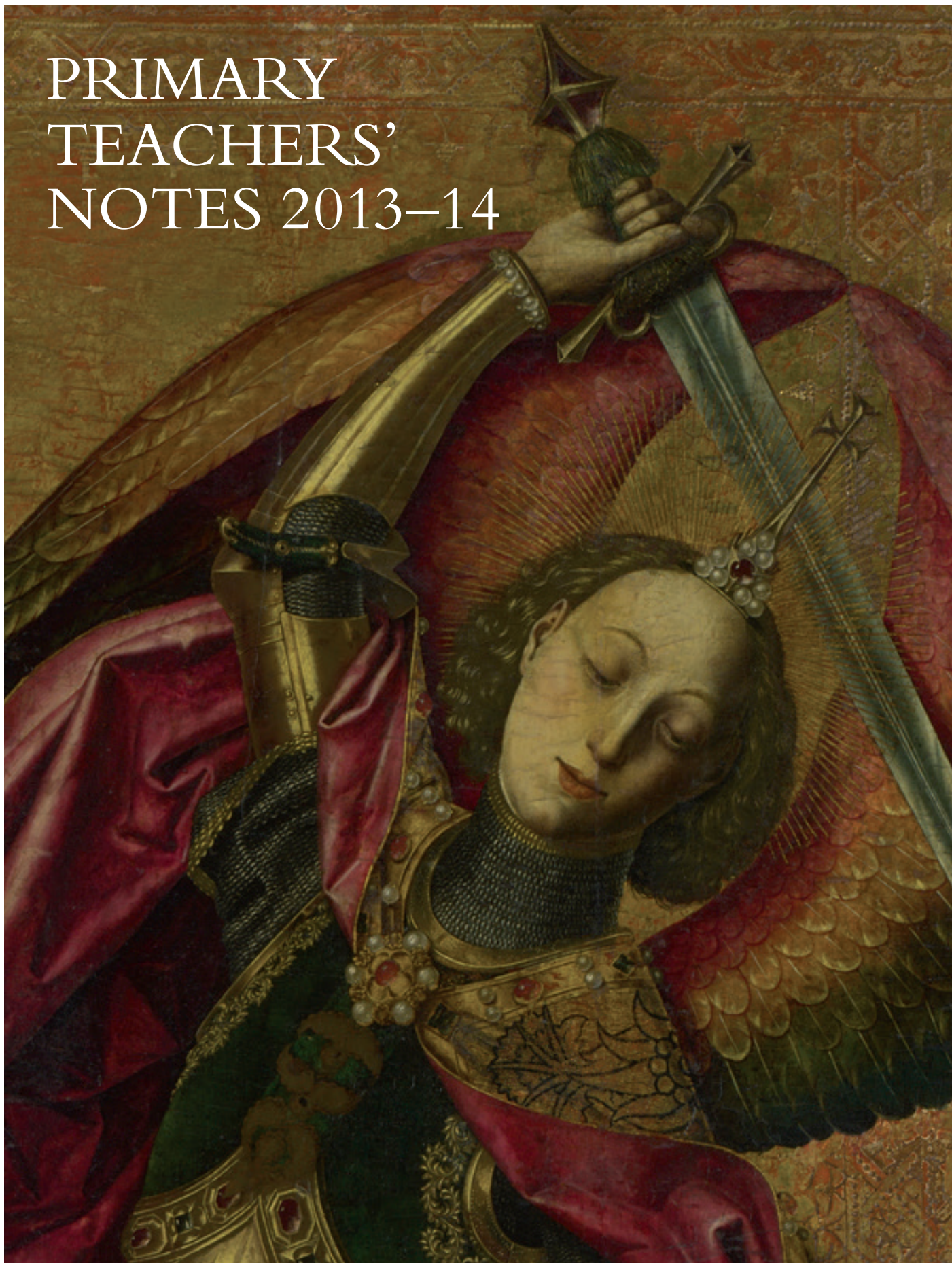


PRIMARY  
TEACHERS'  
NOTES 2013–14



# 'SAINT MICHAEL TRIUMPHANT OVER THE DEVIL WITH THE DONOR ANTONIO JUAN' 1468

OIL AND GOLD ON WOOD  
179.7 x 81.9CM

BARTOLOMÉ BERMEJO



Bought by Private Treaty Sale with a grant from the American Friends of the National Gallery, London, made possible by Mr. J. Paul Getty Jnr's Endowment Fund, 1995

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Bermejo's real name was Bartolomé de Cárdenas, but he is known by his nickname 'Bermejo', meaning 'red', perhaps because he was a redhead. In this work, he has signed himself 'Bartolomeus Rubeus', the Latin equivalent. The signature appears on a 'cartellino', the fictive parchment in the foreground. The prominence of the paper suggests that Bermejo was very proud of this work. He is now considered to be the greatest Spanish painter of the 15th century, although only about 20 of his works survive.

Bermejo was probably born in the 1430s. He was active as a painter from 1460–1498. Originally from Córdoba in Andalucía, southern Spain, his career took him to Valencia, Aragon, Zaragoza and Barcelona. The abundance of reflective and translucent surfaces in this painting, for example the armour and the crystal shield, allowed Bermejo to show off the sophisticated oil glazing techniques that he had learnt from Northern painters working in Spain.

## THE SUBJECT

This tall, thin panel is roughly six feet high. It depicts Saint Michael defeating the devil. Taken from the Book of Revelation, this episode caught the medieval imagination, becoming a popular subject for paintings.

And there was a war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought the dragon ... And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan. (Revelation 12:7-9)

## SACRED OBJECT

An altarpiece is the image-bearing object which is placed upon an altar in a Christian church. Altarpieces usually form the focus of devotion for worshippers and are normally decorated with painting and sculptures.

This picture was the central panel from an altarpiece which

was created for the church of San Miguel in Tous, a town near Valencia in Spain. The other paintings from the altarpiece have now been lost, but studying contemporary altarpieces from the region can inform us about the composition. A Crucifixion scene above, two narrative scenes to either side, and a 'predella' – the horizontal base decorated with narrative images related to the saints shown above – would have been framed by elaborate elements, including ornate tracery around the panels to hold them together and gilded vertical columns on either side, called pilasters.

The picture was painted onto a wooden panel. Made up of three vertical planks, these were joined together and covered in canvas before the gesso, the preparatory layer, was applied. The armour was painted using coloured paint, while the background has been created in gold leaf. The leaf was pasted to a sticky red clay or 'bole', which also gave the leaf a rich, warm colour. Patterns were then punched and etched into the gold. Because of the painting's age, the leaf has worn thin in places and the red bole is showing through.

## DRESSED TO KILL?

Saint Michael is dressed in an exquisite suit of tournament armour, made of gold and set with huge jewels, including lines of large pearls at the wrists and ankles. The mouldings, the buckles and the rivets holding the plates together are all painted in realistic detail, as are the mail shirt and leg pieces.

The towers of a city are reflected in Saint Michael's breastplate. Presumably, this is the holy city of Jerusalem as described in the Book of Revelation. This reflected imagery is one of the most important factors responsible for the impression of metallic lustre.

Saint Michael holds a small shield or buckler in his left hand. Bucklers always had a dome-shaped centre to help them deflect blows. Saint Michael's is particularly unusual and perhaps impractical since it appears to be made of

crystal – although it could also be polished steel. As with his armour, it is set with pearls.

Saint Michael's cloak fills the canvas. Along with his gracefully arched wings it gives the slender saint a volume and presence that he would not otherwise have. It is thought that Bermejo laid out wet fabric on his studio floor and tweaked it into angular folds in order to study it for this painting.

## ANGELS ACROSS FAITHS

Angels appear in the three monotheistic religions, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Saint Michael was one of the seven Archangels, the highest order of angels. The three most often depicted in Christian art are Gabriel, Raphael and Michael. Archangels are depicted with wings and usually carry an attribute which helps to identify them.

**Gabriel's** attribute is a lily, and he is seen as a messenger. Raphael's attributes include sandals, a staff, and the boy Tobias, of whom he is the guardian. He is seen as a healer.

**Michael's** attributes are armour, a sword and scales, and a dragon or serpent at his feet. Leader of the army of God against the forces of evil, and the dispenser of justice, he is the patron saint of banking, grocers and the police. Michael is called Mikhail in Islam and is regarded as the Archangel of mercy, responsible for bringing rain and thunder to Earth and for the rewards doled out to the good. He is considered in Judaism as the protector of the Jews.

There are no depictions of Saint Michael in Jewish or Islamic art. The second of the Ten Commandments against the use of 'graven images' is interpreted by most Jewish teachings to apply to visual art. Islamic art's focus on calligraphy, rather than painting and sculpture, similarly derives from the association of idolatry with the depiction of human or angelic forms.

## FANTASTICAL CREATURES

The devil is made up of a combination of animals. Devils were often shown with more than one face, inspired by the description in the Bible of a seven-headed dragon. His torso is a second face with eyes on the chest. Live snakes slither out of the gaping mouth in his stomach. There are reptilian heads at his elbows and at the joints of his bird-like back legs. His crocodile-like tail, which ends in a single claw, is wrapped around Michael's calf.

## THE DONOR

On the left is the donor, Antonio Juan, who commissioned and financed the painting. In religious pictures, donors are sometimes depicted within the work, emphasising their relationship with the object of devotion.

Antonio Juan was the feudal Lord of Tous and is depicted with the chains and sword of a knight. He holds a psalter (a volume of psalms) showing the opening lines of two penitential psalms: 'Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness' (Psalm 51) and 'Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord' (Psalm 130).

Painted on a much smaller scale than Saint Michael, the figure of Antonio Juan is oddly juxtaposed with the Saint and devil. Although they are all placed on the same patch of sandy ground, Juan's face shows no engagement with the scene. It is as if he is contemplating the battle in his imagination – much as the viewers of the painting would be expected to do.

The faces of the donor and Saint Michael are very different in style. Michael's face is idealised. His expression is serene, without a trace of effort or fear. The face of Antonio Juan, the donor, however, is a naturalistic portrait. Here is a real man with wrinkles, hollow cheeks and a distinctive kink in his nose. It is clear that the two are from quite different worlds.

## SPAIN AT THAT TIME

The casting out of Satan from Heaven had a particular resonance in 15th-century Catholic Spain: it was associated with the 'crusade' of the Reconquista, the reconquering of territory from the Moors. The term 'Moor' refers to the Muslim inhabitants of Spain during the Al-Andalus era, who originated from the Maghreb region (northwest Africa).

Muslim armies had arrived in the Iberian peninsula in AD 711, establishing Islam in the territories they called Al-Andalus (Andalusia). Within a few years, they had conquered nearly the whole of the peninsula.

For more than three centuries Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together and prospered in a thriving multicultural civilisation. However, Christians and Jews had to pay a special tax and submit to Islamic rule.

The Reconquista, or reconquest, began in 722, and by 1260, only Granada remained under Muslim rule. In 1479, six years after this painting was made, Ferdinand, King of Aragon and Isabella, Queen of Castille, became King and Queen of Spain. The Catholic Monarchs became an unbeatable team.

Much of Bermejo's active career as a painter took place during the last stage of the Reconquista. There is some evidence that he may have received patronage from Queen Isabella, who carried a personal altarpiece featuring a work by Bermejo, the *Ephiphany*, which is now in the Royal Chapel at Granada.

In 1483, Ferdinand and Isabella launched the final crusade of the Reconquista, and by January 1492, their armies were at the gates of Granada. The city fell, ending Muslim rule in Spain. Eventually all Muslims and Jews had to convert to Catholicism or be expelled from Spain.

The Moors left an incredible legacy in Spain. Agriculture was developed by improving irrigation. New fruits and crops were introduced, including oranges, lemons, peaches, sugar cane and rice. Literature and poetry also flourished. The great cities boasted beautiful palaces, gardens, universities, libraries, public baths and markets. Some of Spain's most famous architectural monuments date from this time, including Granada's Alhambra and the Great Mosque in Córdoba, the city of Bermejo's birth.

# USING THE PICTURE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

## TAKE ONE PICTURE

The National Gallery promotes the use of a single painting for cross-curricular teaching and learning through the Take One Picture programme. The scheme champions engagement with and exploration of a National Gallery painting as inspiration for the enrichment of learning, making meaningful connections both inside and outside the classroom.

## STARTING POINTS

### Before looking at the painting

- With the pupils' eyes closed, introduce some key vocabulary from the painting and use 'shared imagining' to build the scene in the children's imagination. 'There is an angel with a sword...'
- Set the scene: visit the interior of your local church, or recreate a candlelit altar in a darkened room to evoke the atmosphere. You could use incense and play appropriate music to stimulate the senses.

### Strategies to support looking

- Describe the painting to someone who cannot see it
- Draw the painting without taking the pencil off the paper

### Open questions to initiate dialogue

- How are the people in the painting different or similar to one another? Who stands out? Why?
- Who would you most like to talk to in the painting? What might you ask them? What might their reply be?
- Why might someone want to buy this painting?

## LINES OF ENQUIRY

Lines of enquiry begin with the themes in the painting and extend to making meaningful connections with broader learning experiences. Projects that enrich learning will emerge as you explore the different contexts and possibilities that the painting creates for you and your pupils.

### Sacred object

Think about how this painting might have been used for devotion. What might it have been like in the church? How does it compare with contemporary devotional images in churches today for example? Explore the art of different faiths. How are they similar or different?

### Symbolism

Bermejo has used a number of symbols in the painting. The flowers at the bottom are poppies, a symbol of sleep and dreams. Perhaps they allude to the struggle between Saint Michael and the devil – did Antonio Juan really witness the

scene or was he dreaming? There are also symbols in the donor's costume – the chain and sword tell us that he was a knight. How might you use symbols in other ways, perhaps to tell a story?

### Painting as propaganda

This painting was made during the Spanish Reconquista, a time when Christian armies were taking back land previously invaded, and driving Muslims out of Spain. There are interesting parallels here with propaganda in later art. Could the painting have been used as propaganda? Can you find other forms of art used in this way?

### Technique

What can you find out by exploring the technique behind the painting?

### Fantastical creatures

Investigate the devil. Why did Bermejo make the choices he did? What can you discover by examining Bermejo's creature in more depth?

### Web Links

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/>

British Museum Spanish Altar Set

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/i/investigation\\_of\\_an\\_altar\\_set.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/i/investigation_of_an_altar_set.aspx)

Victoria and Albert Museum Islamic Art & Design Teachers' Resource

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/t/teachers-resources-islamic-art-design/>

Bermejo: *Epiphany*. Royal Chapel, Granada

[http://www.capillarealgranada.com/en/vn/afvn\\_4sacristia\\_4pinturas\\_0225.html](http://www.capillarealgranada.com/en/vn/afvn_4sacristia_4pinturas_0225.html)

### Resources

A printed reproduction of the painting can be purchased from National Gallery shops, by mail order at [mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk](mailto:mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk) or by telephone on 020 7747 5958. A copy will be given to teachers attending the Gallery's Continuing Professional Development courses 2013/14, which introduce the Take One Picture approach.

A Take One Picture DVD, bringing together over 10 years' experience of the Take One Picture scheme, is also available from Gallery shops or to buy by mail order at [mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk](mailto:mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk) or by telephone on 020 7747 5958.