

PAN

AMSTERDAM

LAWRENCE STEIGRAD FINE ARTS



The Adoration of the Magi

oil on panel, a triptych
each side panel: 36 3/8 x 10 1/8 inches (92.4 x 25.7 cm.)
center panel: 35 3/8 x 22 3/8 inches (89.9 x 56.8 cm.)

PROVENANCE

Xaver Scheidwimmer, Munich, by November 1968

Galerie Sanct Lucas, Vienna, Summer 1969

Private Collection, Switzerland, from whom acquired by

Johnny van Haften, London, by 2005 from whom purchased by

Private Collection, U.S.A., May 2005 until the present time

LITERATURE

Weltkunst, November 6, 1968, p. 1135, in an advertisement for Xaver Scheidwimmer, Munich

Vienna, Galerie Sanct Lucas, Gemälde Alter Meister, Summer 1969, unpaginated, no. 4, illustrated

Pieter Coecke van Aelst is regarded “as one of the greatest Netherlandish artists of the sixteenth century”.^[1] His father was the deputy mayor of Aelst. The artist may have studied with Bernaert van Orley in Brussels. It is believed that he traveled to Italy between 1525 and 1526 where he was profoundly influenced by its art. Through his translations of Italian architectural treatises, he furthered the introduction of Italian art theory into the Netherlands. By 1527 Coecke had become a member of the Antwerp painter’s guild, and by 1529 had formed his own workshop in which his son-in-law Pieter Brueghel the Elder may have worked. Towards the end of his career, he was made court painter to Emperor Charles V. Due to his teaching, designs, and publications, Coecke’s influence was felt in sculpture, architecture, and the painting of his time, yet incredibly “no painting by Coecke’s hand can be identified with certainty”.^[2]

This directly reflects the methodology employed in Antwerp at the time to meet the demands of the ever-expanding art market, which in all likelihood was the largest in Europe. During the second quarter of the sixteenth century

Coecke ran one of the biggest multifaceted workshops in Antwerp. Monasteries, churches, hospitals and municipalities were all buyers of individual devotional panels as well as triptychs, but the largest purchasers were foreign merchants who bought in bulk for resale. It is believed it took six months to a year to complete an altarpiece, and although works could be commissioned, ready-made altarpieces met the demand of the massive expansion of the market then underway.^[3]

In order for the workshops to survive and produce at competitive prices, their output came to be created in a semi-industrial manner. Coecke would have employed a number of assistants in order to divide the labor into specific targeted areas in the production process, which necessitated close collaboration between the artists in the creation of a single piece. What resulted was the employment of a few popular compositions. In order to facilitate their production patterns and models were commonly employed as was tracing and pouncing. In pouncing original compositions were traced onto paper and then transferred onto the canvas or panel through pricking.^[4]

The center panel of this triptych represents the Adoration of the Magi, with Balthazar and attendants in the left panel and Saint Joseph in the right. In the center the Christ Child blesses Melchoir while Gaspar presents his gift of frankincense. A unifying medieval landscape runs through the background of all three panels. The depiction of the Adoration of the Magi was among Coecke’s most popular subjects. Its representation of Balthazar called a king of Arabia or sometimes Ethiopia, Melchoir a king of Persia and Gaspar a king of India, all in splendid dress and bearing costly gifts, appealed to the city’s merchant class, as it did for visiting traders along with its message of inclusivity.

Typical of Coecke is his use of saturated reds, blues, greens and yellows, as well as his emphasis on shimmering fabrics and golden objects. Characteristic of his sitters are the ruddy tones of the mens’ faces contrasting against the porcelain quality of the females.^[5] A very similar triptych of this composition by Coecke and Workshop is in the Museo Diocesano de Arte Sacro de Álva Vitoria – Gasteiz, Spain.

[1] “Grand Design: Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Renaissance Tapestry” on metmuseum.org.

[2] “Pieter Coecke van Aelst” on getty.edu/art/collection/person.

[3] Dan Ewing, “Marketing Art in Antwerp, 1460 – 1560: Our Lady’s Pond” in *The Art Bulletin*, volume 72, no. 4, December 1990, p. 580; Filip Vermeylen, “The Commercialization of Art: Painting and Sculpture in Sixteenth Century Antwerp” in *Early Netherlandish Paintings at the Crossroads*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1998, pp. 49, 51; and Maryan W. Ainsworth, “Pieter Coecke van Aelst as a Panel Painter” in *Grand Design Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Renaissance Tapestry*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, N. Y., 2014, p. 22.

[4] Filip Vermeylen, *op.cit.*, pp. 52 – 53.

[5] Maryann W. Ainsworth, *op.cit.*, pp. 38, 70.