

*Adoration of the Shepherds*, by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448–1494)

Art selection and comment by [Heidi J. Hornik](#) and [Mikeal C. Parsons](#)

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The adoration of the shepherds was a very popular theme north of the Alps in the 15th century. Domenico Ghirlandaio learned about the subject in 1483 when Thomas Portinari, a Medici representative working in Flanders, brought a work by Hugo van der Goes to Florence. The Florentines favored the Epiphany scene of the Adoration of the Magi because in medieval Florence Epiphany was celebrated on the same day (January 6) as the baptism of Christ, and John the Baptist was the patron saint of Florence. The birth of the Messiah, according to Luke, has the power to lift up the lowly, the despised and the violent (1:52). The occupation of shepherds may have conjured up an image of a despised and potentially violent group (see Josephus, *The Jewish War*). However, by their actions these rustic shepherds align themselves with

a more positive portrait of the good shepherd—an image already evoked by the mention of the city of David, for David, of course, was himself a shepherd before becoming king. The Christ Child lies before a prominently placed Roman sarcophagus that foreshadows his death and that bears an inscription foretelling his birth.