The Adoration of the Magi

Gentile da Fabriano (c. 1370 – c. 1427)
The Adoration of the Magi

This talk is based on two (2) articles / reflections in the The Sower magazine (October – December 2007) by Lionel Gracey and Caroline Farey.
The Adoration of the Magi

Gentile da Fabriano (c. 1370 – c. 1427) was an Italian painter known for his participation in the International Gothic style. Gentile was born in or near Fabriano, in the Marche. His mother died some time before 1380 and his father, Niccolò di Giovanni Massi, retired to a monastery in the same year, where he died in 1385. He worked in various places in central Italy, mostly in Tuscany. His best known works are his Adoration of the Magi (1423) and Flight into Egypt.
About 1422 he went to Florence, where in 1423 he painted an "Adoration of the Magi" as an altarpiece for the church of Santa Trinita, which is now preserved in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. This painting is considered his best work now extant and regarded as one of the masterpieces of the International Gothic style. He had by this time attained a wide reputation, and was engaged to paint pictures for various churches, more particularly Siena, Perugia, Gubbio and Fabriano.
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About 1426 he was called to Rome by Pope Martin V to adorn the church of St. John Lateran with frescoes from the life of John the Baptist. He also executed a portrait of the pope attended by ten cardinals, and in the church of St. Francesco Romano a painting of the "Virgin and Child attended by St. Benedict and St. Joseph", which was much esteemed by Michelangelo, but is no longer in existence.
Gentile da Fabriano died about 1450. Michelangelo said of him that his works resembled his name, meaning noble or refined. They are full of a quiet and serene joyousness, and he has a naïve and innocent delight in splendour and in gold ornaments, with which, however, his pictures are not overloaded.
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The source of this painting is Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 2:1-12). By the time this altarpiece was painted the wise men were being depicted as kings.

This may be because Matthew’s story came to be linked with Psalm 72.

It may also be because of the costly gifts they brought with them.
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The Magi were a tribe from ancient Media. The Medes were an ancient Iranian people who lived in the north-western part of present-day Iran.

The best known Magi are the "Wise Men from the East" mentioned by Matthew in his Gospel, whose graves Marco Polo claimed to have seen in what is today the district of Saveh, in Tehran, Iran.

In English, the term may refer to a shaman, sorcerer, or wizard; it is the origin of the words magic and magician.
In his *The Histories*, Herodotus lists the names of six Mede tribes:

- Busae
- Paretaceni
- Struchates
- Arizanti
- Budii
- Magi
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The Wise Men are given the names Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar in this late 6th century Romanesque mosaic from the Basilica of St Apollinarius in Ravenna, Italy.

In fact, their number is unknown as it is not stated in Matthew’s Gospel; only that there were three gifts — the supposition that this implied only three givers is speculation.
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This painting has been used in the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church to introduce the whole of Part One: The Profession of Faith.

This part of the Compendium illustrates:

- The encounter between God and Man
- The response of Faith
- The gift of the redeeming Incarnation (*God made Man*)
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The encounter between God and Man
This occurs at Mary’s knee. The seated child stretches forward and touches the old man’s head in blessing, while the bent old man kisses the divine child’s foot.
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The encounter between God and Man
There are, of course, those who turn their backs and refuse the encounter.

The dark depths of the cave symbolise those who refused to recognise Jesus as the Messiah.

Notice the ox and the ass at the entrance. They are a reference to Isaiah 1:3.

The passage from Isaiah is emphasised by the head of the man turned away from the scene; he is looking in the opposite direction to the gaze of the kings. To convert is to turn around; if this man turned around he would see Jesus.
The encounter between God and Man

On the other hand, the man next to him has seen the star, has turned and is attracted. The rest of the crowd are turned in all sorts of directions. The abundance of the natural world is illustrated by the large collection of animals, birds, trees, bushes, and fruits.
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The encounter between God and Man

Look at the detail on the monkeys and the fruits (figs) behind them.
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The response of Faith
This is clearly shown here by the three kings. It is a response of humility. The young, beardless king has just descended from his ‘high’ horse and his spurs are now being removed.
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The response of Faith

The next middle aged king is already bending and reaching to remove his crown prior to falling down on his knees in worship.
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The response of Faith

The oldest king has already cast aside his crown prior to falling down on his knees in worship.
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The response of Faith
The Kings represent the different ages of man.
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The response of Faith
The Three Ages of Man was a common theme for painters during the Renaissance period.
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The response of Faith
Wisdom is represented in this painting by advancing age. The third king is the embodiment of human wisdom.

Human intelligence is bought to the feet of Jesus, the Son of God who is the fullness of divine wisdom, at the knee of Mary who is called the Seat of Wisdom.
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The gift of the Redeeming Incarnation

Look at the star. There is a path of divine (golden) light in a descending arc thorough the halos of Joseph and Mary to the Child Jesus.

Joseph’s cloak emphasizes this pathway of light coming down from heaven to the bent kneeling King.
John 8:12 "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." "

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The gift of the Redeeming Incarnation

The light continues to the halo of the kneeling King, and then floods downwards further to his bright sleeve and onto the ground. Here catching the braid of his cloak it ripples along the bare earth.
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The gift of the Redeeming Incarnation

The semi-naked infant Jesus reveals the true nature of the gift of the Incarnation – which is that he became poor so that we might become rich.
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The gift of the Redeeming Incarnation

Jesus’ nakedness contrasts strongly with the rich garments of the three Kings, and the cloak of Mary, coloured in deepest lapis lazuli blue.
Lapis is a rock. It was ground and processed to make the pigment Ultramarine for tempera paint.

Ultramarine was a very expensive pigment and so was used on only the most important subjects in a painting.
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The gift of the Redeeming Incarnation

Michelangelo's loved Ultramarine. His ingenious use of it in the background in the Last Judgment was not only visually successful, but used as a metaphor of power. It's use was rarely found in fresco painting and on such a large scale due to the cost of the pigment.
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The gift of the Redeeming Incarnation
Look again at the painting. The other person wearing blue is the crouching figure who is removing the spurs of the young king.
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The gift of the Redeeming Incarnation
The person removing the king’s spurs is in a very humble posture. He reminds us of Mary’s utter humbleness.

Mary’s grandeur meanwhile tells us of the incredible nobility of the one untying the spurs.

Luke 3:16 “John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”
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The gift of the Redeeming Incarnation

The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh signify the Incarnate Jesus came among us as King, Priest, and Sacrificial Victim. In this picture they bring the gifts in golden mediaeval ciboria, used then as now to hold the sacred Eucharistic species. The Eucharist of course is the great sacrament of Jesus’ Abiding Presence with us.
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Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly minded,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords in human vesture,
in the Body and the Blood
he will give to all the faithful
his own self for heavenly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way,
as the Light of Light descendeth
from the realms of endless day,
that the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away.

At his feet the six-winged seraph;
cherubim with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the Presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry,
"Alleluia, alleluia!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!"

Words: Liturgy of Saint James (fifth century);
trans. Gerald Moultrie (1829-1885), 1864
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