

Audio Guide Transcript

# Paintings on Stone

Science and the Sacred 1530-1800

February 20–May 15, 2022

Main Exhibition Galleries

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

**STOP 1**  
**Introduction Gallery**  
*Welcome*

**Speakers:**

**Min Jung Kim**  
**Barbara B. Taylor Director**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

**Judith Mann**  
**Curator of European Art to 1800**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Hello, I am Min Jung Kim, the Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

I am delighted to welcome you to the audio guide for *Paintings on Stone: Science and the Sacred 1530–1800*, an exhibition we've organized to highlight a little-known aspect of 16th- and 17th-century artistic practice: the use of stone panels as supports for painted images. The exhibition you are about to experience is the culmination of 15 years of research undertaken by one of the curators here at the Museum. So, to tell you more, I would like to introduce Judith Mann, curator of European art to 1800.

Thank you, Min. The 76 paintings that comprise the exhibition have been brought to St. Louis in order to demonstrate the extraordinary creativity of artists who selected stone panels as the supports for their paintings. They used a variety of stones, including slate, various marbles, amethyst, porphyry, jasper, limestones, and lapis lazuli, and they did so to enrich and deepen the meaning of their artistic productions as well as to make works that delight the eye and incorporate the markings of the stone into their work.

Many of these paintings have never been on public display. All of them document an aspect of the creative endeavor of early modern European artists who were exploring the possibilities of a creative relationship between the products of their own hand and those aspects of the natural world that they understood as having been fashioned by God.

This exhibition audio guide offers commentaries from three of us who have worked on this show. In addition to my voice, you will be hearing from Andrea Miller, research assistant in the Department of European Art to 1800, and John Encarnación, professor of earth and atmospheric sciences at Saint Louis University.

We encourage you to experience this guide in any order you like; you may follow it in numeric order or pick and choose. Each featured object can be located by following the floorplan on this webpage or by identifying the audio icon on the object's label in the exhibition. Whether you're listening from home or in the Museum galleries, I hope you enjoy this audio guide and your visit to *Paintings on Stone*.

## **STOP 2**

### **Sebastiano del Piombo and the Origins of Painting on Stone**

*Portrait of Young Ippolito de' Medici*

**Speaker: Judith Mann**

**Curator of European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

This forceful portrait of a 16th-century soldier, perhaps a member of the powerful Medici family, is painted on a piece of slate. The painter, whose name was Sebastiano del Piombo, was really the person who initiated the practice of painting on stone supports that started around 1530. He was born in Venice and came to Rome in 1511, where he entered into a competitive world dominated by three of the most well-known painters of the Renaissance—Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Raphael. Sebastiano experimented with materials for making paintings, perhaps as a way of distinguishing himself from these other artists. For example, he put oil paints directly onto stone walls rather than using wet plaster as the medium in which to apply his pigments. He developed a reliable preparation method for stone panels so that the paint stuck to the stone. Sebastiano covered the slate entirely with paint, so we don't actually see the stone itself, merely a gray background that looks like slate. Sebastiano understood that a portrait of a man in armor, when painted on a piece of stone, conveys a stronger sense of power and stability than it would, had he used canvas or wood panel. Working in Rome until his death in 1547, Sebastiano came into contact with some of the artists whose work is displayed in this gallery and probably passed along his formula for painting on stone surfaces.

## **STOP 3**

### **Sebastiano del Piombo and the Origins of Painting on Stone**

#### *Portrait of a Young Man*

**Speaker: Judith Mann**

**Curator of European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

This portrait of a young man is the only known work on stone by a female artist, whose name was Sofonisba Anguissola. It probably wouldn't surprise you to hear that she was celebrated for her insightful portrayals of people, often members of her own family. The pensive expression on the face of this young man and the delicacy with which she has rendered his skin and the contours of his lips testifies to her powers of portraying likeness. Born and trained in the northern Italian town of Cremona, Anguissola was invited to the Spanish court in Madrid as court portraitist. She also worked in Genoa and spent her last years in Sicily, where she was highly regarded for her painting. She may have learned about the use of stone supports in either Madrid or in Genoa. She has portrayed her subject, thought by some to be her brother, with a thoughtful, perhaps daydreaming expression as he pages through the leaves of a book. By using stone as the support for her picture, the artist has underscored the idea of lasting or eternal memory of a person. We don't know whether this portrait was made after its subject had passed away. The inscription in the book comes from the opening lines of the Roman orator Cicero's book *De Officiis* and includes the name "Marcus," which may perhaps be a clue to the sitter's identity.

## **STOP 4**

### **Rome 1590–1615: Visible Stone Surfaces**

#### *Perseus Rescuing Andromeda*

**Speaker: Judith Mann**

**Curator of European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

This small oval depicting Perseus rescuing Andromeda was painted on lapis lazuli. Andromeda was the daughter of Cepheus, the king of Joppa. Her mother, Queen Cassiopeia, had bragged that Andromeda was more beautiful than the sea-born Nereids, who complained of the insult to the sea god Poseidon. Poseidon, for revenge, sent a sea monster to destroy Joppa. To save his kingdom, Cepheus sacrificed his daughter to the monster by tying her to a rock. The hero Perseus came by, and when he saw Andromeda, he fell in love and rescued her.

One version of the story indicated that when Perseus first saw Andromeda, he mistook her for a stone sculpture. This story must have been in the mind of the artist, Cavaliere d'Arpino, when he selected a stone support for his painting. Since she is painted on stone, in some sense Andromeda actually becomes stone. Furthermore, the rock that she is tied to is really a rock. This play of materials and narrative must have appealed to the original owner of this panel, who would have enjoyed the joke.

This painting is the reason that prompted the Museum to mount this exhibition. When the picture was purchased in 2000, I knew very little about the practice of creating paintings using pieces of stone for supports. After several years of research, however, I realized how fascinating the subject could be and how extraordinary many of the pictures were.

## **STOP 5**

### **Rome, 1590–1615: Visible Stone Surfaces**

*The Annunciation (recto)*

**Speaker: John Encarnación**

**Professor of Geology and Earth and Atmospheric Sciences**

**Saint Louis University**

Hello, I'm John Encarnación, professor of geology at Saint Louis University.

In this two-sided painting, *[The Annunciation]* by Sigismundo Leyrer, we see a wonderful use of translucent agate. Agate is a stone consisting of curved or wavy layers of quartz and other silica minerals. Agates form when silica-rich groundwaters fill cavities in rock. From these waters, the quartz and other minerals crystallize on the walls of the cavity and progressively fill the void, layer upon layer. The different hues are due to various amounts of iron and manganese oxides and hydroxides that crystallize with the silica. In this particular sample, note that the cavity has an irregular shape, so when the minerals progressively filled the void, three separate compartments were formed, each with a concentric set of agate rings that, together, result in a billowy form and help guide your eyes into different sections of the painting.

## **STOP 6**

### **The Quest for Darkness: Slate and Other Black Stones**

#### *Saint Peter and an Angel Appearing to Saint Agatha in Prison*

**Speaker: Judith Mann**

**Curator of European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

*The following audio guide recording refers to material describing physical violence against women.*

This small slate panel illustrates the high level of mastery that Alessandro Turchi achieved in using slate supports. For a great number of artists who worked with slate, one of the attractions, particularly during the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, was the way that dark stone provided effective contrast for painted light sources and bright illumination. That was certainly an element of Turchi's fascination in using slate supports.

Turchi has chosen a story associated with Saint Peter, the apostle of Jesus and first pope. Seventeenth-century artists often chose to represent stories of Peter's posthumous miracles, such as this one, where he healed a fourth-century young woman who had been punished for her Christian faith. The Roman emperor Diocletian ordered his soldiers to cut off her breasts. Peter visited her in prison and miraculously healed her wounds.

When you look at the main characters in the story that Turchi depicted—Saint Agatha on the left, Saint Peter in the middle, and the angel at the right—they almost seem to hover in front of the surface. The artist has chosen a middle-tone piece of slate. In preparing to paint the figures on the slate, he put a layer of painted preparation that he made slightly larger than the figure to be represented, therefore providing an outline for the form. This, together with his mastery of subtle tonal variations that gives a sense of full three-dimensionality to the protagonists' bodies, creates the sensation of figures placed just in front of the surface of the stone.



## **STOP 7**

### **The Quest for Darkness: Slate and Other Black Stones**

#### *Dante and Virgil in the Underworld*

**Speaker: Andrea Miller**

**Research Assistant, European Art to 1800  
Saint Louis Art Museum**

Hello, I'm Andrea Miller, research assistant in European art to 1800 at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante's masterful 14th-century allegory of the quest for God, the author imagined a journey to the underworld accompanied by the Roman poet Virgil, who served as his guide. The epic poem inspired a myriad of Renaissance illustrations consisting of many striking details, such as the horrors of hell and the suffering of sinners described in the *Inferno*, Part 1 of the *Divine Comedy*. Filippo Napoletano did not seek to create an exact image of the specific passage, but rather presented a compilation of images to conjure up the experience of hell.

As you look at this painting, the flying centaur in the middle arch has been added, and the lobsterlike creature crawling in the lower edge has become more prominent. Furthermore, in adapting to stone, the artist chose a darker palette to emphasize the intense red and deep oranges of the infernal fires. This particular limestone is highly reflective and, when seen with modern lighting, can almost serve as a mirror. However, in the 17th century, the painting would have been viewed in flickering candlelight. As the viewer gazed at the protagonists about to enter the netherworld, the hellfires in the arched openings would be palpable. The combination of the reflective surface and the varied, dancing flames from a single light source, such as a candlelight, and the unsettling details of the array of sufferers and foreground monsters would emerge and then disappear, enhancing the perception of a dangerous and scary place.

## **STOP 8**

### **The Quest for Darkness: Slate and Other Black Stones**

#### *The Nativity*

**Speaker: Judith Mann**

**Curator of European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Part of the appeal of this lovely panel comes from the deep intensity of the glassy black support on which it has been painted. The panel is obsidian, a very rare support for painted images in the history of art, yet one of the most interesting. In fact, it is really a type of glass rather than stone. It comes from the molten lavas that are discharged from volcanoes that are rich in silica. It was not found in Europe, coming instead from South America and the Caribbean. Bartolomé Murillo lived and worked in the southern Spanish city of Sevilla. He was interested in the Caribbean—his son traveled there and he himself may have gone as well. In Sevilla, Murillo had access to a variety of materials and objects that were imported from the New World.

The obsidian on which Murillo painted this picture may have been originally used by the Aztec Indians of Mexico, for whom the shiny reflective surface connoted light, spiritual power, and the ability to see into the supernatural realm. Some scholars think that the artist intended to incorporate the spiritual power of the material into the subject that he has represented. To Catholic believers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as today, the scene of Jesus's birth records an extraordinary event—a divine being taking on human form. Using a material associated with spiritual power would have enhanced this event.

Until a few years ago, the bare obsidian in the background behind Mary and Joseph had been painted over with pale blue paint. At some point years after the picture was completed, an owner had attempted to make the painting look more like the artist's typical painting style, where he used soft colors for his backgrounds.

## **STOP 9**

### **Antonio Tempesta and the Masters of Marble and Alabaster**

#### *Interior of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp*

**Speaker: Andrea Miller**

**Research Assistant, European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

The interior of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, today known as the Saint Charles Borromeo Church—built between 1614 and 1621—was created on the same type of marble used to construct the church itself. The artist, Wilhelm van Ehrenberg, portrayed numerous church interiors throughout his career, although this is the only one painted on marble. He specialized in architectural interiors, both real and fictive, including imaginary places and stately art galleries. Born in Germany, Ehrenberg spent the majority of his career in Antwerp, where he joined the Guild of Saint Luke in 1662 and remained until his death.

The subject of church interiors was popular among the 17<sup>th</sup>-century architectural painters in Antwerp. This work, for example, provides valuable documentation of the original interior, which was largely destroyed by fire in 1718. It is a truly exceptional painting in the artist's body of work and among contemporary Flemish church interior paintings. By leaving the white marble unpainted on the lower levels, columns, galleries, and the entrance to the Houtappel family chapel, Ehrenberg highlighted the relevance of the structure. Its grand scale and splendor earned it the nickname the “marble temple” in the 17th century.

## **STOP 10**

### **Antonio Tempesta and the Masters of Marble and Alabaster**

#### *Bear Hunt*

**Speaker: Andrea Miller**

**Research Assistant, European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Antonio Tempesta was an Italian artist best known for his engravings and landscape paintings. He has recently come to be appreciated as a master of painting on stone. He worked on alabaster, lapis lazuli, and dendritic stone to create hunting scenes like the two works here, *Bear [Hunt]* and *Boar Hunt*. Small paintings on stone were popular with the aristocracy in the early 17th century, and hunting scenes specifically were sought out by royalty. Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II was so enamored with this pair of paintings that he bought them soon after they were made.

In both oval paintings, the hunting scenes are in the foreground and continue in the middle- and background, with tall, slim trees spreading across the scenery. The artist reinforced the stone's existing marks and allowed them to remain visible. For example, the branches of the trees and shrubs in the foreground are not painted; these foliate designs naturally appear within dendritic stone and are scattered everywhere. The distinctive markings of dendrite—from the Greek word *dendron*, meaning “tree”—are caused by metallic deposits in limestone. They resemble trees, and parts of the small branches and leaves are created by this veining. The veining of both pieces seem to be quite similar, suggesting that they are from the same block of stone. Tempesta allowed most of the dendrites to remain evident, simply painting the tree trunks and utilizing the natural leaflike forms to fill their branches. By maintaining so many of these forms, he created more trees and shrubs than he may have originally envisioned or needed for the scenes. There is a wonderful example of this dendritic stone in our Explore Lab, in the adjacent gallery—Gallery 246.

## **STOP 11**

### **Creative Adaptations and Pictorial Stone**

#### *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*

**Speaker: Judith Mann**

**Curator of European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

*The following audio guide recording refers to material describing physical violence against children.*

These two paintings both illustrate a religious narrative that was very popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Based on a story that was not part of the biblical account of Christ's early life, it recounted how the Holy Family fled to Egypt, seeking to save Jesus from King Herod's order that all male infants be slaughtered. On their journey, the family stopped beneath a palm tree, which has been included in each of these two scenes. Then Mary and Joseph refreshed themselves with water from a spring that miraculously appeared at the tree's roots.

Both pieces of stone provide a perfect backdrop that allowed the artist, Jacques Stella, to incorporate an episode from the narrative that described the family's encounter with a farmer who was planting his wheat. When the Holy Family approached, the farmer's seeds sprouted immediately and grew to mature stalks just after the family departed. Soldiers sent by Herod arrived soon after and asked the farmer whether he had seen the travelers. He replied, truthfully, that they came when he planted his wheat. The soldiers turned back, thinking since the wheat was fully grown that the Holy Family was already too far away for them to catch. In both pictures the artist has included the soldiers talking to the farmer in the middle distance. Stella probably chose these particular stones—pietra paesina and "jasper"—since the undulating striations in the material suggested the tilled fields that the farmer had planted. The distinctions between the markings on each stone account for some of the differences in the compositions, demonstrating how Jacques Stella responded to the visual qualities of the stone in designing his paintings.

## **STOP 12**

### **Creative Adaptations and Pictorial Stone**

#### *Sea with Galleons*

**Speaker: Andrea Miller**

**Research Assistant, European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Filippo Napoletano specialized in using a particular type of limestone—a type of limestone that is called Arno lined “jasper”—used in this work. It made a perfect backdrop for naval scenes and episodes from saints’ lives that required seaside settings. Here the carefully observed galleons also reflect the influence of Dutch art on Napoletano. Most of these works were produced in Florence, since this stone was not used as extensively in Rome.

Napoletano was a painter, etcher, draftsman, and collector. While living in Rome, he met and worked with foreign artists experimenting with various types of stones, another aspect of his experience in Rome, as he came into contact with artists from northern Europe. He also worked with an artist known for his landscape views, including scenes incorporating river and seaside elements. This friend and colleague had been sentenced to serve aboard a galley as punishment for some unknown crime, and thus had firsthand experience with boats and sea life. He may have shared this with Napoletano when they worked together in Rome, before the latter was called to the Florentine court in 1617.

## **STOP 13**

### **Science and Wonder**

*Baptism of Christ*

#### **Speakers:**

**Andrea Miller**  
**Research Assistant, European Art to 1800**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

**John Encarnación**  
**Professor of Geology and Earth and Atmospheric Sciences**  
**Saint Louis University**

In selecting amethyst for this work, Filippo Lauri created one of the most compelling representations of a central tenet of John's baptism of Jesus. The event is recounted in three of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—but artists typically follow the account included in Matthew. Lauri included this detail as well as depictions of the potential candidates for baptism on the left, reacting in awe to the presence of the divine. Although not exclusively used for when the divine is present, amethyst was particularly suitable for the evocation of an experience beyond the physical world. The fractured appearance of the material allows the surface to reflect light and creates a shimmering effect suggestive of divine light. Lauri exploited this quality to enhance his painting. For example, a 16th-century author likened amethyst to a river. Lauri's decision to sign the painting on the rocky outcropping on which Jesus rests his right knee may be intended to call attention to the use of stone as a meaningful support for the subject. Lauri worked in a range of sizes—from large-format frescoes to small cabinet pictures—but this is the only known example of a painting on stone by the artist. It is difficult to establish how he developed the technique for it. And now we'll hear from John Encarnación, professor of earth and atmospheric sciences at the Saint Louis University.

The mottled purple background of this work consists of amethyst, the purple variety of the common mineral quartz found in many beach sands. Quartz is composed of silicon and oxygen, but occasionally iron may replace some of the silicon. Then, if that iron receives enough natural gamma radiation, it turns the quartz purple. The amethyst in this work is made up of several crystals, and each crystal is unevenly colored with purple. This occurs because the iron was not uniformly distributed during the growth of the quartz crystals, resulting in the varied intensities of purple in the background.

## **STOP 14**

### **Science and Wonder**

#### *Israelites Crossing the Red Sea*

**Speaker: Judith Mann**

**Curator of European Art to 1800**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

The case in front of you contains a framed piece of stone that served as a door within a magnificent piece of furniture—a cabinet of art and curiosities gifted by the city of Augsburg to the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus. Citizens of Augsburg were grateful to him for freeing their city from Catholic rule during the Thirty Years' War, which lasted from 1618 to 1648. A full-scale photograph of the cabinet is displayed on one wall of this gallery.

The cabinet was a complex structure of doors behind doors, hidden compartments, surfaces to be pulled out and removed, musical instruments, and automata. Cabinets such as this one celebrated both art and science, and often incorporated painted stone panels. Together, paint and the surface markings of the stone created the image, an embodiment of the artist and nature working in tandem.

Look carefully at the door with the painted agate scenes. The stone was decorated on both sides by the German painter Johann König. You're looking at the front, where he depicted the Israelites fleeing from Egypt having walked through the parted Red Sea, shown on the upper portion. Below them, Pharaoh's soldiers perish in the inundation of water that engulfed them when they tried to follow. Using agate perfectly embodies the idea of the melding of human achievement with the works of nature since the artist has allowed the natural markings of the stone to define the shore on which the Israelites seek refuge as well as the frothy waves of the sea. Look carefully so you can discern the patterning within the stone surface from the painted imagery provided by the artist.