THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

By HARRY B. WEHLE
Curator of Paintings

Some days after the birth of Jesus, according to the account of Saint Matthew, “there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him”; and later, when they had departed on their way, “lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.” In the course of the centuries the three wise men, or Magi, became three kings who traveled “with a great multitude and a worshipful company of lords and other servants.”

In the Museum’s little Journey of the Magi by Sassetta (born 1392 ?, died 1450) we see the regal cavalcade winding its way down the pebbly road between gray hills, leaving behind it the rosy gates of a mediaeval city. The sky through which a file of wild cranes flies is aglow with early morning light. A huge golden star hangs low against the pallid near-by rocks. Still nearer at hand a fringe of grasses rises from a rather puzzling strip of reddish brown material. At the head of the procession we see the hind legs of a departing camel. A horse is loaded with bundles of gifts, and another carries covered panniers on which a monkey is riding. Courtiers follow on horseback, one of them bearing a falcon on his wrist, while afoot are young pages. Then come riding the three Kings, one old and bearded, the others young and gay. A jester and divers courtiers follow, while a white greyhound and a nondescript brown dog are seen trotting with the rest. Never, perhaps, has the old tale been told with a greater measure of naive charm nor with lovelier color or finer texture.

But, one may ask, why is the camel revealed only in small part, why does the star hang so low against the rocks, and whence rises the row of grasses in the foreground? The explanations have all been satisfactorily given by John Pope-Hennessy in a book on Sassetta. He points out that Sassetta’s small, jewel-like painting of the Adoration of the Magi now in the Chigi-Saraceni collection in Siena reveals, on a larger scale than in our picture, the same three Kings, several of the same attendants, the same horses and dogs. And there are camels too. The Madonna with the infant Jesus on her lap is seated at the right of the picture receiving the adoring Magi. Behind her is a white stuccoed wall with an arched opening. Clearly the two panels are parts of a single larger painting which some vandal has cut apart. In the Museum’s picture the three Magi are setting forth on their journey, in the Chigi-Saraceni panel they have reached their destination. Thus the miraculous star in the Journey must originally have “stood over where the young child was” in the Adoration. The white wall of the stable was evidently surmounted by an old roof of earth or tiles from which the grasses grew. But the portion of the panel with the roof is now lost, and both the existing pictures give evidence in their compositions of being short at the left.

A good idea of the composition as Sassetta painted it may be obtained from an earlier picture of the same subject by Bartolo di Fredi, a Sienese like Sassetta and probably one of the chief influences on his style.

The current wide appreciation of Sassetta is a matter of recent growth. Like Vermeer, Sassetta was virtually forgotten for centuries together, during which time his works were attributed to his less distinguished contemporaries. James Jackson Jarves brought two examples of his work to America and published them in 1861 as by Sassetta. Yet it was not until 1903 that R. Langton Douglas published the first adequate study of the artist and his major works. Berenson followed up in the same year, and knowledge and appreciation of Sassetta and his work have grown steadily since that time.
The Journey of the Magi, by Sassetta. Maitland F. Griggs bequest, 1943. The detail on the cover is the same size as the original.

The Adoration of the Magi, by Sassetta. In the Chigi-Saraceni collection, Siena. The above illustrations show the relative sizes of the pictures.