

Object of the Month—November
The Adoration of the Magi

Identification:

Name: The Adoration of the Magi

Artist: Unknown

Date: 15th century

Classification: Alabaster and pigment, 17 3/8 x 11 1/4 x 2 in.

Accession number: 2001.268

Social/Historical Context: By the fourteenth century, English artisans had developed a distinctive tradition of intricate carvings of New Testament themes. Alabaster quarries were found in York, Burton-on-Trent, London, and most importantly Nottingham. (Nottingham is often associated with the legend of Robin Hood.) The demand for English stone carvings led to a major export market with Nottingham as the center. English stone-carvings have been found as far away as Iceland and Poland, but France was the major consumer.

The majority of the English religious stone-carvings were destroyed between 1535 and 1555 during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII. Any of the sculptures that may have escaped were subsequently destroyed under King Edward VI with the “Putting Away of Books and Images Act” of 1549. Stone carvers then turned to monuments and classical themes. The survival of the MIA’s panel is due to the fact that it had been exported to the Continent. The alabaster quarries were largely exhausted by the 18th century.

Object: This panel depicting the life of the Virgin Mary was originally intended to be part of a much larger polyptych for the decoration of an altar’s ornamental screens. It tells the story of the arrival of three magi, variously called kings, or wise men “from the East.” The story is told in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1-22. The Magi are named Balthasar, Caspar, and Melchior, and they came after seeing a star which, according to the gospel writer, shown over the stable where Jesus was born. They came bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The MIA’s panel anachronistic setting shows the magi dressed as English kings. All figures are dressed in medieval costumes. Mary is shown as the largest figure with the Christ Child sitting on her lap. Mary’s status as the Mother of God became church doctrine in 431 BCE at the Council of Ephesus. What became known as the Cult of Mary promoted the ideas that Mary was: born free of original sin, taken to heaven at the time of her death, and that her suffering paralleled the crucifixion of Christ. She was worshipped as The Bride of Christ, Queen of Heaven, Personification of the Church and the Intercessor for the Salvation of Humankind. The Christ Child is shown in the pose of the “Sum of All Divine Wisdom”. This depiction of the Christ Child was thought to have originated in Byzantium. The Adoration of the Magi was a very popular theme for medieval stone carvers. More than one hundred Adoration of the Magi panels have survived, including nine in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

The MIA's panel is particularly well preserved, retaining evidence of its pigmented decoration. It is made of alabaster, a fine-grained gypsum. Alabaster is soft to work making fine details possible. The stone then hardens with exposure to air. It also takes coloring, gilding, and polishing well. The ease of workability made alabaster a perfect medium for mass production and export.

Tour possibilities:

Winterlights (This piece is included in the Winterlights brochure.)

Treasures of European Art

Concerning the Spiritual in Art

Absolutely Fabulous: Highlights of the MIA collection

Resources:

Handbook of the Collection, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, p.189

British Museum Website

Victoria and Albert Museum Website

Nottingham Castle Museum Website

ArtsConnected.org.

artsmia.org

Wikipedia