Window - The Adoration of the Magi

Object: Window

Place of origin: Germany (made)

Date: ca. 1500 (made)

Artist/Maker: Master of the Holy Kinship (artist)

Materials and Techniques: Clear and coloured glass with painted details and yellow (silver) stain

Credit Line: Given by J. Pierpont Morgan, Jr

Museum number: C.74 & 75-1919

Gallery location: Sacred Silver & Stained Glass, Room 84, The Whiteley Galleries, case BAY4

Public access description

The Gospel of St Matthew records the story of wise men guided by a brilliant star to Bethlehem. They presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ Child. The story gained enormous popularity in the early centuries of the Christian church, and still exerts a powerful influence today.

The later tradition that there were three wise men depends on the fact that they brought three gifts. By about 750, they were known as Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Gradually, the wise men evolved into kings, based on a similar story of royal gift-giving in the Old Testament (Psalms 72:10). They were said to come from the kingdoms of Tarshish, Sheba and Seba. Seba was thought to be an ancient name for Ethiopia, and in the 14th century the Ethiopian king began to be portrayed as black.

A legend states that St Helena, mother of the first Christian emperor Constantine, discovered the bodies of the wise men/kings in India in the 330s and took them to Constantinople (present day Istanbul). Her son gave them to the Bishop of Milan. In the 1160s the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick I Barbarossa, brought their bodies to Cologne in Germany.

Ever since, the wise men/kings have been especially venerated in Cologne. Their relics are contained in a shrine in Cologne Cathedral. On their feast day, 6 January (Epiphany), thousands of pilgrims visit the shrine.

Descriptive line

Clear and coloured glass with painted details and yellow (silver) stain depicting the Magi, from an Adoration of the Magi window. Made in Germany (Cologne School), ca. 1500.

Physical description

In the left hand panel, two of the Kings are shown, one kneeling in the foreground, clad in a rich robe, and one standing behind him with a gold casket in his hands. In the right hand panel a black king with a servant kneeling at his feet holding a monstrance up to him. By his side is a courtier in a jewelled turban; above him rises a blue standard with the device of the star and crescent. Other figures are grouped in the background and the whole scene is depicted within a building with round archways.

Dimensions

Height: 172.0 cm framed, Width: 126.3 cm framed, Weight: 22.6 kg framed

Museum number

C.74 & 75-1919

Object history note

They are closely related to stained and painted glass panels showing the same scene in the north aisle of the nave of Cologne Cathedral, attributed to the so-called ‘Master of the Holy Kindred’. These panels were on loan from JP Morgan Sr. from 1909. They were given to the museum in 1919 by JP Morgan Jr in memory of his newly deceased father and in the acknowledgement of Anglo-American cooperation during the first world war. m 1909.

Historical context note

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