

Who Painted the Wise Man Black? Who Made the Magus a Negro?

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A question we are frequently confronted with goes something like “So if Christian Identity is true, why are one of the Magi a black man?” But of course, none of the Magi, or “wise men” were black, and originally Christians would not even have conceived of such a notion.



The ancient Parthians, Persians and Medes were all originally and predominantly White people, while the occupants of Mesopotamia and the Near East today are basically comprised of mixed-race arabs, even if they do not consider themselves to be arabs. The people of these regions

became genetic arabs after they were conquered by the Islamic hordes in the 7th century and forcibly converted to the Mohammedan religion, whereafter they were amalgamated with both the arabic and Turkic races, among others. But in earlier times, wherever they were portrayed by the ancient Greek and Roman writers and artists, they were clearly depicted as being White, and from these came the Magi who visited the Christ child. The story of the Magi is related in the Gospel of Matthew, in chapter 2, where the King James Version has "wise men" for the plural form of the Greek word μάγος, or *magus*. According to the earliest of Greek historicans, Herodotus, the Magi were originally a priesthood among the Medes and Persians, and they were mentioned on the Behistun inscription of the Persian emperor, Darius the Great.



A Parthian Soldier circa 2nd c. BC.

Ancient Rome



On a panel from a [Roman sarcophagus](#) at the cemetery of St. Agnes in Rome, dating to the 4th century AD, the Magi are depicted as evidently White and racially homogenous.

12th Century



An [illustration](#) from an illuminated encyclopedia known as the [Hortus Deliciarum](#), which was made as a teaching resource for a convent. The work is attributed to Herrad of Landsberg at the Hohenburg Abbey in Alsace, France, although the region is historically German and the encyclopedia was written in Latin with some German.

[Herrad](#) was the abbess at Hohenburg Abbey, and is credited within the work itself.

Here we see an early expression of the mistaken idea that somehow the Magi were kings, and we see the names that they were assigned by Catholic writers, probably in the 7th century. Some sources claim that the names were found in a 6th century Greek manuscript. In our opinion, this is exemplary of the lack of historical knowledge among medieval western Christians, and how it adversely affected Church doctrines.

13th Century



[A mosaic in the Basilica of Santa Maria](#) in the Trastevere district of Rome, painted by Pietro Cavallini in the late 13th century.

14th Century



[The Adoration of the Magi](#), a fresco painted by Giotto di Bondone in 1302 or 1303, which is in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy.



Another painting of the appearance of the Magi with the Christ child, [The Epiphany](#) by Giotto di Bondone painted circa 1325.

This is the second time in his career that [Bondone](#) (1267-1337 AD) had painted a major work depicting the Magi, and, evidently, he was not at all compelled to portray any of them as a negro.



This image is from a [medieval Book of Hours](#) which is believed to have been written for the De Grey family of Ruthin, a town in Wales, circa 1390 AD.

15th Century



Considered the finest work of Italian artist Gentile da Fabriano, the [Adoration of the Magi](#) was painted in 1423 and currently hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.

There are no negros, but rather strangely, there are a couple of monkeys portrayed in the background, in the upper center of the work.



This representation of the [Adoration of the Magi](#) was part of a series of panels now known as the [Pisa Altarpiece](#) painted by Italian artist Masaccio in 1426 for the chapel of St. Julian in Pisa, Italy.



A representation of the [*Adoration of the Magi*](#) from the [altarpiece of the St. Columba Cathedral](#) in Cologne, Germany, was painted by Dutch artist Rogier van der Weyden around 1455 AD.



For a medieval book of hours illustrated circa 1460, the Heures d'Étienne Chevalier, French artist Jean Fouquet made a political statement with a rather contemporary theme and [depicted the magus](#) kneeling in the foreground as the French King Charles VII. But none of the Magi were depicted as a negro.



German artist Nikolaus Obilman, from Silesia, painted his [*Adoration of the Magi*](#) in 1466. Evidently, he also thought of the Magi as kings, but depicted them all as being White. The [work is now housed](#) in the National Museum in Warsaw, Poland.



Circa 1470, Italian artist Pietro Perugino painted his [*Adoration of the Magi*](#) for the church of Santa Maria dei Servi in Perugia, Italy. In 1543 it was moved to the church of Santa Maria Nuova in the same city.



Italian artist Sandro Botticelli painted this interpretation of the [Adoration of the Magi](#) in 1475 or 1476. It is currently on display at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. This work was commissioned by Gaspare di Zanobi del Lama for his family chapel in the Santa Maria Novella church in Florence, Italy.

Like Fouquet before him Botticelli also evidently took license to make a political statement, depicting the Magi as members of the de' Medici, and various members of the de' Medici court among their entourage, according to a German-language [description of the painting at Wikipedia](#).



Reportedly, Leonardo da Vinci never finished this 1481 painting of [The Adoration of the Magi](#), instead leaving for Milan a year after it was commissioned by the Augustinian monks of San Donato a Scopeto in Florence. While the lighting and color leave the details in amiguity, it is certain that none of Leonardo's figures are negros.



In 1485 the prior of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, Florence's orphanage, commissioned Italian artist Domenico Ghirlandaio to paint this [Adoration of the Magi](#) for an altarpiece for the high altar of the church of Santa Maria degli Innocenti. It was completed by 1488.



A [circular painting](#) sometimes known as the [Cook Tondo](#), after a recent owner, was completed in 1492 by Italian artists Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi. It is believed to have been commissioned by a member of the de' Medici family, who were the first owners of the work. Among the Magi and the large number of people portrayed in their entourage is not a single negro or arabic

type.

But not all 15th century artists portrayed the Magi as three White men. Here is the age when various European nations began to explore the globe, and the period of European colonization began. At this same time, the Roman Catholic Church began to spin yarns which attempted to explain the existence of other races in far-away places within a Biblical context, and European depictions of scenes from Scripture began to reflect those tales. While men always knew of the dark races of Africa and Asia, now they found others in more distant places, and with the advent of colonialism there were many motives to have them all included in European society.



The [*Adoration of the Magi*](#) by Italian artist Lorenzo Monaco, painted in 1420-1422 with several assistants, portrayed a truly multi-cultural and completely unhistorical scene depicting the Magi themselves as arabs, and including a crowd of African-looking negros and even Tatars. But this painting did not yet portray any of the Magi as an actual negro.



The earliest depiction which we have seen of a Magi as a negro is in one of four panels of the [*Triptych of the Virgin's Life*](#), painted circa 1445 by Dutch artist Dieric (or Dirk) Bouts. The painting is currently housed in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain.

Twenty years later, Bouts would paint another representation



of the Magi which did not include a negro. But even then, the ethnicity of one of the Magi is quite ambiguous. This is found in a triptych known as *The Pearl of Brabant*, and the [large middle panel](#) includes the scene of the Magi. The third magus, shown ascending the short staircase, has an oriental appearance but is certainly not a negro, while the others are clearly portrayed as being White.

Of course, we do not know whether Dieric Bouts was confused, or if he had changed his mind, if he had purposely painted whimsical representations, or if he sought to make a political expression in his painting. He may have even been compelled to satisfy the demands of his clients.



By 1462 Italian artist Andrea Mantegna completed what is called the [Uffizi Triptych](#), the central panel which contains a representation of the [Adoration of the Magi](#). Here one of the Magi is clearly a negro, while another has an arabic appearance. The entourage of the Magi is ethnically diverse mixture of arabs, orientals and negros.



Hans Memling was a very successful 15th-century German artist who for most of his adult life lived and worked in the Netherlands. For a time he worked under Dutch artist Rogier van der Weyden. In 1470 he painted what is called the Adoration of the Magi Triptych, and the [large central panel](#) includes the scene of the three Magi, one of which is clearly an African, or perhaps Indian, sort of negro.



[Another panel](#) which is purported to have belonged to the Columba Altarpiece painted by Roger van der Weyden, but which is currently housed in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, shows one of the Magi as similarly-attired but even more flamboyant African negro. This work was originally attributed to Hans Memling, but is now only claimed to have been painted by an unknown follower of van der Weyden.



Circa 1485 a Dutch artist and member of the military order of the Knights of Saint John, or Knights Hospitalier, named Geertgen tot Sint Jans completed a representation of the [Adoration of the Magi](#) in which one of them was painted so black that his features are hardly discernible. This black Magi, who was named Caspar by the Roman Catholic Church as early as the 7th century, originally was depicted in this painting with a European-looking entourage in spite of his blackness. [An article on the work at Wikipedia](#) says: "X-ray examination of the underdrawing shows that originally the European retinue of Caspar originally had him riding a horse and this was later changed to a dromedary." Apparently, Geertgen was confused about what he wanted to portray, and changed his mind after making his original plan.

So we see that while most artists of the 15th century understood the Magi to have been White men, a significant number of artists suddenly began to portray one of the three Magi as a negro. Some say that Caspar was a negro, while others say it was the magus supposedly named Balthasar. This same trend for diversity has repeated itself many times in history, and at the root of it there is always political and economic reasons, which shall be made apparent here as well. As we progress to the 16th century, however, we see that the artists remain divided.

Another theme which was commonly added to the depictions of the Adoration of the Magi in this century is that many artists also began portraying the Magi as being of three different ages, which they likened to the ages of the life of a man. Artists did this whether or not they were persuaded to portray one of the Magi as a negro. The reoccurrence of this theme throughout this century shows how quickly the various artists copied from one another, which also explains how so many chose to make one of the Magi a negro in such a relatively short period of time. Once one influential artist made an innovation, a variety of others after him had quickly incorporated it into their own works.

16th Century



Venetian artist Giorgione painted this interpretation of the [Adoration of the Kings \(Magi\)](#) circa 1507. It is now housed at the [National Gallery in London](#). Once again, the Magi are depicted as being White.



A sculpture which dates to about 1500 to 1510 AD depicting the [Adoration of the Magi](#) by Florentine sculptor Andrea della Robbia was evidently an altarpiece for a church local to Florence. On the frame can be seen the coat-of-arms of the Albizzi, a prominent Florentine family. It is [now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum](#) in London. While all three of Andrea's Magi

are White, he placed a negro and at least one other character of ambiguous ethnicity into the entourage in the background.

While a few prominent artists continued to depict all of the Magi as White men, with increasing frequency in the 16th century one magus was characterized as a negro.



Influential artist Hieronymus Bosch is said to have painted this interpretation of the [Adoration of the Magi](#) circa 1500, and included a pair of African-looking negros, one depicted as a magus. Elsewhere Bosch seemed to have rather prophetically portrayed scenes of miscegenation and promiscuity followed by damnation and hell in what is perhaps his most famous painting, [The Garden of Earthly Delights](#), which dates to the same period.

Sometimes this painting is attributed only to a follower of Bosch, and dated to as late as 1515. This work is listed in Britain's [National Trust](#).



Another influential artist, Albrecht Dürer, included a negro in his interpretation of the [Adoration of the Magi](#), which was commissioned by Frederick III, Elector of Saxony, for the altar of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg. Also known as Frederick the Wise, during the Reformation he was an important patron and the protector of Martin Luther.

The image of the second king is [said to be](#) a self-portrait of Dürer, who was very influential among the other Renaissance painters of his time.



Flemish artist Jan Gossart (or Gossaert) painted this interpretation of [The Adoration of the Kings](#) circa 1515, and depicted one of the Magi as a negro.



Dutch painter Gerard David painted his [Adoration of the Kings](#) circa 1523. His negro magus has nearly European features, but dark skin and nearly kinky hair.



In or around 1530, Italian artist Girolamo da Santacroce depicted one of the Magi as a negro in his own *Adoration of the Magi*. According to the [Walters Art Museum](#), which houses the work, "The wise men were often depicted as kings, and, by the Renaissance, the youngest was frequently depicted as an African, here holding a gold vessel containing myrrh, a precious resin from Arabia and Africa used for perfume. His portrayal reflects both the ethnic diversity encountered by Renaissance painters in a port like Venice, frequented by African traders, and also the concept of Christ's promise of salvation for all people." So here it is practically admitted that the actual Biblical context of the promises in Christ was set aside, or purposely ignored, for the sake of inclusivity for the merchants.

Other 16th century interpretations of the *Adoration of the Magi* featuring one of the Magi as a negro include:



The Adoration of the Magi
by Italian Jacopo Bassano
circa 1555



The Adoration of the Kings
by Dutch artist Pieter
Bruegel in 1564



The Adoration of the Magi
by Venetian Paolo Veronese
in 1573

17th Century



By the 17th century, it seems difficult to find an artist who would not depict one of the Three Wise Men, or Magi, as a negro. Many of the influential philosophers and scholars of the Renaissance had already embraced the Freemasonic ideals of *Equality* and *Fraternity* and the so-called *Brotherhood of Man* which led the world astray at the dawn of the ensuing Age of Enlightenment. One rare holdout may have been the famous Dutch artist Rembrandt, or at least to a painter in his workshop, as his *Adoration of the Magi*, which is dated from 1623 to 1632, is frequently attributed.



Famous Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens painted one interpretation of [*The Adoration of the Magi*](#) in 1624 as an altarpiece for Mattheus van Iersel, the abbot of St. Michael's Abbey in Antwerp, Belgium. The painting is now housed in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp.

In this painting, all three of the Magi are White, while at other points in his career, which we shall include below, Rubens portrayed one of them as a negro.

A far greater number of notable artists followed the wide path and chose to echo a meme that had evidently first begun only to please the merchants of Venice, and ostensibly, elsewhere, and which had quickly sunk into the mires of popular imagination, by portraying a magus as a negro. So below we have a longer list of those who repeated the lie, perhaps for the sake of popular acceptance, or perhaps for the prospect of commercial profit.



The Adoration of the Magi
by Peter Paul Rubens, circa 1617



The Adoration of the Magi
by Peter Paul Rubens, circa 1618



The Adoration of the Magi
by Spanish artist Diego Velázquez, painted in 1619



The Adoration of the Magi
by Dutch artist Abraham Bloemaert, circa 1624



The Adoration of the Magi
by Pieter van Lint circa 1630



The Adoration of the Magi
by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo circa 1660



[The Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi](#) from an unknown artist of the Cretan School, circa 1638. This painting is currently housed in the [Benaki Museum](#) in Athens, Greece. Notice that all of the characters have an arabic appearance typical of modern Greeks. But in spite of that, none of the characters seems to be depicted as an actual negro.

The Magi in nearly contemporary art:



The Star of Bethlehem by Sir Edward Burne-Jones in 1887



The Adoration of the Magi by Edward Burne-Jones for a tapestry for Morris & Co., 1887



The Adoration of the Magi in stained glass by Mayer Co of Munich 1912 for St. Michael Cathedral, Toronto, Canada

At least for a magus, once you go black, it is very unlikely that you are going to come back. Today, we are certain, people would marvel at any representation of the Three Wise Men that sought to be true to history, and portrayed all of them as being White.