

A masterpiece for Christmas

3 December 2024 - 5 January 2025



THE ARTIST

Matthias Stom (or Stomer) was an important Dutch painter active in Italy in the first half of the 17th century. Born around 1600, he was probably trained in Utrecht by the painter Abraham Bloemaert (1564/66-1651). One of Bloemaert's pupils, Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656), might have introduced Stom to the art of Caravaggio (1571-1610). Despite the grey areas surrounding his career, his activity as a painter was first attested in Rome in 1630, before he went to Naples two years later. This Adoration of the Magi was presumably painted during his stay in those cities, before he moved to Sicily around 1640. Five versions of this painting are known, testifying to the artist's ever evolving style.

CARAVAGGISM

Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio was an Italian painter whose career was short but dazzling. In Rome, he was quickly noticed by his contemporaries for his innovative works. He brought realism to religious subjects, using models from the working classes. His portrayal of exalted emotions and, above all, his mastery of intense chiaroscuro enabled him to create theatrical compositions in which spectators are invited to participate through a subtle interplay of gazes. His pictorial style spread widely, first in Italy, then in France, the Netherlands and Spain until the end of the 17th century, giving rise to the international Caravaggio movement, which Matthias Stom contributed.

THE ARTWORK

As narrated in the Gospel according to Matthew (2: 1-12), following the birth of Christ (the Nativity), which is celebrated today on Christmas Day, three wise men from the East were guided by a star (here shown at top left) and came to pay homage to the Infant Jesus. Gaspar, on his knees, followed by Balthasar and Melchior, present him with three precious gifts: myrrh, frankincense and gold. Stom chooses to depict this fundamental event in the Christian creed in a vertical composition that emphasizes its sacred character: all eyes converge on the Infant Jesus, from whom a white light emanates. The young page on the far right, is the only one gazing at the viewer inviting him to contemplate. The ruins in the foreground and background express the idea of a bygone age on which a new order is being built.

LIGHT

A Caravaggesque artist, Stom was particularly interested in night scenes, as shown in this work through a play of strong contrasts of light and shadow. Halos of light and vivid hues emerge from the darkness, giving the work profound dramatic effects. The main source of light emanates from the Infant Jesus, 'light of the world' in the Gospel according to John (8: 12-20). The painter thus recalls the essential role of light in the Christian liturgy, associated with the divine and its victory over darkness, and at the same time reconnects the epiphanic tradition of the Adoration of the Magi with the lengthening of daylight after the winter solstice (21st December).

