

The Holy Family with Two Saints,

a work from the workshop of
the Master of the Antwerp Adoration



Catheline Périér–D'leteren

**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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Dressed in dark blue tunic and ample red madder gown, the seated Virgin holds the naked Child Jesus in her lap [fig. 1]¹. The Child leans towards a plate of cherries proffered by Saint Catherine, robed in an elegant brocade dress and a sumptuous cap with wheel earflaps in precious metals. Standing behind Mary, Saint Joseph humbly doffs his hat while Saint Barbara, angled towards him, sits with her back to the spectator on a stone bench next to an apple and some cherries. In one hand she holds an open book and in the other a peacock feather, while she contemplates the holy group. Standing before a hybrid building that boasts late Gothic and Renaissance features, an angel with wings unfolded plays the lute. To the left of the doorway rises a stone column crowned with a gilt capital providing support for a *putto*, while the wall of the palace is adorned with a sculpted frieze evoking the pagan world. Naked figures beat off a dragon with a mace while a man and woman, also naked, pull serpents from the branches of a tree². A fine landscape bathed in bluish light unfolds to provide a fitting background for the scene. In the middle ground, the thick trunk of an oak tree stands out against the sky. Small figures are visible walking amongst the buildings, by the pond and up on the hill.

Although the work has remained intact because the four unpainted edges and the overlap have all been preserved, the finely balanced composition is quite distinctive. The figures of the saints are placed very close to the side edges of the panel and their robes are cut off towards the bottom, suggesting that the painting may have been part of a group, perhaps a series of paintings forming the predella of a retable. Indeed the same compositional layout is found in other retables from Antwerp, including *The Life of the Virgin* from Lübeck by the Master of 1518³. It could equally be part of a side panel on a retable with two superimposed scenes, as is the case with the one in Lübeck⁴.

1 The Baltic oak panel (55.6 x 40.7 cm) comprises two vertical elements (31 and 24.7 cm) joined at the corners and reinforced with original inlaid spigots visible in the x-ray. On the back, the fibres of the high quality wood are regular. On the front, the four borders are unpainted and there is a fairly thick overlap. A few dashes of vermilion appear at some points on the unpainted borders. This is probably from the gilding of the frame, which is later. Although a line engraved on the paint surface marks the limit of the composition, at roughly a centimetre from the overlap, the elements of the painting go beyond it. A Jado Collection label with the number 26 on it is still on the back, together with another with the reference J.186, which is the number that figures in the Plasencia catalogue from 1932, p. 49.

2 It is a mythological scene with no specific literary source, evoking pagan Antiquity. Didier Martens, for whose help I am most grateful, the reliefs would appear to represent the pagan world, associated with a barbarism that Christianity would conquer.

3 The measurements of the paintings in the predella of the Lübeck retable (Marienkirche) are similar (45.7 x 40 cm) to the size of the Bilbao panel.

4 Hoffmann 1998. This type of composition in which the figures are shown in half-body portrayals is also typical of the Antwerp triptychs showing in particular the Adoration of the Magi. However, in the Bilbao panel there is no trace of a hinge that would prove that it was once part of a triptych or any other similar group.



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1. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop (active first third of the 16th century)
The Holy Family with Two Saints, c. 1520
Oil on oak panel, 64.3 x 55.7 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/79

The Department of Restoration & Conservation at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum restored *The Holy Family with Two Saints* in January 1996⁵. As the support and ground layers were in good condition⁶, work was limited to cleaning the paint surface, under a thick layer of oxidized varnish, particularly dense at the edges of the painting and in the dark areas. This varnish made it extraordinarily difficult to "read" the composition, while masking over the subtle technical details of the work's execution. Some retouches partially covering the original material were removed, and small losses were filled in with watercolour using an illusionist method. Then a new layer of varnish was applied. Also restored was the old carved frame, of high quality although not original⁷.

Part of the Laureano de Jado bequest, the painting was added to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum collection in 1927. It was identified as the work of Cornelis Engebrechtsz⁸, a painter from Leiden, an attribution maintained continuously to the present day⁹. Xesqui Castañer argued persuasively in favour of this attribution in a groundbreaking essay in 1991; in 1995, she again defended the attribution through a comparison of the work in Bilbao with other works usually attributed to this Master in the scientific literature¹⁰.

Castañer draws particular attention to the analogies between this composition and a painting on the same theme in a similar format in a private collection in The Hague¹¹. Above all she finds some, to my mind, rather unconvincing likenesses in the typology of the Virgin and the Child and the landscape. Castañer does however point up major differences in the figure of Saint Joseph and the architecture, finding parallels in the shapes and several details with other works by the Dutch master, in particular with a Holy Family that had appeared on the Berlin art market¹².

In my opinion, a comparative study of the two Holy Families, one in Bilbao and the other in The Hague, reveals more divergences than likenesses. The way the composition is constructed and, in particular, how the group of figures is integrated in the latter, and the way they relate to the landscape and the architecture, are all the result of a different approach. The reciprocal positions, individual attitudes and expressions have few points in common. Only the lapidary style of the draperies are repeated but, even there, the drawing of the folds on the Virgin's robes and those of Saint Catherine is drier, more arid, in the version in The Hague. This type of drapery, much influenced by Dürer's treatment popularized by prints, is typical of many paintings of the time and should not therefore be used on its own as a criterion for attribution.

In my own view, *The Holy Family with Two Saints* in Bilbao is not a Dutch work, but rather a Flemish one: I am persuaded by the general atmosphere that emanates from the work and the style it is couched in, related to Antwerp Mannerism and, more specifically, to a group of painters active around 1520, to whom Max J. Friedländer has attributed conventional names¹³. We need to remember the names of the Masters of the Antwerp Adoration and Crucifixion, the Master of the Von Groote Adoration and the Pseudo-Bles. Some details linking it with Jan de Beer and the Master of 1518 are also detectable.

5 The Rotary Club of Bilbao and the Fundación Esclerosis Múltiple Eugenia Epalza Fundazioa financed the restoration, after which the painting featured in an exhibition in 1996.

6 Two original spigots were added to the upper and lower parts of the joint to strengthen the adhesion of the two panels.

7 Paloma Sánchez-Lassa restored the painting and José Luis Merino Gorospe the frame.

8 Cornelis Engebrechtsz was born and died in Leiden (1468–1533). It seems likely that he trained in Colyn de Coter's studio before starting to work in Antwerp and setting up his own studio. See Pelink 1948–1949; Friedländer 1973, p. 79.

9 Catálogo de las obras... 1932, p. 49; Lasterra 1969, p. 37, cat. 79; Bilbao 1998, no. 277; Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao... 2006, p. 28 (fact file by Ana Sánchez-Lassa).

10 Castañer 1991, pp. 9–11; Castañer 1995, pp. 36–39.

11 The painting in The Hague measures 50 x 50 cm; the one in Bilbao, 64.3 x 55.7 cm. In his 1991 article, Xesqui Castañer identifies The Hague resident T. Hermsen as its last known owner (Castañer 1991, p. 11).

12 Ibid, p. 39.

13 Friedländer 1915; Friedländer 1974, p. 11.



2. Cornelis Engebrectsz (1468–1533)

Triptych of the Crucifixion, c. 1510

Oil on panel, 198.5 x 146 cm (central panel); 15 x 109/99.5 cm (predella); 182.5 x 66 cm (left wing); 182.5 x 66 cm (right wing)

Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, Netherlands

Inv. no. S 93

Unfortunately, these anonymous masters have not yet been identified with any certainty, so we can do little more than deal in hypotheses. Godehard Hoffmann suggests Adriaen van Overbeck as the Master of the Antwerp Crucifixion¹⁴. Paul Philippot¹⁵ proposes seeing a monogram in the letter G shown in the lower left angle of the central panel of *The Adoration of the Magi* in the Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, discovered during restoration. In consequence he calls this Master the G Monogrammist. However, this interpretation was immediately rejected and the name has found no favour with subsequent researchers¹⁶.

Nevertheless, as a group, and this applies equally to Cornelis Engebrectsz, the artists involved resorted to compositions and a generalized, stereotyped formal repertoire that makes attributions very difficult, there being so many likenesses between the works.

Signed works by Engebrectsz, such as the triptychs of the Crucifixion [fig. 2] and the Lamentation in the Stedelijk Museum in Leiden, tend to feature figures in agitated, gyratory movement with the body projected

14 Hoffmann 1998. After a comparative analysis of the underdrawing and the style of the retables of *Saint Anne* and *Kempen* by Adriaen van Overbeck with the Brussels triptych, Hoffmann concludes that there was no direct relation that might justify it being a work by the Master or his studio (p. 202).

15 Philippot 1956. An attempt to identify the Master and interpret the monogram can be found in Vanaise 1958.

16 Peter van den Brink sees it as a simple, extraneous brushstroke. Examination of this "monogram" led me to the same conclusion. Vanaise, taking up Philippot's thesis, researched the painters figuring in the Guild of St. Luke's in Antwerp with a tendency to use a G monogram. See Vanaise 1958, pp. 132–144.



3. Master of the Antwerp Adoration (active first third of the 16th century)
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi, c. 1519–1520
 Oil on panel, 29 x 22 cm (central panel); 29 x 8.5 cm (wings)
 Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp
 Inv. no. 208-210



4. Master of the Antwerp Adoration (active first third of the 16th century)
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi, c. 1519–1520
 Oil on panel, 142.5 x 114 (central panel); 143 x 54 cm (left wing); 142 x 52 cm (right wing)
 Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels
 Inv. no. 336

forwards and the back curved or inclined backwards, the head in diagonal. These characteristics were also visible in the retable of *The Gathering of the Manna* in Berlin¹⁷. All these works contain identical motifs, including broken-off or tortuously shaped rocks and thick cloud.

What surprises us about *The Holy Family with Two Saints* in Bilbao, on the other hand, is the serenity and equilibrium of the composition and the intimate expressions of the figures portrayed, which at first sight relate it to the Flemish painters of the 15th century, although it is grouped with the Mannerist movement in Antwerp. Indeed, most analogies are to be found with the works that Max J. Friedländer attributes to the Master of the Antwerp Adoration¹⁸. Friedländer includes first five and then nine paintings under this patronymic associated with the *Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi* in the Antwerp museum [fig. 3], which to date is, together with the one in Brussels [fig. 4], the standard work of reference for any attributions to this master¹⁹. A further reference is a Holy Family whose whereabouts are currently unknown [fig. 5]²⁰.

Before embarking on a detailed analysis of the Holy Family in Bilbao, we should perhaps first consider briefly the similarities between this painting and the "lost" Holy Family.

The shape of Mary's face is similar, and there is the same disproportion between her ample bust and the small thin body of the Child. The drapery of the gown are also shown front on, with similar, deep lapidary-looking folds. The knee can be made out beneath the fabric. In both works, Saint Joseph, shown in a typology deriving from Pieter Coecke and his studio, is placed slightly behind the group; Saint Catherine is sumptuously dressed and the sharp-winged angels take up a Mannerist pose recalling the angels painted by Jan de Beer. The painstakingly executed architecture shown in diagonal is also hybrid in style. Finally, cottages nestle in an attractive landscape with trees.

A close analysis of the style and technique in the Bilbao Holy Family provides a clear insight into the way the painter worked, facilitating a comparison of the observable features with those in the surviving works usually attributed to the Master of the Antwerp Adoration or his studio.

Although under analysis the painting technique is rapid, deriving from repetitive systems, the overall effect of the painting is one of great care. Saint Catherine's brocade tunic²¹ is densely rendered [fig. 6]. A series of fine yellow lines accentuated by small touches of round impasto, or simple dots, can be clearly seen within the floral motifs traced flat on the largely unmodulated brown background of the fabric. This the painter creates a kind of finely organized graphic mesh in the lights, clearly visible in the x-ray [fig. 7]. In the middle tones he replaces the yellow threads with pink ones, using changing tones for the dress and the buffed sleeves. On a pink layer, he applies blue in a very thin layer in *frottis* [fig. 8]. The same technique can be seen in the musician angel's wings, although faster execution was achieved through dynamic brushstrokes of colour applied on backgrounds in a variety of tones [fig. 9]. This way of working the paint while still wet is repeated in the blue of the landscape. The stratigraphy of Mary's red gown has a classical look. Comprising red mad-

17 This retable, which belonged to the Gemäldegalerie at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Dahlem, was destroyed. See Friedländer 1973, plates 56/57.

18 See Friedländer 1974.

19 On the Brussels work, see note 15. For the Antwerp work, see Brink 2005, no. 69. Interestingly, until the early 20th century, this triptych was attributed to painters from the northern Low Countries, including Engebrechtsz. Hoffmann's essay (see note 14) once again sees the Holy Family as the work of Adriaen van Overbeck's studio (p. 275). I do not share this opinion.

20 Friedländer 1974, plate 59.

21 Although the clumsy positioning of the saint's bosom in respect of the rest of her body tends to go unnoticed at first sight, it shows up the painter's weak points. There is an identical silhouette on the Queen of Sheba portrayed on the side panel of a triptych in the Art Institute of Chicago (inv. no. 1937.127) [fig. 38] which Martha Wolff associates with the production of the Master of the Antwerp Adoration of the Magi. See Wolff 2004. My grateful thanks are due to Ms. Wolff for kindly sending me her article.



5. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
(active first third of the 16th century)
The Holy Family
Present whereabouts unknown



6. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Saint Catherine's brocade (detail)



7. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
X-radiography



8-9. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Sleeve of Saint Catherine's tunic and
Angel musician (details)



10. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Stratigraphy of a sample taken from the Virgin's red gown
 1. White ground comprising calcium carbonate (75 µm)
 2. Red comprising vermilion (12 mm)
 3. Red glaze comprising organic red lake (10 mm)
 4. Repaint (6 mm)



11. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 The Virgin's hand (detail)

der glazes on vermilion [fig. 10], it looks like a flat surface except in the highlights, which were achieved by a light, striated white layer. Several fine lines of lead white repeat the design of some folds on the surface.

Under the x-ray, the flesh tones, charged with brush-worked white, give the image "heterogeneous" modeling, which the partial wearing away of the paint layer accentuates in the Virgin's face. On the surface, it looks smooth except in the touches of light on the forehead and the profile of the nose, as the painter makes fine use of glazes to make a harmonious whole. The shadowed areas of the faces and necks are bluish or brown, and traces of the brush are equally perceptible here. Thick lips are profiled with a madder line and the treatment of the eyes is highly specific, notable for the opacity of the very large, black pupils, crossed by the lines of the eyelashes. Highlighting the edge of the eye is a thick dark brown line. Note also the rapid rendering of the tulle, of which only the outlines are traced by a white line, the effect of the fabric being achieved by transparency on the underlying paint. Finally, the transition from face to neck is obtained through a succession of contrasted colours: two vigorous brown lines delimit a clear plane.

The master is unskilled in the representation of the hands, as here they are much too long and thin; the fingers are poorly defined and look deformed when holding objects. Mary's hands [fig. 11] have clear traces



12-13. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail of the Virgin's neckline and the Child's arm and the same detail under infrared reflectography



14-15. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail of some branches of trees and the same detail under infrared reflectography

in relief on the contours and the knotty quality of the fingers is summarily sketched in with a few pink lines. The schematized portrayal of the gold and silver work or to the jewels and precious stones shows that the painter has not paid much attention to the execution, based on a repetitive system of touches of light that provides a quick way of giving them structure.

The x-ray image is highly legible, which strongly suggests the use of a large quantity of lead white in colour composition, although the clear, fairly homogeneous look could also be due to a layer of white *imprimatura*, by no means unusual in 16th-century Flemish painting. However, there was no sign of such a layer in the available x-ray or stratigraphies. Nevertheless, we expected to locate it in reflectography²².

22 Chemical analysis of pigments and paint mediums were performed by Arte-Lab, S. L. SGS Tecnos helped to produce the x-ray of the work. The Bilbao Fine Arts Museum's Department of Conservation & Restoration performed infrared reflectography using Osiris equipment from Opus Instruments. I would particularly like to thank the members of the Department and in particular José Luis Merino for their help in analyzing the work. Brink 2002, Brink 2005. The Antwerp triptych is small format.



16-17-18. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
 Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp
 Underdrawing (details)

With the exception of the trunk of the tree overlooking the landscape behind and the volume of his characters' hair, the painter has left few areas reserved. Saint Barbara's white dress has been painted over the stone bench she is sitting on. The angels have also been painted on the palace façade.

Infrared reflectography revealed only a summary drawing. The placing of the figures was done rapidly by tracing out their shapes, while a number of scrawled planes indicate the shadows in the depths of the folds. *Pentimenti* are scarce, the most important ones being Mary's v-shaped neckline and the outline of Jesus's right arm [figs. 12 and 13]. Some modifications have also been made to the tree in the centre of the composition [figs. 14 and 15]. Originally foliage covered the lower branches, which are bare in the final version. Thus the artist clears the landscape and gives the tree greater expressivity.

Observation of the underdrawing revealed an additional reason for not attributing the painting to Engebrectsz, who in all his compositions produced a highly elaborate black pencil outline²³, covering most of the forms with a series of parallel lines that often crisscross in areas of intense shadow. The economy of the drawing in the Bilbao panel is a problem if one attributes the work to the Master of the Antwerp Adoration, because in general he does also a detailed drawing, particularly in the compositions for triptychs of *The Adoration of the Magi* in the museums of Brussels and Antwerp, which are to date considered autograph works.

²³ Filedt Kok 1999, plates 19-28.

19. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
 Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels
 Underdrawing (detail)



So the underdrawing for the Bilbao Holy Family has very little to do with the drawings for these two works Peter van den Brink examined under infrared reflectography²⁴. In the Antwerp Adoration documents reveal a detailed line drawing [figs. 16 and 17], even for the landscape, done with a very fine brush and a liquid medium, and another for modelling [fig. 18]. The artist works using blocks of parallel or crisscrossing lines, which, in the darkest areas of shadow go through the forms, evoking the style of engravings of the period²⁵. In the Brussels Adoration the lines are more ample and are arranged in a more regular series [fig. 19]²⁶, which may partly be due to the work's large format, but which would probably also suggest a difference in the writing.

Our observation about the nature of the drawing points to a double working hypothesis. Either it is not the work of the Master of the Antwerp Adoration and the author of the painting, whoever he was, did not need an accurate aid to execute it because he was familiar with the composition and possessed painted or drawn models in his studio [figs. 20 and 21]²⁷, which might even have been traced, or a more elaborate underdrawing did exist and for some unknown reason it is not visible by infrared radiation²⁸.

24 Brink 2002, Brink 2005. The Antwerp triptych is small format.

25 I noted the analogy between the underlying drawing of the Mannerists of Antwerp and Albert Dürer's engravings back in 1984. See Périèr-D'leteren 1984. Since then a number of authors have taken up the similarities between drawings and engravings in Brink/Martens 2005.

26 The strokes are clear to the naked eye owing to the loss of covering power of the red and white layers in the Brussels Epiphany.

27 The pen-and-ink drawing in the Ashmolean Museum collection in Oxford (Parker 1938, pp. 1–2) is one of those examples of models for small devotional paintings of which so few now remain. It is a pounced cartoon used to transfer the composition mechanically, whose dots are connected and then the drawing is reworked freehand. The general atmosphere, the typology used in the figures and the faces of the saints recall the Holy Family at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum and have analogies with other works from the same stylistic group. For instance, the face of the saint on the right evokes the faces of Saint Barbara and Saint Catherine, while the face of Saint Catherine, on the left, recalls the face of the Queen of Sheba in the side panel of a triptych at the Art Institute of Chicago mentioned in the text (see note 21; Parker 1938). The other painting of analogous theme and composition, at the Suermondt–Ludwig Museum in Aachen, would also seem to derive from the same model and, judging by the style, could well come from the studio of the Master of the Antwerp Adoration. Even so, it is not considered a first-class work. See Villwock 1995–1997. The author of this article attributes the painting, erroneously in my view, to Jan de Beer and his circle.

28 This phenomenon might possibly be due to the imprimatura or to a pigment used in the drawing undetected by IRR. On this subject, see Leeflang 2007. Reference is also made to an identical case in Leeflang 2003.



20. Anonymous, Flemish
Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine, c. 1520
 Pen and brush and Indian ink on paper, 24.1 x 31.5 cm
 Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
 Inv. no. WA1863.136



21. Circle of Jan de Beer (c. 1475–1528)
Virgin and Child with Saint Catherine and Saint Barbara, c. 1520
 Tempera on canvas stuck to panel, 38.5 x 46 cm
 Suermondt Ludwig Museum, Aachen, Germany
 Inv. no. GK 309

Clearly, the Antwerp and Brussels paintings share a common vocabulary, one also found in the Holy Family in Bilbao. In all three the Virgin's face is oval, slightly inclined, the lips and eyes nicely drawn, with eyelids that droop over black pupils [figs. 22, 23 and 24]; Jesus also looks amused, with his curly hair and claw-like hands [figs. 25, 26 and 27]. Behind the group, the attitude of Saint Joseph, the luminous colour range in the landscape and several other details like the use of hybrid architecture bearing bas relief and pagan sculpture as decoration, the types of trees, the houses and the tiny, sketched-in figures are all common features [figs. 28, 29 and 30]. However, although closely associated, as most art historians have noted, the style of the two triptychs, in my view at least, are clearly differentiated in spirit. The dynamism of the Antwerp composition, with its rhythm marked by floating shawls and Mannerist gestures, is in sharp contrast to the stillness of the Brussels work, where draperies of greater plasticity imbue the figures with a more pronounced rigidity. Furthermore, the rendering of the former, at once fine, enthusiastic and succinct in the smallest details, gives way to the heavier, more expert and at some points more carefree execution of the latter. In my view, we are dealing with two different stylistic trends at work in the same studio, expressing two very different personalities. The depth of the landscape and the sensation of space it conveys, the subtlety of the colour gradients, the clear distribution of the small figures, are just some of the features of the painting in Antwerp not found in the Brussels one.



22. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

23. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

24. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

The Virgin's face (details)



25. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

26. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

27. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

The Child (details)



28. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

29. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

30. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

Landscape (details)



31. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

32. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

Drapes (details)



33. Master of the Antwerp Adoration and workshop
The Holy Family with Two Saints
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



34. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
 Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

Architecture (details)

A much greater affiliation exists between the Holy Family in Bilbao and the Epiphany in Brussels. A thoroughgoing comparison reveals evident analogies of style and technique, despite the major difference in format and, undoubtedly, in function. A review of the most obvious similarities, the details of which we have noted above, would take in the technique used in execution and the shape of the Virgin's hands and face, Her hair rendered, in the more luminous areas, by means of clear masses of silken locks [figs. 22 and 24], the expression and delineation of Jesus's chubby face, His large, amused eyes, the curls in yellow impasto, His hands, with very short fingers, the facial structure of the Magi and St. Joseph, the clear impasto touches for the pieces of gold and silver work, the repetitive but careful system of fine yellow lines to simulate the thread of the brocades, the worked brushstrokes in the clear areas of the drapes and their rounded forms, which adapt to the character's anatomy at knee and thigh height [figs. 31 and 32]. Finally, the hybrid-style architecture and the landscapes with blue-tinged horizons [figs. 33 and 34], the motifs, the chromatic range and the painting technique used being similar.

A number of stylistic analogies may also be established with other paintings, which facilitates a first grouping within the same studio and involving the same personality. To begin with, there is the central panel of a *Triptych of the Holy Family with Angels Playing Music* [fig. 35] in a private collection and which was presented for the first time in Antwerp at an exhibition called *ExtravagAnt*, where Peter van den Brink²⁹ attributed the work to the studio of the Master of the Antwerp Adoration. Once again, we find the Virgin in the same attitude and frontal position, Her hair, the rotund face and expression, the small, restless Child, Saint Joseph's facial type and the same details in the landscape, the blue-tinged mountains. Although on a much larger scale than the one in Bilbao and painted to a higher quality, this composition is rendered in the same old-fashioned style and radiates an agreeable sensation of serenity, two identical general characteristics which, in my opinion, are the group's main specific features.

²⁹ Brink 2005, pp. 162-168. My thanks to Peter for sending me photographs of the triptych for this essay.



35. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
(active first third of the 16th century)
Triptych of the Holy Family with Angels Playing Music
Oil on oak panel, 69.5 x 52.8 cm (central panel)
Private collection

I shall also look at a triptych that shows *The Adoration of the Magi* [fig. 36], which Christie's put up for auction in January 2010³⁰. This last work, initially attributed to the Master of the Von Grootte Adoration (failure to distinguish him clearly from the Master of the Antwerp Adoration has often led to confusion), has a compact composition analogous to the one in Bilbao, with figures shown half body. As with the Bilbao work, this one radiates a sensation of serenity not to be found in the majority of Mannerist paintings of the 1520s and which gives these panels, and the *Triptych of the Holy Family with Angels Playing Music* mentioned above, more old-fashioned connotations. Furthermore, the way the Virgin's face is painted, in the terms used to describe the Bilbao painting and which is clear too in the Brussels triptych, is very similar. Some features of the details are also similar, both in the style of the slashed sleeves and in the way the gold and silver work, the landscape, the trees and the architecture are portrayed. Even so, the style of the whole is rather heavier and the characters are rendered with greater volume.

Two other paintings are *Mary Salome and Her Family*, now in the Antwerp Fine Arts Museum [fig. 37], and *The Adoration of the Magi* in the Fine Arts Museum in Vitoria, attributed in the 1950s³¹ to the Master of the Antwerp Adoration. Both certainly have close stylistic analogies, in particular in the faces of the Virgin and the Child. To end, two wings in the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht featuring *The Nativity* and *The Presentation in the Temple* on their inner sides, may also be related to these works, together with *King David Receiving Water of Bethlehem* and *King Solomon Receiving the Queen of Sheba* at the Art Institute of Chicago [fig. 38]³², works attributed to the same studio³³.

30 Catalogue Christie's... 2010, pp. 14-17. The attribution to the Master of the Antwerp Adoration was proposed by Peter van den Brink.

31 Philippot 1956, pp. 157-166; Vanaise 1959.

32 See note 21.

33 Brink 2002.



36. Master of the Antwerp Adoration (active first third of the 16th century)
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi, c. 1520
Oil on oak panel, 108 x 76.2 cm (central panel); 105.5 x 33.7 cm (wings)
Private collection

What conclusions may we draw from these observations?

The Holy Family at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum can be definitively added to the core of the works attributed to the Master of the Antwerp Adoration and his studio. It is most directly linked to the Brussels Epiphany, a work which, beyond individual similarities (the result of intense cultural exchanges within a single group of painters), is notable for its unitary global style and content, a characteristic that distances it from the more agitated style of the Antwerp Epiphany.

Comparison of these two triptychs, both commissioned by a donor portrayed in the wings, considered key works by the Master of the Antwerp Adoration, has revealed clear differences that prompt me to suggest two distinct groups of works from the same studio and to group around *The Adoration of the Magi* in Brussels some works of similar style and technique, amongst which the Bilbao Holy Family has a special place. In my view, it could even have been painted by the same hand, although at some distance in time and in another context, when the artist was collaborating on a retable immediately prior to the 1520s, bearing in mind the still rather rigid style.

In the current state of our knowledge and, despite some intensive research, the prototype for the Holy Family has still not come to light, and the identity of the Master remains unknown. However, once we have accepted the hypothesis that the work was produced by the same hand as the Brussels triptych, the painter offers his portrait, although not his name, on the latter work. His self-portrait is on the wing illustrating the



37. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
 (active first third of the 16th century)
Mary Salome and Her Family
 Oil on oak panel, 95 x 66 cm
 Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp
 Inv. no. 5081

Circumcision [fig. 39]. He left his portrait there to point up the particular importance he attached to this work, which was the result of a commission and as such worthy of special care.

The wings of Maastricht, Chicago [fig. 38] and the two triptychs attributed in recent years to the Master of the Antwerp Adoration or his studio need to be added to Friedländer's catalogue. In my opinion they integrate perfectly into the stylistic group of the Bilbao Holy Family.

Free in execution and bathed in harmonious tones, the *Triptych of the Holy Family with Angels Playing Music* [fig. 35] could also be by the same hand as the Brussels triptych and the panel in Bilbao, although it is most likely a later production, given the more confident and yet careful execution. The style of the triptych of Christie's *The Adoration of the Magi* [fig. 36] strongly suggests it was painted by another artist in the same group. Finally, the drawing *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine* in the Ashmolean Museum [fig. 20] might have been used as a model in this studio, particularly in view of its affiliations with the works produced there.

So it brings us back to the main problem in studying these anonymous Mannerist painters from Antwerp from 1515 to 1520. Despite art historians today having more or less abandoned thinking in terms of the identity of a Master and attributions to the same artist, they do in fact face another dilemma; they have to establish characteristics of execution and similarities in formal and typological idioms, common to all stylistic features and painting technique in the works they study, that are sufficiently representative of a group of painters or a specific studio. To make any headway in our knowledge and understanding, being able to "recognise" such characteristics in other related works is very helpful in providing justification for proposals of new coherent



38. Master of the Antwerp Adoration (circle of)
 (active first third of the 16th century)
*King David Receiving Water of Bethlehem and
 King Solomon Receiving the Queen of Sheba*, c. 1510-1520
 Oil on panel transferred to canvas
 73.5 x 27.5 cm; 73.2 x 27.7 cm
 The Art Institute of Chicago
 Inv. nos. 1936.127; 1936.126



39. Master of the Antwerp Adoration
Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi
 Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels
 Self-portrait of the artist on the right wing (detail)

groups of paintings. This is what I have tried to do here by reorienting the Holy Family in Bilbao towards the Mannerism in Antwerp and integrating it into the studio of the Master of the Antwerp Adoration and, more specifically, in the core paintings around the triptych of *The Adoration of the Magi* in Brussels. By situating it in its proper historical dimension, the painting thus becomes a reference work in a new research context³⁴.

34 I am profoundly grateful to Valentine Henderiks for her critical reading of the manuscript and for giving to me helpful suggestions.

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