



JAIME EGUIGUREN

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Cuzco School
18th century

ADORATION OF THE MAGI



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Anonymous artist, Cuzco School
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Adoration of the Magi

Oil on canvas.
162 x 112.5cm
Provenance: Private collection, Germany

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The episode of the *Adoration of the Magi*, or *Epiphany*, has been a quintessential topic for (mostly pictorial) artistic representations since the dawn of Christianity. The Epiphany is the first manifestation revealing the divinity of Jesus. For that reason, since antiquity, the Church has used it to symbolize the idea of the salvation of all humanity¹.

It is as such that this episode is among the most frequently found in written sources.

The first mention appears in the *Gospel according to St. Matthew*:

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’ [...] When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”²

Other sources continued adding new information on the event, such as the *Protoevangelium of James*, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* or the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*. In the Middle Ages, the writings of Jacobus de Varagine, in his *Golden Legend*, would also play a significant role in consolidating this scene’s iconographic profile.

The first known representations of the *Epiphany* can be found in a number of Paleochristian Roman catacombs (3rd-4th centuries A.D.), and also as reliefs decorating sarcophagi from the Late Antiquity. One of the best examples, dating from the 6th century, can be found in the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, in Ravenna, where the Adoration of the Magi is presented as a mosaic, alongside an inscription where their names are first mentioned. (Fig. 1) It wasn’t until the 10th century that they were treated as Kings, and so in this instance they are not wearing crowns on their heads but Phrygian caps and clothing in an Oriental fashion. Similarly, the age difference between them is

¹ L., RODRÍGUEZ PEINADO, 2012, p. 32.

² GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW, Ch. 2: 1-11.

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apparent as, symbolically, the aim was to represent the three ages of man: youth, maturity and old age. The absence of a black character is, nonetheless, its most significant feature. Use of such a feature would not become widespread to represent the figure of Balthazar until the 14th century³, as a way of alluding to the different parts of the world. Symbolically, Melchior became the representative of Asia, Caspar of Europe, and Balthazar of Africa. After the Discovery of the New World, colonial paintings would sometimes replace the figure of one of the Kings with a native, with the physiognomic characteristics and clothing of the local culture, thereby turning the Americas into their sign of identity (Fig. 2)⁴.

With regard to our Cuzco canvas we find, in the foreground and surrounded by the ruins of classical architecture, the figure of Melchior, bearded and with white hair, who



Fig. 1: Adoration of the Magi. 6th century A.D.
Mosaic. Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo,
Ravenna, Italy.



Fig. 2: Cuzco School. Adoration of the Magi.
18th century. Church of San Miguel, Ilave, Peru.

³ L., RODRÍGUEZ PEINADO, 2012, p. 29.

⁴ Ibid., 2012, p. 34.

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is depicted kneeling on the ground in the same way that vassals from the Middle Ages would have knelt before their Lords. This gesture of deference is reinforced by the fact that he has also taken off his crown before adoring the Child, as a sign of honor and respect. The Virgin Mary is obligingly presenting her son to him, while St. Joseph is pictured peering over curiously to see what is going on⁵. On the floor we observe a golden object similar to a chalice which, according to the scriptures, must have contained the gold coins that Melchior was offering up to Jesus as a symbol of his status as king. Standing behind him, the other two Magi are awaiting their turn: Caspar, with auburn hair and beard, is holding another cup in his left hand, this time containing incense, alluding to Christ's divine status; and, finally, Balthazar, representing the black race, holds myrrh, a symbol of the new Messiah's human status⁶.

Behind them, as is common in most depictions, a large procession may be seen, identified as the royal retinue made up of soldiers, pages and their respective horses and camels, the latter rather oddly drawn, perhaps due to the artist not being familiar with this species of animal.

It is also worth taking a moment to mention the artist's fixation with creating a sense of opulence. This is clearly reflected in the lavish clothing of all the characters portrayed, in this case employing the *brocateado* technique, which was popular in the Cuzco School. As such, by applying thin layers of gold leaf, the artist was able to adorn the surfaces of long, luxurious robes and cloaks with linear phytomorphic motifs. He also used this technique to highlight the opulence of the Magi's gifts and crowns, and the Virgin's and Child's halos, shaped like sun rays, or the more austere version that the artist used for St. Joseph.

⁵The character of St. Joseph was reviled from early times, being relegated to the background, in the shadows, even. His figure really gained in importance from the Baroque era onwards.

⁶ L., RODRÍGUEZ PEINADO, 2012, pp. 29-30.

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The composition chosen by the artist did not come about arbitrarily. Painters in the New World often used prints brought from Europe as source material for their work. This enabled them to assimilate the iconography being addressed, without fear of making a mistake. They regularly copied the style, postures and gestures literally, interpreted with Andean touches that gave rise to a new artistic trend known as syncretism. There are records that hundreds of shipments containing prints exported from Spain arrived in Peru in the 17th century. They were easy to transport and to file, while also being cheap and in great supply, making them the most important channel for the dissemination of new European artistic trends among the workshops (in this case, of Cuzco), as a tool for learning⁷. These prints were generally of religious images, and intended for private devotion or earmarked for decorating the new temples that were being built.

It is in this regard that the figure of Rubens comes into play, especially in his facet as an engraver. Between 1610 and 1620, he and a group of collaborators began making prints of engravings, mostly intended to illustrate religious books with large print runs. To this end, he entered into association with the renowned Plantin-Moretus publishing house, and the final product began to be exported to the Americas⁸.

The work being studied here clearly reflects this, as it takes one of Rubens's drafts from the 1610s as inspiration, the original of which is currently housed at the *Pierpont Morgan Library* in New York. (**Fig. 3**) The normal procedure was for Rubens' original idea to be copied by the engravers in his workshop, in order for them to be adapted to the illustration of books. Theodoor Galle's workshop was in charge of undertaking this part of the process in the case of the print of the *Adoration of the Magi* (**Fig. 4**), resulting in a less expressive, more classical version.⁹ What really catches the eye is the fact that the result is a mirror image of the original Rubens model. This is because the copyist must

⁷STASTNY MOSBERG, F., 2013, p. 309.

⁸ Ibid., 2013, p. 306.

⁹ Various Artists, 2004, pp. 169-170.

have replicated the design on his plate without taking the trouble to engrave it using a mirror, resulting, once printed, in an inverted image of the model he had used.

Many pictorial works from the Cuzco School used Galle's print as a reference. As a result, paintings with similar compositions to the one being studied here may currently be



Fig. 3: Peter Paul Rubens. *Adoration of the Magi*, ca. 1612 – 1613. Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, US.



Fig. 4: Theodoor Galle (Workshop of). *Adoration of the Magi*, *Missale Romanum*, p. 42. 1613. Museo Plantin-Moretus, Antwerp, Belgium.

found in different museums and collections. For instance, an *Adoration of the Magi* dated circa 1700 that belongs to a private collection (**Fig. 5**), where only the royal retinue is missing, and in which the figure of St. Joseph is relegated further still from the central scene. Another example may be found in the Palacio Arzobispal in Cuzco (**Fig. 6**). In this case, the composition is more noticeably landscape, but also avoids depicting the royal retinue. Finally, another work, in this case from the 18th century, on display at the Casa-Museo de Murillo in La Paz (**Fig. 7**), uses the same model, adding brocade details, though with a simpler, more schematic *fattura*.

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Fig. 5: Cuzco School. *Adoration of the Magi*, ca. 1700. Private collection.



Fig. 6: Cuzco School. *The Adoration of the Magi*. 18th century. Palacio Episcopal de Cuzco, Peru.



Fig. 7: Cuzco School. *Adoration of the Magi*. 18th century. Casa-Museo de Murillo, La Paz, Bolivia.

It is such that, despite similar versions existing, the work being studied here is a more faithful reflection of the composition created by Rubens, thanks to the Cuzco artist's boldness in portraying the details, giving rise to a fuller, more accomplished ambience overall.

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