

## OBJECT of the **month**

**December 2021**

### BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Welcome. My name is Janet and I would like to explore with you an early 17th century painting by the French artist, Claude Vignon, a master of the French Baroque style.

Its title is *Adoration of the Magi* and it was painted while the 26-year-old, Paris-trained artist was visiting and studying in Rome. There, it was commissioned as an altarpiece for a Roman church or chapel and so, it is impressively large—over six feet tall!

Let's take a look...What first draws your eye?

Perhaps, you're taken to the brightly lit center of the composition attracted by the vivid color red. How would you describe this scene? For Christians, it is the classic story recounted in Matthew's Gospel that is celebrated during Christmastime.

Notice the colors and the way the figures are arranged. Vignon directs our gaze. The Virgin Mother's head bows toward her infant son who looks fondly at a sumptuously dressed old man kneeling before Him with gifts of gold nearby. Mary's husband, Joseph, overlooks the scene from behind her and we notice his face is in shadow.

What is causing these shadows? You may observe just above him diagonal bands of subtle color, rays of light which we can follow toward the upper left to a brightly shimmering star.

According to Matthew's Gospel, "...when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there came wise men from the East seeking the Messiah whose birth was prophesied in the old scriptures. The Magi had found and followed His star until it stopped over the place the child was. They saw the child with His mother Mary and they bowed down in worship and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh."

Returning to the painting, the silvery light from that star also illuminates a very large figure in the foreground but only from behind, casting him into near silhouette. Just enough light is provided to reveal his elaborate and exotic garments as well as the gift he bears. Notice the cross atop his gift, a reference to the child's ultimate death by crucifixion. Why make this foreground figure so large and dark



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while the others not? Does the compositional effect of this figure, so large in the foreground, allow you to feel that you also are there, a witness to this scene?

It was common during this era in Europe for the Magi to be shown as diverse in age as well as ethnicity, demonstrating Matthew's Christian belief that Jesus was born as a savior for all peoples. There was also known symbolism at that time in the gifts themselves. Gold was considered to represent kingship. Frankincense, divinity; and myrrh was a reference to death.

Vignon's composition is dramatic with high contrasts of light and dark, both hallmarks of the Baroque style. The artist demonstrates with fluid strokes his ease in rendering the gleam of gold, not only in the gifts but in fine threads running through the lavish garments of the Magi.

There is so much to discover in this majestic treasure and I hope you will come enjoy and ponder it further in-person. You'll find it in, the Kettering Health Gallery of 17th Century Baroque Art of Flanders and France, Gallery 215 of the Dayton Art Institute. Thank you.

## END TRANSCRIPT

Click [here](#) to access the video presentation.

## FEATURED ARTWORKS\*

Stefano di Giovanni (Italian, about 1400–1450), *The Journey of the Magi*, about 1433–1435, tempera and gold on wood. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Maitland F. Griggs Collection, Bequest of Maitland F. Griggs, 1943, 43.98.1

Lauren Ford (American, 1891–1973), *Holy Family*, date unknown, etching on paper. Dayton Art Institute, OH. Gift of Mr. Frederic Newlin Price, 1954.6.25

Guiseppe Cesari (Italian, 1568–1640), *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1600–1610, oil on wood. Dayton Art Institute, OH. Gift of Mr. Robert Badenhop, 1956.21

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (Spanish, 1617–1682), *The Adoration of the Magi*, about 1655–1660, oil on canvas. Toledo Museum of Art, OH. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1975.84

Jean Jouvenet (French, 1649–1717), *Adoration of the Magi*, 1770–1710, oil on canvas. Detroit Institute of Arts, MI. Founders Society Purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation Fund, 78.67

## MEDIA CREDITS\*

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