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**Circle of Gregorio Fernández**

Spain, 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

**THE MAGI**

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## Circle of Gregorio Fernández

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### The Magi

Carved polychrome wood

Melchior: 45 x 42 x 31.5 cm. Base: 32 x 22.5 cm

Caspar: 61 x 35 x 32 cm. Base: 29 x 23 cm

Balthasar: 61.5 x 33 x 29 cm. Base: 29 x 21.5 cm

Provenance: Spanish Private Collection

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If any scene from Christ's childhood has been developed with particular interest and devotion in Western figurative art, it would be the Epiphany; the depiction of the Three Wise Men or Magi, arriving in Bethlehem to worship the Child and offer him their gifts<sup>1</sup>. Artistic representation of this Bible episode are both abundant and varied, with it proving difficult to synthesize them into one single artistic mode, given the proliferation of narrative sources, which we will briefly examine below.

*"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking: 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the East and have come to worship him'. [...] On seeing the star they were overjoyed. They entered the house and saw the child with his mother Mary and, bowing down, they worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then, having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."*<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1 Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellin, Rome 3<sup>rd</sup> Century. Fresco

Taking this narrative from the *Gospel of St. Matthew* into account, we notice that the Bible is rather sparse on details, failing to specify the number of Magi, which gave rise to artistic productions depicting two (Catacombs of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus) or four (Catacombs of Domitilla) (**Fig.1**). Nor does this early text give us any information regarding their names; for that we would have to wait for the *Apocryphal Gospels*, which provided more precise information from which the core details were

<sup>1</sup> RODRÍGUEZ PEINADO, Laura, La Epifanía, Revista Digital de Iconografía Medieval, vol. IV, No. 8, 2012, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> Gospel according to Matthew 2: 1-12

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taken in order to generate the subsequent iconography. The first of these texts was the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, which names them as Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar and where, in addition, we get the first allusion to the dark skin of the latter (**Fig.2**). These names became popular during the middle ages, following their inclusion in the 9<sup>th</sup>-century *Liber Pontificalis*. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with the *Catalogus Sanctorum*, they would become identified as representing the three ages of life (youth, maturity and old-age), (**Fig. 3**) and were linked to the descendants of the children of Noah, thereby representing the difference races of mankind. Both iconographic expressions are reflected in the sculptures were are introducing here.



Fig. 2 *Catacomb of Domitila*, Rome 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Fresco



Fig. 3 Hans Memling, *Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi*. Museo Nacional del Prado

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If, to this multitude of representational possibilities, we add the fact that the adoration of the Magi is one of the earliest iconographical subjects, constituting the liturgical celebration commemorating the Nativity in early Christianity, we can understand the sheer quantity of artistic depictions, both individually and forming part of a series of scenes. Within the latter type of multiple-scene works, one common version is that of the Nativity Scene, frequently used in Christmas celebrations to represent the birth of Jesus Christ in a stable in Bethlehem.



Fig.4 Albrecht Dürer, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1511,  
woodcut, MET

I feel it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the possibility that the figures we are examining here may have formed part of a broader sculptural ensemble as, in the same way that we have documentary evidence of the depiction of the Epiphany in drawings, paintings (Fig. 4) and sculptures (Fig. 5) over the years, we also know that the commemoration of the Nativity Mystery has roots going a long way back in history, with Francis of Assisi being considered the initiator of Yuletide Nativity representations as early as 1223<sup>3</sup>, and that these became both popular and extremely widespread. It was in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that the Nativity scene iconography reached the

<sup>3</sup> DELICADO MARTÍNES, Francisco Javier, "El belén en el arte español",

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Hispanic world. At this point we should also bear in mind that the Counter-Reformation, through the Council of Trent (1545-1563), encouraged the celebration of Christmas and the installation of Nativity Scenes in churches and convents, calling the faithful to worship, these no longer being relegated to merely a monastic or infantile context but, rather, becoming displays by which royal and aristocratic families could show off their wealth and good taste<sup>4</sup>. Proof of this is found in the documentary records showing the involvement of major Spanish sculptors in this sort of Nativity Scene genre”.



Fig.5 *Triptych of the Magi*, c. 1500, Colegiata de Covarrubias. Burgos, Spain

Although we only suggest this possibility as a hypothesis, the sculptures present compositional features that lead us not to rule it out, above all the fact that the three figures are perfectly finished at the back, by

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<sup>4</sup> Charles III

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which we can conclude that they were intended to be seen from all angles, *en ronde-bosse* as Cellini (Figs. 6a, b, c) would have it.



Fig.6a Circle of Gregorio Fernández



Fig.6b Circle of Gregorio Fernández



Fig.6c Circle of Gregorio Fernández

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Let this observation serve as a preamble to the technical analysis of the Magi on display here. These three sculptures were made of walnut wood, *ronde bosse* and full-length, executed to be seen from any angle, thereby enabling the viewer to observe the pronounced dynamism and movement of their lines (**Fig. 7**). King Melchior opens the composition, depicted with his right knee resting on the ground in an act of genuflection, as a sign of his adoration of the Child. He is followed by Caspar, this time standing upright, but with an equally reverential pose which involves him holding out his arms and hands, the right-arm extending out from his side, while the left arm and hand are held at chest level. Finally, and continuing in the same line of compositional intention, we observe the third and youngest wise man, transmitting the clear intention of approaching the newly-born, which the sculptor has achieved by bringing his right leg and arm forward while his left hand is placed close to his heart, allowing us to share in the contained emotion of the scene. One element particularly worth noting is the expressive balance the artist has attained through the carving of the three faces, where wonder flows in harmony with the peace and calm generated by the arrival of the Messiah. It is, in short, a sculptural group defined by its veracity, movement and harmonization as an ensemble.



Fig.7 Circle of Gregorio Fernández, *The Magi*

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What we have before us are three full-length masculine portraits, carved in walnut wood with oil paint polychromy, which maintained the realistic proportions demanded by the Baroque. Intended to attract the gaze, make an impression and move the viewer, infused with a sense of realism along with splendid execution and beauty, they are pictured in the presence of the Christ Child, wearing elegant, regal clothing of which it is worth highlighting the technical skill shown in the carving of the folds and, most exceptional of all, their polychromy, in accordance with the exigencies of Counter-Reformation doctrine in this regard. Having removed any motifs that might offend decorum (fantastic creatures, nudes or grotesque figures) from the decorative canon, naturalistic details were adopted, including an array of motifs that are perfectly-represented in the fabrics worn by our three kings.



Fig.8 Circle of Gregorio Fernández, *Melchior*

Starting with the oldest of the three, Melchior, we find him dressed in a sober-colored robe in which the red background is what stands out. It is adorned with floral details in golden tones, made with the tip of the brush and with white trimming, once again with floral motifs, this time combining blues, greens and reds in the decoration. The trimming runs along the neck of the robe in a V-shape, and is also present on the cuffs and bottom of the garment. In line with the other Magi, Melchior wears a blue cape or cloak over his shoulders, which is rich in naturalistic motifs (**Fig. 8**).

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Caspar shares in his older companion's aesthetic, being dressed in robe, cape and boots. First we observe the robe, oil-painted in a pastel blue tone, which it shares with the decorative trimming. On it we find drawings, in a sort of "colors on top of color" effect, of flowers, feathers and other naturalistic details that increase the chromatic richness of the composition. On top of the robe sits his cape, red on the inside and an intense blue in the most visible parts. Both surfaces are adorned with brocades, fine gilt ones on the inside, and depictions of feathers and white, lilac and green flowers on the outside. Finally, we see he is wearing white boots, which one assumes reach the knees, with ornamental details (Fig. 9).



Fig.9 Circle of Gregorio Fernández, *Caspar*

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The last of the three Magi is Balthasar, dressed in a robe and white knickerbockers that contrast with his black skin coloring. The robe, which is open at the neck and fastened at the waist with a belt, is decorated with eight-petalled flowers, which are painted onto the fabric in an ordered and symmetrical fashion. Over his left shoulder we see a cape which, falling down his back, reaches the floor. This cape, which is a pastel blue color and soberer than those worn by his companions, is only decorated at the edges, with trimming presenting obviously Baroque touches (**Fig. 10**). He wears the same sort of footwear as Melchior and Caspar, only red this time.



Fig.10 Circle of Gregorio Fernández, *Balthasar*

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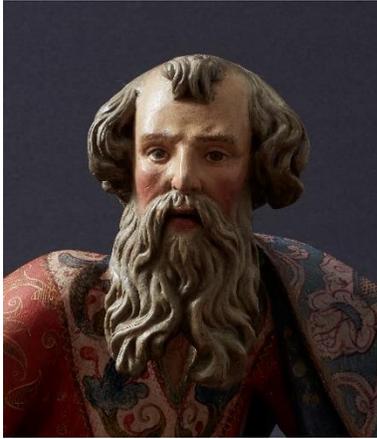


Fig.11 Circle of Gregorio Fernández, *Melchior*

Let us now move on to a description of the faces, both their carving and carnation, the final job to be undertaken in the polychrome process. The three figures' carnations are oil-painted using the matt technique that was becoming increasingly popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Melchior, in accordance with the iconographic requirements in place since the middle ages, is depicted as an old man with a moustache and long grey beard, parted in the middle and sculpted into thick, wavy clumps. The face of the king, with his small half-open mouth, discreet nose and brown eyes, looks straight at us, which, along with the reddish hue of his cheeks, shares with the viewer a sense of encounter (Fig. 11).



Fig.12 Circle of Gregorio Fernández, *Caspar*

He is followed by Caspar, also bearded although his is not so long, as if the length of beard were indicative of the passage of the years. His hair, beard and thick moustache are all the same brown color, the latter pictured between a small, closed mouth and pointed nose, while the brown eyes exude emotion. (Fig. 12)



Fig.13 Circle of Gregorio Fernández, *Balthasar*

Finally, representing youth and arrived from Africa, we have Balthasar, the only one without a beard. His nose and mouth, which are both small, contrast with his big, dark eyes which are full of wonder (Fig. 13)

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The last element of these compositions to be analyzed are their bases. Rectangular and with identical polychromy in all three cases, simulating red marble on top and with blue edges, they are decorated with superimposed gilt geometric motifs. (Fig. 14)



Fig.14 Circle of Gregorio Fernández, *The Magi* (base)



Fig.15 Gregorio Fernández, *Way to the Calvary*, 1610-1615, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Spain

Both in terms of model and style, as well as the technique in which they were executed, these carvings can be linked with the artistic context of the circle of Gregorio Fernández (Fig. 15), although it is difficult for us to come up with a specific name, such was the master from

Valladolid's skill at obscuring any knowledge of the professional careers of his contemporaries.

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The obvious depiction of what has been called *painting from nature* dates the works to between late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Castile. This label is understood to include sculptural works that combine polychromatic richness with simplicity, naturalism and the decorum demanded by the Council of Trent. A further association with the circle of the genius of Castilian Baroque is found in the execution of the works' contours which, in accordance with naturalism, present a new sensitivity that infuses the image with dynamism while also impregnating it with mysticism (**Fig.16**). Given a realistic appearance, combined with splendid execution and beauty, they can only be defined as "*art for the soul*".



Fig.16 Francisco Rincón, *Saint John*, 1608, Museo Diocesano de Valladolid

**Sofía Fernández Lázalo**

Art Researcher

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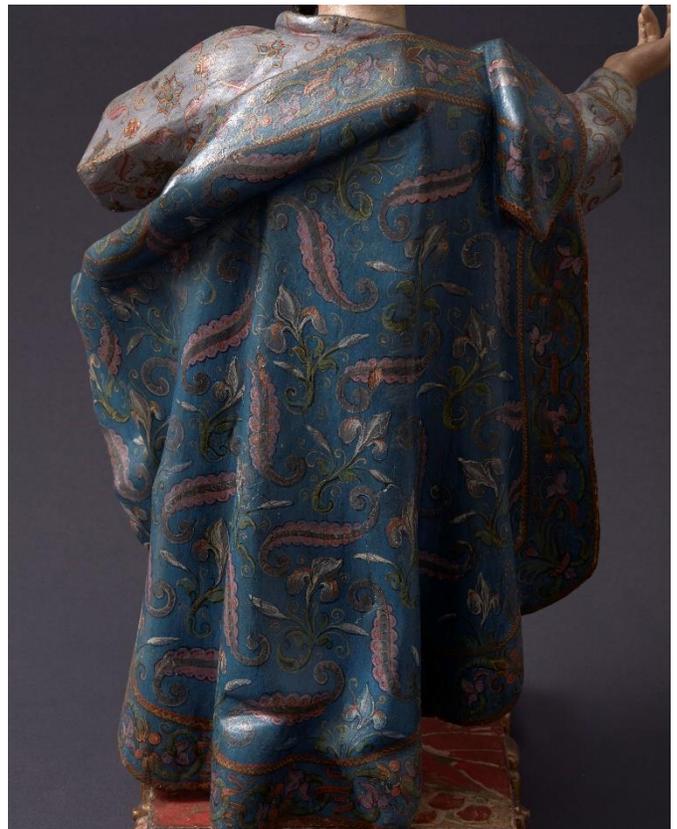
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