

Leah Clark - Mantegna, Adoration of the Magi

LEAH CLARK: Hi, I'm Leah Clark. I'm a lecturer in the Department of Art History at The Open University, and I specialise in the Italian Renaissance with a particular focus on the collection and exchange of objects at the end of the 15th century in the Italian courts.

Today, I'm going to be speaking about a painting by the Italian artist Andrea Mantegna, which depicts the adoration of the Magi. This painting is housed in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, but the last time I saw it was actually in London at the British Museum as part of an exhibition on Ming China.

Now, you might be wondering what a Renaissance painting was doing in an exhibition on Ming China. Well, the secret, or the answer, lies in the porcelain cup that one of the Magi holds, something we'll come back to shortly.

The painting is just under 20 inches by 25 inches and it's painted distemper on linen. Distemper is a form of animal glue, but it allows for a matte-like finish, rather than the kind of glossy qualities you may see in oil painting or egg tempera painting. Even though it has this kind of fresco-like appearance, perhaps even a pastel-like quality, Mantegna still renders some of the colours quite brightly, but you can also see, through his painterly technique, the form of kind of glassiness, or shininess, on some of the gems and jewels that one of the Magi wears.

If you look closely at the painting, you can see that in some places, the paint is abraded, or is starting to flake off. And there, you can really see the weave of the linen that is the actual materiality of the painting itself. The painting is a sacred painting, so it depicts a religious narrative. In particular, it is the story from the Bible of the nativity. If you're familiar with this story, you may know of the three wise men who come from the East, proffering gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And this is the part of the story that's depicted in the scene.

Christ is at the centre. He is held by his mother, the Virgin Mary, and behind him is Joseph. So the three members of the holy family are marked by their halos, unlike the Magi. One thing you might notice is, as the viewers, we're very close to the action, and that's because Mantegna has chosen to depict a very shallow space. We don't see another part of the scenery around you can even see that the background is actually a neutral colour. So we're not even really aware of our space. The figures are also mostly 3/4 in length, so we're not even seeing their whole bodies. This allows us to actually get very close to the action as a viewer, and in some ways, it makes us feel as if we're a privileged viewer, or even a participant, in this exchange of gifts.

Mantegna was very much influenced by classical art, in particular, classical sculpture. So for instance, in the shallow space, the composition of his painting may have been influenced by Roman reliefs. But many scholars have also talked about the ways in which he depicts his figures as almost stony, or sculptural-like. And this has been a kind of signature of Mantegna.

This is also evident in the drapery. In particular, if you notice the drapery on Christ, it almost appears sculptural. It's kind of starch-like, rather than the fluid nature we would associate with

swaddling clothes. Mantegna has also paid extreme attention to depicting the material qualities of the objects that are in the painting.

So for example, if you look closely at one of the Magi's fur cloaks, you'll see tiny little brushstrokes that make out each individual fur. This is mimicked as well in his beard. You'll also notice, for instance, on the hard stone vase that one of the Magi holds, he's really paid attention to depicting the different types of colours that make up the marbling quality of the stone.

In the Renaissance, there was a tradition of depicting biblical stories in contemporary settings or relating them to contemporary practices. This is a way to make the stories from the Bible, which happened hundreds of years ago, relevant for the contemporary viewer. So the story of the Magi, for example, was expanded and adapted in the Renaissance, and you can see this in this painting.

Caspar, at the front, is the oldest of the three, and he sports a white beard and holds a Chinese porcelain cup. Behind him is the younger of the three and his name is Melchior. And he holds, probably, a tombak incense burner. And beside him is Balthasar, usually represented as an African king, and he holds an agate hard stone.

So these types of objects that they hold are similar to the types of objects that would have been exchanged from courts in the East and given to Western courts, particularly, in this case, Italian courts. So it references contemporary diplomatic practices. But the painting also references contemporary collecting practices. These types of objects were highly sought by collectors in the Italian courts at the end of the 15th century.

So now we come back to the Chinese porcelain cup that one of the Magi is holding. Chinese porcelain was extremely rare at the end of the 15th century in Italy. And what's fascinating is it wasn't coming directly from China, but via Persia, and then often gifted as diplomatic gifts from the Ottoman and Malik sultans of what is now Turkey, Syria, and Egypt.

So this painting was probably painted for the Gonzaga family, who were the rulers of the court of Mantua, where Andrea Mantegna was employed as court artist. And they were well known for their collections. In particular, Isabella d'Este, who married into the family, was one of the most famous female patrons and collectors of the Renaissance.

We know from an inventory that she owned a few pieces of Chinese porcelain, but also collected rare hard stones similar to the agate receptacle that one of the Magi holds. She also collected antiquities, as well as contemporary paintings. So the painting may be a showcase of the collections of the Gonzaga family.

So what was its purpose? Well, it was certainly a religious painting, so it would have been used, perhaps, in devotion as an altarpiece on a small altar within the Ducal Palace. But it's certainly also had an aesthetic function. It was painted by one of the most famous court artists of the time. And of course, it was also a showcase. It was demonstrating the collections of the Gonzaga family.

So what is its relevance today? Well, we definitely live in a globalised world. But today, we can click on a button on the internet and order a shirt from China and get it the next day, or we can send an email, which gets received immediately on the other side of the world. Now, the Renaissance certainly didn't have the commercial or technological abilities we have today, but the painting shows that in the 15th century, in Italy, you could still see a Chinese porcelain cup, showing and demonstrating that the world has always been, in some way, global.