

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

MARRIAGE OF THE VIRGIN depicts a popular apocryphal story
that explains how God chose Joseph, though he was an
older man, to wed the young Mary.

Perugino (c. 1450-1523). MARRIAGE OF THE VIRGIN, 1500-1504. Oil on wood, 234 x 185 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Caen, France. Photo: © Erich Lessing / Art Resource. Used by Permission.

A Wedding Story

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Pietro Vannucci, better known as Perugino, was the leading painter of the school at Perugia, Italy. He brought fame to that city through his own works and those of his most famous pupil, Raphael (1483-1520). By 1472 Perugino was working in Florence where he joined the artist's Company of St. Luke. He quickly learned perspective and a drawing style favored by the Florentines.

Pope Sixtus IV della Rovere called the artist to Rome in about 1480 to supervise the painting of the entire cycle of wall frescoes in the newly built private chapel of the Pope, the Sistine Chapel. Perugino painted the primary scene, *Christ Giving the Keys to St. Peter*, which depicts the events of Matthew 16:18-19, the basis of apostolic succession.

Marriage of the Virgin, painted twenty years later, portrays an extra-biblical story found in the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James* (c. 150) and *The Golden Legend* written by the Dominican and Archbishop of Genoa, Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1229-1298). Perugino expertly applies the Renaissance characteristics of harmony, balance, proportion, and scientific perspective to the painting. The story's main scene, Joseph placing the ring on Mary's finger as the High Priest joins their hands, is in the front and center of the picture plane. Behind the wedding group, the piazza has a precise grid pattern using scientific one-point linear perspective as codified by architect Leone Battista Alberti in *On Painting* (1435). In the center of the background the Temple, looking very much like a centrally planned Renaissance building, looms over the correctly proportioned boy sitting on its steps. For a sense of recession, several groups of people in the middle ground are reduced proportionally in size.

Apocryphal stories were popular in this era because they provided readers with missing details about the lives of the biblical saints. According to the story of the Virgin's wedding, Mary was fourteen when the high priest ordered all the male descendants of David of marriageable age to bring a rod and gather at the Temple. The man whose rod blossomed into flower would become Mary's husband. Though Joseph was no longer a young man, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove made his rod bloom. Then the wedding was celebrated according to Jewish custom. In Perugino's painting, the unsuccessful younger suitors whose "rods did not flower" are standing beside Joseph and in groups on the piazza.