

THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI IN THE CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY. CASEWORK. FROM THE CATACOMB PICTURE TO RENAISSANCE

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ABSTRACT. Inspired from the Holy Bible (Matthew 2, 1-22), the theme *The Adoration of the Magi* is encountered in the iconography ever since the second century. From the characteristic elements of the scene, we keep in mind: the countenance of The Mother of God and of the Holy Child in profile developing into a frontal expression; the presence of the star; the Magi wearing Persian clothes (caps), starting from the third century. In the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine art, the theme of *The Adoration of the Magi*, is often included in the representations of Nativity of Jesus, but it can also be represented as individual theme.

Taking the compositional scheme of the old models of the catacombs and sarcophagi, the Worship theme is treated with great interest by a number of creators since the post-Byzantine space, until early Baroque: Giotto, Gentile da Fabriano, Weyden and later Bosch, Botticelli, Leonardo and until Mantegna or Dürer will enrich the theme.

During the Byzantin Empire the subject remains within norms of iconography, while in the early Middle Ages, the characters humanize, losing their mystery and later being used in more sophisticated compositions. Beginning from post-Byzantine area until the early Baroque. Giotto, Gentile da Fabriano, Weyden onward Bosch, Botticelli, Leonardo until Mantegna or Dürer will enrich the subject.

Key-words: Melkon, Caspar and Balthasar, Byzant, Medieval Age, Renaissance, Giotto, Torriti Cavallini, Fabrianao, Bosch, Weyden, Botticelli Lippi, Mantegna, Leonardo, Dürer.

Inspired from the Bible, the theme *The Adoration of the Magi* is encountered in the iconography ever since the second century. Saint Matthew the Evangelist presents the event explaining, with many details, the circumstances of the birth of Jesus Christ, which happened during Herod the Great (Idumean).

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He, being troubled (as the whole Jerusalem), convoked all the scholars and the bishops, willing to know the Nativity place. According to the prophet, this will be Bethlehem. In this context, it is mentioned the secret meeting between the king and the magi (without being mentioned their number), who reveal the presence of the guiding star. Herod advises them to find as many information as they can about the New-Born Child, asking them, as soon as they return, to let him know the exact place in Bethlehem. Continuing the journey, the Magi were guided by the Star of Bethlehem until they arrived in the house where they found the Son of God, with His mother, Mary, to whom they knelt down, bringing Her gold, myrrh and frankincense. Returning into their country, they were enlightened through a dream, to follow a different path and, so, not to meet Herod anymore.¹

In the Romanian tradition, the Magi were also named The Kings of the East and they are three: Balthasar, Melchior, Caspar. In the Holy Bible, their number and name are not mentioned, but the fact that they offered to Jesus: gold, myrrh and frankincense, in the popular culture states that they were three.²

According to the Roman-Catholic Church, Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar are considered to be saints and they are celebrated on the sixth of January. The names of the Kings of the East appeared in a Gospel of the Armenian Church, in which were cited their ranks: Melkon, the king of Persia, Caspar, king of India and Balthasar, king of Arabia. Their relics are preserved in The Dom of Koln.³



Severa and the Adoration of the Magi, marble, second century, Pio Cristiano Museum, Vatican.

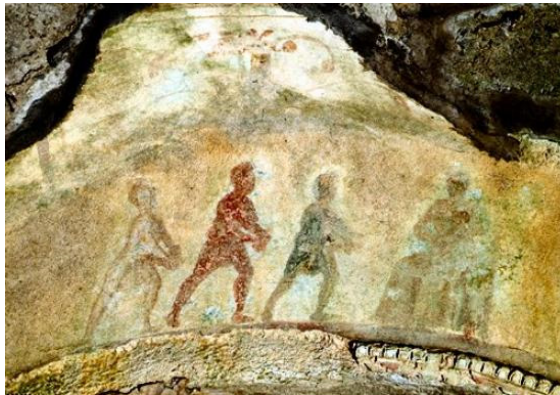
The ancient relief, discovered in the Saint Priscilla's cemetery, depicts two distinct scenes: on the one hand, the portrait of a defunct, Severa, with the text IN DEO VIVAS, and on the other hand, The Adoration of the Magi.

¹ *Synopsis of the four Gospels*, (Bucharest: Interconfessional Biblical Society of Romania, 2000), 24.

² Marcel Ghe. Muntean, *The Byzantine painting repertoire - feast icons*, pub. (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2014), 31.

³ http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magii_de_la_r%C4%83s%C4%83rit, accessed at 6:50 A.M., 12 01 2015.

The Magi, carrying gifts, are pictured in full swing, detail that results from the waving mantles and the energetic steps with which they advance in front of The Mother of God with Jesus, placed on a magnificent throne. At the back of the two, standing, we can observe a person pointing out a six-cornered star. Definitely, his presence is identified with Varlaam's (Numbers 24, 17).



Adoration of the Magi, fresco, III-th century, Catacomb of Priscille, Rome.

The theme of the Magi that bring gifts to the Son of God, can be found at Matthew the Evangelist (2, 1-2),⁴ who does not say neither the number, nor their origin, only the fact that they came from the East. The most important is the mentioning of the gifts: gold, myrrh and frankincense, but also the fact that Jesus is together with His Mother, in the house. Saint Luke the Evangelist (2, 8-20) brings as reminiscent testimony events, adding to the narration the shepherds' announcement, in the middle of the night, and the manger where was present The Son of God. For the artists was significant to reveal the group, which will be established to contain three wise men, as well as the clothing and their names, detail appeared in the seventh century.⁵ From the characteristic elements of the scene, we keep in mind: the countenance of The Mother of God and of the Holy Child in profile developing into a frontal expression; the presence of the star; the Magi wearing Persian clothes (caps), starting from the third century.

⁴ *Synopsis of the four Gospels...*, 24.

⁵ Frédéric Tristan, *The first Christian images from symbol to icon II-IV century*, pub. (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2002), 258, 254. They are Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar; each with his attributes and typology. The first one is old and offers gold, the second in young and brings myrrh, and the third is black and brings frankincense.

Saint Irenaus gives a significance to each gift: royalty to gold, priesthood to myrrh and death to frankincense, all of them making reference to Jesus Christ.

In both examples, we can observe the representation of Mary and Jesus, usually in profile, and in front of them are the three Magi; with a bigger liveliness in movement, rhythm and the details stated above is the mural/fresco from the fourth century from the Catacombs of San Callisto. Among the remarkable presentations of this theme, we can remind the mosaics of the Basilica of San Vitale⁶ from Ravenna, or the ones from Santa Maria Maggiore from Rome.



Adoration of the Magi, bas-relief, IV-th century, Vatican Museum, Rome.

The composition plastically narrates the gifts presentation of the Magi to the Son of God and to His Mother. The Child is in swaddling-clothes, held by Mary. Magi are accompanied by the busts in relief of some camels. In the back of the throne, we can distinguish the empty manger, according to Saint Luke the Evangelist (2, 12), followed by the two symbolic animals: the ox and the ass. Flanking the right side of the bas-relief, Saint Joseph has a high staff, being emphasized having raised the left hand.



Adoration of the Magi, bas-relief, IV-th century, Pio Cristiano Museum, Rome.

⁶ David Hugh Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, pub. (Bucharest: Enciclopedic Universe, 1999), 525-526.

The relief with the theme The Adoration of the Magi, resumes the conceptional scheme from the Catacombs of San Callisto⁷, in this case being more highlighted the entire ensemble. The Magi are presented as three young men with large movements, carrying offerings; the origin of the vestment is Phrygian. The three camels mark the origin and the place of the event. The first Magus shows with his right hand the guiding star, which is above Mary and the Holy Child sitting on throne. Also represented in profile, the couple Maria-Jesus expresses the inner peace, an intimate plastic aspect. The author does not invest the two figures with the sacred insignia, the halos.



Adoration of the Magi, fresco, IV-th century, Catacomb of San Callisto, Rome.

The scene from the Catacomb of San Callisto resumes, in a reduced form, The Adoration of the Magi. The clothing is important (the Phrygian caps), which are like a leit motif in all these anonymous compositions. The yellow background definitely makes us think at the future gold fund, which will be naturalized in the Byzantine canon.



Adoration of the magi, mosaic, V-th century, Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica, Rome.

⁷ David Hugh Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints...*, 106-107.



Adoration of the Magi, mosaic, VI-th century, Basilica San Vitale, Ravenna.

The complex composition from the Papal Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, reveals us a scene in which Jesus, on the throne, blesses the Magi, His Mother is near Him, as well as the Angels, a shepherd and a queen; the whole scene stands under the guiding star. The Magi are presented as being young, with colored clothing, wearing the Phrygian cap. There are some buildings with slender roofs that shape in the distance, Jerusalem.

There are also the Magi of San Vitale, they wear mantles, red fezzes and they have gifts in hands. The procession is moving to the Virgin sitting on the throne, holding Jesus, together with Archangels.



Adoration of the Magi, miniature, X-th century, The Menology of Vasile the Second, The Vatican Library, Rome.

In the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine art, the theme of The Adoration of the Magi, is often included in the representations of Nativity of Jesus, but it can also be represented as individual theme. In this way, it has a simple and direct structure: on the background of the cave or of the manger in the illustrations influenced by the western art, The Virgin holding The Child is represented sitting, slightly turned to the three Magi, who are in front of Her, worshiping and offering gifts. This conceptional scheme can also be found in the ancient reliefs, paleo Christians.

We observe the Magi having crowns on their heads and wearing royal robes, in the miniatures from Vasile the Second's liturgical Menaion, from Vatican, 976. Before being represented in this way, they were seen wearing Phrygian caps like the priests of Mitra.⁸

There are some more complex variations of this theme, in which can appear extra figures, for example the Righteous Joseph, angels or other witnesses of the event.

The image of the Magi standing in front of Herod and of the Scholars' council, is extremely rare encountered in iconography. Dionysius of Fourna provides us the text that formed the basis of further iconic redaction: a palace. King Herod is sitting on the throne. In front of him, the three Magi are reaching out their hands towards him; outside, Jewish, Scribes and Pharisees talk between them.

The theme is painted in south wall register, in nave. It is always seen in the scenes of The Akathist Hymn. Late examples of Byzantine area can be found at Monastery of Brontochion from Mystras, or in the Monasteries from „Țara Românească” and „Moldova” of the XVI-th – XVII-th century.⁹

Due to the fact that the rank, the age or the origin of the three Magi are not specified in the evangelic sources, the apocryphal literature and the popular one were free to assign the most diverse characteristics, even to multiply their number to 12, like the number of the Disciples. This is the reason for which the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine art does not establish a fixed representation of the Magi, only limits their number to three and specifies their rank-magus, king, noble origin- they are riding and offering gifts.¹⁰ Magi are riding to the cave (Matthew 2, 9), following the guiding star, or offering gifts. (Matthew 2, 10-11).

⁸ I. D. Stefanescu, *The byzantine art and Romanian medieval painting iconography*, pub. (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1973), p. 96.

⁹ I. D. Stefanescu, *The byzantine art ...*, 93.

¹⁰ I. D. Stefanescu, *The byzantine art ...*, 96. Origen in the first who mentioned the three magi.



Adoration of the Magi, fresco, XII-th century, Cappadocia.

Something special, the fresco from Cappadocia presents a greater number of worshipers bringing gifts to Jesus. The Magi have around their heads, devoted positioned, white halos, while Mother of God, Jesus and Joseph have yellow halos. Another distinctive element is the appearance of the herald angel in the left side of the image, above all.



Adoration of the Magi, water colors on paper, XIII-th century, The Vatican Apostolic Library, Vatican.

The Manuscript from The Vatican Apostolic Library brings a novelty: the crowns from the heads of The Kings of the East.



Adoration of the Magi, fresco, XII-th century, Taull Church.

The artist chose to illustrate this theme, not together with other scenes from the church iconography, but in the Holy Altar Apse. If in almost every example, The Virgin with The Child are on one side or the other, in this case, they dominate the central semi-calotte. What is more, they are framed by a large mandorla. On the background of a colored strip and willing asymmetric, are the Magi, one on the left side and the other two on the right side. In terms of composition, the artist assumes the traditional structure of the Madonna and Child on a Curved Throne, met in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine iconography.



Jacopo Torriti, *Adoration of the Magi, mosaic, XIII-th century, Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica, Rome.*



Pietro Cavallini, *Adoration of the Magi*, mosaic, XIII-th century, Santa Maria Basilica in Transevere, Rome.

Having as model the conceptional schemes from Catacombs and Sarcophagi, the Adoration theme is treated with a lot of interest by many artists from post-Byzantine area until the early Baroque.

Jacopo Torriti, sensitive to eastern models, transpose the scene on a golden background. The three knelt down Magi are in front of the Mother with Holy Child, while the Angel of God hovers on high. The celestial star stands out in the area. The details of clothing, the linear drawing, get us back in the eastern atmosphere.

With a more obvious detachment from the Byzantine canons, we can mention the Mosaic of Santa Maria Maggiore of Pietro Cavallini. The movement, together with the subtle and colored countenance model and the whole perspective expresses the artist's wish to be renewed.

It is Giotto, who draws attention to a more ingenious composition, in the illustration of the fresco from Padova, which contains besides the principle characters, angels, camels and the two young ministers. There is a mountainous landscape, dominated by the wooden stable.



Giotto di Bondone, *Adoration of the Magi*, fresco, 1303-1305, Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padova.



Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, tempera on wood, 1423, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

The broad perspective of Gentile da Fabriano proposes a magnificent scene that illustrates the spectacular art of picture. The author exceeds the restricted frame of byzantine patterns, turning it into a large one, grandiose due to the impressive number of figures, animals and architectural elements.

The emphasis is on the Magi clothing. They can be seen in the main plane of the working.¹¹



Van der Weyden, Triptych *Adoration of the Magi*, oil on wood, 1455-1460, Alte Pinakothek, München.

With an obvious concern for the accurate details submitted to adoration and admiration, for a knowing and cultivated public, Van der Weyden illustrates in the famous triptych called *Adoration of the Magi*. This triptych treats the evangelic theme as being an ordinary and contemporary fact. The multitude of elements offers splendor to the ensemble. The red color found in the two figures' mantle, who are disposed symmetrically to the Virgin, borders the blue color of Her maforion, conferring intensity and individuality to the theme.

¹¹ Virgil Vatasanu, *The History of European Art, v. I., The Medieval Age*, pub. (Bucharest: Didactics and Pedagogy, 1967), 45.



Bosch Jeronimus, *Adoration of the Magi*, tempera and oil on wood, 1460, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

With an obvious emphasis for the understanding of the binomial figure-universe or human-nature, Jeronimus Bosch chooses to present the Saint Matthew's text from a different perspective, placing the main theme on three parts, in a wide, opened landscape, dominated by the constructions that are shaped in the horizon. The humanization and individualization of the characters, with direct reference to the three ages of the man, but also to the three continents Europe, Africa, and Asia are important in the process of understanding the universal worshiping and adoration of Jesus Christ.¹²

Being built on a pyramidal scheme, the brilliant composition of Botticelli from the Uffizi Gallery, the one from 1476-1478, impresses with its magnitude and grandeur. The figures, part of the Magi's procession, are members and friends of the noble Medici family, from Florence. The old man, Cosimo Medici is presented worshipping. In the bottom and in the right side, two other men are prostrating; they are Pietro and Giovanni Medici; between the two can be noticed, in profile, Giuliano. On the opposite side, still in the main plane, there is Lorenzo the Magnificent; he seems to be embraced by Angelo Poliziano, the poet. In the left side of the painting, as we look at it, can be distinguished in a bulky, other colored tunic, the artist himself.¹³

¹² James Hall, *Dictionary of subjects and symbols in arts*, pub. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 6.

¹³ Virgil Vatasanu, *The History of European Art*, 59.



Sandro Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi*, tempera on wood, 1475, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florența.

The beauty of this painting followed by a large variety of preparatory studies consists in the strict and balanced organization of the whole picture dominated by multiple characters. It was unfinished. The Virgin with the Holy Child can be seen at the bottom of the picture, surrounded by many people full of devotion and adoration. Between Her and the two old men symmetrically placed on both sides of the scene, forming a triangle. It is taken over by the semicircular shape of the grouped figures. Behind them are ruined buildings, horses, riders, a magnificent scale, trees and other figures captured in various movements.¹⁴ We can distinguish a fight between two stallions on the right side. The theme is conceived in light and shade contrast and defines the art of Leonard. It was considered a novelty in that period, a period that marked the end of his collaboration with Verrocchio.

The contemporary artist, Jean David paints the theme on a smaller scale. Watching it, we admire the science of details, but also the loss of mystery and harmony proposed by the Italian artist. The hierarchical treatment of the plans, of the fragments and the attention given only to certain figures or elements are lost in the replicate of the Canadian artist.

¹⁴ Virgil Vatasanu, *The History of European Art*, 108.

THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI IN THE CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY. CASEWORK. FROM THE CATACOMB PICTURE ...



Leonardo da Vinci, *Adoration of the Magi*, oil on canvas, 1481-1482, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florența. Jean David, *Adoration of the Magi*, XX-th century.



Filipino Lippi, *Adoration of the Magi*, oil on wood, 1496, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Designed in a festive atmosphere inaugurated by Botticelli and influenced by the unfinished painting of Leonardo, Fra Filippino Lippi's *Adoration of Magi* was ordered by the monks from San Donato agli Scopet Monastery, Florence. In essence, the scene is being recomposed in a pyramidal shape, to which the Renaissance artists are so fond of, although the lack of unity and organization characterizes the painting. As in Botticelli's masterpiece, in this case are also present the members of the Medici family; the painting brings out figures that are in relation with the landscape from the second plan.¹⁵



Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi*, tempera on wood, 1497-1500, Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Mantegna chooses to illustrate the theme in a totally different way. He considers to be most important the event, increasing the characters, pictured as busts and portraits. Having a triangular shape, the composition connects the Magi through its diagonal axes, also Mother of God and The Holy Child, as well as Joseph, who is on the left side, above. The Magi are worshipping; two of them are wearing colored turbans. The graceful drawing with monumental valences, influenced by the studies after the ancient statues, characterizes the characters.

¹⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoration_of_the_Magi_\(Filippino_Lippi\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoration_of_the_Magi_(Filippino_Lippi)). accessed at 8:12 A.M, 18. 01. 2015.



Albrecht Dürer, *Adoration of the Magi*, tempera on wood, 1504, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Dürer treats the evangelic theme with an assumed freedom, taking everything down, in a pyramidal shape and being influenced by the Italian Renaissance tradition; this is a form to which the architectural elements accede; the stable's roof, the fragmentary ruined wall, the mountain on the horizon. There are the perspective lines, which remind us of the albertinean studies and forge axes that go beyond the picture. What is important to be mentioned is the thoroughness with which the artist treats the Magi's object and accessories.

In conclusion, we admit that the theme that appeared in the catacombs and was developed in the revenants mosaics, has had an impressive number of representations. These have had as a leit motif: the three Magi, wearing the Phrygian caps and oriental tributary clothing, and being knelt down in front of Mary holding the Jesus.

Starting with the early Middle Ages, the characters humanize, losing their mystery and later being used in more sophisticated compositions, for example at Botticelli or at Filippino Lippi.¹⁶

¹⁶ http://www.antiqua.mi.it/icon_magi.htm, date 14. 01.2015, accessed at 4 P.M.

At the half of the Renaissance, the artists pay more and more attention to these compositions. As examples they have each other, but they also make some improvements, such as scenic elements, characters, animals, architectures and clothing. The theme, starting from the XVI-th century, is losing popularity and the artists are moving toward the dramatic repertoire *The Passion of the Christ*, leaving behind the magnificent theme *Adoration of the Magi*.