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ARTS & ANTIQUES

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(active in Valencia in the late 15th and early 16th centuries)

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OF THE MAGI**

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Oil on panel

203.2 x 154.94 cm

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This magnificent Valencian altarpiece depicting *The Adoration of the Magi* was published as an autograph work by the Master of Perea by Post in 1958 when it was in a private collection in Paris.

The name given to this master, who was active in the region of Valencia, derives from the study of the *Altarpiece of the Three Kings* formerly in the chapel of the Three Kings in the monastery of Santo Domingo in Valencia. This conventual chapel was initially granted to Pedro de Perea (who died in 1489), Grand Carver to Ferdinand the Catholic, and then to his widow, Violante de Santa Pau y Centelles, in May 1491. The coats-of-arms at the top of the structure are those of Pedro de Perea, his wife Violante, their daughter Rafaela and Galcerán de Santa Pau.

That important, framed altarpiece (548 x 286 cm), formerly in the Dominican monastery, entered the Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia with the disentanglement of the religious houses in the 19th century and can be considered one of the most important pictorial creations to have emerged from Valencian workshops of the second half of the 15th century.

The identity of the donor of that work, who is shown next to the Magi in the foreground in an attitude of prayer, wearing dress of the period and a gold chain, provided the name for this anonymous artist who is clearly indebted to the Valencian 15th century tradition led by Joan Reixach.

The Master of Perea, a contemporary in Valencia of the painters Paolo de San Leocadio, Bartolomé Bermejo, Rodrigo de Osona and his son Francisco among others, is characterised by his mastery of the oil technique and his interest in the depiction of detail of a clearly northern type, as in the present *Adoration of the Magi*.

As in other compositions by the Master of Perea, this panel is notable for the treatment of the figures with an almost minimal spatial concept. Like the two paintings on the same subject by this artist (former Esclasans collection, 96 x 78 cm; and the one in the *Altarpiece of the Three Kings* in the Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia) this image includes a carpet, an element also found in panels by Joan Reixach.

The episode of the tribute paid by the Magi to the Infant Christ (a recounted in the Gospel of Saint Luke and in the apocryphal Protoevangelium of Saint James, The Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew and the Arabic Infancy Gospel) is described here using a simple setting with a reed roof and a cloth held up by a cord and hail. The tentative inclusion of shadows on the wall reflects a partial assimilation by this artist of innovations arriving in Valencia from Flanders as well as the presence there from 1472 of the Italian painters Paolo de San Leocadio from Reggio Emilia and the Neapolitan Francesco Pagano, who painted frescoes on the walls and ceiling of the presbytery of Valencia cathedral.

Prominent in the foreground is the Virgin, dressed in a red tunic and a richly embroidered mantel with a green lining. On the border of the mantle, embellished with pearls and precious stones in the manner of Van Eyck, is the word "AVE" in various sections. Holding the Christ Child on her lap, the Virgin has a golden halo with stars in relief of a type typical of this master.

In addition to the sumptuous clothing of the Magi, another example of the interest in conveying detail is the manger, with the grain of the wood very realistically painted. Also present are the ox and ass from the apocryphal accounts.

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Behind the Magi are members of their retinue such as pages and two heralds with trumpets, one of them mounted. The naked Christ Child on a white cloth wears a necklace of coral beads (commonly believed to protect infants) and is shown blessing the oldest King who kneels at his feet.

The head of the elderly Saint Joseph is painted with great virtuosity in the treatment of the hair and beard in a way notably typical of this painter.

Numerous elements of the under-drawing are visible to the naked eye, particularly those used for the construction of the folds of the mantles, based on parallel strokes that are combined with incising in some areas.

The present *Adoration of the Magi* is one of a series of masterpieces by this artist: the *Altarpiece of the Three Kings* in the Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia; *The Visitation* in the Museo Nacional del Prado; *Mary Magdalene, Lazarus and Martha* in the Museo Lázaro Galdiano in Madrid; and *Saint James* in Valencia cathedral.

José Gómez Frechina

Bibliography

Post, Ch. R.: *A History of Spanish Painting*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press 1958, vol. XII, part II (fig. 287), pp.658 and 660.

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