

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Unidentified artist
(Cuzco School, late 17th century)

Adoration of the Magi

oil on canvas

162 x 112.5 cm.; 63 3/4 x 44 1/4 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Germany.

LONDON

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The episode of the *Adoration of the Magi*, or *Epiphany*,¹ 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 humanity.

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 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 on.² 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 status.

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.³ 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.

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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 found in different museums and collections. For instance, an *Adoration of the Magi* dated circa 1700 that belongs to a private collection (fig. 1), where only the royal retinue is missing, and in which the figure of St. Joseph is relegated further still from the central scene.

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Figure 1. Cuzco School, *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1700. Private Collection

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Footnotes

¹ A study of the iconography of this biblical episode has been conducted by L. Rodríguez Peinado in 'La Epifanía', *Digital Magazine of Medieval Iconography*, no. 8, Complutense University of Madrid 2012.

² The 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.

³ B. Belda Lindo, *La técnica de la brocatería en las pinturas de la Escuela Cuzqueña*, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia 2013.