



St Matthew and The Angel

by
Jan Van Bijlert
(1598-1671)

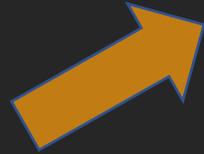
A workshop
by
Emma Stewart



Symbolism

Symbolism is an artistic and poetic movement or style using symbolic images and indirect suggestion to express mystical ideas, emotions, and states of mind.

Can you spot any symbols or signs in this painting?





The Cherub

Putto (another word for cherub) means a figure of a young boy or infant who features in European Renaissance or Baroque Art.

Initially during the Italian Renaissance, the Putto symbolised love and divinity, but its meaning was developed further during the Italian Baroque period.

The artists of this period understood Putto to symbolise the omnipresence of God.

The placement of this cherub suggests a **divine link**.

The cherub is in close proximity to St Matthew, perched on his right with a hand on his shoulder in a manner that suggests **familiarity**.

The cherub is looking at St Matthew in an almost endearing manner and assisting his writings by holding the small, black ink pot. Leading one to believe that the cherub is a **metaphor** for the close relationship St Matthew holds with the omnipresent God, the divine helping to guide this man in his writings and beyond.

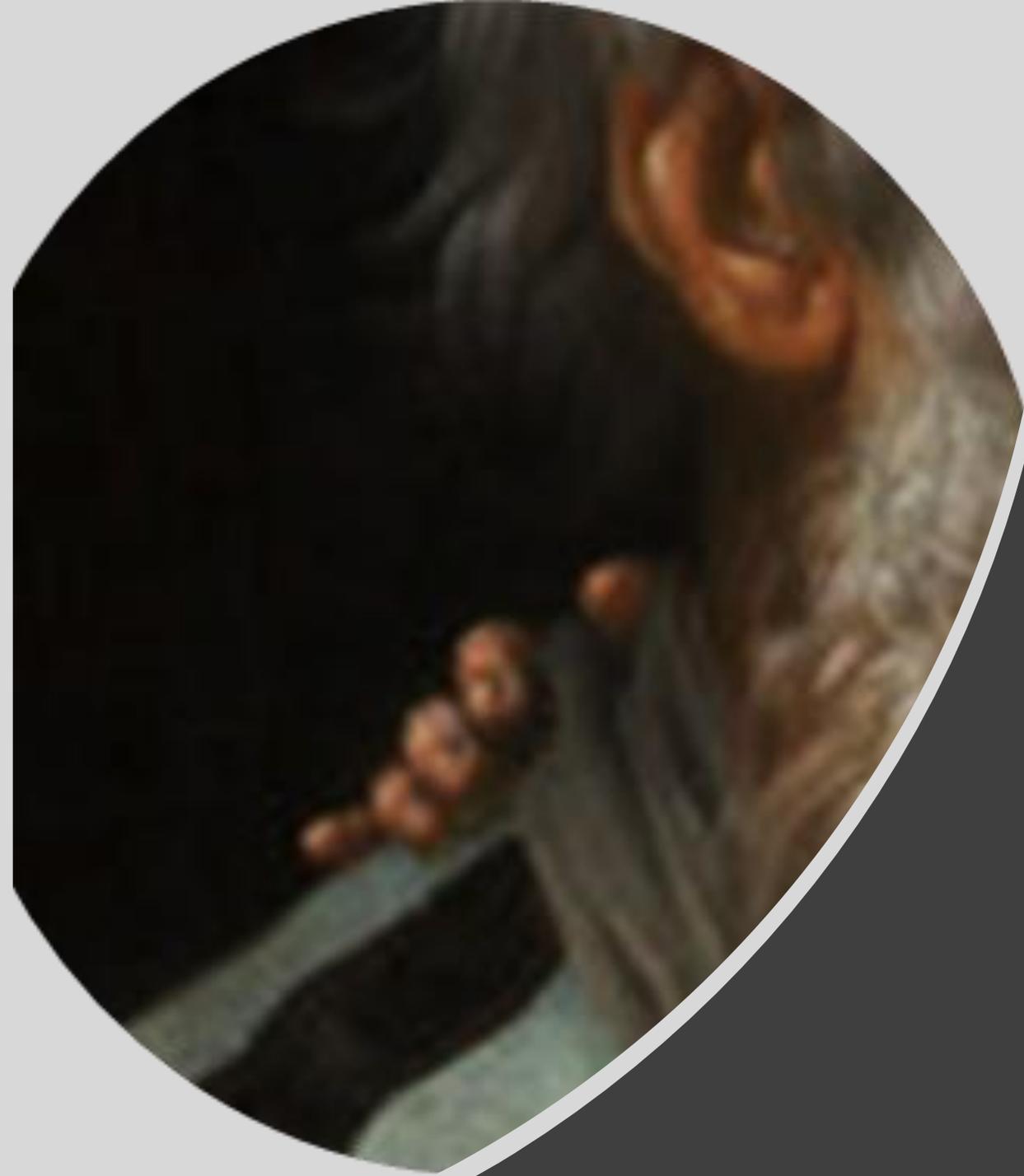
Shoulder Angel

This angelic creature is precariously placed over St Matthew's shoulder, presumably it is a 'shoulder angel'.

The term 'shoulder angel' has origins as far back as the 3rd century, where it was first seen featured in tomb carvings.

At the time this piece was created - during the 17th century - the shoulder angel had developed into a form of iconography, that in more westernised societies, symbolised a guardian angel. This personal guardian angel is said to act as a guide for the individual, steering them away from harm and immoral acts.

We can liken this to the idea of a conscience. These angels are bound by obedience and duty to the divine.





Depictions of Old Age

There is a common belief that depictions of elderly subjects are symbolic of powerful meanings such as authority, strength, and wisdom.

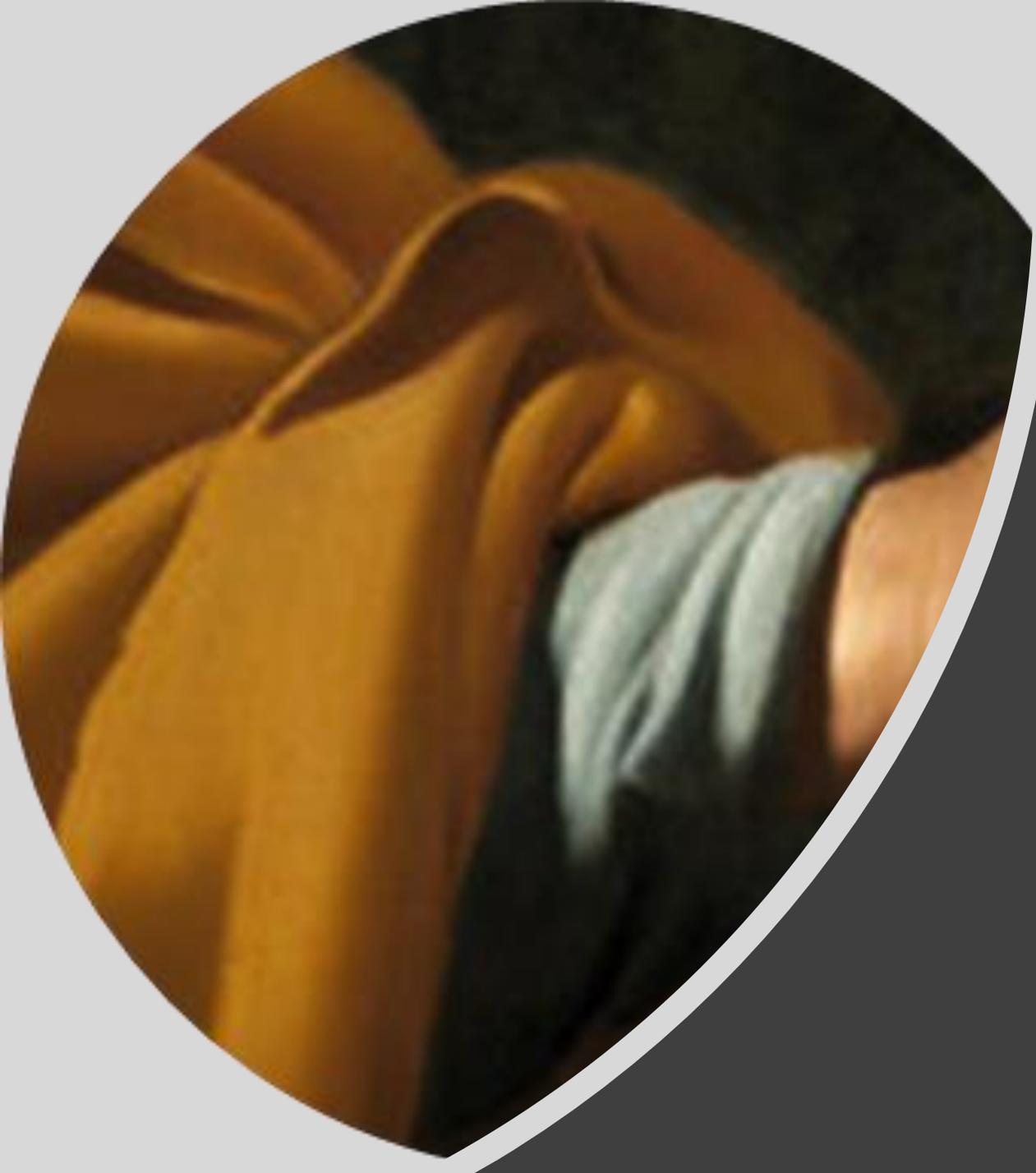
In contrast to the youthful cherub, we can see that St Matthew is an older subject.

Age is an eternal topic in painting, spanning all eras of art.

The elderly figure is used to represent wisdom, possibly due to the experience and intellect one gathers throughout life.

Items such as the book and quill that are depicted reinforce this idea of St Matthew being a wise man.

St Matthew is possibly shown in such a perceptive manner as he is a religious icon, one that is greatly revered and respected and so it is only fitting that he is conveyed in a deferential manner



Colour Symbolism

Caravaggio, being of great influence on Bijlert, shaped the colour palette of the Caravaggisti. This group of artists assumed the technique of “Chiaroscuro”, which features dark shadows and backdrops that contrast the subject. The subject then being typically illuminated by a bright shaft of light.

The high contrast of dark and light separates **good from evil**.

The darker, more dramatic tones within the work make the highlights even more striking.

The lighter shades symbolise purity and faith, hence the use of lighter shades surrounding the religious figures.

Other colours that are commonly featured in both Caravaggio’s and Bijlert’s work are earth colours with the brighter colours being veiled.

The shade of yellow ochre on Saint Matthew’s robes can be associated with **intellect and honour**.



Further Research Activity

For further study:

look at other works from Jan Van Bijlert and identify the symbolic aspects of them.

There are a few examples of other artworks from Bijlert on this slide.

L-R

Young Woman playing with a Cat (1630-35)

Shepherd Holding a Flute (1630-1635)

Young Man Drinking a Glass of Wine (1635-1640)