



Today's Masterpiece: Giovanni Bonsi, [*Saint Nicholas of Bari*](#), ca. 1360-1365. Tempera on panel. Gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam and commemorating the Silver Jubilee Celebration of Fine Arts Society, 1950.89.



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute with Doc Brown on Virtual SDMA**. I'm your host, **Michael Brown**, Curator of European Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month at 10:00 a.m. to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is by Giovanni Bonsi, a leading innovator in fourteenth-century Florence. It is one of only five Italian works in the Museum that pre-date the year 1400. Bonsi's subject is the much-beloved fourth-century Saint Nicholas, around whom so many legends and traditions would later spring.

Much of what we know of Nicholas is from the Medieval Lives of the Saints or Golden Legend, first compiled by the archbishop of Genoa in 1275. Born in what is now present-day Turkey, Nicholas was left with considerable wealth when he was orphaned at an early age. He would go on to become bishop of Myra during the reign of emperor Constantine.

Nicholas devoted his life and inheritance to charitable work, most famously by secretly providing dowries for three daughters of an impoverished neighbor in the form of bags of gold coins, which he surreptitiously dropped through the family's window on three subsequent nights. The dowries are represented by three golden spheres visible in the center of the painting. Whether historically accurate or not, this compelling story helped spread Nicholas's fame from Turkey to Poland and Ukraine, and eventually to the Netherlands, giving rise to the tradition of Sinterklaas, which led to the modern jolly old Saint Nick, or Santa Claus, in North America.

Somewhat less jolly, perhaps, is the story of Nicholas's open-handed slap across the face of arch-heretic Arius during a theological debate at the Council of Nicaea in the year 325, an episode recorded in Byzantine icons and illuminated manuscripts.

While scholars may not agree on the details of Nicholas's life, we are on firmer ground when it comes to the authorship of the painting. When it came to San Diego, the panel depicting Nicholas was thought to be the work of Nardo di Cione, possibly Bonsi's teacher in Florence. However, in 1964 pioneering historian Federico Zeri matched the punchwork ornament framing the richly attired figure and carpet to a signed panel in the Vatican Museums, identifying the San Diego panel as the outer wing of a triptych centered on the *Virgin and Child with Donors*, now in the Denver Art Museum. Renaissance painters prized their gilding stamps, which often featured designs unique to the workshop, giving modern scholars important piece of forensic evidence to establish such early paintings' authorship.

Bonsi's modelling and shading in his treatment of the face attests to the stylistic influence of Giotto di Bondone, whose fame had spread throughout Italy for his early innovations in perspective and naturalism. You can learn more about Giotto in episode ten of this podcast.

This has been Doc Brown with Masterpiece Minute, thanks as always for listening here on Virtual SDMA!



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