

## ***Artwork of the Month May 2025***

### **Circle or Workshop of Pieter Coecke van Aelst c. 1530: Balthazar**

*Peter Gibbard, formerly Chair of the Friends, writes about Balthazar, also known as The Black African King, who is depicted in a 16th-century panel from a triptych of Flemish origin, Adoration of the Magi.*



The Antwerp School, *Balthazar*, c.1530, oil on panel.  
York Art Gallery (YORAG: 2024.1). Photo: A.McLean

This oil on oak painting from the Antwerp School in the Mannerist style dates from circa 1530. It is the right-hand panel from a triptych, *The Adoration of the Magi*, the artist being unknown. The provenance for this panel is limited to it having been purchased in 1980-81 by Christopher Foley of Lane Fine Art, London, while he was in the USA. David Harrison of York purchased *Balthazar* from him in 1982, and subsequently bequeathed it to Margaret Rogers, who donated it to the Gallery in 2024. Funding for the conservation and the framing was provided by the Friends.

The conservation work included x-ray analysis at the Courtauld Institute in London to understand more about the original design, and to identify alterations, including those made as a result of damage and subsequent repairs.

When I started research for my talk, it didn't take long to learn that the Antwerp School was a massive creative industry centred on this major trading port. It flourished for the first 65 years of the 16th century, and then declined with the onset of the Dutch Revolt (or Eighty Years' War). There were well-advertised periodic exhibitions held in rooms above the Antwerp Stock Exchange. Much of this exhibited art had not been commissioned, but instead it was created in anticipation of demand, and also in bulk.

Art dealers, an industry sub-sector that emerged in the Low Countries during the second half of the 14th century, became a dominant fixture, promoting the prosperous mercantile class of Antwerp, negotiating sales to an increasingly international clientele, and in some instances placing large export orders for specific regions such as Spain or the Baltic. Membership and quality was managed by the Guild of St. Luke, so there was direct control over apprenticeships and the accreditation of artists. Significantly this 'industry' benefitted, in spirit and financially, from the patronage of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, and his sister, Mary of Hungary, who was the Governess for the Low Countries, and their Hapsburg successors in that century.

Art encompassed drawings, paintings, stained glass, tapestry, and sculpture, much of it focused on scenes from the life of Christ. The large number of Antwerp-based artists, or 'not named' collectives of artists, are known today from surviving works. Public galleries throughout the UK, from Paisley to Brighton, and in much of Western Europe, hold examples, not always complete, as is the case with York's panel. There is also a substantial volume to be found in galleries in the USA. The commercial art market remains strong for paintings of the Adoration of the Magi from 16<sup>th</sup>-century Antwerp. Complete or not, they appear regularly at auction houses, and in fine art dealers' brochures here and abroad.

It has been most helpful that Francis Downing's conservation report, and the observations of Professor Jeanne Neuchterlein (until recently a member of the Friends Committee) to YMT's Acquisition Committee, along with historical e-mails, have been made available to me. In an exchange of e-mails during 2021 between Margaret Rogers and the Curator Micha Leeftang from the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, Dr Leeftang observed that Balthazar's face is much more individualised

than is typical, and suggests close attention to the features of a genuine Black man, not a stock image commonly used in copies at that time.

Balthazar has been making regular appearances in depictions of the Adoration of the Magi for many centuries. Our awareness of him dates from the Bible's Gospel According to Saint Matthew (chapter 2), though the wise men are not given names there or a number. By the 3rd century most theologians agreed that there were three Magi. This number may well have been determined from the Gospel's account of the gifts they were bearing (gold, frankincense, and myrrh, verse 11), or by the land masses known to travellers at that time (Asia, Europe, and Africa). By the 5th century scholars had given the Magi names: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. In that same time frame it was established that Balthazar was the youngest. In the 8th century theologians identified Balthazar as a black African king. This was no doubt to help illustrate the universal reach of Christianity. During his long life of appearances, Balthazar has been identified as a magus, a Persian, an astrologer, a prince of Arabia, and an African king. The objective was to portray the Magi as exotic, powerful, perhaps majestic, and thus communicate the universal appeal of Christianity among non-believers.

The Magi's style of dress in art changed over time. It became more exotic, and could be related to a distant classical past or 'otherness'. Initially they appeared as desert travellers with simple headdresses, and then turbans appeared as they became more Saracen-like, and from the 14th century colourful Moorish cloaks and turbans were worn quite regularly. Balthazar's costume in this panel is an example of an imagined classical past. In remarkably accurate detail Balthazar is dressed as a member of the Roman elite in around the 4th century AD. Of the Magi Balthazar is the one most likely to be seen bearing a weapon; highlights of his Roman dress are these: (1) his crown is the *corona castrensis*, awarded for valorous conduct; (2) an earring of semi-precious stone or pearl was a male fashion item from the 2nd century; (3) worn from one shoulder with clasp, the cape in purple with gold trim was exclusive to the Roman elite; (4) the tunic in fine red fabric or leather was worn over an undyed cotton simple tunic; (5) the red tunic is embellished with a repetitive tapestry-style decoration, examples of which have been found by archaeologists; (6) the small dagger at his left-side is a *pugio*, a specific type of dagger used by Roman soldiers as a sidearm; (7) the sceptre Balthazar is holding was exclusive to emperors and kings, and this actual image appears in other Adoration paintings associated with one artist.

My identification of the artist mirrors the observations offered by Dr Micha Leeftang and Professor Jeanne Neuchterlein; namely, the circle of Pieter Coecke van Aelst, whose dates are 1502 to 1550. Aspects of presentation in the panel which can be associated with Coecke include the following: (1) Balthazar is depicted on the right-hand panel, whereas the standard iconography for this period placed him in the left-hand panel with the Holy Family in the centre panel; (2) the three-quarters profile was intended to suggest an intimate devotional experience, a presentation that Coecke promoted; (3) early on in his career Coecke sought to integrate the three panels of a triptych, with Balthazar's focus towards his right - the gift cup (myrrh) partially merges into the central panel, while his left arm with sceptre similarly draws the observer's eye to the Holy Family; (4) the detail for every element of this panel is in keeping with Coecke's high standard in respect of perspective, light, and colour. Lastly, I have not found an example of Balthazar dressed as a Roman in a painting of this subject circa 1530 that has been attributed to another Low Countries artist or workshop.

*Balthazar* is a most welcome addition to York's collection of early religious art. While the attribution to the Antwerp School is entirely accurate, I do suggest that it merits upgrading to a more specific 'circle or workshop of Pieter Coecke van Aelst'.

**Peter Gibbard**

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