



## The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary Teacher's Pack

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Supporting material and ideas for teachers using The Seven Sorrows as part of the Take One scheme. (*The painting is also known as The Ashwellthorpe Triptych*)



**The Seven Sorrows of Mary (*The Ashwellthorpe Triptych*), c.1520s**

An image of the picture can be downloaded from our website  
[www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/view/NCC146455](http://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/view/NCC146455)



Inspired by the National Gallery's  
Take One Picture programme

## Introduction to the painting

This Flemish altarpiece was commissioned by a Sir Christopher Knyvett of Ashwellthorpe in Norfolk and his wife, Catherine. The central panel depicts the Sorrows of the Virgin Mary, while the two side panels show two saints and the donors, Christopher Knyvett and his wife Catherine, kneeling in the foreground. Christopher was sent to the Netherlands in 1512 in service of the King and he was a courtier until his death in 1520 at the age of 29. The evidence for the identification of the donors includes the heraldic shields hanging from trees in the top corners of the image, the coats of arms worn by the kneeling male figure and the donors' name saints. St Catherine is recognised by the wheel, indicating her martyrdom and St Christopher is represented carrying the infant Christ on his shoulders. The shape of Catherine's heraldic shield (diamond or lozenge shape) suggests that by the time the painting was finished she was a widow.



The central panel focuses on the Virgin Mary and presents the viewer with the Seven Sorrows in the background. The first of these is the Presentation in the Temple. Joseph and Mary are represented with the Christ child



in the temple of Jerusalem where they met a devout man called Simeon. Simeon then had a prophesy foreseeing the Virgin's sorrows, saying that because of her child her heart would be pierced. The second group of figures, next to the temple, represents the Flight into Egypt when the Holy family were forced to flee the wrath of Herod. The third is the scene after the Virgin realised that Christ had been left behind in Jerusalem, where he was later found disputing with Jewish scribes. The last four scenes are from the end of Christ's life on earth: The Road to Calvary shows Christ carrying the cross, the Crucifixion and the Descent from the Cross are shown in the background and to the left of the Virgin there is a scene of the Entombment.



The altarpiece is a triptych (three panels) and the side panels fold to cover the main one in the centre. This is a traditional type of altarpiece in northern Europe, particularly with the Virgin with saints and donors on either side. On the back of the side panels there are also images, which would have been visible when the panels were closed: St John the Evangelist on the left and St Barbara on the right.

The exceptional richness of colour that was also much more durable than previous painting methods has been achieved by careful layering onto the oak panels. Many layers of gesso (a mixture of chalk and glue) are first applied to the oak panels before being sanded down and then the design is drawn on. Layers of pigment are then added and fixed with either linseed or walnut oil. Each pigment layer must be carefully dried before the next can be added - a time costly production. This painstaking work indicates that is a very expensive commission - further proof is in the use of silver leaf on the patrons' coat of arms.

## Further Background Information

### About the Artist

It is not known exactly who painted the triptych but the style of the piece links it to a 16th century artist in the Netherlands dubbed, 'The Master of the Legend of the Magdalen'. Whoever the artist is, it is certain that he would have had a team of apprentices to assist with the lengthy production methods. He would also have seen himself as performing, not just a 'job', but a holy task, because of the particular subject matter.

### About Flemish Painting

Flemish painting of the 16th century is known for its intense depth of colour. Early in the century paintings traditionally depict religious scenes used as altarpieces or other devotional images. Portrait paintings were also becoming very popular at this point and this triptych incorporates both popular elements, plus a developed sense of the landscape as setting for the figures. In the history of Western art the Low Countries are seen as particularly important in developing landscape painting – previous Western painting had focussed on the figures.

### The Central Panel

The central panels of altarpieces of this kind were often made separately, as a way of testing the market. This partly speculative approach was possible because the late medieval painters and woodcarvers of the Southern Netherlands commanded a huge export market, stretching across all of Northern and most of Southern Europe. They would paint a generic scene such as the Seven Sorrows, likely to appeal to a wide market, and then custom-make the wings once a buyer had been found. However, judging by the care with which the landscapes and buildings have been matched up across the three panels, it is thought that Sir Christopher commissioned the entire piece from scratch.

### The Patrons and 'Donor Portraits'

This triptych is the earliest known commission of Flemish work made by a Norfolk family. Sir Christopher Knyvett was a member of the Norfolk gentry, with good connections to the royal English court and spent time in the Netherlands on a diplomatic mission by order of the King in the 1510s. During this time he is thought to have met his wife Catherine, whose surname was probably van Grimberghen. It is believed that during the time that Sir Christopher and Catherine spent together in the Netherlands they commissioned this triptych as this form was not yet seen in England. The triptych would have been displayed either at their home in Norfolk or in their local parish church.

### The Saints

The side panels also include paintings of saints: Sir Christopher is pictured with St Christopher and Catherine with St Catherine

*St Christopher* – the name means *Christ bearer*. Christopher, who was tall and strong, carried travellers across a dangerous river. One day a child asked to be taken across, but the child was heavy as lead and Christopher struggled to carry him. When they reached the opposite bank, the child was revealed to be Christ.



St Christopher is the patron saint of travellers and also believed to offer protection against sudden death (Did Sir Christopher die suddenly – he was only 29?)

*St Catherine* – the name means pure. St Catherine was considered a model of femininity. She was a princess who became a Christian in her teens. The Emperor tried to make her renounce Christianity. When that failed, he tried to get her to marry him. She refused and was sentenced to be executed on a breaking wheel, which miraculously broke when she touched it. She was beheaded instead. Her name and death sentence are remembered in the firework called the ‘Catherine Wheel’.



On the back of the two side panels, two more saints are painted in black and white. On the left you can see St John the Evangelist and on the right you can see St Barbara. There are clues in the painting that reveal their true identity.

*St John the Evangelist* – is painted behind the left panel.

This St John may or may not be the same person as St John the Apostle.

The chalice he holds could be a reference to the Last Supper or the legend that St John was handed a poisoned chalice. He blessed it and the poison rose in the shape of a dragon.

*St Barbara* is venerated by all who face danger from sudden or violent death through their work such as soldiers and miners. In art, she is usually depicted standing by the tower in which she was imprisoned by her father.

Obviously, if the altarpiece was closed up, these two figures would be on the front. They are painted in monochrome using a technique called *grisaille*, from the French *gris*, meaning grey.

St Christopher, St Catherine and St Barbara were all martyrs and all put to death by beheading. St John, according to legend, lived to old age.

## **Bible references**

### **The Seven Sorrows of Mary**

#### **The central panel**

##### **1. The prophesy of Simeon**

*Luke 2: 22 -35*

The baby Jesus was taken by his parents to be presented at the temple, according to the law of Moses. An old man, Simeon, was at the temple. The Holy Spirit had told him he would not die until he had seen the Christ. He held Jesus and said that he could now die in peace 'For mine eyes have seen thy salvation'. He also told Mary that 'a sword of sorrow' would 'pierce' her heart.

##### **2. The flight into Egypt**

*Matthew 2:13-21*

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and warned him that Herod wished to kill the infant Jesus. The angel said that Mary, Joseph and Jesus should flee to Egypt and stay there until Herod was dead. The night they left, Herod gave orders to kill all male children under the age of two.

##### **3. The loss of Jesus in the temple**

*Luke 2: 41-50*

When Jesus was twelve, Mary and Joseph took him to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. When they set out to return to Nazareth, Jesus stayed behind in the temple. His parents did not realise – they thought he was in the large group of people travelling with them. When they had travelled a whole day, they realised he was not with their group and went back to Jerusalem to look for him. They found him in the temple, talking to the learned men there 'and all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.'

##### **4. Mary meets Jesus carrying his cross**

*Luke 23:26-32*

Jesus carried his cross to the place of execution. On the way, he met the women of Jerusalem who were crying. Jesus said 'Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and your children'. St John's Gospel (John19:26-27) states that Mary stood at the foot of the Cross as Jesus died.

##### **5. Jesus dies on the cross**

*Luke 23:46*

Jesus cried out with a loud voice: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit' and having said this, 'he gave up the ghost'.

##### **6. Mary receives the dead body of her son**

*John 19: 31 – 34, 38*

The Jews asked Pilate for the bodies to be taken down so that they would not remain on the cross for the Sabbath. Pilate gave permission.

##### **7. Jesus is laid in the tomb**

*Matthew 27: 58 – 60*

Joseph of Arimathea, with Pilate's permission, took away Jesus' body. 'He wrapped it in a clean linen cloth. And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door.'

## Asking Questions

### Possible themes for questions and discussion in front of *The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary*

#### What can we see?

People  
Landscape  
Buildings  
Objects  
Colours  
Clothing

#### The Central Panel

Who is the most important person in the painting? Why do you think that?  
Where do we see her again? What kind of person is she?  
Who else is she with each time? (Describe the other characters in the painting)  
Who else appears in the picture more than once?  
What is she doing each time we see her?  
Is this telling a story? What do you think it is about?  
Describe the buildings in the picture. What are they used for?  
What is in the distance in the picture?  
Where does your eye travel? (Follow the road and the river)

#### The side panels

Describe the people in the side panels. What are they holding? Wearing? Doing?  
What other objects are around them?  
How are these panels the same as each other?  
How are they different?  
Are these people part of the same story?

#### How is the picture put together?

How is this painting different from one that would hang on a wall?  
Shape of the painting – idea of a triptych, look at the painting as a structure, paintings on both sides.  
Identify sections and shapes in the painting.  
What shapes repeat in the picture (curves in the landscape/ buildings, triangles of the groups of figures)  
What colours stand out?

#### What do you think of it?

How does the picture make you feel?  
Why do you think someone wanted to make a picture like this?

## Developing lines of enquiry in the classroom

### Identity

#### Triptych (Maths, Art and Design)

Give each child a piece of A4 white card. Fold this to make a triptych. Plan 5 drawings – a centre panel and 2 side panels which will only be seen when the triptych is ‘open’ and 2 side panels which will be visible when the triptych is ‘closed’.

The theme of the triptych could be left open or you could ask the children to design a triptych in honour of someone they admire.

#### Heroes Triptych

Create a triptych “shrine” for a personal hero. Select a person who has made a positive impact on them. The centre panel could have a photo or portrait of the person with the 2 side panels representing their contributions in some way. Who do you identify with?



#### Story path (Literacy, Maths, History)

Give each child a story sequence writing frame. Ask them to think of 7 key events in their own lives. Ask them to draw a picture in each space along the path, illustrating their story, in chronological order. At the end, children could hold up their story paths and use them to tell their stories to the rest of the class.



#### Heraldry (Maths, Art and Design)

Look at the shapes and colours in the Knyvett family heraldry.

What is heraldry? What are the common characteristics of Heraldry in the middle ages? How are symbols traditionally used in heraldry? How can I use modern images and symbols to create my own coat of arms? How can colour be used symbolically? What are common colour meanings in different cultures? Children can create a contemporary coat of arms for themselves or their family. They can explain the symbols, images and shapes in their coat of arms and how they are significant to them. Research traditional heraldry in the middle ages.

#### Suits you Sir!

In the painting, Sir Christopher wears a bespoke over tunic. Children could take the role of his fashion designer in a bid to seek his patronage. Look at 16th century designs and create a fabric pattern for a new tunic.



## Drama Ideas

### Thought tracking - Time traveller

Christopher Knyvett died aged 29 before the painting was finished. Imagine that you are Christopher and have come back to life. You are looking at the painting which you paid for and planned with your wife Catherine. What do you think of it?

Children sit on floor with eyes closed.  
Ask the children to think of a sentence which begins, 'I can see ...'  
Adult touches individual children on shoulder.  
They say their sentence. If they can't think of anything or don't want to speak, they remain silent and adult will pass to someone else.

Repeat with 'I think the painting is ....'

### Voices in the head - Freeze frame

Working in groups, the children form a tableau or still image of one of the scenes from the painting (it's probably best if the leader directs them; for example choose *The Flight into Egypt* and explain this story briefly).

Each member of the group thinks of a word or phrase or sentence to describe how their character feels or what they are thinking at that moment.

Each pupil in turn, speaks their feeling or thought.



**Mixed Media Collage of Ashwellthorpe Triptych produced by pupils at Falcon Junior school, Norwich**

For more details visit [www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk)  
To make a booking, please telephone 01603 493636  
Or email [museums@norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:museums@norfolk.gov.uk)

