

Exhibition Guide

Carlo Crivelli
Shadows on the Sky

23 February — 29 May 2022
First Floor Galleries

It is the original artist, the one who breaks the rules, the eccentric, the maverick, who should be more carefully considered, and not cast aside, because he or she doesn't fit into the mainstream of a movement. One should not be punished for being unique – and yet this has been the case.

Audrey Flack, on Carlo Crivelli

Ikon presents the first exhibition in the UK dedicated to the work of Renaissance artist Carlo Crivelli. *Shadows on the Sky* highlights his experimental use of perspective, trompe l'oeil (optical illusion) and sculptural relief. Elegantly crafted, Crivelli's paintings both suggest and undermine his own visual trickery to explore the coexistence of material and spiritual realities.

Born c. 1430, Crivelli worked as a painter in his hometown of Venice until he was brought to trial for committing adultery. After serving a jail sentence, he left Venice permanently and eventually resided in the Marche region of eastern Italy. Here he developed a style that distinguished him as a painter of religious subjects, often incorporating local landscapes and celebrating artisan culture.

This exhibition brings together a group of works spanning Crivelli's career comprising altarpieces, small panels that once belonged to larger ensembles, and a stand-alone work intended for private devotion. Crivelli's first audiences experienced these works very differently from how we do today. In their original architectural settings, these panels formed spectacular altarpieces framed in elaborate carpentry and lit from below by flickering candles, dramatising the presence of the holy beings depicted. It is likely that aspects of Crivelli's pictorial play and astonishing attention to detail would have gone unnoticed in these conditions. Here, viewing the paintings at eye level, we can explore Crivelli's complex spatial systems, which signal the existence of a reality that lies beyond our immediate senses.

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Gallery 1



**1. Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Mary Magdalene* (c. 1491-94)
Tempera on lime. The National Gallery, London. Bought 1874.**

Crivelli's *Saint Mary Magdalene* is at once seductress and saint, worldly sinner and Christ's divine spouse. In her right hand, she holds a jar containing the ointment with which she anointed Christ's feet. Small in size, this *Magdalene* condenses the opulence of Crivelli's larger works. She wears a pearl headband and floor-length gown held in place with a gold-buckled belt. Such lavishness would not have been permitted in fifteenth-century Italy, where women's clothing was rigidly prescribed. This locates the female saint in the sacred rather than the earthly realm. Illusionistic details, such as the crack in the niche, hint towards an existence beyond the painted representation.



**2. Carlo Crivelli, *Virgin and Child* (c. 1480)
Tempera on panel. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Bequeathed by John Jones.**

The Virgin, adorned in a luxurious mantle of raised gold, holds the infant Christ with her long hands. She touches his skin and the swaddling bands wrapped around his waist. He sits on a marble ledge, his naked flesh protected from the cold hard surface by the green lining of his Mother's mantle. A carnation, attached to the stone ledge with red wax, may allude to Christ's sacrifice. It appears to sit both 'within' and 'on' the picture, almost acting as a votive offering pinned to the object's surface. A fly has landed on the marble ledge just above the artist's signature. Scaled to the viewer's reality, it appears to belong to real space and exposes the work as a painted fiction.

Gallery 2



**3. Carlo Crivelli, *Two Evangelists* (Saint John the Evangelist and possibly Saint Luke) (c. 1471-73)
Tempera and oil on panel (poplar). National Trust Collections,
Upton House (The Bearsted Collection).**

These reading saints once formed part of the base of a large altarpiece for the Franciscan church of Montefiore dell'Aso, a hilltop town in the southern Marche. The elder saint is strongly individualised with a furrowed brow and a long bony nose. His companion is younger with tresses of blonde hair. The pair would have been accompanied by other saints engrossed in study, passionate preaching and lively intellectual debate. Their modest clothing and dedication to study would have offered the friars a model of Franciscan poverty and scholarship.



4. Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Benedict* (c. 1490)
Tempera on panel. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.

Similarities between the male saints featured in this exhibition suggest that Crivelli may have kept a modelbook of portraits in his workshop, providing prototypes for his figures. This standing saint, absorbed in the quiet act of reading a large book, is likely to be Saint Benedict, whose Rule established the core principles of monastic life. Like *Saints Mary Magdalene, Catherine of Alexandria* and *Roch*, this panel's small scale and vertical format suggest that it was once embedded in the frame of a single-field altarpiece. His left foot, projecting over the marble threshold, implies that he is not confined to the spatial limitations of the picture.



5. Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Roch* (c. 1480)
Tempera and oil on limewood panel. By kind permission of the Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

Little is known of the origins of this *Saint Roch*. It may have formed part of an altarpiece commissioned by a group of female Franciscans for the church of Santissima Annunziata in Ascoli Piceno during the plague of 1487. This altarpiece acted as a votive offering, invoking the protection of the saints represented at a time of desperate need. According to his fifteenth-century biographers, Roch cared for plague victims during a pilgrimage to Rome. His large wound makes reference to the disease over which he triumphed. The cotton handkerchief tied to Roch's pilgrim staff, the drawstring gathering his white underwear and the silver buckles that fasten worn-out leather boots speak to how closely attuned Crivelli was to the world of objects and the interrelationships between body and cloth.



**6. Carlo Crivelli, *Madonna and Child* (1482)
Tempera on wood. Vatican Museums.**

The crowned Madonna, draped in a magnificent brocaded damask, holds the Christ Child, dressed in an olive-green slip lined with gold. Crivelli incorporated three-dimensional elements into an otherwise painted image by modelling the Madonna's crown and the Christ Child's coral necklace in raised gesso. The Madonna's mantle is decorated with pomegranates and pine cones in gold leaf. A darker glaze was painted over the gold to suggest shadow and give the fabric a shimmering quality. Beneath the Madonna's foot is a dramatic crack in the marble floor, which juts out into the viewer's space and almost reads as a crack in the picture surface. The small kneeling friar may represent Fra Francesco da Force, who was the leading Franciscan in the town of Force, fifteen kilometres northwest of Ascoli Piceno. This *Madonna and Child* probably formed the central panel of a triptych for Force's church of San Francesco.



**7. Carlo Crivelli, *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius* (1486)
Egg and oil on canvas. The National Gallery, London.
Presented by Lord Taunton, 1864.**

The juxtaposition of different realities in Crivelli's work is most obvious in *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius* where heaven meets earth head-on. Emidius, patron saint of Ascoli Piceno, kneels beside the archangel Gabriel with a model of the town in his hands. Set in a celestial Ascoli, this work depicts the moment when Mary was impregnated with the Holy Spirit. A gold ray of divine light follows the dove's passage, cutting across the composition to disrupt its linear perspective. This spatial disruption highlights the supernatural occurrence of Christ's Incarnation. Crivelli paid close attention to the representation of domestic objects on display in the Virgin's house, giving an everyday feel to the biblical event. The large fruits in the foreground project over the parapet, bridging the viewer's space with the painted fiction.



**8. Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (c. 1491-94)
Tempera on lime. The National Gallery, London. Bought 1874.**

Saint Catherine, the Christian princess who lived in Alexandria under Roman rule, is pictured holding the palm of martyrdom and the spiked wheel that was engineered to kill her. This small, oblong panel was once fixed in the frame of a single-field altarpiece alongside *Saint Mary Magdalene*. Both figures stand in a curved marble recess, casting a shadow on the wall behind them. Their feet peep out over the edge of the marble threshold as if breaking out of the flat panel into our space. To Catherine's left, a fly casts its own shadow on the flat surface, once again reminding us that this is a painting. Scaled to the viewer, the fly appears to belong to our world, and its contact with Catherine's places the difference between the two realities into sharp relief.



**9. Carlo Crivelli, *The Vision of Blessed Gabriele* (c. 1489)
Egg and oil on poplar. The National Gallery, London. Bought 1861.**

This work depicts a miraculous occasion testifying to Fra Gabriele Ferretti's (1393-1456) ability to witness visions of the Madonna and Child. Crivelli locates Gabriele, a Franciscan holy man, in the grounds of his convent of San Francesco ad Alto, Ancona. A path leads us through a miniature woodland lined with the trunks of dead trees, which contrast with a much larger tree behind the friar. Its twisting branches extend to the sky and provide a perch for a bird who turns away from us. Half way down the path we encounter another friar, his head curiously oversized in the undergrowth. He faces the portico of a church which shows signs of decay, with foliage growing out of the cracks in the stone and white sea salt deposits forming powdered icicles over the red bricks. The sense of depth created by the receding landscape is counterbalanced by a swag of fruit that throws a shadow onto Crivelli's naturalistic painting of a sky – the picture plane. This trompe l'oeil swag is therefore used paradoxically to untrick the eye.



10. Susan Collis, selection of works

Shadows on the Sky includes an installation by contemporary artist Susan Collis. Her work aims to elevate the mundane and challenge perception through combining everyday objects with precious materials. For example, *Dirty Dancer* (2010) appears at first glance to be a discarded broom, but upon further inspection, we discover Collis has inlaid the object with jewels and pearls. Although separated by more than 500 years, Collis' work presents an interesting parallel with Crivelli's use of gold, gems and precious pigments to enrich his altarpieces. Her mixed-media craft resonates with Crivelli's juxtapositions of painting alongside carpentry, textiles and goldsmithing. While Collis subverts our expectations by showing humble objects of rich materiality, Crivelli often simulated more expensive crafts using paint alone.

Shadows on the Sky was made possible by the inaugural Ampersand Foundation Award which Ikon won in 2019.

The National Gallery, London

A special collection display at The National Gallery takes place alongside *Shadows on the Sky*, focused on the [Demidoff Altarpiece](#) (1476) that is too fragile to travel to Birmingham.

First Floor

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Gallery 3



**8. *Saint
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**5. *Saint Roch*
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**6. *Madonna and Child*
(1482)**

**4. *Saint Benedict*
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Gallery 2

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**7. *The Annunciation,
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Gallery 1

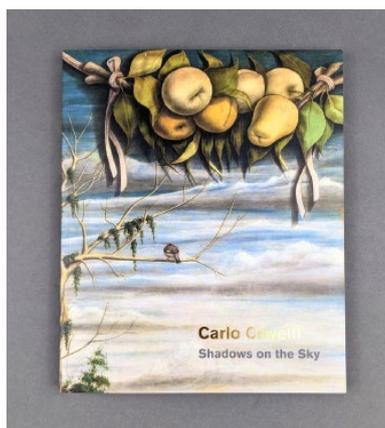


**2. *Virgin and Child*
(c. 1480)**

**1. *Saint Mary Magdalene*
(c. 1491-94)**

Entrance

Exhibition catalogue



Carlo Crivelli: *Shadows on the Sky*

This publication accompanies Ikon's Carlo Crivelli exhibition: *Shadows on the Sky* (23 February — 29 May 2022).

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