

This photo is available  
in the print version of  
*Marriage.*

*Michele Tosini (1503-1577). MARRIAGE AT CANA, 1561. Fresco. Strozzi Chapel, Villa Caserotta, Paolini, Italy. Photo: © Heidi J. Hornik. Used by permission.*

# Water into Wine

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

**A searching question is inscribed beside the MARRIAGE OF CANA: “Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time?” We become the faithful servant who observes the miracle and ponders its significance in Christ’s self-revelation.**

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**T**he *Marriage at Cana* is a central image among the elaborately constructed paintings that fill the Strozzi chapel in Paolini, Italy. We know much about the artist, who was a younger contemporary of Michelangelo, from archival research.<sup>1</sup> Michele lived in Florence, where his father was a messenger for the *Signoria*, the central administrative body for the city. With his wife Felice and their four children, Michele was a member of the Dominican parish of Santa Maria Novella. Both of his sons became painters: the older Baccio would take over his father’s workshop in the late 1570s, while the younger son, following in the Dominican manner of Fra Angelico and Fra Bartolomeo, became a painter after entering the order as Fra Santi Tosini in nearby Fiesole. Michele’s two daughters also joined the Dominican order in convents near Florence. Michele received a number of commissions from his familial connections with the Dominicans, but he also inherited from his teacher, Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, a prestigious clientele that included the Strozzi family who commissioned the fresco cycle in their private villa chapel.

Michele was trained in the same Ghirlandaio workshop where Michelangelo, twenty-eight years his senior, had studied. The Ghirlandaio workshop was best known for training artists in drawing (*disegno*) and painting techniques, including the fresco method (painting on wet plaster) used in *Marriage at Cana*. Domenico (Michelangelo’s teacher) and his son, Ridolfo

(Michele's teacher), were excellent businessmen. They had developed a strong patronage base before Michele di Ridolfo, as Tosini was known by his contemporaries, inherited the workshop and became *capo*, or master.

The Strozzi chapel fresco cycle is a visual interpretation of redemptive epiphany. The chapel, adjacent to the present kitchen of the villa now occupied by the Ganucci Cancellieri family, was completed during the Strozzi

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ownership in 1561. The largest frescoes depict the *Adoration of the Kings* and the *Marriage of Cana*. These two scenes face each other and are two of the three events associated with the favorite Florentine feast day of the Epiphany. A third event, the *Baptism of Christ*, is juxtaposed with a Lamentation scene in the original

altar panel. Together, the frescoes and altar panel define the program of the chapel as the full cycle of redemption from the infancy narratives through Christ's sacrifice and death.

The iconographic key to the program of the chapel is found in the background of the feast of the Epiphany, or God's manifestation in Jesus Christ, that the Church celebrates on January 6. The earliest celebrations of the feast of the Epiphany probably date back to the third century in Egypt where it replaced a festival of Isis, the main point of which was the virgin birth of Aion, on January 6. The changing of water into wine, a Dionysian miracle, was celebrated in conjunction with the Isis festival. The Christians reinterpreted this miracle as a reference to baptism, and they may have associated it with the miracle at Cana, which they then celebrated at Epiphany.<sup>2</sup>

By the sixteenth century, the Church was observing three celebrations on January 6—the feasts of the Adoration of the Magi, the Marriage at Cana, and the Baptism of Christ. This holy day, with its emphasis on Christ's baptism, was especially important in Florence because John the Baptist was the patron saint of the city.

On the day of Epiphany the Church is married to Christ.<sup>3</sup> During the morning prayer hour (or Lauds) therefore, the response to the *Benedictus* (the prayer of thanksgiving for Jesus' birth from Luke 1:68-79) is: "Today the Church is joined to her celestial spouse, because in Jordan Christ doth wash her sins; the Magi hasten with gifts to the royal marriage feast, and the guests exult in the water turned to wine." The inscription written above this fresco, "today he changed water into wine at the wedding," is a direct reference to the Lauds.

*Marriage at Cana* portrays Jesus' first miracle or "sign" in the Gospel of

John, the turning of water into wine at the wedding feast. Jesus, his mother, and the wedding party sit at a long banquet table. From their places of honor in the center, the bride and groom look directly toward the viewer; probably they are contemporary portraits, but their identity remains unknown. Two women sit to the left of the bride and four men squeeze in uncomfortably to the right of the groom.<sup>4</sup>

The fresco depicts the events narrated in John 2:3-8. Mary is informing Jesus that the wedding party has run out of wine (2:3). Six stone water jars are in front of the table (2:6). Jesus is raising his hand in authority to instruct one of the servant boys to fill them with water. The boy on the right is pouring water into the first of the elegant vases after receiving direction (2:7). The second servant, obeying Jesus' command to "draw some out, and take it to the chief steward" (2:8), is pouring wine into the goblet. The image invites us to witness a miracle and not merely observe a sumptuous feast.

Michele fills out the image with other figures. The guests at the table probably are contemporary portraits, similar to those frequently repeated by Michele and imitators of his workshop in the 1560s and 1570s. In the corners are other men – six on the left and thirteen on the right – who vary in age, stature, and facial expression. A musician is playing a flute in the right background. The table in front of the guests is laden generously with birds (perhaps they are sparrows, the Florentine delicacy) and plates of fruits and vegetables.

Inscribed on the wall to the right of the fresco are the first sentences of the biblical account:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

*John 2:1-4*

Below this passage, a searching question from the parable of the faithful servant is appended: "Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time?" (Matthew 24:45). It is appropriate to link this parable with the moment depicted in the fresco: the servants obeying the instructions of Christ, which is also a moment of transubstantiation and redemption. The viewer of *Marriage at Cana* becomes the faithful servant who observes the miracle, but may not fully grasp its significance in Christ's self-revelation.

The Strozzi chapel paintings represent Michele's participation in the important theological discussions of his day. The great reformer, Martin Luther (1483-1546), had proposed *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone) to em-

phasize the singular importance of the Bible in guiding Christian discipleship. Michele's fresco scenes are entirely biblical, yet they incorporate the symbolism of the liturgy iconographically.

Christ's changing the water into wine at the wedding at Cana is a transubstantiation that points us toward the Eucharist, or Communion. Of course, the proper understanding of the sacraments was an issue raised by Luther. In *Marriage at Cana*, Michele visually ties the Eucharist to the sacrament or union of marriage, which is another new beginning for a couple brought together in a covenant with God.

Michele's integration of biblical text and liturgical imagery came at a critical time in the history of Christianity, which failed to realize all the potential ramifications for such a combination.

#### NOTES

1 This biographical sketch is based on Tosini's testament found in the Archivio di Stato, Florence. See Heidi J. Hornik, "The Testament of Michele Tosini," *Paragone* 46:543-545 (1995): 156-167.

2 See Heidi J. Hornik, "The Strozzi Chapel by Michele Tosini: A Visual Interpretation of Redemptive Epiphany," *Artibus et Historiae* 23:46 (2002): 97-118.

3 Rab Hatfield, *Botticelli's Uffizi 'Adoration': A Study in Pictorial Content* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 55.

4 The style of Mannerism – a movement away from the one-point linear perspective, perfect balance, proportion, and symmetry of the High Renaissance to the flamboyance of the Baroque period – allowed artists to create spatial incongruities. In this painting the four men do not appear to have enough space for more than one of them to sit down!



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