

## CHAPTER 1

### **A NEW BOSCH *EPIPHANY*? *ADORATION OF THE MAGI* REASSEMBLED**

**Larry Silver, University of Pennsylvania**

For Yona Pinson, colleague and friend

Today Hieronymus Bosch is most readily associated with images of Hell and its torments or with the temptation of isolated hermit saints by legions of demons. Among his Gospel subjects, however, Bosch's most popular (and most copied) imagery features the scene of Epiphany. That event, associated with the twelfth night of Christmas season, occurred when the wise men or "Magi" from "the East" (traditionally three in number in visual art) came to Jerusalem, led by the star in the East, to view the King of the Jews, the new-born infant Jesus (*Matthew* 2:1–11). In tribute they brought luxury gifts, fit for a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Although pagans, these foreign kings were the first Gentiles to acknowledge the divinity and royal supremacy of the Christ Child. Their holy relics were later to enjoy special veneration in a magnificent golden shrine from the early thirteenth century created by Nicholas of Verdun, in Cologne Cathedral, the archdiocese of the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup>

During the period of Bosch's early career, Netherlandish visual conventions of the late fifteenth century pictured the Three Magi as representatives of the three ages of mankind (youth, maturity, and old age) as well as the three Old World continents

---

<sup>1</sup> Franz Günter Zehnder, *Die Heiligen Drei Könige: Darstellung und Verehrung* (Cologne: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 1982).

(Africa, Asia, and Europe).<sup>2</sup> Europe, the most senior by virtue of being the first to adopt Christianity, is usually shown as the oldest, white-haired Magus, given the most favorable position, kneeling closest to the Christ Child. Asia usually appears second, although with fewer distinguishing features of skin pigmentation or costume, since figures from that continent were least familiar to Netherlandish painters. Black Africa, however, the youngest and most distinctive member of the trio of Magi as representatives of continents, first appeared only in the last third of the fifteenth century. Bosch himself would readily include a black Magus in his own *Adorations*, though usually as a figure isolated at the margins of the scene.<sup>3</sup>

In the Netherlands, specific representation of one of the three Magi as a black man began around 1470, either with Hans Memling's *Adoration* (Madrid) or else with Hugo van der Goes's *Monforte Altarpiece* (Berlin), which more strongly emphasized the Asian Magus alongside the African black Magus in the overall scene. By the 1480s younger followers of Hugo and Memling – Geertgen tot sint Jans and Gerard David – had already incorporated a black Magus into their own compositions of the Adoration of the Magi.

Contemporary maps, known as T-O maps, showed Jerusalem as the center of the known world, with the three continents converging upon it. In a similar fashion, so too did the three personified kings of “the East” come to signify the central location of

---

<sup>2</sup> The Three Magi enjoyed particular popularity in early sixteenth-century Antwerp, in part because of the conflation of Jerusalem as a central destination with the port city of Brabant as the new central meeting point. See: Dan Ewing, “Magi and Merchants: The Force behind the Antwerp Mannerists’ Adoration Pictures,” *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* (2004/05): 287–291; for Rubens, 296–299.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Leo Koerner, “The Epiphany of the Black Magus circa 1500,” in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 3, *From the “Age of Discovery” to the Age of Abolition*, eds. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7–92, esp. 62–81; Paul H.D. Kaplan, *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985); Joaneath Spicer, ed., *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe* (Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 2012, published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at Walters Art Gallery).

Jesus as the wellspring of the new, true religion, for which these altarpieces were all produced. Both the world dominion of Christianity as well as its adoption by the world's Gentiles are claims imbedded in the developed imagery of the Adoration of the Magi.



Fig. 1: Bosch *Adoration of the Magi* triptych (Madrid, Prado), ca. 1495-97

The most accomplished and familiar Bosch *Adoration of the Magi* triptych (Madrid, Prado) can now be dated. Its donors, discovered by Paul Vandenbroeck, were an Antwerp couple, Peeter Scheyve and Agnes de Schramme.<sup>4</sup> Before 1495 Peeter was still married to Barbara van Woelputte, and Agnes died before 15 January, 1500. Thus the Madrid *Epiphany* by Bosch must have been painted between 1495 and

<sup>4</sup> Paul Vandenbroeck, *Jheronimus Bosch: de verlossing van de Wereld* (Ghent: Ludion, 2003), 176.

1499. Moreover, the Prado wings closely resemble a derivative, lesser, Bosch workshop *Ecce Homo* triptych (Boston Museum of Fine Arts), whose shutter panels present a similar structure, showing patron saints standing above two kneeling donor figures before a deep landscape.<sup>5</sup> We also know the names of the Boston donors, Peter van Os (left outer wing), who married the daughter of Franco van Langel (left inner wing) in 1496, only to lose her to death in 1497, thus dating the picture quite precisely to 1496/97.<sup>6</sup> Bosch's Madrid *Epiphany*, its model, therefore likely dates to before that time, i.e. from around 1497 or even earlier; and because of the link with the Boston triptych, the Prado *Epiphany* can be dated even more precisely to a period between 1495 and 1497.

Yona Pinson has provided the most insightful analysis of the gifts provided by the Magi in Bosch's Prado painting, particularly by the young black Magus. She reveals these offerings to be steeped in evil, even as they are presented to the Christ Child – both in this *Epiphany* as well as in its later adaptation (1564; London, National Gallery) by Pieter Bruegel.<sup>7</sup> Even the omniscient Christ Child seems

---

<sup>5</sup> For the Boston *Ecce Homo*, see: Karel Gerhard Boon, ed., *Jheronimus Bosch* ('s-Hertogenbosch: Hieronymus Bosch Exhibition Foundation, 1967, published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at Noordbrabants Museum), 104–105, no. 27; Colin Eisler, *New England Museums*, vol. 4 of *Corpus de la Peinture des Anciens Pays-Bas Les Primitifs Flamands* (Brussels: Centre national de recherches primitifs flamands, 1961), 33–43.

<sup>6</sup> Godfried C.M. van Dijck, "Peter van Os ontmaskerd: het drieluik van Boston," *De Brabantse Leeuw* 47 (1998): 116–124. I am indebted to Bernard Vermet for this reference.

<sup>7</sup> Yona Pinson, "Bruegel's 1564 *Adoration*: Hidden Meanings of Evil in the Figure of the Old King," *Artibus et historiae* 30 (1994): 109–128. For Bosch's Prado picture, see: Larry Silver, *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: Abbeville, 2006), 168–175; Debra Higgs Strickland, "Picturing Antichrist and Others in the Prado *Epiphany* by Hieronymus Bosch," in *Others and Outcasts in Early Modern Europe: Picturing the Social Margins*, ed. Tom Nichols (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 11–35; Lotte Brand Philip, "The Prado *Epiphany* by Jerome Bosch," *Art Bulletin* 35 (1953): 267–293. On the ornamented crown of the aged Magus, placed in the foreground directly before the Madonna (and closest to the viewer), Bosch shows a pair of naked figures holding up a circular mount, which looks like a convex mirror but might depict a dark gemstone. Atop that crown a pair of gluttonous birds holds large red fruits in their mouths (redolent of Bosch's sensuous world of sin in the central panel of his *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Prado, Madrid). Even the golden gift behind the helmet, a sculpted scene of the Sacrifice of Isaac – traditional medieval typology for the Crucifixion – rests upon the backs of nefarious black toads, an unambiguous symbol of evil and pestilence (See: Renilde Vervoort, "The Pestilent Toad: The Significance of the Toad in the Works of Bosch," in *Hieronymus Bosch: New Insights into his Life and Work*, eds. Jos Koldeweij and Bernard Vermet (Rotterdam: Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, 2001), 145–151). The crown of the middle Magus,

unaware of these hidden threats of present evil, so the viewer must be unusually vigilant in order to notice them.

Moreover, the Prado *Epiphany* remained Bosch's most popular image for copies, some preserved without the wings, while three others use the original triptych form.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, this subject forces an attentive, pious viewer to reflect on the very act of seeing and believing, just as the three Magi had to perceive divinity even when hidden within the form of the humble flesh of the infant Christ Child.

Many features of this Bosch Madrid painting are indeed conventional, starting with its triptych format.<sup>9</sup> Visual attention focuses on the foreground Madonna and Child, who sit at the right side of the central panel, separated visually by a bare branch that scarcely supports the roof of this humble, ramshackle stable. This isolated holy pair of figures forms the object of devotion for the Magi, who advance from the left edge, leading the viewer's eye readily to the Madonna and Child. On her lap, against a dark blue mantle, suggestive of her future state of mourning, the Magi's true object of devotion, the Christ Child, sits upon a bright white sheet, not only a swaddling cloth but also an anticipation of the eventual funeral shroud of the Deposition, the very relic that would come to be known as the Shroud of Turin.<sup>10</sup>

---

held by an ominous figure in the doorway of the stable (identified by Brand Philip as the Antichrist), also features a row of demonic figures, including apes and birds. Another item in the hand of Bosch's black Magus echoes this same imagery: atop an orb in his hand a golden bird with a red fruit perches above an unidentified scene, presumably also typological, of offerings by a trio of soldiers before a king. The robe hem of the black Magus reveals ornament trim with hybrid monsters, birds with human heads, and even more large fruit. These monstrous hybrids were understood to live at the farthest margins of the known world, emblems of the uncivilized and strange, as Strickland elucidates.

<sup>8</sup> Gerd Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch: Die Rezeption seiner Kunst im frühen 16. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Mann, 1980), 82–85, figs. 13–20; Roger Van Schoute, Hélène Verougstraete, and Carmen Garrido, "Bosch and his Sphere: Technique," in *Hieronymus Bosch: New Insights into his Life and Work*, 111–112.

<sup>9</sup> Lynn Jacobs, *Opening Doors: The Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 206–209.

<sup>10</sup> John Belden Scott, *Architecture for the Shroud: Relic and Ritual in Turin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), esp. 9–16; the Shroud was featured in works by painters such as Caravaggio and Rubens in their images of Christ being lowered from the cross or laid in the tomb.

Bosch deliberately makes the holy figures of his Prado *Epiphany* less pretty and more distinctly ordinary as humans. In contrast to the courtly markers of heaven in many fifteenth-century Flemish imagers of Madonna and Child, they are not surrounded by angels, haloes, glowing lights, or even jeweled garments, which all conventionally signify the supernatural. Moreover, Bosch presents the Madonna and Child in the foreground, directly before the gaze of the viewer, who assumes a role akin to the Magi. Rather than kneeling, like the European Magus, Bosch's black Magus stands erect in a white cloak along the left edge of the central panel, farthest away from the Virgin and Child, while the other two Magi appear in the very center foreground.



Fig. no. 2: after Hieronymus Bosch, *Adoration of the Magi*, triptych, Moonen Collection

The Prado *Epiphany* was a mature formulation by Bosch, who must have become a master in 's-Hertogenbosch around 1475.<sup>11</sup> Most of these elements,

---

<sup>11</sup> Pater Gerlach, "De bronnen voor het leven en het werk van Jeroen Bosch: Bronnen voor zijn werk," *Hieronymus Bosch: Opstellen over leven en werk*, ed. P. M. le Blanc (The Hague: SDU uitgeverij, 1988), 55–62; Jos Koldewij, "Hieronymus Bosch and his City," in *Hieronymus Bosch: The*

however, had already appeared in a simpler, smaller work, presumably an earlier Bosch composition, which has been known to scholars until now only from several copies and variants, such as the Moonen Collection *Adoration of the Magi* triptych.<sup>12</sup> The clearest, best painted version of the central *Adoration*, but the least consistent with an otherwise uniform composition revealed in the other copies, is a preserved *Adoration of the Magi* triptych (Anderlecht, Maison d'Erasmus; on loan from the Collegiate Church of Saints Peter and Guido).<sup>13</sup> However, the missing Bosch original wing panels differ among the several copies. In the Anderlecht central panel the humble stall (akin to the later Madrid structure) also appears, supported beside the Madonna by the same bare branch, but with its overall spatial depth flattened out. In most copies, however, the setting does not resemble the Prado *Epiphany* so closely; instead, like the Moonen version, it consistently presents a ruined Classical structure with a rounded stone arch, flanked by a pair of supporting columns and further marked by a hanging red curtain, which provides a visual suggestion of a cloth of honor behind the Virgin and Child.

In most copies, particularly the Moonen (again, that of Anderlecht differs), the main figures of the composition are clearly positioned. Mary and the Child now appear left of center, with the black Magus in the front left corner, almost behind her, but still separated visually by both a curtain and a column. Opposite Mary, to the viewer's right, the other two Magi approach; once more the European Magus, closest to the center and the holy figures, kneels, backed by a standing bearded king from

---

*Complete Paintings and Drawings*, eds. A. M. Koldeweij, Paul Vandenbroek, and Bernard Vermet (Rotterdam: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 20–83, esp. 53–56.

<sup>12</sup> Koldeweij, "Hieronymus Bosch and his City," 67–68; Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 102–111, figs. 43–51, a fine discussion, which anticipates much of this article, devoted to the rediscovered missing center panel. He, however, is disinclined to give firm attribution to Bosch of the basic composition because of the unusual spatial configuration common to the copies. For the Moonen Collection *Adoration*, now in 's-Hertogenbosch, Noord-brabants Museum, see: Boon, *Jheronimus Bosch*, 80–81, no. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Boon, *Jheronimus Bosch*, 78–79, no. 13.

Asia. Outside the precinct of the stall, a pair of curious shepherds peer over the wall to the viewer's right.

The European Magus has placed his tall red hat (matching his robes) on the ground as he kneels to offer his gift of gold in a shiny gilded beaker. Behind him stands the Asian Magus, also bareheaded; he holds his flat coronet and a scepter in his left hand, while he extends a golden *nef*, a prestigious and expensive ship-shaped present that contained spices and was closely associated with court luxury.<sup>14</sup> As Pinson observed for the Bruegel *Adoration* of 1564, where a similar ship appears, this puzzling gift may allude to the sea transport and celestial navigation by the Magi on their way to Bethlehem, perhaps even intended to serve as a votive offering for safe arrival, although the ship is also a traditional symbol of the Church. In the case of the early Bosch *Adoration*, however, a pair of cupids on the *nef* flanks a central vegetal container (again redolent of the fecund profusion of (over-)growth in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*), thus clearly suggesting signs of evil.

Once more the African Magus, standing in the lower left foreground, offers a contrast, as the "odd man out." Like the Prado *Epiphany*, the robes of the black Magus in this early Bosch *Adoration* also display the same two Old Testament scenes, accented in color against the white fabric: above, a horned Moses with the Tablets of

---

<sup>14</sup> A similar *nef*, probably used as a salt-cellar, appears on the feast table of Duke Jean de Berry in the January page by the Limbourg Brothers of the *Tres Riches Heures* (Chantilly); Jean-Pierre van Rijn, "Precious Metalwork in Gold Leaf: Everyday Luster at the Court of Jean de Berry, as Depicted by the Limbourg Brothers," in *The Limbourg Brothers: Nijmegen Masters at the French Court 1400–1416*, eds. Rob Dücker and Pieter Roelofs (Nijmegen: Ludion 2005, published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at Museum Het Valkhof Nijmegen), 166–169, figs. 3, 5, 7.



the Law; below, the Dance around the Golden Calf (*Exodus* 32).<sup>15</sup> This juxtaposition contrasts true religion and an invisible God with idolatry and the worship of strange or foreign gods, in violation of both the First and Second Commandments. The heretical figures of the dancers are nude and frenzied, like the foreign dancers of contrasting “Moorish,” erotic steps, known as the *moresca*.<sup>16</sup> Once more the larger theme of true spiritual insight contrasts the superficial, worldly sensory vision; the same problem is posed when the Magi stand in the presence of a humble Child who is God-made-human. In similar fashion, the silver gift in the hand of the black Magus too holds ambiguity, like his gift, myrrh, also used for funerals. Its rounded shape echoes his silver crown, like a domed tower, also reinforcing the fact that he is the only Magus who is not bareheaded before the holy figures. His orb in the Anderlecht triptych shows a kneeling nude man with two upright companions before a seated monarch with a scepter; in other versions the decoration is more difficult to read. Once more, as in the Madrid *Epiphany*, the lower hem of the black Magus’s garment depicts monsters with ripe fruit. One distinctive feature of the African Magus’s garment, present in all copies as well as in the Anderlecht one and later repeated in the Prado *Epiphany*, is its exotic, presumably “Moorish” pendulous sleeves with tassels. By implication, the black king, pigmented with the color of darkness, still stands closest

---

<sup>15</sup> Rare as a subject in itself, this combination of Golden Calf and Moses formed the subject of a small triptych by Lucas van Leyden (c. 1530; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum); Jan Piet Filedt Kok, “*The Dance around the Golden Calf*” by Lucas van Leyden (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2008). On the horned Moses in Christian art, see: Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1970).

<sup>16</sup> Also known in England as the “Morris” dance; Christian Poché, *Dictionnaire des musiques et danses traditionnelles de la Méditerranée* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 262–265; I am indebted to Barbara Fuchs for this reference. An engraving from the era of Bosch by Israhel van Meckenem shows a *morisca*, with a woman standing in the center of a circle as a group of three rival men and a costumed fool dance around her in frenzy as they compete for her attentions and favor; Thea Vignau-Wilberg, *Hofse minne en burgerlijke liefde in de prentkunst rond 1500* (Leiden: Nijhoff, 1983), 31–37; Achim Riether, *Israhel van Meckenem (um 1440/45–1503)* (Munich: Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, 2006, published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name), 265, no. 126.

to a world of idolatry and false worship and thus apart from his peers from the other two continents.



Fig. 3: Hieronymus Bosch and workshop, *Adoration of the Magi*, triptych, reassembled (center: Paris, private collection; wings: Philadelphia Museum of Art)

These elements comprise the consistent costume and gift details contained in all copies of the center panel of the missing Bosch *Adoration* triptych. Today at last, however, we can consult the original lost central panel, which has now been found in a European private collection.<sup>17</sup> Its authenticity has been secured by the prominent alterations evident upon close inspection of the work. Visible *pentimenti* include a proposed beard for the kneeling European Magus, eventually omitted, which never features in any of the other copies. In addition, underdrawing on the panel is

<sup>17</sup> Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 109–110, 260, no. 43a, fig. 45; formerly Kleinberger Gallery (1929); discussed in reconstruction, *The Worcester-Philadelphia Exhibition of Flemish Painting* (Worcester, MS: Worcester Art Museum, 1939), no. 36. Measurements given 70 x 52 cm (30 x 22 in). Recent measurements by the current owner are given as 70.7 x 55.1. Current dendrochronology of the work at the Bosch Research and Conservation Project in 's-Hertogenbosch has estimated that the wood of the tree would be from around 1502 or afterwards (information from owner). A copy of the entire triptych, formerly Moonen coll., Vught, now at 's-Hertogenbosch, Noordbrabants Museum, has a center panel, measured at 75 x 63 cm., according to Boon, *Jheronimus Bosch*, 80–81, no. 14. However, it measured 69 x 53.2 cm. in a recent inspection. Its wood is clearly posthumous, c. 1545. For the Anderlecht triptych, see 78–79, no. 13.

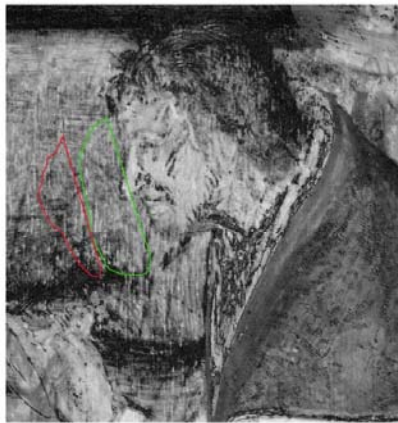
particularly visible in the reds of the curtain and the cape of the European Magus, as well as preparation for the figure of the standing Asian Magus. Such preparatory composition could, of course, also indicate detailed instructions for workshop execution by skilled assistants, but at the very least it suggests a direct involvement by Bosch himself in the production process. Infrared examination also indicates the alteration of the Asian Magus from a profile view to the adopted three-quarter pose retained in the several copies, other than that of the Anderlecht.



Fig. 4: The Asian Magus (detail of Fig. 3)

One reservation in respect of quality might be raised, particularly regarding the inferior execution of several faces, notably those of Madonna and Child, but also of the Asian Magus and the onlooking shepherds in the upper right; however, those features now show clear results of damage sustained during earlier restorations to areas of thinner skin tones, in all likelihood the result of spot cleaning by an indifferent conservator. The whites of the veil of the Virgin and of the cloth beneath the Christ Child show considerable abrasion. The gilded orb of the African Magus has lost its sharp definition, so that this important theme can no longer be read. Both the

faces and costumes of the African and European Magi, however, clearly remain in better condition, and they show the fluid brushwork and thin paint layers characteristic of Bosch's own handling. All of the underdrawing and shifts of original composition point to the originality of this newly-discovered version, and the underdrawings at least suggest the work of Bosch himself, even if some surface elements indicate workshop execution (not to mention weaker restoration).



WAVE LENGTH 400-480-900



DAY LIGHT 6,500°K

Fig. 5: detail of Fig. 3: Balthazar (European Magus) Head



WAVE LENGTH Diff900-800x.9



DAY LIGHT 6.500°K

Fig. 6: Adoration of the Golden Calf (detail of Fig. 3, center, African Magus)





WAVE LENGTH 520-560-760



DAY LIGHT 6,500°K

Fig. 7: Head of Virgin [detail of Fig. 3]

Additionally, two authentic Bosch fragments in the Philadelphia Museum (John G. Johnson Coll.) have already enjoyed wide acceptance as Bosch originals by such connoisseurs as Max Friedländer and Ludwig von Baldass, who considered them as part of an early work. These works have been suggested as surviving parts of the original wings of the lost Bosch *Adoration* triptych.<sup>18</sup> The left wing, *Two Shepherds*, can easily be confirmed as matching the center panel: it includes an architectural feature that continues the structure also visible at the left edge in the center panel, above the head of the standing African Magus. Behind that black Magus and above

<sup>18</sup> Max Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. 5, *Geertgen tot Sint Jans and Jerome Bosch* (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1969), 82, no. 70; Ludwig von Baldass, *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1960), 239; See also: Charles de Tolnay, *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: Reynal, 1965), 96–97, 380. Dendrochronology was not possible for these small fragments, so their scientific dating remains conjectural. They were acquired together. Each measures 33 x 21.6 cm. (13 x 8-1/2 in.).

the shepherds in the architectural fragment extends a consistent set of arches: its main element, an arcade, is decorated with characteristically ominous Boschian monsters – apelike and prominent, placed upon the capitals and functioning like caryatids supporting globes. Another characteristic Bosch painting touch on the *Two Shepherds* is an added figure, a thinly painted dog beside the shepherds, whose body is now so fully transparent that it reveals the dark leggings of the rear shepherd through its fur in a *pentimento*, another sign of originality. Both the ox and ass behind the shepherds under the arcade also compare well to other Bosch animals, such as the ass in the Prado *Epiphany*. Moreover, the color harmonies of browns and grays accord well with the mature achievement of such Bosch works as the Prado *Epiphany* or the Rotterdam *Peddler* tondo.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> The Rotterdam *Peddler* oak panel has been assigned an earliest felling date of 1486 by Peter Klein, “Dendrochronological Analysis of Works by Hieronymus Bosch and his Followers,” in Koldeweij, Vernet, and van Kooij, *Hieronymus Bosch: The Complete Paintings*, 125; an earlier date around 1502, for its painting was assigned, with 1488 being an earliest dating; see: Friso Lammertse, *Van Eyck to Bruegel: Dutch and Flemish Painting in the Collection of the Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, 1994), 91.



Fig. 8: *The Two Shepherds*, left wing, Philadelphia Museum (John G. Johnson Coll.)

Further confirmation of the fit between the Philadelphia *Shepherds* and the rediscovered Bosch *Adoration* comes from the Moonen copy of the lost triptych. It reveals that for the left shutter of the early *Adoration of the Magi* triptych the shepherds provided the principal figures, originally situated above a small bridge and below a tall building, whose main doorway opened with a cluster of other shepherds behind its threshold. Part of that building survives, trimmed, at the left edge of the extant Philadelphia wing fragment. The copy also suggests that above the arcade a continuous landscape of background hills linked this original left wing to the visible distance in the center panel. Thus, where links can be established, the new-found



*Adoration* accords well with its Philadelphia shutter fragment of *Two Shepherds* as well as with the evidence of the missing portions of the left wing.



Fig. 9: The *Retinue of the Magi*, Right wing, Philadelphia Museum (John G. Johnson Coll.)

Connections to the remaining Philadelphia fragment from the other wing, *Retinue of the Magi*, are more uncertain, since there are no obvious shared features

and since the spatial coherence of the background row of trees appears inconsistent with the other portions of the original triptych. A few details do coincide, however, notably the stovepipe red hat of the figure at the right edge, which echoes the hat removed and placed before the European Magus. This Philadelphia fragment depicts a crowded cavalcade of mounted riders in exotic costumes with relatively grotesque features. These figures closely resemble the tormentors of Christ in the original wing panel of Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), usually considered an early work in the artist's oeuvre. The Philadelphia figures certainly could be regarded as onlookers or witnesses to a similar Passion scene, such as a Crucifixion, because they appear outdoors before a stand of trees.

What the 's-Hertogenbosch/Moonen copy reveals, however, is how this group with its upraised banners formed the right wing of the dismembered triptych. These unattractive individuals should thus be regarded correctly as the *Retinue of the Magi*, the exotic figures in the newly-discovered central panel. Besides their hats, their insignia, and weaponry connected to costumes, particularly the swords and daggers borne by the Magi in the center panel, their fluttering pennons (the copy reveals that a third one at the right edge was cut off from the surviving fragment) suggest an heraldic display, not to mention the significant number, three, which matches the number of the three kings. One background figure gestures upward towards a feature that cannot be explained from the fragment. His intended target lies high in the center panel: the star of Bethlehem, visible through a central hole in the roof above the holy figures – and consistent across all the copies. Thus the evidence of the 's-Hertogenbosch/Moonen copy clearly permits a reconstructed, relatively early *Adoration of the Magi* triptych from the Bosch workshop, which should include both

Philadelphia fragments as the figural remnants of the original wings and the new centerpiece (private collection).

The meaning of the grotesque features for Bosch's Philadelphia *Retinue of the Magi* becomes clearer if one examines later *Adoration* images, which comprehendingly build upon the model of Bosch: the 1526 Quinten Massys's *Adoration* (New York, Metropolitan Museum) and Pieter Bruegel's 1564 London *Adoration*.<sup>20</sup> Close inspection of the Bruegel *Adoration*, of both the faces of the Magi as well as those of their followers, reveals simplified but ugly features, verging on caricature. For example, the two heads closest to the black Magus include a profile of a turbaned man, suggesting paganism or the contemporary heathenism of Islam. Another, wide-eyed figure wears spectacles, emblematic of his literal but also spiritual short-sightedness. The gaping mouths of some soldiers in the upper right and the stare of an armored figure behind the Virgin suggest incredulity, surprise, or lack of comprehension concerning this awesome encounter with the holy figures. Massys's earlier *Adoration* offers a crowd of swarthy, caricatured heads in the upper right, where the retinue of the Magi offer their own range of responses, including a scowl of hostility as well as a simple gaze of rapt adoration. Just as with Bosch's secondary crowds, these ancillary figures generally remain uncomprehending of the spiritual revelation before them.

In the rediscovered center panel, the role of St. Joseph is notably minimized. The left wing of the Prado *Epiphany* places St. Joseph in the background margin engaged in a menial domestic task, washing diapers. In this new central panel, a tiny figure of an older Saint Joseph is placed well behind the Madonna and Child in a deep interior chamber, where he sits in profile before a fire and performs the same menial

---

<sup>20</sup> Both Bruegel and Massys are compared to the Bosch Prado *Epiphany* in Larry Silver, *Pieter Bruegel* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2011), 240–245.

task, making him easily overlooked as a mundane servant. However, an adze in a log just inside the doorway shows that he has laid aside his own professional carpentry tools to tend to the diapers, so the figure is thereby designated explicitly as Joseph.

In the Anderlecht triptych, by contrast, Joseph is given greater prominence in the foreground of the left wing, but his role is the same: facing the center panel in profile, he has laid aside his tools after gathering firewood, and he stoops to fill a bucket of water in preparation for heating porridge to nurture the Child. In the same wing a background angel is drying the swaddling clothes by a fire, while a similar pot of porridge heats beside the hearth. Whether the Anderlecht work goes back to another Bosch composition is impossible to determine, but the humility of the holy figures and their common humanity remains consistent across the new-found central *Adoration* as well as the Anderlecht variant.

Thus, we can now reconstruct substantial surviving remnants of a lost Bosch workshop *Adoration of the Magi* triptych, starting with the newly-recovered center panel (European private collection), now definitively complemented by the main actors from the two wings, preserved in a pair of fragments (Philadelphia): *Two Shepherds* and *Retinue of the Magi*. Evidence for Bosch shop's authenticity (allowing for damage to the faces of the Madonna and Child in the center panel) and originality appears in the form of *pentimenti* and underdrawings, some easily visible to the naked eye. Close relationships to forms and content of other Bosch works, especially his datable Prado *Epiphany*, reinforce the religious meaning and significance of this reconstructed triptych within the artist's generally harsh vision of an obtuse, spiritually blind humanity, even in the face of spiritual revelation. The particular figure of the black Magus with his negative costume decoration of the Golden Calf scene shows Bosch's distinctive presentation of a Gospel narrative with overtones of

widespread sinfulness, specifically idolatry. All these elements demand the close attention and religious self-consciousness of pious beholders, made increasingly aware of their own limitations and shortcomings in relation to the undistinguished, truly humble holy figures. If today we remain uncertain as to how much workshop execution made up the output of the Bosch oeuvre – for we no longer regard this unique artist as a lonely genius who worked unaided<sup>21</sup> – we can at least be confident that the newly reconstructed triptych with its original center left that work-shop as an authentic “Bosch” creation, whose content accords with other works by the same painter on this crucial theme of the Adoration of the Magi. The ongoing work of the Bosch Research Project, which will culminate in a major retrospective exhibition cycle in 2016 (‘s-Hertogenbosch and Madrid) will elucidate more clearly how the underdrawing hand and related comparisons from “Group Bosch” help to identify the precise authorship of this important reconstructed triptych. But there can be no doubt that the serious iconographic content and ultimate vision of this small devotional work stem from the unique imagination and from the lifetime workshop of Bosch himself.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ron Spronk, *All by Himself? Remarks on Painting Technique and Attributions in Regard to Hieronymus Bosch* (Nijmegen: Stichting Nijmeegse, 2011).