



Wirkungsgeschichte and Visual Exegesis: The Contribution of Hans-Georg Gadamer

Journal for the Study of

the New Testament

33(2) 147–159

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DOI: 10.1177/0142064X10385859

jsnt.sagepub.com



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Abstract

The article considers the visual dimensions associated with *Wirkungsgeschichte*. It accentuates the role of the artist as an active reader of the Bible and not merely as an illustrator of biblical scenes and highlights the approach of Hans-Georg Gadamer in appreciating the part played by the viewer, as well as the artist, in the visual hermeneutical process. The biblical story of the adoration of the Magi (Mt. 2.1–12), the first public and universal seeing of Christ and one of the most frequently depicted scenes in the entire history of biblical art, is used to illustrate Gadamer’s approach. The emphasis in the biblical narrative on the *revealing* of the Christ-child to the reader parallels a key concept in Gadamer’s hermeneutical aesthetics, namely *Darstellung*, a term that denotes how a painting facilitates its subject matter in *coming forth*, in becoming an existential event, an *epiphany*, in the life of the viewer.

Keywords

Wirkungsgeschichte, Gadamer, visual exegesis, *Darstellung*, epiphany

The terms *Wirkungsgeschichte* and ‘visual exegesis’ are not terms we generally associate with one another and so, for the purposes of this article, it is appropriate to start off with some definitions and distinctions. First, when related to visual culture, the terms *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, while complementary, have quite different connotations. Contemporary biblical commentators make more and more use of paintings and other forms of visual interpretation to draw attention to the Bible’s rich reception history and to show how even some of the most obscure of biblical passages have enjoyed rich and varied afterlives. Their interest in visual culture tends to be of a general nature, and references to biblical paintings are included—unfortunately too often

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as a mere cataloguing exercise—to illustrate the extent of the Bible's influence and impact in various social and historical contexts. We can say that, in most cases, the way they approach and deal with biblical visual culture comes under the general heading of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. The complementary term *Wirkungsgeschichte*, as I see it, denotes a much more specific process: as it relates to visual culture, it focuses on how a work of art affects its viewer and is concerned with the work's capacity to draw the viewer, sometimes quite powerfully, into the visual world of the Bible.¹ It is interested in the dynamic at work that results in the viewer's identification with the scene depicted, or with a specific character in that scene, and it takes into account whether the artist sets out very deliberately to affect the viewer, and his or her skill and ability to do so. Therefore, rather than simply exploring how the visual arts have been used to illustrate the biblical text, or in the production of biblical scenes for patrons, or as ornate decoration in churches and other public buildings, *Wirkungsgeschichte*, as I interpret it, deals quite specifically with how the visual interpretation of a biblical scene impacts on and influences the viewer, and most often in a personal way. The term 'visual exegesis' implies a similar focus: it centres on how the painter 'reads' the text, the role of the viewer in interpreting the image and emphasises the powerful dynamic at work between image and viewer. It also describes the beholder's new encounter with the corresponding biblical text made possible by the image. Understanding the process at work between a biblical painting and its viewer—and seeing this process in parallel terms to what happens between a biblical text and its reader—allows us to appreciate how the painting of a biblical subject presents the viewer with a biblical event that impacts on his or her life.

While there has clearly been a burgeoning of publications in relation to the reception history of the Bible in art, the most influential figure associated with *Wirkungsgeschichte* remains Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the main seminal work that provides a theoretical underpinning to the process is found in his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (1975), where he presents the role of hermeneutical aesthetics in understanding the function of art.² While Gadamer clearly leads the way, others have made significant contributions that highlight how we can use the concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* more profitably in appreciating the role of art in biblical interpretation. Art historian Paolo Berdini, in an extended introduction 'Scripture Reading and Visual Exegesis' in his book *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis* (1997), coins the term 'visual exegesis' to describe the processes at work when an artist interprets visually a biblical text and when the viewer beholds that interpretation. Mieke Bal, in her now classic *Reading 'Rembrandt'* (1991), challenges the conventional ways we have become accustomed to 'reading' biblical paintings; Gesa Thiessen (1999: 9-36) has explored a number of contemporary abstract paintings in modern art as a source in and of theology, following the approach of Paul Tillich; Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons, in their trilogy *Illuminating*

1. This may be an exaggerated distinction but serves the focus of this article, which is concerned primarily with the impact biblical art has on its viewers. For a useful and detailed discussion of definitions and distinctions relating to *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, see Parris 2009: ix-xviii.
2. See especially 'The Question of Truth as it Emerges from the Experience of Art' (Gadamer 1975: 5-150).

Luke (2003, 2005, 2008), show how the understanding of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a biblical text shapes quite powerfully our contemporary reading of it. But for the purposes of this article, it is the contribution of Gadamer that remains the most significant and influential. It is appropriate, therefore, to begin by presenting some essential aspects of his hermeneutical aesthetics and then to apply these to depictions of a specific biblical scene, the adoration of the Magi (Mt. 2.1-12), the first public and universal *seeing* of Christ (and generally given the name Epiphany). This is a subject that constitutes one of the most frequently depicted themes in the entire repertoire of biblical art, and that, for artists, 'has provided the most perfect context for involving the spectator in the world of the Bible' (Carr 1997: 91).

Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hermeneutical Aesthetics

The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer has had very significant influence on biblical interpretation. His central notion of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) holds that authentic interpretation does not take place by attempting to put oneself in the shoes of the author, but rather through a merging of one's horizon with that of the author.³ His ideas on how understanding a text from the past and applying its meaning to our present circumstances occur simultaneously, and not as two separate events, have been used effectively in the area of biblical hermeneutics, particularly by Gerhard Ebeling (1968), Anthony Thiselton (1980: 293-326), and Ulrich Luz (1989). In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer is concerned with three aspects: aesthetic experience, historical consciousness and language, but while his ideas relating to language and texts have been used widely, the relevance of his work to visual culture has been less well appreciated. Gadamer argues that, in experiencing a work of art, one undergoes something similar to the experience of play in games; the participant is drawn into an event with its own subjectivity and life. We experience truth in art when the work draws us into its play of meaning and allows us to see something previously hidden about the everyday world in which we live. The scholar who has engaged most extensively with Gadamer's views on aesthetic experience is Nicholas Davey, and he has presented a robust argument for the value of a hermeneutical aesthetic in coming to appreciate what lies in a work of art (1999). He demonstrates how the appreciation of visual interpretations of a biblical subject, far from being a simply subjective experience, is essentially dialogical in that it 'underwrites art's ability to take us beyond ourselves and out of the initial horizons of our present historical circumstance into others' (Davey 1999: 3). Such a perspective powerfully accentuates the active participation of the viewer, which is essential, in my opinion, to the task of *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the importance of acknowledging the impact that both artist and viewer have had on the formation of interpretative traditions surrounding biblical subjects.

Following Gadamer, Davey defines hermeneutical aesthetics as a 'philosophical meditation on what happens to us in our experience of art'. Davey makes linguistic understanding a paradigm case for grasping the nature of artistic understanding, shows

3. For a synopsis of Gadamer's contribution to hermeneutics, see Klemm 1999: 500.

how contemporary philosophical hermeneutics emphasize the ability of the said to point to and reveal the unsaid, and argues that what comes to pass in language illuminates the nature of our understanding of art.⁴ Language discloses of itself subtleties of association and nuances which logical analysis cannot foresee; consequently, embedded within words are world views capable of supplementing and extending our own, with the possibility of alternative meanings which flow from the past into our contemporary world. There is no fundamental difference, he argues, between experiencing the disclosive powers of language and experiencing what art discloses to us.

Hermeneutic aesthetics makes a distinction between the *broad* subject matter of a work and the very *particular* way a painting interprets it; it discloses how the subject matter an art work brings to mind is larger than what is shown and, at the same time, reveals the individuality of a work, its particular way of contributing towards its expression (Davey 1999: 14-17). When an art work brings its subject matter to mind, it will bring to mind more than what is initially seen. We are led out of the immediacy of our own horizon and brought to consider other ways of seeing and thinking; re-acquainting ourselves with previous interpretations of a subject frees us from being compelled to think and feel solely in terms of our present horizon. By recognizing different traditions of art practice and history, hermeneutical experience exposes the (subjective) limitations of our ways of seeing and opens us to a greater objectivity (Davey 1999: 3).⁵ The subject matter (*Sache*) that a painting expresses can never be exhausted by its particular exemplifications; it always remains more than any individual expression of it and is always susceptible to extension by further interpretation so that no art work can ever do full justice to the visualization of the subject.⁶ Gadamer's notion of *Darstellung* emphasizes that aesthetic understanding is inseparable from its instances:

Only by looking at the singular image, do we begin to *see* and engage with what it brings forth (*darstellen*); namely the whole field of meaning which informs it. The particular art work allows us to gain sight of that which without art's mediation, we could never come to see. Though aesthetics and aesthetic revelation must focus on the particular instance, the value of aesthetic experience resides in its ability to illuminate, re-interpret and develop previous experience... Finitude and partiality of vision are a condition of being able to *see* more (Davey 1999: 24).

One of the most important contributions of hermeneutical aesthetics is the argument that, in the experience of art, seeing and understanding are not merely passive. On the contrary, the spectator is a condition of what is 'held within' a work of art, and this can effectively change the subject matter it discloses. Gadamer's distinction between representation (*Vorstellung*) and presentation (*Darstellung*) in art is crucial: while *Vorstellung* implies a re-presenting of something independent of the work, or simply an attempt to

4. See also Heidegger 1982 for a development of this idea, and Gadamer 1975: 5-150.

5. See also Paul Ricoeur's similar idea in relation to the text: 'to interpret is not a question of imposing on the text our finite capacity of understanding but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self' (Ricoeur 1981: 143).

6. Gadamer (1975: 99) notes that 'all encounter with the language of art is an unfinished event'.

re-present something 'objectively', the notion of *Darstellung* is altogether different (Davey 1999: 19). It hints at that which an art work presents or 'offers up'; it concerns how an image occasions the *coming forth* of the subject matter it depicts, facilitating its epiphany, its coming into appearance. Gadamer is particularly concerned with what happens in our experience of art, with the 'event of being that occurs in artistic presentation', 'what comes to picture' in a painting. The 'appearing' is not secondary to the subject matter but is, to the contrary, a presentation (*Darstellung*) of the essence itself:

A work of art belongs so closely to what is related to it that it enriches the being of that as if through a new event of being. To be fixed in a picture, addressed in a poem...are not incidental and remote from what the thing essentially is; they are presentations of the *essence* itself (Gadamer 1975: 144).

Gadamer's important distinction between *Vorstellung* and *Darstellung* is especially helpful in recognizing the different interests of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*. While many contemporary biblical commentators tend to see biblical art simply as a resource that provides interesting and diverse examples of illustration (*Vorstellung*), *Wirkungsgeschichte*, on the other hand, corresponds to the notion of *Darstellung* and concerns itself with the participative role of both artist and viewer in interpreting the text, filling the gaps in the narrative and offering creative responses to the issues raised by—but often left unanswered—by the biblical authors.

Two further aspects of *Darstellung*, rightly emphasized in Davey's presentation of Gadamer (1999: 20), also relate directly to the task of *Wirkungsgeschichte*: the first relates to its particular relevance when discussing *religious* art, and the second to its importance in conveying 'realities' that are not tangible or 'objective' but that are, nevertheless, capable of radically reshaping our lives. The notion of *Darstellung* is particularly important for understanding religious art, since the artist cannot offer 'objective' images of the divine; religious art is not simply a depiction (*Vorstellung*), but a coming into picture (*Darstellung*), a revealing, of a divine presence. Images of the divine must always be *more* than what is depicted; biblical paintings that reveal something of the divine essence must, at the same time, always conceal other divine characteristics, since no single image alone can ever convey all the attributes of God. With regard to the second aspect, biblical paintings are (often intentionally) affective in that they present realities that go far beyond what is 'objectively' visualized.⁷ As Davey notes, intimacy, nearness, vivacity, directness, nakedness, inwardness or graciousness are not 'objective' but yet are realities that can radically reshape our lives—we can be as profoundly affected by these as we can by more tangible realities. By means of art, these qualities gain a tangibility of presence which, without art's mediation, they would not have. Such qualities can only be presented (*darstellen*) and not re-presented (*vorstellen*) and must be experienced by the viewer if they are to be drawn affectively into the biblical world.

Gadamer's perspective helps highlight the important role that visual culture can play in biblical interpretation; it respects the changing and developing tradition that surrounds

7. The medieval *imago pietatis* or *Man of Sorrows*, deliberately eliciting sorrow and repentance from its viewers, is a case in point.

many biblical subjects, it appreciates the range and variety of visual expressions of any biblical scene and draws attention to the potential for biblical subjects to be expanded and enriched through the merging of the horizons of artist and viewer. In addition, Gadamer's concept of *Darstellung* is especially applicable to the notion of the Bible as a source of divine revelation. Visual interpretations of the adoration of the Magi provide particularly appropriate illustrations of the relevance of Gadamer's approach; as the first public instance of the revealing of the divinity in human form, the subject concerns not a scene that can be depicted objectively (re-presented: *Vorstellung*) but a divine reality that must be disclosed (presented: *Darstellung*) or that *comes forth* in the life and world of the viewer. Gadamer's description of how a painting allows the subject matter to *come forth* becomes particularly significant since it corresponds to the biblical theme of the *coming forth* of the Christ child.⁸ The especially rich visual reception history of this story illustrates the popularity of the story for artists and the variety of imaginative ways artists have interpreted it; their interpretations demonstrate how a work of art points beyond itself, to a subject larger than what is shown, while also revealing the individuality of the work. By appreciating a range of visual expressions of the same biblical subject in many different art traditions, we free ourselves from the limits of our present horizon and recognize that no single expression of the theme is ever complete, ever definitive, since the subject addressed is simply inexhaustible and therefore always more than any individual expression of it.

Before that, however, it is important to include here the significant contribution of art historian Paolo Berdini, whose work, though from quite a different angle, strengthens Gadamer's idea of *Darstellung* and underlines the relevance of *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Berdini is primarily interested in the role of the artist as *reader* and *interpreter* of the biblical narrative: what the artist paints is never an 'objective' scene but always a 'presentation'. With specific reference to the late sixteenth-century artist Jacopo Bassano,⁹ Berdini has explored the process and implications of what happens when an artist paints a subject or narrative from the Bible. In the place of traditional art-historical criticism, which emphasizes text as *source* and the *function* of the corresponding image, he advocates the notion of textual expansion. What the painter visualizes is not the narrative of the text, but its expanded form as it emerges from the painter's reading of it. Painting, therefore, visualizes *a reading* and not *a text*, for the relationship between a text and its visualization has to take into account the circumstances under which that text is read, in addition to what makes it the object of the particular interest that might result in its visualization. Painting (and not only Bassano's) thus proceeds by a process Berdini calls 'visual exegesis'. In the image the viewer acknowledges not the text in

8. 'In speaking to us, an art work reveals something; it brings something forth from concealedness' (Gadamer 1994: 180).

9. According to Berdini, Jacopo Bassano (1518–92) was 'a painter and reader of Scripture. The list of subjects he took from the Bible for his painting is impressive in its number and variety, and includes parables and pronouncement stories that are seldom visually represented. Bassano's engagement with Scripture, though, was hardly limited to such professional expertise. His biographers tell us that, when fatigued by painting, he resorted to scriptural reading. Reading was his virtuous activity' (Berdini 1997: xi).

the abstract, but the painter's reading of it so that the effect the image has on the viewer is a function of what the painter wants the viewer to experience in the text. Visual exegesis is a process that allows the text to reveal, through an image or painting, multi-level meanings. In his study, Berdini points out that *any* artistic invention could not be taken for textual expansion: the case of Veronese is an example for, when he was brought before the Inquisition for his depiction of figures extraneous to textual accounts of the Last Supper, he was questioned primarily as a *reader* and not as a painter.¹⁰ Berdini's concept of visual exegesis is helpful in acknowledging the important role of the artist in the first stage of *Wirkungsgeschichte*. It highlights the creative and often highly disciplined way in which many artists have read and interpreted the biblical text, their expansive readings of it and their focus on the realities they wanted their viewers to experience in the text, mediated through their painting.¹¹ But Berdini's term 'visual exegesis' can also be used in a broader, more inclusive way—and as a helpful English-language term—to describe that crucial engagement of the viewer that lies at the heart of Gadamer's notion of *Darstellung* which, in turn, is pivotal in the task of *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

The Adoration of the Magi or The Epiphany

In Matthew's Gospel, the story of the adoration of the Magi is presented as the first public revealing of Christ, often referred to in Christian tradition as the Epiphany. By the fourth century, the Magi had come to represent the three ages of humankind (old age, middle age and youth) and the three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa), and were given individual identities as Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Through the centuries, it has become one of art's most painted subjects.¹² However, Ulrich Luz, in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* section of his commentary on this Matthean text, finds the apparent lack of correspondence between the text of Mt. 2.1-12 and its afterlives striking and notes:

The discrepancy between the biblical text and popular piety is especially thought provoking. The history of the influence of our text is also an example of its lack of influence. The exegesis therefore aids in critical examination of popular piety to find the way back from the abuses to

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10. Veronese was taken to task by his inquisitors for crowding a painting of the Last Supper (Accademia, Venice, 1573) 'with such irrelevant and irreverent figures as a buffoon with a parrot on his wrist, a servant whose nose was bleeding, dwarfs and similar vulgarities'. He staunchly defended his right to artistic license: 'I received the commission to decorate the picture as I saw fit. It is large and, it seemed to me, it could hold many figures'. He was instructed to make changes, but the matter was resolved by changing the title of the picture to *The Feast in the House of Levi* (WebMuseum, Paris. www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/veronese, accessed 12 April 2010).
 11. Art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon (2008: 180) makes the point that the images in the Sistine Chapel owe so little to the traditions of medieval and renaissance art, and so much to the naked words of Scripture itself, that Michelangelo must have read and re-read the Old Testament continually while he was painting them.
 12. For a history of the story's reception, see Trexler 1997.

the message of the text, without destroying the inherently positive element, namely, the possibility of Christians to identify with the Magi (Luz 1989: 141).

Although Luz is, of course, committed to the task of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, I find his comment on this particular passage quite ambiguous. He seems to imply that any creative engagement with the text, for example on the part of artist or viewer, constitutes an 'abuse' or aberration in interpretation, something that must be corrected in the light of traditional (textual) exegesis. However, in the latter part of his quotation, he notes the 'positive element' in tradition that allows Christians to identify with the Magi—it is precisely this perspective that corresponds to Gadamer's notion of *Darstellung* and Berdini's visual exegesis.

David Brown, on the other hand, is more explicit in defending the developing tradition as having continuity with Matthew's intentions and notes how, in the popular tradition, deliberations on the identity of the Magi as wise men or the significance of the star quickly receded, replaced by a desire to depict a child relevant to every age of humanity and race:

There is the need to hear in them (i.e. later traditions surrounding the Magi) the transformation of the biblical story into a deeper social critique than Matthew himself offers. Through the use of his imagination the evangelist set the Church on a particular path, but what arose was no mere straightforward deduction or implication, but itself a creative re-working in the light of later, more developed, Christian self-perception (Brown 1999: 92).

Brown's emphasis on 'creative re-working', which is much closer to Gadamer's notion of *Darstellung* than Luz's perspective would appear to be, can be exemplified by a brief snapshot on how the story is depicted in art. Of the many depictions of the adoration of the Magi, paintings by four artists, Mantegna, Lippi, Botticelli and Bassano, are representative of the theme in Italian art in the century before the Council of Trent (mid-fifteenth to mid-sixteenth century); they represent a period when iconographic traditions relating to the theme were well established, yet before the injunctions of the Council relating to the depiction of biblical images came into force, and so provide good case studies to illustrate the theoretical approaches of Gadamer and Berdini.¹³

Andrea Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* [1497–1500] in the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, is regarded as one of his most innovative and best-known compositions in which the artist followed closely the guidelines of his contemporary Alberti in his treatise *De Pictura* (1435), in which he recommended that the prime goal of painting should be *historia*, meaning storytelling as moral and intellectual instruction. *Historia*, according to Alberti, should convey a multiplicity of higher meanings.¹⁴ A painting was not meant to be a pictorial re-creation of an event as it might have appeared to an onlooker; rather it was to

13. Mieke Bal (1991: 224–47), on the other hand, using a Rembrandt drawing of the Epiphany, argues that tracing motifs back to traditions and sources tends to preclude active interpretation and suggests 'a suspension of the iconographical tradition', in order to allow a more spontaneous and immediate reaction on the part of the viewer.

14. For Alberti's emphasis on the inclusion of the viewer and the importance of the painting 'holding the eye of the learned and unlearned spectator', see Andrews 1995: 116–17. This idea is also developed by David Freedberg (1989: 14–17).



Figure 1 Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1497–1500, John Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

be a learned interpretation that would reveal the quintessential meaning of the subject matter to the viewer (in the same sense as Gadamer's *Darstellung*). The ultimate goal of *historia* was the emotional identification of the viewer with the action or moral significance of the scene. Mantegna used Alberti's conception of art as potentially revealing a multiplicity of meanings and, in the case of his *Adoration of the Magi*, to exploit the significance of the story for the viewer and to encourage a variety of meditational paths. He depicts the characters in a half-length format against a dark background, an aspect that lends a directness and emotional immediacy to the scene so that the viewer experiences an intimacy with the biblical characters. The painting illustrates Gadamer's view that, through art, aesthetic qualities such as intimacy, nearness, directness and inwardness gain a tangibility of presence which, without art's mediation, they would not have. Mantegna deliberately abandons any use of setting such as landscape to concentrate on the psychologies of the scene. In this close-up view, his vivid characterizations of the psychological reactions of the Magi attempt to draw the viewer into similar appropriate action—worship of the Christ child and meditation on his incarnation. The Magi, before whom the viewer stands, serve as clear role models; they establish the appropriate devotional state and, as the 'original' worshippers, could show the way in contemporary devotion (Carr 1997: 91). The composition permits multiple interpretations. The viewer can identify with one of a number of characters, interpreting the event from different perspectives: the old, humble and wise magus, the entranced middle-aged and the young astonished black magus—or from the perspective of Joseph, who is not included in the biblical text but who appears in the left corner, an outsider as it were, scrutinizing the strangers who appear to reveal a deeper level of insight.

Fra Filippo Lippi, the Carmelite priest and artist, reads the same scene in quite a different way.¹⁵ In fifteenth-century Italy, biblical images were called upon in a wide range of situations in daily life for many liturgical and didactic needs and were subject to highly variable demands.¹⁶ Since viewers were familiar with many lessons from the Bible and tradition, most images were planned to be used as loose frameworks to enable individual viewers to make a (personalized) range of associations. To the extent that they have a parallel in literary structure, paintings were more like vernacular hymns and sermons with loose sequences of ideas than like theological treatises with closely knit arguments. Such an approach offered flexibility to the viewer in determining the meaning the subject matter contained. Lippi's exceptionally rich association of images in his *Adoration of the Magi* (1450) makes it his most sermon-like painting, suitable for the appropriate moral reflection of his viewers, and presents 'a wider range of incident than virtually any other panel painting of the early to mid-fifteenth century' (Ruda 1999: 210). The imagery depends on well-known sacred texts and commentaries and not on any particular theological argument, so that the painting represents 'an original and sophisticated visual exegesis' (Ruda 1999: 238). Through the extensive symbolism in this painting, the viewer is drawn into, and engages with, a heavenly world.

Sandro Botticelli's painting (1470–75) was commissioned for the chapel of the Epiphany in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence;¹⁷ Rab Hatfield notes that 'for an altarpiece in the form of a self contained narrative picture, it is unprecedented in the elasticity and range of its symbolic content' (Hatfield 1976: 67). This painting may be seen as an allegory of the church, rising amid the ruins of the ancient religions, to which the Magi come, representing the nations of the pagan world, while the shepherds, the Jews, are seen in the background to the left. Botticelli offers a reading of the biblical text suitable for the purposes of an altarpiece. The symbolic images in this picture are relatively few and their approximate meanings must have been clear to the average worshipper, but it is the manner in which familiar images are interrelated to its function as an altarpiece that sets Botticelli's painting apart. Since this is an altarpiece, the meaning of the painting must be interpreted in terms of the liturgical practice of the eucharist; it is the symbolism of the body of Christ that lies at the heart of the conceptual structure of Botticelli's painting.

Jacopo Bassano (the sixteenth-century artist who is the focus of Berdini's own study) produced a large number of paintings of the adoration of the Magi, including versions now in Edinburgh (National Galleries of Scotland) and Birmingham (The Barber Institute of Fine Arts). In the Barber Institute *Adoration*, the three Magi are clearly differentiated as individuals, each conveying a different attitude. The elderly magus, kneeling with his crown removed, gazes intently at the Christ child. The second magus emerges from the right holding out his gift while the youngest magus has not removed his crown. He offers his gift but is detracted by the gold platter held out by the servant boy. Mary and the child stand out in pastel colours and are positioned between Joseph and the elderly magus, who resemble each other in looks and posture. The group on the left display an attitude of deep contemplation, while the group to the right are distracted by commerce and worldly concerns.

15. See image on www.frafilippolippi.org.

16. See Ruda 1999, especially his section 'The Painting as a Sermon' (1999: 238–57).

17. See image on www.1st-art-gallery.com



Figure 2 Jacopo Bassano, *The Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1565), The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, The University of Birmingham

In this naturalist painting, the painting can be interpreted in less overtly 'religious' ways: two elderly men, representing old age and imminent death, contemplate birth and new life, represented by a new-born child and its youthful mother; the nakedness of the child which contrasts with the rich fabrics of his mother and the kings, together with the glittering crowns, suggests the vulnerability of life in the face of death (a point strengthened by the setting of decayed buildings and a desert landscape) regardless of wealth and prestige. The investigation of the crowns on the ground by the curious donkey suggests that wealth is alien to and inessential in the natural world. The crowded scene to the right, full of activity and commerce, denotes a lack of awareness of the brevity of life and what should be regarded as essential. Seen in this way, the painting can be a meditation on life, its purpose, priorities and its certain and ultimate decay. Bassano allows the viewer to interpret the painting on a number of levels, from a naturalist painting to an intensively religious one.

Different visual interpretations of the adoration of the Magi show how each artist reveals a unique dimension of the subject matter of the text. Mantegna, with his emphasis on classical form, structure and portraiture, highlights the qualities of the individual characters to be imitated by the viewer. Lippi focuses on the significance of the symbolism traditionally associated with the story and how it impacts on the life of the viewer. Botticelli in his altarpiece associates the Epiphany with the Eucharist, thus actualizing the text sacramentally in the life of the viewer. Bassano, through his naturalist paintings, presents the viewer with a stark choice of good and evil by depicting his characters within two mutually exclusive groupings. Each painting, therefore, offers the viewer a different perspective, another way of reading the text, in the light of the developing

traditions that surround the story. The range of visual expressions of the adoration of the Magi shows that artists were interested primarily in making the story relevant to their times and their viewers rather than simply depicting the literal details of the corresponding biblical text. Their rich and varied interpretations illustrate Gadamer's concept of *Darstellung*, the process in which an image is presented to the viewer as an existential event, a *coming forth*, an *epiphany* of the biblical subject. Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics and Berdini's concept of visual exegesis illumine the central role of both artist and viewer in extending and appropriating a biblical subject or theme through its visual expressions, while at the same time highlighting the inability of any particular visual interpretation to exhaust the full significance of its subject. No single interpretation can ever be complete or definitive but will always remain limited and finite. *Wirkungsgeschichte*, with Gadamer's *Darstellung* as its guiding principle, is not simply about the history of cataloguing responses to a biblical text, but about a vital and multi-faceted human engagement in interpretative situations that are forever changing.

Artists and painters illumine the biblical text for their viewers; they exploit its ambiguities and pay close attention to its nuances and subtleties and, most importantly, they *interpret* it. Traditionally, biblical scholars have prioritized theological and doctrinal commentary, such as rabbinic and patristic exegesis, where the stability of the canonical written word remains paramount. However, it is crucial that we include interpretations from visual culture, because artists frequently take on the role of 'visual exegete'; they raise challenging new questions and offer alternative 'readings'. Useful methodologies that value the role of artist and viewer in interpretation and in the task of *Wirkungsgeschichte* must yet be fully thought through, but we can be certain that the contributions of Gadamer and Berdini will always be central to this enterprise.

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