

The Adoration of the Magi
Germany, Upper Swabia, most probably Ulm
c. 1515-25



32.7 x 40.6 cm (overall); limewood carved in two sections, both carved to the reverse using a U-shaped gouge, and both with extensive original polychromy and gilding. Wear and losses to the pigments in places, Joseph's stick replaced, the tip of one of the Christ Child's fingers missing from the second knuckle, otherwise extremely well preserved.

Provenance

Private collection, Switzerland;
 Their sale, Lempertz, Cologne, 15th November 2003, lot 1188;
 With Blumka Gallery, New York

Related literature

G. Otto, *Die Ulmer Plastik der Spätgotik*, Reutlingen, 1927
 H. Rott, 'Quellen und Forschungen zur südwestdeutschen und schweizerischen Kunstgeschichte im 15 und 16 Jahrhundert' in *Alt-Schwaben und die Reichsstädte*, Band 2, Stuttgart, 1936
 G. Jaspar und E. Treu, *Bildhauerei und Malerei vom 13 Jahrhundert bis 1600: Katalog 1*, Ulm, Ulmer Museum, 1981
 M. Beer and M. Woelk, ed. *The Magi: Legend, Art and Cult*, Exh. Cat., Cologne, Museum Schnütgen, October 25, 2014–January 25, 2015
 S. Guillot de Suduiraut, *Dévotion et séduction: Sculptures souabes des musées de France, vers 1460-1530*, Exh. Cat., Paris, Musée du Louvre, 2015

Description and Iconography

A kneeling Magus offers a chest filled with gold to the infant Christ, who sits up alertly on his mother's lap side-on to the viewer, and reaches out playfully towards the elderly king's long, greying

beard with both hands. His mother twists her upper body to our right in a visual echo of the child, but sits with her legs viewed frontally on a low mottled stone bench. She is clad in a voluminous golden mantle lined in blue and falling open to reveal her blue, gold-trimmed dress beneath. Behind her at the far left of the scene is her husband Joseph, wearing a similar blue and gold mantle over a red long-sleeved garment with gold cuffs. He strikes a pose suggestive of humility - somewhere between standing and kneeling - which helps balance the composition and ensure that the seated figure of the Virgin beside him remains the dominant focus of the scene. The almost corkscrew-like torsion of his pose is communicated through the undulations of his mantle as he twists his head to the right and his legs to our left. He holds a wooden walking stick in his left hand and extends his right in order to gather up part of the Virgin's mantle so that she can better extend her own arms before her, offering the Christ Child towards the kneeling Magus. This chain reaction of twisting poses and gestural lines connects each figure to the next in turn in a deft and dynamic arrangement of forms.



Even with the loss of two of the three Magi figures, which must have been carved from another section of timber and nestled around or behind the one surviving king in a larger arrangement of figures, we can see clearly that the scene before us represents the *Adoration of the Magi*, a key moment in the narrative of Christ's infancy following the Nativity, when according to the Gospel of Matthew 'On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh'.¹ The moment at which the three kings finally reach Bethlehem on their long pilgrimage to visit the Christ Child and kneel before him in the stall is commonly celebrated at the Feast of the Epiphany on 6th January each year. Encapsulating the moment in which Christ is first revealed to mankind as God incarnate, the scene has come to represent one of the key turning points of the liturgical calendar. As such, its popularity in the art of northern Europe was cemented during the Middle Ages with the proliferation of theological texts, treatises and other written aids and guides to prayer. Picturing each stage of Christ's infancy became a significant aspect of liturgical and private devotional ritual, and medieval artists were quick to fulfill the demand for such images. The format

¹ Matthew 2:11

in which our figures appear, strung together laterally in a legible and rhythmical manner, was popular right across northern Europe in the later Middle Ages, since it could be used by sculptors, painters, and printmakers as a way of building temporal and narrative progression in a single, stand-alone image (fig. 1).



Fig. 1
Gerard David (active Bruges, by 1484, died 1523)
The Adoration of the Kings
c. 1515
60 x 59.2 cm; oil on oak panel
London, National gallery, inv. NG1079

Function, Context, Localisation and Dating

The intimate scale of these figures and their wealth of finely rendered details (the individual locks of hair, the subtle interplay of trim and fabric on each of the figures' garments, and the incredibly delicate features of their faces) indicate that we are looking at a fragment of a house altar, a popular form of late-Medieval private devotional altarpiece intended for close looking and contemplation. House altars typically took the form of a square or rectangular wooden box with painted wings that could be opened and closed to reveal or enclose a central sculpted scene during Masses said within a private chapel space or domestic setting. The sophisticated networks of master sculptors active across southern Germany during the early sixteenth century developed a remarkable language of verism and visual drama in sculptural groups carved from the locally abundant limewood. Their close proximity

to a spider's web of arterial rivers criss-crossing the region and to trade routes that bisected central Europe in all directions brought financial prosperity to even small urban centres, and made the largest cities across the region extremely rich indeed. The historic region of Swabia, which borders Bavaria and the Black Forest and is home to the great cathedral cities of Ulm and Augsburg, was one of the prime recipients of this wealth. Both cities oversaw an abundant production of sculpted works of art between around 1460 and 1530, a period of artistic prosperity ended only by the shift in religious mentalities during the Protestant Reformation.

Several of the idiosyncrasies in the treatment of the figures' faces, with their high foreheads and generously rounded outlines, as well as their drapery folds, such as the thick, cubic nub of mantle cloth immediately above the Virgin's proper right leg, tie our group closely to a corpus of sculptures believed to have been executed in Ulm in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Several of these, including a strikingly similar standing Virgin and Child at Sigmaringen, an example in the Detroit Institute of Arts (inv. 22.205), and another in the parish church at Wattenweiler (fig. 2) cement the notion of a shared artist idiom. Early scholars of German Renaissance woodcarving, including Gertrude Otto who authored the first representative monograph on Swabian sculpture in 1927, sought to group these disparate works around a single dominant artistic influence, which they readily found in the form of the master Ulm sculptor Jörg Syrlin the Younger.² More recent research has enabled modern scholars to form smaller, more concrete groups of carvings around other identities who played no less significant a role in Swabia's buoyant cultural exchange, including the Master of Biberach, Niklaus Weckmann, Daniel Mauch, and their contemporaries. The almost windswept nature of Joseph's beard, which seems to twist between the plane of his shoulder and his face as it turns in profile, strongly reflects the fashion for hairstyles that emerged in the 1510s, and most notably in the workshop of Daniel Mauch, the Ulm-born sculptor responsible for the famous Heiligen Sippe altarpiece in Bieselbach (fig. 3). There (and on other retables including the Coronation of the Virgin altarpiece in Hamburg – see fig. 4 – and the Marian altarpiece at Geislingen), the same approach to the Child's hair (carved in tight, short corkscrew ringlets) and its dramatic point of difference with that of his mother (long, carefully carved striations running the entire length of the hair) are identical to our more intimately scaled group. Such features, clearly carefully studied by our sculptor in direct emulation of Mauch's own approach, suggests that this diminutive and miraculous survival was carved in that artist's orbit in Ulm in the later 1510s or early 1520s. Its compact and preciously sized format is a rare survival among the corpus of extant German Renaissance wood sculpture, and offers important information about the market for private devotional carvings from the most fruitful period of Swabia's glittering artistic output.

² G. Otto, *Die Ulmer Plastik der Spätgotik*, Reutlingen, 1927, p. 113 ff. For the shared 'faltenmotive' or drapery motifs of these sculptures see especially p. 122, fig. b.



Fig. 2
Circle of Jörg Syrlin the Younger (c. 1455-1521)
Standing Virgin and Child
Swabia, Ulm
c. 1500-10
Limewood with gilding and polychromy
Wattenweiler, parish church



Fig. 3
Daniel Mauch (c. 1477-1540)
Detail of the altarpiece of the Holy Family, or Heiligen Sippe
1510
Limewood with polychromy
Bieselbach, Franz Xaver Kapelle



Fig. 4
 Circle of Daniel Mauch
 The Coronation of the Virgin, also known as 'The Virgin of the Rosary'
 Germany, Swabia, Ulm
 c. 1510-15
 67.5 x 55 x 31.5 cm; oil and gilding on softwood (poplar?)
 Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, inv. 1899.101