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EST. 1817

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Giulio Cesare Procaccini (Bologna 1574 –
Milan 1625)

The Adoration of the Magi

Signed “G.C.P” (lower right)

Oil on canvas

84 ¼ x 56 ¾ in. (214 x 144 cm.)



Provenance

Commissioned by Pedro de Toledo Osorio, 5th Marquis of Villafranca del Bierzo (Naples, 6 September 1546 – 17 July 1627),
and by direct descent until 2017.

This present painting by Giulio Cesare Procaccini, one of the most important painters in seventeenth-century Lombardy, is a significant rediscovery and a major addition to his oeuvre.

Amidst a sumptuous architectural background, the Virgin sits at the centre of the scene, tenderly holding Jesus in her arms. She offers the Child's foot to the oldest of the *Magi*, so that he can kiss it. The kings attributes of power, the crown and sceptre, lay in the foreground on the right, with his entire attention turned to worshipping the baby. Simultaneously, he offers Jesus a precious golden urn. Next to Mary are several figures attending the event. On the right, a dark-skinned king leans towards the centre of the composition holding an urn with incense. On the opposite side, the third king holds a box containing myrrh and looks upwards to the sky.

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Procaccini was born in Bologna in 1574 and moved to Milan with his family in 1587, where he began to work as a sculptor in the Milan Cathedral. From around 1600, he abandoned this profession – at which he did not excel – in order to devote himself entirely to painting. At the beginning of his career as a painter, he executed significant works for the site of Santa Maria presso San Celso in Milan. Notoriety came for Procaccini a few years later when, in 1610, he was involved in the execution of the cycle of the *Miracles of St Carlo Borromeo*, commissioned for the Milan Cathedral, where they still hang today, on the occasion of the canonisation of the Milanese archbishop. In these works, the sculptural volume of the figures suggests the training of the artist as a sculptor. Simultaneously, the delicacy of the figures' faces show the influence of Correggio and Parmigianino on Procaccini's work.

The originality of Procaccini's style derives from his reinterpretation of the Emilian pictorial tradition, along with his assimilation of the novelties of Peter Paul Rubens, who had been active for a long time in Italy and, particularly, in Genoa. This city was fundamental for the development of Procaccini's career. There, the artist met his most important patron, Giovan Carlo Doria, one of the wealthiest and most enlightened men of his time. In Genoa, Procaccini executed important works, such as the colossal *Last Supper* for the Church of the Santissima Annunziata al Vasato, painted in 1618. Two years later, the work *Constantine the Great Receives the Relics of the Passion*, today in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, opened the late phase of Procaccini's career, characterised by darker, earthier tones, along with a greater attention to drawing, which became increasingly sharper and more sculptural. Procaccini continued such pictorial research until the end of his career, which coincided with his death in 1625.

Procaccini signed this *The Adoration of the Magi* with his initials, i.e. "G. C. P." suggesting the importance of the work in the artist's production. Here Procaccini masterfully combined Correggio's distinctive tenderness, visible in the Virgin's face, with the expressive force of Peter Paul Rubens, seen in the intense facial expressions and emphatic gestures of the other figures.

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From a chronological point of view, *The Adoration of the Magi* belongs to the mature phase of Procaccini's career. It is likely that the work was executed after the aforementioned *Miracles of St Carlo Borromeo* (1610)¹ and, more precisely, at around the time when Procaccini painted *The Marriage of the Virgin* for the Basilica of Santa Maria della Steccata in Parma in the summer of 1617.² Indeed, the two works share similarities both in terms of their composition, in that the figures are placed in a semicircle, to involve the viewer in the sacred event, as well as the monumentality of the figures. The delicate facial traits of the Virgin in *The Adoration* are closely reminiscent of those of the Virgin in *The Marriage*. Similarly, the physiognomy of the bearded priest in *The Marriage* recalls that of the two elder *Magi* in this *Adoration*. The amazed facial expressions of the three kings and their cortege recall those of the apostles in the lunette depicting *The Death of the Virgin* commissioned to Procaccini in 1616 for the Church of San Domenico in Cremona,³ as well as those found in the previously mentioned *Last Supper* executed in 1618.⁴ In this painting, one can also find the same solemnity of gestures characterising *The Adoration*. With all this considered, *The Adoration of the Magi* can certainly be dated to before the execution of *Constantine the Great receives the Relics of the Passion* (1620),⁵ which shows darker hues and a sharp design diverging from the delicateness of *The Adoration*.

Procaccini painted this subject several times in his career, as in the small panel of the Isola Bella, an early sketch where the artist was greatly inspired by Parmigianino and Correggio, and in the altarpiece painted in 1610 for the Church of Santa Maria Giardino in Milan. The latter is closely reminiscent of *The Adoration* in terms of its similar pyramidal composition and Virgin sitting on a throne. Nevertheless, despite such similarities, the strong monumentality and sculptural volumes of the figures in Procaccini's *The Adoration* allow one to date the work to a later phase of the artist's career.

¹ H. Brigstocke, *Procaccini in America*, London-New York 2002, p. 165.

² The painting is today at the Galleria Nazionale in Parma. See Brigstocke 2002, p. 183.

³ The painting is today in the Pinacoteca Civica in Cremona. See Brigstocke 2002, p. 148.

⁴ Brigstocke 2002, p. 153.

⁵ Brigstocke 2002, p. 174.

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It seems probable that this *Adoration of the Magi* belonged to a majestic series of canvases dedicated to the life and Passion of Christ, which was commissioned from Procaccini by Pedro de Toledo Osorio, 5th Marquis of Villafranca del Bierzo. The series includes a nucleus of altarpieces, which were linked together by scholars during the 1970s, due to the similar dimensions and strong stylistic analogies. The cycle, today in various museum throughout the world, is generally considered to be the apex of Procaccini's career. The series includes *The Flagellation* (fig. 1) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (fig. 2) first published by Alfonso Pérez Sanchez in 1965 and purchased in 2013 by the Museo del Prado; *The Crowning with Thorns* (fig. 3) in the Sheffield Art Gallery and *The Raising of the Cross* (fig. 4) in the National Galleries of Scotland.

The similar dimensions of these works, along with their subjects related to Christ's Passion, led scholars to consider them as parts of the same pictorial cycle. Nevertheless, their patron and original location remained unknown. In light of the large dimensions and austere subject of the canvases, these were believed to have been commissioned for a religious site.

In 2014, I made a new hypothesis on the provenance of Procaccini's cycle. Fundamental was the analysis of a letter dated 31 January 1616 sent from Fabio II Visconti Borromeo to the most important of Procaccini's patrons, Giovan Carlo Doria. The Lombard nobleman informs the Genoese art collector to have visited Procaccini's studio. He also affirms that the artist "has received from our Governor the commission to paint large canvases with the life of Our Lord." At the time, Pedro de Toledo, V marquis of Villafranca del Bierzo, was the Governor of Milan. He had arrived in the city in 1615 and returned to Spain in 1618 at the end of his mandate. Such a date might therefore represent a *terminus ante quem* for the execution of the series.

In addition to the letter by Fabiano Visconti, the analysis of the 1625 inventory of Toledo's collections was fundamental to strengthen my hypothesis. In the inventory, several canvases are said to be located in the hall of the governor's residence in Madrid: "treçe cuadros grandes de la

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Pasión de Nuestro Señor” (thirteenth large paintings depicting the Passion of Christ), “Otro cuadro grande del nacimiento de Nuestro Señor” (another large painting depicting the birth of Christ), “Otro de la adoración de los macies del tamaño di los de arriba y de la misma mano,” (another canvas with *The Adoration of the Magi* of the same dimensions and by the same hand of the paintings mentioned before), “Otro de la disputa con los doctores e nel templo de la misma mano y del tamaño de los de atrás” (another canvas depicting *Christ among the Doctors in the Temple* painted by the same hand and of the same dimensions of the paintings mentioned before) and another canvas depicting an obscure subject, described as “Otro de la misma mano y del tamaño di los de atrás de dos niños en el suelo y dos en el ayre,” (another canvas painted by the same hand and of the same dimensions of the previously mentioned paintings, depicting two babies on the ground and two up in the air). All these works are attributed to Procaccini. In addition to the letter dated 1616, the list of paintings in the inventory suggests that the cycle depicted not only scenes from the Passion of Christ, but also other episodes of his life.

Unfortunately, the inventory does not provide specific information on the episodes depicted in the paintings. It is therefore hard to consider them with certainty as the canvases of Procaccini's Passion series. Nevertheless, my hypothesis was substantiated in 2015 when another painting from the cycle, *The Christ Carrying the Cross*, was put up for sale at Christie's (London, 9 July 2015, lot 35) by the heirs of the marquis of Villafranca. The painting's dimensions are comparable to those of the works mentioned in the inventory. Furthermore, the canvas is signed with the initials “G. C. P.” on the bottom right, as it occurs in *Christ on the Mount of Olives* in the Prado. In *The Taking of Christ* (Fig. 5.), *The Crowning with Thorns* in Sheffield and the Boston *Flagellation* the same initials can be found on the bottom left.

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The *Adoration of the Magi* is signed on the bottom right in a similar way. In my opinion, the painting is one of the works from the Passion series. Indeed, its dimensions and scale of figures are comparable to those of the other canvases listed in the inventory. Specifically, I believe that *The Adoration* is to identify with the “adoración de los macies del tamaño di los de arriba y de la misma mano,” mentioned in the Toledo inventory of 1625.

The discovery of this painting confirms my hypothesis on the provenance of the cycle. In addition, it confirms that the paintings listed in the inventory, which all share similar dimensions and were painted by the same hand (“del tamaño di los de arriba y de la misma mano”) belong to the same series.

The Adoration of the Magi is the only extant painting from the Passion cycle that depicts an episode of Christ's life, rather than of his Passion. It is nevertheless very close to the paintings of the cycle in terms of style, monumentality of composition and dramatic theatricality of figures' gestures. The rapid touches of colours on the *Magi* and their entourage's faces suggest their inner turmoil, as it occurs on the faces of the executioners in the Boston *Flagellation* and the Sheffield *The Crowning with Thorns*. The high quality of Procaccini's *The Adoration of the Magi* is suggested by its bright, intense tones, along with its elegant details, such as the *Magi's* colourful turbans, where reflections of light generate refined translucencies.

To be included in the forthcoming catalogue raisonne on the artist currently being prepared by Odette D'Albo and Hugh Brigstocke. We are grateful to Odette D'Albo for this catalogue note.

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Fig. 1: Giulio Cesare Procaccini, *The Flagellation/ The Scourging of Christ*, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 2: Giulio Cesare Procaccini, *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

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Fig. 3: Giulio Cesare Procaccini, *The Crowning with Thorns*, Sheffield Art Gallery, Sheffield.



Fig. 4: Giulio Cesare Procaccini, *The Raising of the Cross*, Edinburgh National Gallery, Edinburgh.



Fig. 5: Giulio Cesare Procaccini, *The Taking of Christ*, on loan to the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA.