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Tosini emphasizes John the Baptist's innocence, determination, and strength—traits that served the young prophet well when he cried out in the wilderness for God's people to "prepare the way of the Lord."

Prepare the Way of the Lord

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Reflection on John the Baptist plays a prominent role in preparing our minds and hearts for the coming of Christ during Advent. In the Gospel lectionary readings on the second and third Sundays in Advent we are reminded of John's message (Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:6-8, 19-28) and Jesus' praise for his faithful ministry (Matthew 11:2-11).

The Synoptic Gospels identify John the Baptist as the one whom the prophet Isaiah promised would come to announce the end of the Exile and the salvation of God's people:

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Luke 3:3-6 (cf. Matthew 3:3 and Mark 1:2-3)

John the Baptist is a critical figure throughout Christian history and culture, but he is nowhere more important than for the citizens of Florence, Italy, where he is the patron saint of their city. The artists of Florence turned to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark for a description of John's clothing—a shirt made from camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist—to establish his iconographic attributes of asceticism.

The Florentine painter Michele Tosini probably created his *Saint John the Baptist* to be displayed in a wealthy patron's palace or villa for private devotion. Tosini, working in the Mannerist style (between the High Renaissance and the Baroque), utilizes some of the scriptural iconography of Matthew and Mark. Around John's waist is his hairshirt; instead of a leather belt at his waist, a strap originating from one corner of the hairshirt is draped over his muscular chest and left shoulder.

The composition consists of John in half-length figure, with his left arm moving upward and left forefinger pointing on a diagonal almost parallel with the cruciform staff that he holds in his right hand. This manner of composition for John the Baptist, made popular in the beginning of the sixteenth century in paintings by Leonardo da Vinci (*Musée du Louvre*) and Andrea del Sarto (*Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts*), was firmly established in the visual tradition by the time Tosini was working.[†]

Tosini positions the head in three-quarter view with the right eye looking directly toward the viewer while the other eye wanders to the left. Tosini's Mannerist style can be found in the muscles modeled from the light and shade—a technique used by many artists including Tosini's friend, Michelangelo. The touch of John's right hand onto the very painterly and tactile hairshirt is soft and delicately posed. Viewers can imagine the feel of the hairshirt, the light touch of a finger on just small a piece of the material. John's hair is delicately painted, and the curls are lit almost as highlights in the front, drawing attention back to the eyes and elegant shape of the head and neck. These are also characteristics of Mannerist portrait style. John is made human and attractive in a familiar way as in the commissioned portrait of a family member.

Michele Tosini incorporated Leonardo's *invenzione*, Michelangelo's muscularity, and Mannerist sensuality into an original depiction of a young adult man. This is in sharp contrast to other depictions of John the Baptist with an old and emaciated body, which encourage us to reflect on his hermetical lifestyle. Tosini's painting emphasizes characteristics of innocence, determination, and strength—traits that served the young prophet well when he cried out in the wilderness for God's people to "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." He reminds us of the great vigor and intensity required by John the Baptist's spiritual preparation and expectant waiting for the coming of the Christ in whom "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

NOTE

† Heidi J. Hornik, *Michele Tosini and the Ghirlandaio Workshop in Cinquecento Florence* (Brighton, U.K., and Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 110-116.



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