



EMBROIDERED ALTARFRONTAL, ITALIAN, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, BY COURTESY OF
M. DIKRAN G. KELEKIAN.

AN ADORATION OF THE MAGI IN EMBROIDERY

by

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WHILE the Adoration of the Magi depicted in this embroidery follows the traditional formula in the central episode, added unto that are a wealth and variety of imaginative detail. In the center sits Mary, holding out her Son, a charming and lively baby who resembles the well rounded, graceful putti, popular at this time. Joseph, standing behind the Virgin, is the traditional figure established some two centuries earlier. Behind Joseph are the ox and the ass, unusually well rendered. They meant, of course, that the humblest of God's creatures acknowledged the new-born King, but they also symbolized the Old Law and the New, coming to accord, the Hebrews and the Gentiles. That the ox should be associated with the peoples of the Ancient East is obvious. Bulls had been a central feature of the cult in most of the Ancient Eastern civilizations. The choice of the ass, however, is ambiguous.

The Magi are the Three Kings, rather than the simple three wise men of the earlier version, potentates of dazzling wealth and luxury. Melchior, the eldest, follows the pseudo-Bede's description, an elderly man with flowing beard, who kneels before his Lady, pouring coins into a carpet. But Caspar, the King of middle years, instead of being the ruddy, beardless man of the mediæval account, is also bearded, doubtless in accordance with prevailing fashion among middle-aged men of the upper classes. Balthazzar again follows the pseudo-Bede's conception in that he is young and a negro. The three men thus represent not only the Three Ages of Man but also the Three Races of the Earth, the New Testament parallel of Ham, Shem, and Japheth.

Caspar has removed his crown and kneels in homage. Balthazzar turns to take from a kneeling page a golden vase that he will offer. On either side across the foreground stretch the trains of the Kings' attendants. On

the left is a page holding a handsome falcon. Carrying a falcon had been for centuries an implicit insignia of nobility, just as, in the earliest historic and even prehistoric Eastern cultures birds of this family had been the emblem of the King.

Behind this page is a group of three courtiers in conversation, of whom the most vivacious holds out, conspicuously, an apple, apparently the subject of their discussion. That this is merely an accidental detail is improbable. It is too clearly emphasized and too relevant. For the apple was not only a symbol of the Fall of Man but as such indicated also the Redemption, and the homage of the Three Kings means humanity's acceptance of their Redeemer.

The parallelism of the Old Testament and the New, implicit in the identification of the Three Magi with the Sons of Noah, which had been such a major doctrine in the Middle Ages, is further developed in some small episodes on the left. On a steep ramp in the upper left corner, formed by broken ruins in the romantic taste of the time, but treated as a hillside, a shepherd guards his flock. So Moses watched his sheep when he saw the Burning Bush, and Moses and the Burning Bush was a presage of the Nativity. Just below, a man and woman carrying fagots lead a child. So Isaac was led to sacrifice, and Isaac led to the sacrifice meant the Carrying of the Cross. These two episodes, which are presented as genre scenes, might merely be enlivening illustrative details without any significance, but that they are allusive is established by the next little scene below. A coiled serpent appears before a man hammering a transverse into a stock of wood. The presentation of the serpent is such that it immediately suggests the Serpent of Brass, and the wood on which the man is working is put together like the staff on which the Serpent of Brass was coiled for display. But the Serpent of Brass meant the Crucifixion, and the making of the staff implies the Building of the Cross. Here, then, in these three scenes is the Incarnation and the Passion in summary presentation. Moreover, the theme is epitomized by the majestic stag that paces out from under the arch of the ruins, for the stag is Christ come to rid the world of sin, just as the stag (according to the old Bestiaries) devours snakes.

To the right of the ruins a little group of travellers, depicted to suggest the weariness of a long trek, find their further progress barred by the sea. A man driving a laden horse and pon plods on, but his companions and their camels stop and look across the waste of waters, while their leader

turns to speak to them. Even so the wandering Children of Israel came to the Red Sea, and the Exodus and the sufferings it entailed were symbolic of humanity lost in the wilderness of error and sin before the advent of the Son of God.

Furthermore, this Flight of the Children of Israel is balanced by a reference in the center of the composition to its specific New Testament parallel, the Flight into Egypt. Three men, the leader mounted, stop to speak to a laborer reaping grain. When the Holy Family was fleeing into Egypt they met a laborer sowing wheat. The little Jesus took a handful of grains and scattered them. Immediately the wheat sprouted, grew, and matured. When the soldiers of Herod came in pursuit, the laborer was reaping this grain. They asked him if he had seen a family with a child and he replied: "Yes, when I was sowing this grain." Thus they were diverted from their quest and the Child was spared.

The significance of a very picturesque caravan approaching to the right of this is not clear; yet it at once suggests the merchants to whom Joseph was sold, and Joseph Sold by His Brethren meant the Betrayal. The second caravan winding down a hill to the right seems to be simply a continuation of the Magi's train.

All these episodes are presented as actual happenings of the day, with, however, as much emphasis as possible on the Oriental features, for the development of Asiatic trade and world exploration had stimulated throughout Europe a great enthusiasm for all things Eastern. This is reflected, too, in the central episode of the Adoration of the Magi in two most interesting details. The exquisitely accurate minute patterning of Melchior's tunic is clearly adapted, directly or indirectly, from a Persian textile; and the carpet spread to receive his gift of coins must be intended to represent an Oriental rug, strongly suggesting a so-called "Polonaise."

Four animal episodes are also relevant to the central theme of Christ's mission on earth, and two are of very ancient origin. On the left is a goat nibbling a plant. The capridae eating of the Plant or Tree of Life were from the most remote ages, a symbol of the invigorating power of the gods, and the Byzantines took this symbol from their neighbors to the east, reinterpreted it to Christian ends, and transmitted it to Europe. That the figure of the goat is not an insignificant detail is shown by the fact that it is balanced by a second motive that has the same history, a stag going to drink, another ancient representation of the transmission of divine power which had been appropriated by Byzantium.

The other two animal episodes are of relatively more recent derivation, illustrating the kind of animal fables told at least as early as the Classical period in the East, and often used in Europe as illustrations in Christian sermons. On the left are hounds chasing a fox, on the right, a fox stealing grapes. Neither has any direct relation to the Oriental stories made familiar by Aesop and his later imitators and translators, but obviously they exemplify sin among the animals. For the Christian they would indicate the enmity among the beasts that resulted from the Fall and the consequent demoralization of the Garden of Paradise. Thus these animal episodes illustrate in this kingdom the Fall and the Redemption.

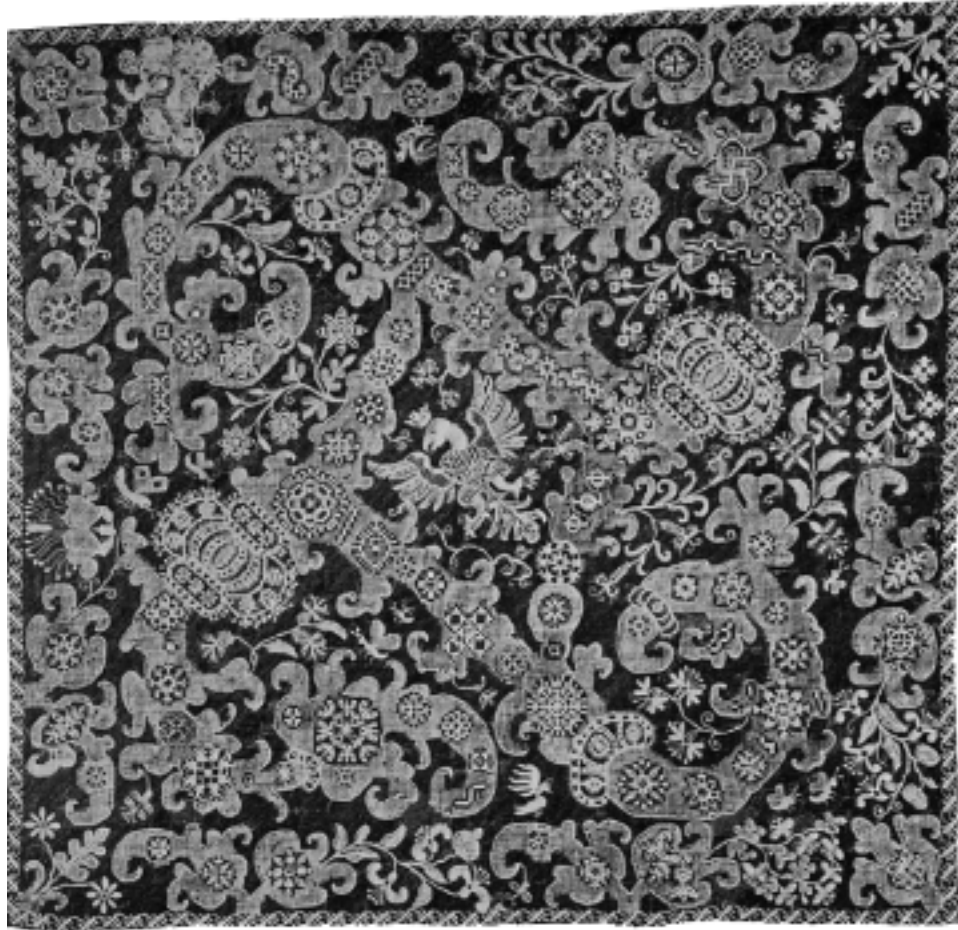
Finally, the same theme is shown in Heaven. On either side are falling angels, struggling in vain through the clouds. In the center is God the Father in glory, surrounded by the cherubim and seraphim and the choir of angels, accompanied by an angelic orchestra of lutes, viols, an organ, harps, and trumpets.

Thus this Adoration of the Magi is a great symphonic demonstration of the mission of Christ as the Redeemer, and in its presentation every race, age, and class of man and every species of animal has been represented: the fishes under the sea and even the shell-fish; the quadrupeds and the birds of the air. For the whole universe suffered in the Fall, and all rejoiced in the Redeemer.

In contriving the multiple details, some of which are so unusual, of this great Christian exposition, the designer was probably not following his own religious and artistic fancy. Probably he was illustrating a sermon or one of those rhetorical essays in picturesque Christian exegesis, so popular in the late Renaissance. Many of the episodes seem to be comments on the significance of the Epiphany, and the ensemble presents a popular but eloquent summary of the central theory of Christian ethical doctrine. It is a brilliant discourse in embroidery, preached to a pious but fashionable audience, interested in the tastes and even fads of the moment, but genuinely moved in their devotions.



DETAIL OF ADORATION PLATE



CENTER PANEL IN A COVER OF EMBROIDERED NETTING FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE LATE MRS. ANNA BLAKESLEY BLISS. THE COVER MEASURES 41 INCHES. THIS PANEL IS 20 INCHES.