

The Adoration of the Magi

A problem of attribution



Xabier Bray

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

This text is published under an international Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs Creative Commons licence (BY-NC-ND), version 4.0. It may therefore be circulated, copied and reproduced (with no alteration to the contents), but for educational and research purposes only and always citing its author and provenance. It may not be used commercially. View the terms and conditions of this licence at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-ncnd/4.0/legalcode>



Using and copying images are prohibited unless expressly authorised by the owners of the photographs and/or copyright of the works.

© of the texts: Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa Fundazioa-Fundación Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao

Photography credits

- © Basilica di Santa Maria della Passione, Milano. Photography: Nino De Angelis: fig. 4
- © Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa Fundazioa-Fundación Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao: figs. 1, 10 and 12
- © Chiesa di Sant'Antonio Abate, Milano. Photography: Nino De Angelis: fig. 11
- © Museo Nacional del Prado: figs. 5, 6, 8 and 13
- © Pinacoteca del Castello Sforzesco di Milano. Photography: Saporetti Immagini d'arte Snc: figs. 3 and 7
- © Pinacoteca di Brera, Milano. Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali: fig. 9

Text published in:

B'05 : *Buletina* = *Boletín* = *Bulletin*. Bilbao : Bilboko Arte Eder Museoa = Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao = Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, no. 1, 2006, pp. 17-41.

Sponsored by:



A restoration programme carried out by the Museum of Fine Arts of Bilbao with the support of El Corte Inglés in 2001 brought to light a small and jewel-like painting of the *Adoration of the Magi* that had until then been forgotten in its reserve collection [figs. 1 and 2]¹. Painted on an walnut panel measuring 45.6 x 54.5 centimetres, the picture came into the museum in 1927 when the wealthy industrialist Laureano de Jado, gave his collection to the institution. The picture was at that time attributed to a Milanese artist, Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli (1573-1625/1626), known as *Il Morazzone*. It was never exhibited or published, however, and remained in store until a thorough review of the collection was undertaken prior to the re-opening of the museum in November 2001. The picture was found to be in a critical condition, but thanks to careful restoration and cleaning by the restorer José Luis Merino Gorospe, its beautiful and meticulously painted details were once again revealed.

The picture can now be properly examined and its attribution fully considered. From the style in which it is painted, there is no doubt that the picture is by a Milanese artist working in the first quarter of the seventeenth-century, but its precise authorship still remains unclear. The old attribution to Morazzone can no longer be accepted on stylistic grounds, as his style of painting as we know it bears little resemblance to the Bilbao *Adoration*². While Morazzone's religious oeuvre is often mannered and artificial looking, borrowing postures from the antique and adapting them in a theatrical manner, the artist who painted the Bilbao *Adoration* was more interested in capturing the event in a naturalistic manner. In this article, I should like to propose one or the other of two artists working in Milan in the same period as the author of this painting. The first is Giovanni Battista Crespi (1573-1632), an influential and highly successful artist better known to his contemporaries as *Il Cerano*. The second is his younger contemporary (but not a relative) Daniele Crespi (c. 1597-1630).

1 Inv. no. 69/170.

2 Varese 1962.



1. Attributed to Giovanni Battista Crespi, *Il Cerano* (1573-1632)
The Adoration of the Magi, c. 1610-1620
Oil on walnut panel, 45.6 x 54.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Before restoration



2. Attributed to Giovanni Battista Crespi, *Il Cerano* (1573-1632)
The Adoration of the Magi, c. 1610-1620
Oil on walnut panel, 45.6 x 54.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
After restoration

The artists

Giovanni Battista Crespi was born on 23 December 1573 in Romagnano Sesia, province of Novara (Italy). He grew up in Cerano, a small town some one hundred kilometres west of Milan from which he took his nickname. He spent most of his working life in Milan and was highly esteemed in his day, working for the archbishop of Milan as well as for the civic authorities and distinguished patrons such as Cardinal Federico Borromeo and the Gonzaga families. Along with his contemporaries Morazzone, Giulio Cesare Procaccini and Daniele Crespi, he was part of what is now known as the Lombard Baroque School of painting, made up of well-travelled artists who had trained in Rome and had visited Florence, Bologna and Parma, bringing together the styles practised in those cities to create a new form of painting. Cerano and his contemporaries created a highly individual style blending Michelangelo's robust and anatomically correct figures with Parmigianino's mannered and twisted compositions and adding a touch of realism following Caravaggio. This is wonderfully illustrated in Cerano's painting of the *Archangel St. Michael*, in which the idealised saint stands in an elegant *contrapposto*, painted with bright reds, greens and yellows and surrounded by muscular devil-like figures executed in a more realistic manner [fig. 3].



3. Giovanni Battista Crespi, *Il Cerano* (1573-1632)
Archangel St. Michael, c. 1605
Oil on panel, 98 x 76 cm
Pinacoteca del Castello Sforzesco, Milano

Working in the same circles as Cerano was his younger contemporary, Daniele Crespi. Probably one of the most original artists working in Milan in the 1620s, Daniele was one the first to break with the wilful exaggerations of Milanese mannerism, developing an early Baroque style distinguished by clarity of form and content. His *Supper of St. Carlo Borromeo*, c. 1620-1625 [fig. 4] in the church of Santa Maria della Passione, Milan, is one of the most famous early seventeenth-century pictures in northern Italy. Another picture that demonstrates his prowess in depicting the male nude is his *Pietà* in the Museo del Prado [fig. 5].

Daniele's family is thought to have come from Busto Arsizio, north of Milan, but Daniele was most probably born and educated in Milan. Although his teacher remains unknown, in 1619 he was already described as a promising painter and he is documented to have worked with the painter Moncalvo on a fresco series in



4. Daniele Crespi (c. 1597-1630)
Supper of San Carlo Borromeo, c. 1620-1625
Oil on canvas, 190 x 265 cm
Church of Santa Maria della Passione, Milano



5. Daniele Crespi (c. 1597-1630)
The Pietà, c. 1626
Oil on canvas, 175 x 144 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

the cupola of San Vittore al Corpo in Milan. Daniele's three canvases of scenes from the *Life of St. Anthony*, as well as his fresco decoration painted in 1619 for the chapel of San Antonio in the same church, provide a better understanding of his artistic development. They show a young artist grappling with the style of his elders, particularly in his use of large, rhythmic and rather flat forms that reflect the study of Cerano. From then on, Daniele was to receive many important commissions to decorate churches, monasteries, and private chapels. One of his great works is a large fresco cycle for the apse and choir of the Charterhouse of Pavia. His career came to a sudden end in June 1630 when he returned from Pavia to rejoin his family in Milan and perished in an epidemic of the plague, along with his mother, wife and two sons.

Political and religious climate in Milan

Before embarking on a stylistic and iconographical examination of the Bilbao picture, it is worth reviewing the political and religious conditions in Milan in the early seventeenth-century. In Spanish hands since 1521, when the troops of the Emperor Carlos V reclaimed the city for the Hapsburgs, Milan had declined from the capital of an independent duchy to a provincial capital within an empire. Some administrative autonomy was granted to the 60 members of the nobility who formed the citizens' council, but in general the city suffered from the political and economic rigidity of Spanish rule.

The negative effects of Spanish government were countered by the strength of the Church, particularly under Archbishop Carlo Borromeo (the future St. Carlo Borromeo), in office between 1563 and 1565. He played an important role during the Council of Trent held on and off between 1545 and 1565, rigorously applying its decrees with a view to making Milan a stronghold of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. His charitable works included the foundation of institutions to educate clergymen and lay rulers. On several occasions, he was involved in clashes with Philip II of Spain and the Spanish authorities over matters of public order, and in particular over the installation in Milan of the Inquisition, which he strongly opposed.

The profound influence of Carlo Borromeo's austere religious ideas on the arts in Milan is demonstrated in the already mentioned *Supper of St. Carlo Borromeo* by Daniele Crespi, painted after his canonisation in 1610 [fig. 4]. In this lifelike portrait, St. Carlo is shown sitting alone at a table reading the Bible and weeping on reading a passage describing the Passion of Christ. St. Carlo is fasting, as is beautifully suggested by the minimalist still life of bread and a carafe of water. Two figures in the doorway show their amazement at his frugal meal, while the viewer, from the opposite direction, shares in this spectacle of spiritual austerity. St. Carlo's rejection of worldly pleasures was taken as an example by many. He apparently sold his collection of antiquities so as to offer the Church, in his role as Bishop, a model of poverty.

The spartan and awkward composition of Daniele Crespi's painting brings to mind Zurbarán, and in particular the Spanish painter's composition of the 1630s for the Guadalupe cycle showing Bishop Gonzalo of Illescas receiving divine inspiration as he writes. As Milan was under Spanish control, such influences cannot be excluded, especially as other paintings by Milanese artists are to be found in Spanish collections. The Museo del Prado, for example, owns a very realistic painting of *St. Carlo Borromeo praying before the Dead Christ* [fig. 6] by Cerano, which clearly shows the extent to which he could change his mode of painting from stylized figure compositions to the hyper-realistic treatment of St. Carlo Borromeo's mystical visions³.

St Carlo's moral and political influence was sustained by his cousin, Federico Borromeo, who became archbishop of Milan in 1595 and who not only continued Carlo's reforming work but played a key part in the

3 Rosci 2000, no. 92, pp. 156-158. This picture was first recorded in the Cathedral of Segovia before being taken by Charles IV of Spain for his own collection.



6. Giovanni Battista Crespi, *Il Cerano* (1573-1632)
St. Carlo Borromeo praying before the Dead Christ, c. 1610
Oil on canvas, 209 x 156 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

cultural events of the city, commissioning several works from Cerano and his contemporaries. Federico also set up educational institutions, such as the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in 1606 and the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in 1618. In the latter, he displayed works from his own collection, which still exists today and can be visited, featuring paintings by Italian Renaissance artists and landscapes and still lifes by Flemish artists such as Jan Brueghel the Elder and Paul Bril, which Federico Borromeo bought while studying at the Vatican. Perhaps the most celebrated painting in the collection is the *Basket of Fruit* by Caravaggio, probably acquired directly from the artist in Rome. In 1620, Federico founded the Accademia del Disegno, for which he solicited help from the Bolognese painter, Ludovico Carracci, making Cerano its first artistic director.

With such an influential patron, the arts flourished in Milan in the first part of the seventeenth-century more than at any time since Leonardo da Vinci and his followers worked for the Sforza family in the early sixteenth-century. To mark the canonisation of Carlo Borromeo on 4th November 1610, Federico commissioned Cerano and his colleagues Morazzone, Giulio Cesare Procaccini and Daniele Crespi to paint a cycle illustrating the *Life and Miracles of St. Carlo Borromeo*. These paintings were to be hung above the arches of the cathedral's main nave in celebration of Carlo Borromeo as the embodiment of Counter-Reformation sanctity.

Federico Borromeo had a deep interest in art and culture as instruments for upholding the faith, and in his position as archbishop he became a sort of official overseer of ecclesiastical art. In his writings he explicitly stated that sacred art had three functions: didactic, devotional and documentary. He often lectured other bishops, exhorting them "to teach people the truths of faith and sacred history, not just in words but in paintings and any other form of representation that serves to rouse the minds and feelings of the faithful to venerate the mysteries of religion"⁴. It is in this context that one should consider the Bilbao painting of the *Adoration of the Magi*.

The subject: the Adoration of the Magi

The artist's interpretation of the New Testament story concentrates on the moment when the three Kings, or Magi, pay homage and offer their gifts to the newborn Christ Child. They acknowledge him as the King of Kings and bow before him as they offer him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. From early Christian times, these gifts were seen as bearing symbolic meanings: gold for Christ's kingship; frankincense for his divinity; and myrrh, used in embalming, foreshadowing his death. These are the kind of details that Federico Borromeo would have delighted in communicating to the faithful and such pictures were most probably commissioned by wealthy Milanese patrons for private devotional purposes.

In the foreground, the artist shows Melchior, the eldest of the three magi, clad in a red cloak trimmed with ermine and bending forwards to kiss Christ's feet. He has just offered him a vessel full of gold coins, which Christ accepts by lifting the top and clasping the coins within. Behind Melchior, Caspar, the youngest of the three, has removed his crown in recognition of Christ's divinity. In shadow, about to offer a golden vessel, is the black King, Balthazar. Two spectators in the background witness the scene. The Virgin carefully holds her child, presenting him to the three Kings as a divine being. To her right, Joseph holds one of the vessels already offered, while behind him we can see the head of a horse in a stable. We do not know who commissioned this picture, but it may well have been a wealthy patron who, as was common in paintings of this subject, wanted to associate himself with the rich Kings in homage to the Christ Child. The idea of the rich helping the poor and carrying out good works was fundamental to the new Catholic regime in Milan, influenced by Carlo and Federico Borromeo.

In painting his subject, the artist combines realism in the hands of the figures, in Joseph's face and in the horse behind with an elaborate sense of design and composition. In doing so, he makes his subject intimate and approachable while retaining a sense of religious awe. By applying the oil paint with meticulous brushwork on a panel, the painter succeeds in achieving a smooth polish. The Mannerist composition, lacking in perspective and with the figures crowded together around the Christ Child, and the Caravaggesque attention to detail and realism are typical of the techniques used by artists such as Cerano and Daniele Crespi.

Problems of attribution

In the year 2000, Marco Rosci published a catalogue raisonné of *Il Cerano's oeuvre*⁵. In it, three versions of the Bilbao composition are illustrated⁶. Two are in private collections in Genoa and Casalmaggiore, while the best of the three is now in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan [fig. 7]. But as Rosci points out, the quality of these three versions is poor, and for this reason he assumes them all to be copies after a lost original. Rosci was

4 Federico Borromeo. *De Pictura Sacra*. Milano, 1624.

5 Rosci 2000. The first attempt to catalogue Crespi's work can be found in the exhibition catalogue Novara 1964.

6 Rosci 2000, no. 198, pp. 279-281.



7. Anonymous
Copy after Giovanni Battista Cerano (1573-1632)
Adoration of the Magi, 17th century
Oil on panel, 46 x 58 cm
Pinacoteca del Castello Sforzesco, Milano



8. Anonymous
Copy after Giovanni Battista Cerano (1573-1632)
Adoration of the Magi, 17th century
Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 52 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid
On temporary loan to the Spanish Embassy, London

unaware, however, of the existence of two other versions of this composition, a picture given to the Museo del Prado by the Duquesa de Pastrana in the 1880s, now on loan to the Spanish Embassy in London [fig. 8]⁷, and the present picture from the Museum of Fine Arts of Bilbao. In the case of the Pastrana version, the hardness of the edges and the unconvincing expressions of the figures point to a good seventeenth-century copy.

With so many close copies extant, the original must have been extremely well appreciated when it first came out of the studio. The quality of the Bilbao version prompts the question of whether it could be indeed the missing picture from which these copies were made. The lack of details regarding its provenance prevents us from tracing the picture back to its original owner. But the excellent quality of brushwork, the atmosphere created and the masterly design tend to support the possibility that it could be the lost original or at least one of the best copies to have survived.

By comparing the picture with other works by Cerano one can build a strong argument that the original design may be by him. Considering the picture's strong link with Cerano's style of painting it is worth examining

⁷ Atributed to an anonymous, Italian, 17th century. Inv. no. P4151. A sticker with "no. 144 Coleccion Pastrana" is stuck at the top centre on the back. There is also a chalk inscription that reads: "Pastrana Grupo- Letra B, 67 Cuadra". On the front, in the lower left hand corner is an inventory number: "T943".



9. Giovanni Battista Crespi, *Il Cerano* (1573-1632), Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli, *Il Morazzone* (1573-1625/1626) and Giulio Cesare Procaccini (1574-1625) *Martyrdom of Santa Rufina and Seconda*, early 1620s
Oil on canvas, 192 x 192 cm
Pinacoteca di Brera, Milano

specific details and comparing them with those in other pictures that are firmly attributed to Cerano. Let us first look at the horse in the background, quite an unusual detail given that nativity scenes normally include a donkey as a symbol of poverty. A very similar horse appears in a painting now in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, known as the *Martyrdom of Santa Rufina and Seconda*, painted in the early 1620s [fig. 9]. This is no ordinary painting. It is known by the Italians as the *quadro delle tre mani* because Cerano painted it in collaboration with Morazzone and Giulio Cesare Procaccini for one their most illustrious patrons, Scipione Toso, an influential member of the town council⁸.

As a visual conundrum, this curious picture displays an odd mixture of artistic expression by the three acknowledged masters of Lombard painting during this period. A contemporary connoisseur would have been able to ascribe parts of it to each of the three artists. Cerano painted the soldier on the horse, the child with the dog below and the decapitated head of one of the saints, while Procaccini was responsible for the depiction of St Rufina and a putto on the far right and Morazzone for the torturer in the centre of the picture, the angel above and the heads of the background figures.

Interestingly, the manner in which Cerano has painted the horse in this picture is very similar to the portrayal of the horse that appears in the top left hand corner of the Bilbao *Adoration*, both in its appearance and in the precise and decorative manner of applying the brush in each of the two paintings. In addition, the way the highlights are painted, with a touch of the brush in the hair of the saint or the sword of the soldier, bears

⁸ Pesenti 1980.



11. Giovanni Battista Cerano, *Il Cerano* (1573-1632)
The Resurrection, c. 1610
 Oil on canvas, 319 x 190 cm
 Chiesa di Sant' Antonio Abate, Milano



10. Attributed to Giovanni Battista Cerano, *Il Cerano* (1573-1632)
The Adoration of the Magi, c. 1610-1620
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail of the ermine collar worn by Melchior



12. Attributed to Giovanni Battista Cerano, *Il Cerano* (1573-1632)
The Adoration of the Magi, c. 1610-1620
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail of the head of St. Joseph

a strong resemblance with details in the Bilbao picture, such as the highlights applied on the receptacles carried by the Kings.

Another detail worth comparing is the ermine collar worn by Melchior [fig. 10]. Almost the same collar appears in Cerano's painting of *The Resurrection* in the church of San Antonio in Milan [fig. 11], where with a light brush Cerano carefully suggests the fur-like quality of the material dotted with black spots. It is worth comparing the treatment of the head of the soldier in this picture with the heads of both Melchior and St. Joseph, whose tanned and wrinkle skin is depicted with similar assurance. In a further detail, the head of St. Joseph in the Bilbao painting [fig. 12], leaning into the composition, is exactly the same as that of a figure that appears seated on the right of one of Cerano's large canvases for the Cathedral of Milan showing *St Charles Borromeo Curing Aurelia de los Angeles from Gout* (1610). Cerano is possibly using the same model as they both have a similar expression and the same greyish tones to show aging hair. The slightly receding hairline of the Christ Child is another stylistic clue, inviting comparison with that of the Christ Child in Cerano's *Flight into Egypt*, a small painting on copper which belongs to the Museo del Prado [fig. 13].

Finally, a detail that suggests Cerano as the possible author concerns the receptacles or gifts given by the Kings. These elaborate examples of the goldsmith's art may even have been designed by Cerano himself.



13. Giovanni Battista Cerano,
Il Cerano (1573-1632)
Flight into Egypt, c. 1600
Oil on copper, 43 x 31 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

We know that he designed church facades such as that of the church of San Paolo in Milan, as well as sacred vestments and the crystal casket for the relics of St. Carlo Borromeo. In his painting of the *Agony in the Garden* in Borromeo's palace, the chalice born by the angel shows similar attention to detail, volume and purity in design. As we have seen, Cerano took pleasure in depicting the luxuriousness of richly coloured vestments, golden vessels and jewels. This is evident in the Bilbao painting in the light blues and greens in the crown of Caspar, the chains worn by the Kings and the receptacles already mentioned. A detail from the *Resurrection of Christ*, a large altarpiece for the church of San Vittore in Meda outside Milan confirms this. Clad in rich vestments, bishops and a soldier kneel before the resurrection of Christ. Greens, reds, oranges, and whites are richly applied, giving the picture a sense of luxury similar to that found in the Bilbao *The Adoration of the Magi*.

Despite these convincing visual connections, however, it is worth examining Daniele Crespi as the possible author of the Bilbao painting. Daniele's early style is often mistaken for Cerano's and it is possible that the Bilbao painting could be a juvenile work. Dr Hugh Brigstocke, an expert in Milanese painting, has pointed out to me that in around 1621 Daniele painted in fresco *The Adoration of the Magi* for the sacristy of the parish church of San Alessandro, Milan. He based his composition on an altarpiece by Cerano of the same subject, painted for the parish church of Pusiano and unfortunately destroyed in 1943. Daniele, in his fresco, borrows Cerano's idea of a cramped composition to create a claustrophobic atmosphere and heighten the intimacy of the scene.

Perhaps the most convincing support for the suggestion that the Bilbao painting could be by Daniele Crespi is a similar picture of the same subject painted on panel and measuring 48.5 x 66.5 centimetres, now in a private collection [fig. 14]⁹. The distinctive Christ Child in the Bilbao painting is particularly close to the Christ Child in this composition, while in both paintings there are similarities in the Madonna's face and the faceted drapery she wears. As for the man with the leopard skin cloak, the *Ecce Homo* in the Metropolitan Museum is not dissimilar¹⁰. Brigstocke notes that it would not be surprising for the early Daniele to show a strong Ceranesque influence and he suggests that the Bilbao picture could indeed be an excellent example of such.



14. Daniele Crespi (c. 1597-1630)
The Adoration of the Magi, c. 1620
Oil on panel, 48.5 x 66.5 cm
Private Collection

Although the characteristics discussed herein suggest that this work may well be by Cerano, while we may never know who painted the Bilbao painting, it is unquestionably of excellent quality, a product of a wonderful moment in Milanese painting when artists were trying to create paintings that blended beauty and artifice with realistic details so to enable viewers to feel and comprehend simultaneously. Christ, though only a child, is the King of Kings, adored and recognised as such by mortal viewers.

9 Neilson 1996, p. 130, ill. 3B.

10 Ibid., no. 45. *Ecce Homo*. Oil on canvas, 127 x 97.8 cm. Collection of Suida Manning, on deposit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Neilson 1996

Nancy Ward Neilson. *Daniele Crespi*. Soncino, Cremona : Edizioni dei Soncino, 1996.

Novara 1964

Mostra del Cerano. [Exhib. Cat.]. Marco Rosci (ed.). Novara : Banca popolaris, 1964.

Pesenti 1980

F. R. Pesenti. "Il quadro delle tre mani a Brera : Técnica e stile en G.C. Procaccini, Morazzone e Cerano", *Studi di Storia delle Arti*, no. 3, 1980, pp. 7-21.

Rosci 2000

Marco Rosci. *Il Cerano*. Milano : Electa, 2000.

Varese 1962

Il Morazzone : catalogo della Mostra. [Exhib. Cat., Varese]. Mina Gregori (ed.). Milano : Bramante, 1962.