

## **Readers' Notes for The Nativity by Arthur Hughes**

### **The Nativity (1857-58) by Arthur Hughes (1832-1915). Oil on canvas. Birmingham Museum & Gallery**

The English Pre-Raphaelite artist Arthur Hughes shows us a very young Mary when she gave birth to Jesus.

Hughes' *Nativity* focuses on a teenager learning how to care for her brand, new baby. Mary wraps the swaddling around her little boy, perhaps here for the first time.

The pink-winged angels are subtly yet dramatically defined to make it clear that the two young women assisting Mary are indeed angels. Jesus is crowned with a gold nimbus to emphasise that this is no ordinary Mother and baby.

The constricted space feels cramped to recall the basic set-up and close quarters of the stable that would have sheltered animals as well as humans. Mary is kneeling in front of Jesus – one angel holds a lantern to give Mary light for the task; the other angel is holding him out while looking upwards to heaven. It is an offering up to God not just a midwife's practical assistance. The three angel heads above are all looking in different directions, they know what is happening but they each have a different focus.

#### **A single moment**

This painting is quite naïve in style, but it evokes a genuine tenderness. It is not sophisticated in technique, just look at the length of Mary's thigh.

However, it is a real girl with a real baby in an extraordinary setting. The rough manger, Mary's make-shift dress and hair loose and matted - yet utterly absorbed in her baby while surrounded by angels, is very different from most of the well-known nativity paintings. Usually, Mary is portrayed as a woman with Joseph by her side but there are no other people here, no onlookers, shepherds, kings, animals or any of the familiar attributes of the nativity. Hughes' contrasts Mary's youthful innocence with her new role, which centres on a single moment in the biblical story. '*And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*' (Luke 2:7).

While we are quickly drawn to Jesus, our eyes cannot but help follow the variety of angels – all of whom look similarly young with a sweetness and grace amid the stable's coarse and trampled straw.

These angels exude warmth in the darkness - their lilac, pink and apricot hues enhance the sacred. We are in the presence of a unique event; one that will never be repeated, and yet, each year, we too bow down to worship God made man in nativity scenes across the world. These midwife-angels remind us that while clothing a new-born baby is usually a private affair for any first-time mother, their presence points to Mary's universal role in Jesus' birth and salvation. Jesus may be a vulnerable new baby, Mary a vulnerable young teenager but she wraps her ordinariness into perfect holiness.

#### **Look and adore**

This is the original girl-only, smallest-stable-in-the-world. Forget about no room at the inn, there is no room *in* the stable; it is the epitome of too many people round for Christmas. Here we see a busyness that seems incommensurate with the content: wings, knees and halos are all vying for space. Mary is trying to concentrate on wrapping up her tiny baby but she can hardly think.

Yet, all is calm, all is still, all is bright, since these angels require nothing of us other than to look and adore. They are guarding someone and something very special.

Hughes painted this scene at a time of great fear politically and religiously as existing structures and ideas were shaken to the core and 19th century England struggled for relevance; afraid to defend itself theologically or challenge the commercialism sweeping across the English-speaking world. How like today!

These angels are ministering against those fears and changes and protecting the faith as much as protecting this new-born child. They are multi-tasking in this instant and in the world at large.

This nativity painting gives the sense of a moment freeze-framed in quiet reverence yet of cataclysmic importance. Everything is irrevocably changed by the birth of Jesus, and for the people of this darkened world nothing will ever be the same again. Mary gazes at her son and begins a new life in which we are invited to partake.