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Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi* works well iconographically in its location in the sacristy (where the clergy prepare for the Mass): for in the Eucharist, Christ is revealed to the faithful in the congregation as happened to the Magi.

The Magi's Adoration

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The *Adoration of the Magi* was commissioned by Palla Strozzi, a banker and perhaps the richest man in Florence at the time, who wanted an altarpiece with a subject appropriate for his family burial chapel in the Sacristy of Sta. Trinità, Florence. Prior to this work, altarpieces did not show narrative scenes. Yet this image works well iconographically in its location in the sacristy (where the clergy robe themselves and prepare for the Mass), for Christ becomes manifest in the Eucharist on the altar during the Mass; he is revealed to the faithful in the congregation as happened to the Magi.

Gentile was born in the Marches region of Italy and worked in Venice prior to coming to Florence. His paintings combine the naturalism of the Early Renaissance with the elegant, refined drapery style and meticulous attention to details that characterize the International style. In this composition, the oldest magus, having removed his crown, prostrates himself before the Christ Child who affectionately touches his balding head; the second magus kneels as he lifts his right hand to remove his crown; and the third and youngest magus stands waiting his turn. Their entourage on the right includes irreverent servants (exchanging glances or making jokes as their masters bow to a child), well-groomed horses, a dog with a jeweled collar, chained monkeys, exotic leopards, and fighting falcons. Behind the Holy Family are the traditional symbols for the Gentiles (the ox) and Jews (the ass), positioned here to emphasize the attentive response by the Gentile visitors. The distant background depicts the entourage on its way to the Bethlehem city gate.

The predella (horizontal panel beneath the central composition) shows three scenes from the infancy narrative of Christ: the Nativity with the shepherds in the background, the flight into Egypt, and the presentation in the Temple. These scenes instance a sophisticated use of atmosphere (the Nativity may be the first painted night scene) and the casting of shadow determined by an identifiable light source. These observations of light and shade in nature are one of the most critical contributions made by fifteenth-century artists to the history of art. Gentile da Fabriano interprets the manifestation of Christ to the Magi, a supernatural event, through the observation of nature in a precise and profound way that will, stylistically, become known as the Renaissance.