



THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

TEACHERS'
NOTES
2020–21

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Orazio Gentileschi,
The Finding of Moses,
early 1630s



On a hot day by the river Nile, something extraordinary has happened: a baby boy has been found, hidden in a basket at the water's edge. A group of women excitedly crowd around him, cooing, smiling, and wondering. Some point towards the river in the distance. An elegant figure dressed in yellow takes charge. She turns towards two women who have come to offer help – two women with a secret.

In this huge painting, we are shown a new telling of an old story – a celebration of hope, kindness, and the beginning of a great journey, all told through the actions of women. Gentileschi updated the story for a 17th-century audience to celebrate the start of a new life.

The story

The baby in this story is Moses, an important figure in many different religions. His story can be found in the Torah, the Qur'an, the Bible, and in the teachings of several other religions, including the Baha'i faith. Details of the story vary but Orazio would have known the Bible version best.

Moses was born in Egypt thousands of years ago. His people, the Israelites, had been enslaved by the rulers of Egypt. The Pharaoh, worried that the growing number of Israelites might overthrow him, ordered that all newborn Israelite boys should be drowned in the river Nile.

Jochebed, an Israelite, had just given birth to a baby boy, Moses. At first, she kept him hidden inside, but she worried that his crying would reveal his hiding place. In desperation she took him to the river Nile and placed him in a basket which she hid among the bulrushes. She left her daughter Miriam to watch over him from a distance. Maybe she hoped that someone kind would find him and take him in. In some versions of the story, she puts his basket in the water and hopes that the flow of the Nile will carry him to safety.

When Pharaoh's daughter came to the river to bathe with her attendants, she discovered the baby among the reeds. She realised that he was one of the condemned Israelite boys but she decided to look after him. Having seen this, Miriam stepped forward and cleverly asked if she could find a woman to nurse the baby. Pharaoh's daughter agreed, but little did she know that the woman Miriam ran back to fetch was her (and Moses') own mother. So, without realising it, Pharaoh's daughter would pay Moses' mother to look after her own son.

When the baby grew older, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and gave him the name 'Moshe', or 'Moses' in English. Some people believe his name is based on a Hebrew word meaning 'to draw out' (because he was drawn out of the river), or an Egyptian word meaning 'son of'. Moses would go on to free the Israelites from slavery and lead them out of Egypt on a 40-year journey to their Promised Land.

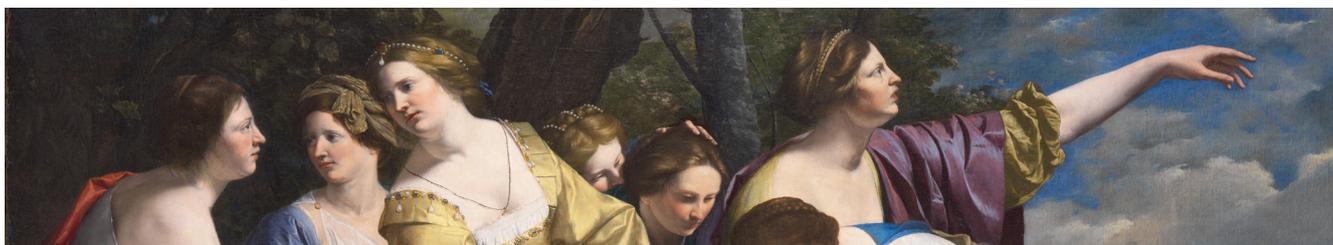
Journeys

The story of Moses is full of journeys. His journey from enslaved man to great leader is mirrored by the long journey he made out of Egypt.

Orazio Gentileschi also travelled. He was born Orazio Lomi, in the Italian city of Pisa. He later moved to Rome and lived with his uncle, deciding to take his surname, Gentileschi. Orazio became a successful artist. He travelled to Paris to paint for Marie de' Medici, mother of the King of France. He also travelled to London to paint for her daughter, Henrietta Maria, the Queen of England and wife of King Charles I.

The Finding of Moses was made for Henrietta Maria. She admired Orazio's art and this is one of the many paintings by him that she commissioned. But this picture would not stay in Henrietta Maria's possession for long – it would go on a journey of its own. Charles I was executed at the end of the English Civil War and Henrietta Maria fled to France, leaving the painting behind where it was sold.

Years later, when Henrietta Maria was visiting England, she found it and had it shipped back to France. It stayed there for over a hundred years until the French Revolution, when many royal collections were broken up and sold. By the end of the 18th century, the painting was back in England and in 2019 the public helped the National Gallery raise the money to buy the painting for the nation.



Family

In this painting Moses is surrounded by both his biological and adoptive families. It shows a crucial point in the story, on which the future of Moses and the Israelites hinges. It is no coincidence that Henrietta Maria chose this scene. The work was almost certainly commissioned to celebrate the birth of her son, the future King Charles II. Just as Moses grew up to be a powerful leader, there were high hopes for the future king of England.

Orazio was head of a family of artists and had brought his three sons to England with him in 1626. His daughter Artemisia was the most talented of his children and she was enjoying a successful career of her own. She joined her father in England in 1638 but we know few details about her visit. Orazio painted many works for Henrietta Maria while in London. As well as *The Finding of Moses*, he also painted *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, and an enormous ceiling painting, *Allegory of Peace and the Arts*, which were all displayed in the Great Hall at the Queen's House in Greenwich. Father and daughter both worked in London until Orazio died a year later. He was buried in the Queen's Chapel in Somerset House.

Telling stories with style

How can you tell a story in one painting? You only have one canvas to give your audience a sense of the characters, themes, location, and action. Orazio carefully puts the scene together in a way which is not only beautiful but also helps us to understand what is happening. The figures are almost life-size; making us feel as if we could step into their world. The painting is also full of gestures and poses to direct our gaze. The baby must be important because he is in the middle, but some of the women are also looking and pointing at him to show that he is the centre of attention. The woman holding him is partly

undressed and so she was probably bathing when she found him.

The other central figure is wearing a golden yellow dress and glittering jewellery that show her importance. Yellow is also a royal colour, so this must be Pharaoh's daughter. She is also one of the tallest figures and some of the women look up at her. On the left, a young woman in green kneels, offering her service to Pharaoh's daughter. The woman above her in red gently touches her back, suggesting that she knows her. They are Miriam and Jochebed, Moses' sister and mother. Jochebed is higher up, showing she is more important, and she has let her dress slip off her shoulder, as if she is ready to breastfeed the baby. Her eyes meet those of Pharaoh's daughter – will her secret be uncovered?



Orazio has carefully studied how people stand, kneel, point and look to compose this scene – and we know that he often used live models – but he is most interested in creating something elegant and refined. This style was popular in royal households and can be seen in the artwork of other painters working at the English court, such as Rubens and Van Dyck. It was popular with royalty abroad too, and Orazio painted a second version of *The Finding of Moses*, which was sent to King Philip IV of Spain, whose wife was Henrietta Maria's sister.

Look again at the women in the painting. Their gestures do not just help to tell the story, but their long bodies and outstretched arms are elegant and graceful too. Their poses often

mirror each other and neatly frame the baby. This helps to make the image look balanced and beautiful. Orazio was also particularly talented at painting realistic-looking fabrics and textures. Look at the light, loose folds of Moses' mother's sleeve, and the iridescent silk draped over the arm of the attendant pointing on the far right, shining both purple and blue. The whole scene has been made to look as luxurious as possible.

In its own time and place

Even though they appear lifelike, the women in this painting are not very individual. They all have similar facial features and plain expressions. Orazio is interested in creating an elegant scene, not necessarily one that explores the figures' personalities. Despite this, the painting celebrates female agency. Each person – apart from the baby – is a woman, and Moses' fate is in their hands. It is Jochebed who decides to hide him, Pharaoh's daughter who decides to spare him, and Miriam who suggests her mother become his wet nurse. The painting was also commissioned by the most powerful woman in England, Henrietta Maria.

Aspects of Moses' story have been changed to suit its new setting. While it tells a tale from Egypt, thousands of years ago, the women here are all European and dressed in 17th-century fashions. Patrons of this era were not interested in paintings that accurately represented people and places from history, but instead wanted them to reflect their own world. This is also true of the scenery – the landscape looks more English than Egyptian. The later version sent to Madrid was adapted again, featuring a background bathed in a warmer Spanish light and without anyone pointing into the distance. In its original position in the Queen's House, the women on the right in our painting would have pointed out of a nearby window, not to the Nile, but to the River Thames.

Links

The Foundling Museum tells the history of the Foundling Hospital, a charity which cared for foundling and orphaned children – foundlingmuseum.org.uk

Queen’s House, Greenwich is where Orazio’s work for Henrietta Maria originally hung rmg.co.uk/queens-house

The Prado, Madrid has the other version of Orazio’s *The Finding of Moses* – museodelprado.es/en

The Victoria & Albert Museum has objects, fabrics, and clothes from the same time as the painting – vam.ac.uk/collections/baroque

The Royal Collection holds Orazio’s other paintings he made for Henrietta Maria – rct.uk

The National Army Museum has information on the Civil War and Charles I’s fate – nam.ac.uk/explore/british-civil-wars

Related paintings

Biblical stories

Caravaggio – *The Supper at Emmaus*

Poussin – *The Finding of Moses*

Poussin – *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*

Connections

Artemisia Gentileschi – *Self Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*

Rubens – *War and Peace*

Van Dyck – *Charles I*

Motherhood

David – *Portrait of the Comtesse*

Vilain XIII and her Daughter

Lagrenée – *Maternal Affection*

Mignard – *The Marquise de Seigneley and Two of her Sons*

Journeys

Claude – *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*

Pintoricchio – *Penelope and the Suitors*

Turner – *Calais Pier*

Key dates

1563: Orazio Lomi born in Pisa

1576–8: Orazio moves to Rome and takes his uncle’s surname, Gentileschi

1624: Marie de’ Medici of France invites Orazio to Paris

1626: The Duke of Buckingham invites Orazio to England

Early 1630s: Orazio works for Henrietta Maria and paints *The Finding of Moses*

1639: Orazio dies in London aged 76

Discussion points

Leadership and power

Do you know any leaders? What sort of things do leaders do? How can you spot a leader, or a person in charge? What sort of things do good leaders do? Are leaders always the oldest, strongest, smartest or richest people? Do you need to be strong to be powerful? Does there always have to be a leader? Why? What might happen if there isn’t a leader? Should leaders be chosen by others or born into leadership? Are most leaders men or women? Is that the same in all jobs and countries?

Journeys

Can you think of a journey you have been on? Which journeys were long, and which were short? Which journeys do you do often, and which ones have you only done once? What are the best and worst parts of a journey for you? What journeys do you know of from stories? Where might journeys begin, and where might they end? Does a journey always involve travel, or can it be about a different kind of change? Does every journey have a beginning and an end?

Connections

What connects you to others in your class? Do you live on the same street or like the same things? What do you have in common with each other, and which things are different? How many people are in your family? Does all your family live in one place or

many different places? Do you feel connected to a specific place, object, or belief? What sort of groups can you be connected to? What connects the people in these groups? Is it different to what connects a family? Is there a limit to how many people can be part of one family? Do you have to be related to someone to be part of their family?

Storytelling

What is your favourite story? What makes a story fun for you? Is it the characters, the plot, the location, or something else? Are stories always true or fictional? Can they be both? Are they always written down? What other ways are there to tell stories? Can you tell a story without speaking? Can you tell a story without moving? How can dressing up help you tell a story? What is different about stories from the past compared with stories from today? Do people in stories need to be like us for us to enjoy them or understand them?

Composition

What are your favourite shapes and colours in the painting? Which ones do you notice first? Who stands out the most and why? What sort of lines can you find in the painting? Which are vertical, horizontal, and diagonal? What sort of things in the painting form these lines? Are there any lines of symmetry? Where is the painting most crowded, and where does it have space? How is the artist helping us to understand what is happening? What might happen if you change the position of some of the people in the painting?