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Francisco Rizi

Madrid, 1614 - San Lorenzo de El Escorial, 1685

**ADORATION OF THE
SHEPHERDS AND ADORATION
OF THE MAGI**

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Adoration of The Shepherds and Adoration of The Magi

Ca. 1640-1665

Oil on canvas

Both 134 x 114.5 cm

Provenance: Private collection. Spain

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As we read in the bibliography drafted by the Prado Museum, Francisco Rizi was a Spanish painter and son of the Italian artist Antonio Ricci, who arrived in Spain along with Federico Zuccaro to work on El Escorial. Brother of the painter and art theorist Juan Andrés, he Hispanicised his name to Rizi. After beginning his apprenticeship with his father, he went on to study at the workshop of painter to the King and portrait artist Vicente Carducho, becoming one of the latter's most brilliant students. He was an extremely successful painter and one of the main exponents of Madrid Baroque painting from the mid-17th century onwards. A style he was able to pass on to his students, given artists of the calibre of Juan Antonio Escalante, José Antolínez and Claudio Coello studied under him. He had links with Court from an early age (around 1638), becoming painter to the King in 1656. Apart from his work at Court, he was particularly closely connected to the Cathedral of Toledo, where he worked on all manner of projects, canvas and fresco paintings as well as temporary decorations, such as those carried out for Queen Mariana of Austria's arrival in Madrid in 1649, or the Cathedral of Toledo monument in 1669, receiving the title of cathedral painter in 1653.

All of this bears witness to his versatility across all facets, as he painted in both oil and fresco, following on in the wake of Bologna's Agostino Mitelli and Angelo Michele Colonna, and he was equally successful at both architectural decorations and religious painting, the latter represented, for example, by the pair of paintings we are studying here, the *Adoration of the Shepherds* and the *Adoration of the Magi*.

These two scenes or passages from the Incarnation or Nativity Cycle have been popular iconographic subjects throughout art history, appearing either on their own without the other, as a joint composition sharing the same support or, as is the case here, as an ensemble of two complementary canvases (Figs. 1 & 2).

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Fig. 1 Francisco Rizzi, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Altarpiece of St. Peter, oil on canvas, ca.1655, Saz de Jarama.



Fig. 2 Francisco Rizzi, *Adoration of the Kings*, Altarpiece of St. Peter, oil on canvas, ca.1655, Saz de Jarama.

The first of the two canvases depicts the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, a recurrent theme in the oeuvre of the Madrid-based artist who, along with other 17th century painters, restored the compositional autonomy that the iconographic image had lost in the period between the 14th and 16th centuries with the rise of easel painting, which saw the scene always represented alongside that of the Magi or the Nativity. This episode from the life of Christ can be found in various historiographic sources, both apocryphal and Biblical, with the most prominent source of artistic inspiration being the Gospel of St. Luke:

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“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”¹



Fig. 3 Francisco Rizi, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, oil on canvas, 1668, Museo de Prado

On this occasion, although he remains faithful to the Biblical narrative, Rizi distances himself from other compositional versions from his repertory, by placing the shepherds on the right-hand side of the canvas, in contrast to the version depicting the same iconographical scene housed at the Museo del Prado (Fig. 3). These figures present a slight and yet unmistakable gestural intention, while the artist ensures the intentionality of the holy message by including all the iconographic requisites in the scene.

¹ Gospel of St. Luke (2: 8-21)

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The Adoration takes place in a manger, the same context as the Nativity, as told by the Gospel. In the central part of the canvas, and in compliance with the hierarchical demands of the narrative, we find the Christ Child being cradled by the Virgin Mary who, dressed in red and blue, and with her face tilted towards her right shoulder in a clear indication of love, gazes towards the new-born child while swaddling him. To her side, in the right-hand section of the composition, we find the shepherds, dressed in modest clothes and accompanied by their flock, with a lamb intentionally placed in the foreground, as the symbol of Jesus offered as a sacrificial victim to redeem us of Original Sin. It is in this episode that the shepherds, having discovered and confirmed the angel's news, and having spread the word, become the first "evangelists". On the left-hand side of the canvas we can see the angel, dressed in elaborate



Fig. 4 Francisco Rizi, *The Annunciation*, oil on canvas ca. 1663, Museo del Prado

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robes and boasting beautiful, flowing, curly golden locks that match Rizi's angelical depiction in his various Annunciations (Fig. 4) Finally, towards the top of the composition the choir of angels is depicted, joining the call of the shepherds, crying out "*Gloria in excelsis Deo*".

The second of the canvases making up this pair of works depicts the *Epiphany* or *Adoration of the Magi*, probably one of the earliest iconographic subjects, being part of the commemorative nativity liturgical celebrations of the first Christians, a fact that explains the proliferation of artistic depictions both individually and as part of wider ensembles. As was the case with the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, and probably to a greater extent, we can find references to this episode in a multitude of bibliographic sources. Within the Apocryphal Gospels it is worth highlighting the versions in the Protoevangelium of James, the Armenian Gospel of the Infancy, or the interpretation of this episode to be found in Jacobus da Varagine's *Golden Legend*. However, the main source of historiographical inspiration was the Gospel of St. Matthew, which reads as follows:

*"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 worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route"*²

As such then, and as tends to be the case in Rizi's depictions of the Epiphany (Fig. 5), the Christ Child is pictured sitting on his mother's knees with his hand raised towards the first of the magi (or kings), blessing the head that is bowed before him. To fill the space opening up before the viewer, the figure of Melchior is placed before him, bald and with a long white beard, as can also be seen in the version preserved at the Museo del Prado (Fig.6).

² Evangelio según San Mateo (2, 1-12)

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Fig. 5 Francisco Rizi, *Epiphany*, oil on canvas, 1645, Cathedral of Toledo



Fig. 6 Francisco Rizi, *Adoration of the Kings*, oil on canvas, ca. 1663, Museo del Prado

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The first of the three kings is depicted kneeling down, faithful to the iconographic model of Medieval fealty and courtesy, taking off his crown as a sign of recognition, in the understanding that he is kneeling before a more powerful King than he is. Behind him, in the left-hand section of the canvas, a child holds the crown that Melchior has taken off in a homage made by the earth's powerful men to the Child, in much the same way as can be observed in another of Rizi's versions of the Biblical episode housed at the Prado (Fig. 7). At the fore of the composition, but on this occasion to the right of the canvas, we find Balthasar, depicted as a black king, an iconographic detail included in the artistic canon from the 14th century onwards. The youngest of the kings wears elegant silver and gold-hued robes with red boots and a Phrygian hat, bearing witness to the artist's technical skills at drawing and handling colour. Finally, and towards the back of the composition, Caspar, dressed in a dark outer robe revealing glimpses of the orangey sleeves of his under-tunic, and also wearing a Persian style headdress with a crown on top, opens his arms wide in a gesture of wonder and dynamism, while waiting his turn to present his offering.



Fig. 7 Francisco Rizi, *Adoration of the Kings*, oil on canvas, ca. 1670, Museo del Prado.

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Rizi once again remembers to include all the compositional elements that make up the Epiphany. We therefore see how the three magi or kings, depicted to represent the different parts of the known world, and alluding to the three ages of man, offer the new-born child sumptuous cups of gold, incense and myrrh. The first of the gifts refers to the *Signum Rei*, Christ's nobility, the second, offered up by Caspar, represents the *Signum Dei*, Christ's divinity, and finally, the myrrh brought by Balthasar symbolises the *Signum Sepulturae*, a homage in anticipation of the death of Christ. Furthermore, towards the top middle of the work, in between the clouds, we see the star of Bethlehem, as a symbol of the light and birth of the Messiah. Finally, and as was the case with the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, in the background behind the figure of the Virgin, we find St. Joseph taking care of the gifts while looking on at the scene in wonder. Rizi depicts him in accordance with the same human model in terms of composition and gesture as seen in his father of Christ from *The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, housed at the Prado (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8 Francisco Rizi, *The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, oil on canvas, ca. 1663, Museo del Prado

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Both scenes are unquestionably examples of the Madrid Baroque style on the rise in the second half of the 17th century. Here Rizi is casting aside the naturalistic demands of Carducho and offering a more dramatic work. Though he does not abandon the formal rigour of the drawing, on this occasion he fuels the composition's dynamism using a rough and fibrous technique that takes on the exceptional chromatic energy that would become a common feature of his painting (Fig. 9) With his loose and carefree brushstroke, in full colourist extravagance, drawing on Venetian or Flemish artists such as Rubens and Van Dyck, he manages to create effects of dynamism and movement loaded with an expressiveness that proves undeniable in these two new versions.



Fig. 9 Francisco Rizi, *The Presentation at the Temple*, oil on canvas, 1674, Campo Real Palace, Jerez de la Frontera

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