore was the Muse of dance, and Thalia was the Muse of comedy.

But which Muse could our figure be? She might be Calliope. Known as the leader of the Muses, Calliope was the Muse of eloquent speech and epic poetry (stories about Greek gods and heroes such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by the ancient Greek poet Homer). Her name means ‘beautiful voice’ from the Greek words *kallos* (beauty) and *ops* (voice). In ancient stories, she poured ‘honeyed dew’ onto the tongues of kings to give them clear and powerful voices to settle disputes. Because of this, she became a symbol of both eloquence and justice.

Several details suggest this figure could be Calliope. As leader of the Muses, she wears a golden crown and sits on a monumental throne inspired by classical architecture. The branch of cherries she holds may symbolise justice – inspired by an illuminated manuscript owned by the family that commissioned the painting. The manuscript image shows Justice as a woman with a cherry-eating cherub. Ancient sources also link Calliope to the Sirens, sea creatures whose beautiful voices lured sailors to their death, which may explain the marine motifs on her throne.

But Calliope is usually shown holding a scroll or tablet, which are missing here, making some people think that this figure may be someone else. The cherries could symbolise justice, but are also linked to fertility and beauty – could she be the goddess of Love, Venus, or perhaps the season spring personified? Venus was born from the sea and is often shown with shells and sea creatures. Who do you think she could be? How important is it that we know for sure? The answer may

have once been clearer but the painting was trimmed down, cutting off a scroll beneath the throne that probably carried an inscription used to identify her.

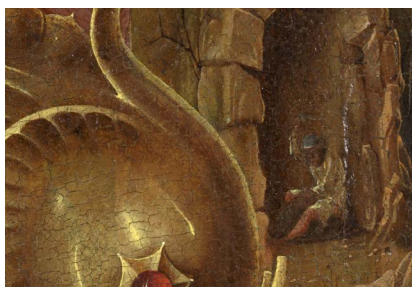
Beauty and power

Our Muse is not shown as a passive figure, but as an active, commanding presence. She is both beautiful and powerful, a combination rarely granted to women in Renaissance art. Her appearance reflects 15th-century Renaissance ideas of beauty – with a pale, oval face framed by a plucked high forehead and thin brows. Her curled hair is wrapped in fabric and decorated with a delicate crown. Rather than ancient Greek costume, she wears expensive 1400s fashion: a red cloak with green lining and gold edging falling in folds around her feet, a deep blue dress laced with gold thread revealing glimpses of a white undergarment, and red and gold velvet sleeves with botanical details. Her costume reflects her status, but the tight corsetry also shaped how women looked, moved and even breathed.

Her beauty is matched by her authority. She sits in a strong, elegant pose, with her body slightly turned as if clasp ing an invisible shield. She doesn’t look directly at us, but gazes to the side with a calm, superior expression. With her legs set wide and one hand planted firmly on her knee, she clearly claims a position of power. The golden dolphin-like creatures flanking her throne are both fierce and beautiful, with ruby eyes and snarling jaws bared as they await her command. Her figure and throne dominate the scene, towering above us as we look up.

Vignettes

On either side of the throne are two small figures, one on horseback riding into the hills, and the other working as a blacksmith inside a cave. The landscape around them could be inspired by the area around the hunting lodge where the painting was displayed. What part could they play in the world of the Muse? Are they mortal or mythical beings? What meanings could they have?



Calliope was a strong, active and sometimes dangerous leader. In the Greek mythological tale of the Pierides, nine mortal sisters challenged the Muses to a singing contest, but Calliope's voice was so moving that the nymph judges declared her victorious. When the Pierides refused to accept the result and mocked the Muses, Calliope punished them by transforming them into magpies, their proud songs reduced to harsh squawks.

An artist at court

This painting was created by Cosimo Tura, who was born sometime before 1431 in Ferrara, Northern Italy. In 1457 he became court painter to the powerful Este family, who ruled the region at the time. He created works for the family and their courtiers. This painting was ordered by the Duke, Leonello d'Este for his private study (*studiolo*) in the Palazzo Belfiore, a country hunting retreat. This *studiolo* was a room designed for study, reading, writing and admiring beautiful objects. In the 15th century, ancient Greek objects and stories were seen as fashionable, particularly by the upper class. So what better way to decorate a room dedicated to the arts than with the Muses themselves?

This painting was one of a set of nine, each depicting one of the Muses. The paintings were originally placed high on the walls, so viewers would have to look up at them, physically as well as metaphorically. The original framing would have formed part of the decorated interior of the room alongside textiles, furniture and architectural panels. The series was painted by several artists, including Cosimo Tura, Angelo da Siena and Michele Pannonio. After Angelo's death, Tura completed the project, which may explain why our Muse is different in style from some of the others.

Ferrara in the 15th century was a lively centre of artistic innovation. In this painting, Tura blends older and newer styles. The flowing, decorative lines of the Muse's clothing and her graceful pose belong to the elegant and decorative style that had flourished across European courts since the late 14th century. This audience favoured elegance, fine detail and rich colours, often inspired by illuminated manuscripts.

At the same time, Tura drew on newer influences, especially Andrea Mantegna's sculptural style. The solidity of the throne, with its three-dimensional shell and architectural details, reflects this and even the Muse herself seems stone-like, her gown's elaborate folds resembling chiselled marble.

Making a Muse

This is the earliest Italian painting in the National Gallery to be made entirely using oil paint – a technique that was starting to be used more and more in 1450s Italy. Tura could have learned by studying the works of Netherlandish artists who had started using oils earlier, such as Rogier van der Weyden, who also worked for the Este Family. Previously, Italian artists had mixed their powdered pigment colours with egg yolk to create tempera paints which gave a muted, matt appearance. Oil paints gave greater depth and luminosity and high-quality pigments produced vibrant colours.

The brilliant blue sky was painted with ultramarine, a rare and expensive pigment made from the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli. Pigments were mixed with walnut or linseed oil to create paints that could be layered over each other in translucent glazes. This layering could be used to create more natural effects, such as the softening of the blue sky near the horizon and the gentle dappled clouds. Tura's skill with oil paint is clear in his realistic depiction of different materials – from the velvet of the Muse's dress, to the coral and rock-crystal beads above her head, and the gold, jewels and pearls that all gleam beautifully. As well as painting, Tura also designed items such as tapestries and silverware, which would have helped him to understand different materials and textures.

The painting was made on a poplar panel covered with linen canvas. Over this, gesso – a mix of rabbit-skin glue and chalk – was applied to create a smooth surface. The arcs and vertical lines of the throne were carefully scratched into the gesso, while the figure was sketched more freely. One or more layers of underpaint were applied, giving a base for further layers of paint. For example, the figure's bodice was first underpainted in pale blue to prepare for the application of ultramarine. From there, details were gradually developed, building up to the finished image.

A hidden secret

X-rays and infrared photographs reveal an unfinished painting beneath the surface: a woman on a simpler throne decorated with columns. These columns could be a pipe organ – was the painting originally of Euterpe, Muse of music? They could also be timber bundles, linking to Calliope as giver of poets' 'raw materials and resounding voice'. This first egg tempera version was later painted over in oils to create the Muse we see today. Tura may have made both versions or reworked a painting by Angelo da Siena, who worked on the series before Tura.



Talking points

This painting is an excellent starting point to get children thinking and talking, sharing ideas with each other, building on the ideas of others and using new vocabulary. Here are some ideas to start discussions. While some questions could be answered with 'yes' or 'no', encourage children to justify why they think that and consider other points of view.

Picturing an idea – inspiration personified

The idea of the Muses still influences how we think about creativity today - we call someone who inspires us a 'muse' and even 'museum' comes from the Greek *mouseion*, a place for the Muses. Where do you find inspiration? From museums, books, TV, computers, famous people, or family and friends? If you could turn an idea into a person, what would they look like? What might Bravery, Kindness, or Hope wear or hold to show who they are? Would you rather be the artist or the muse, why? Could you be both?

Voices and storytelling

Does this picture remind you of any stories you know? What do you think the story of the Muse and the two small figures might be? Do you prefer reading silently, listening to stories read aloud, or perhaps acting them out? What kinds of voices do you use when you read, speak or act – do they change with the story or situation? What makes a voice powerful or peaceful? Or can silence ever be powerful or peaceful? Have you ever used your voice to calm a disagreement like Calliope might?

Identity and power

Who do you think she is? What clues do we get from her crown, her pose, or the way she looks at us? What kind of place do you imagine this is – a sacred space, a royal palace, or something imagined? How does it feel to be inside this world? And how does it feel to look up at her? Does her height make her seem powerful, distant, or something else? Now, imagine there were nine paintings like this – would that make her presence stronger or weaker? What does power look or feel like? Can you pose in a way that feels powerful? Can everybody have power?

The senses

What can we see, hear, touch, smell or even imagine tasting in this painting? How do colours, fabrics and textures help us imagine the world of the Muse? Can you describe how the cloak or velvet dress might feel, or how heavy the gold might be? What sounds might fill the space she is in? Silence, music, or voices? Can looking at a painting make you imagine a scent or a taste? Which of your senses do you feel connects you most to art?

Comparison artworks

These artworks have elements in common with *A Muse (Calliope?)* – some in style and some in theme. Try comparing them through discussion; do they change how you see Tura's painting?

In the National Gallery Collection:

Andrea Mantegna, *The Introduction of the Cult of Cybele at Rome*, 1505–6

Bartolomé Bermejo, *Saint Michael Triumphant over the Devil with the Donor Antoni Joan*, 1468

Cosimo Tura, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned*, mid 1470s

Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Hermine Gallia*, 1904

Pierre Mignard, *The Marquise de Seignelay and Two of her Sons*, 1691

Elsewhere

Angelo Maccagnino and Cosimo Tura, *The Muse Terpsichore*, 1460. Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan

Michele Pannonio, *The Muse Thalia*, 1456–7
The Museum of Fine Arts Budapest, Hungary

Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, 1485
Uffizi Galleries, Florence

Sir Thomas Brock, *Victoria Memorial*, 1901–24. London

Taddeo Crivelli, *Justice*, from page 112 of *Leviticus* in the Bible of Borso d'Este. 1455–1461

Unknown artist, *Sarcophagus of the Muses*, c. 160 AD. Musée du Louvre, Paris

Various artists, *Studiolo* from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio, 1478–82. The Met, New York

Contemporary

Fernando and Humberto Campana, *Shark and Dolphin Banquete Chair*, 2002

Hendrik Kerstens, *Bag*, 2007. Private Collection

Maggi Hambling, *Scallop*, 2003. Aldeburgh beach, Suffolk

Mickalene Thomas, *Afro Goddess Looking Forward*, 2015. Private Collection

Troika, *Compression Loss*, 2017