

**Using Non-Western Culture, Humanism, and Comparison to Explore the Possible Patron
of the *Adoration of the Magi***

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Introduction

Andrea Mantegna, an Italian Renaissance artist, was one of the first people to include the black Magus in his adoration paintings—*Adoration of the Magi* (see fig. 1).¹ The black Magus is one of the three Magi, also known as the wise men, who visited baby Jesus. The patron of the *Adoration of the Magi*, currently located in the Getty Museum, is unknown. There is speculation on who the patron could be, but there is not enough evidence for historians to confirm their identity. This essay focuses on the black Magus and additional paintings of Mantegna to argue that the patron of the *Adoration of the Magi* was Marquis Francesco II, who was the ruler of Mantua from 1484 to 1519. Scholars have argued that Marquis Francesco's wife, Isabella d'Este, was the patron of the *Adoration of the Magi*.² However, an analysis of other works that historians argue that she has funded, as well as her attitude towards Africans, makes it probable that Marquis Francesco was the patron. Marquis Francesco and Isabella d'Este both viewed Africans as prized possessions, but they both funded work that portrayed Africans differently; Isabella portrayed them in a subordinate position, while Marquis Francesco portrayed them in a more respectable manner. To compare the portrayal of black Africans, *Judith and her maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* and *The Triumphs of Caesar* will be analyzed further in order to prove that the patron of the *Adoration of the Magi* was Marquis Francesco II.

¹ Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1495-1505, distemper on linen, 48.6 x 65.6 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum accessed April 3, 2018, <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/781/andrea-mantegna-adoration-of-the-magi-italian-about-1495-1505>.

² Paul Kaplan, "Isabella d' Este and black African women," in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. T.F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 125-154.



Fig. 1. *Adoration of the Magi*. Created by Andrea Mantegna. c. 1497-1500 (distemper on linen, 48.5 x 65.6 cm, Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum.
<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/781/andrea-mantegna-adoration-of-the-magi-italian-about-1495-1505>

How Andrea Mantegna Came to the Court

To understand who may have been the patron of the *Adoration of the Magi*, Andrea Mantegna's history must be examined. Mantegna studied as Francesco Squarcione's apprentice, who taught his pupils with the intention that they would surpass him.³ He kept "casts or model books" of his works, as well as that of other painters.⁴ This allowed for Mantegna to be exposed to other artists' work. Eventually, Mantegna legally dissolved his partnership with Squarcione and sought various commissions enabling his travels to Venice, Italy.⁵

While in Venice, Lodovico Gonzaga Primo, a member of the Gonzaga family—rulers of Mantua, Italy—invited Mantegna to work for the family as a court artist. Before Mantegna accepted Gonzaga's offer, he was given the privilege to choose whether he wanted to display a version of the Gonzaga coat of arms.⁶ Coats of arms were symbols that represented families of high social status, and therefore held great value to rulers attempting to legitimate their rule. Mantegna, being born a commoner, should not have been allowed to wear the Gonzaga coat of

³ Evelyn Lincoln, "Mantegna's Culture of Line," *Art History* 16, no. 1 (1993): 33-55.

⁴ Lincoln, "Mantegna's Culture of Line," 37.

⁵ Lincoln, 39.

⁶ Lincoln, 40.

arms. Mantegna's ability to wear a version of their coat of arms shows that the Gonzaga family valued him deeply as an artist and wanted to extend their ruling paternalism over his work.

The Original Stories

The story of Judith is usually the subject of many Italian Renaissance paintings. The story inspiring the paintings concerns a widow named Judith, who intoxicates Holofernes, an Assyrian general, under the pretense of seduction. Her act of inebriated seduction was meant to prevent Holofernes from destroying the city of Bethulia. Judith then proceeds to cut off Holofernes' head and it is put usually in a basket or cloth and taken away. No Africans are mentioned because this story is from a section of the Old Testament, the Book of Judith. The Book of Judith does mention an attendant, but the "faithful attendant [is never] described as African."⁷

There are many artworks created by Mantegna about this story which include African figures. It has not been proven that Isabella d'Este is the patron. However, there has been extensive scholarly work that argue that Isabella is the patron. Therefore, *Judith and her maidservant with the head of Holofernes* will be discussed as if Isabella is the patron.

The Triumphs of Caesar are a series of nine paintings created by Andrea Mantegna. The paintings depict the military parade that celebrated Julius Caesar's victory over the Gallic tribes, recently defeated enemies of the Romans. The Gallic Wars, fought in what is now modern-day France, lasted eight years from 58 to 50 BC.⁸ Like *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, no Africans are mentioned in the original story.

Judith and her maidservant with the Head of Holofernes is like the *Adoration of the Magi* in that they both include Africans that are in a submissive role to the baby Jesus and Judith. *Judith*, like *The Triumphs of Caesar*, has an African musician, African soldier, and African

⁷ Kaplan, "Isabella d'Este and black African women," 127.

⁸ France: The Roman Conquest. Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

woman that are not original or essential elements of the original stories. Therefore, in both artworks of Judith and *The Triumphs of Caesar*, the patrons asked to include unessential elements in the story, making an analysis of their portrayal important as a form of comparison. The African Magus in the *Adoration of the Magi* and the African musician and soldier in *The Triumphs of Caesar* are similarly based in their grand portrayal, contrasting Judith's servant who has a more subordinate role based on her simplicity compared to the grand Judith.

Black Figures

The idea of including black Africans in Renaissance paintings was derived from the Czechs and the Germans who depicted them from 1350 to 1450.⁹ Around the same time, Mantegna was working on *Judith and her maidservant with the Head Holofernes* (see fig. 2)¹⁰, commissioned by Isabella d'Este. This painting is comparable to the *Adoration of the Magi* because both contain depictions of Africans. In *Judith and her maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*, Mantegna's positioning of the African woman is difficult to avoid. The main figure of the painting is Judith, who is in beautiful Roman draperies. Towards the side of the artwork is an African servant. Her face appears aged due to her rough features, but her African identity is not portrayed through skin color. Mantegna illustrates her ethnicity through "the maid's earring, along with the treatment of her nose, lips, and hair, [which] conveys her African identity."¹¹

⁹ Kaplan, "Isabella d'Este and black African women," 131.

¹⁰ Andrea Mantegna, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, 1491, pen, bistre, chalk on paper, 360 x 240 mm, ARTstor Slide Gallery, University of California, San Diego, accessed March 23, 2018, https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001026325;prevRouteTS=1555927873.

¹¹ Kaplan, 137.



Fig. 2. *Judith and her maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*. Created by Andrea Mantegna. [c1491]. From ARTstor Slide Gallery. https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001026325;prevRouteTS=1555927873

Historians argue that Isabella is most likely the patron, claiming that because she was the one that requested more black figures from Mantegna, not only as Magi but also as common people such as retainers, her touch was on the *Adoration of the Magi* as well.¹² Retainers refers to servants of wealthy noble families, especially if they have worked there for a long time. While she did commission more work that had black Africans, the portrayal of the figures should be considered. In *Judith and her maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*, the African woman is portrayed in a rather derogatory manner. The African woman holds the position as a servant, and Judith arches over her as if she is looking down at the servant. Yes, the African woman is in a subordinate position because she mimics Judith's maidservant, Abra.¹³ However, she is African and she is not in the original story. The purpose of the African woman being included is to show that Italians had possession of them, and they were prized by society. Also by having Abra be an

¹² Kaplan, "Isabella d'Este and black African women," 148.

¹³ Kaplan, "Isabella d'Este and black African women," 134.

African woman, it is possible that Isabella's infatuation with them was not fulfilled, "but through the medium of art Mantegna was able to increase their numbers."¹⁴ This means that because Isabella had African servants and could not afford more, Mantegna increased Isabella's possessions of Africans by including them in paintings. This is not a respectable portrayal of an African individual, and the point of having a black servant in a painting is to showcase the potential of imperial power.¹⁵ Not only does this portrayal exemplify Africans' supposed inferiority, but Isabella's attitudes also indicate that she saw them more as accessories.

The black Magus in the *Adoration of the Magi* is not similarly objectified. He looks adoringly towards the Madonna, taking up equal space with the rest of the Magi. The space they take up seems tight as there is not enough room for the three Magi to be there comfortably, creating the illusion that they are trying to get close to the Holy family. There is the argument that the black Magus is accepted because he bows down in submission and love towards the Christian faith, symbolized by the baby Jesus.¹⁶ According to an Italian Renaissance scholar, one theory that explains the subservience of black figures is by illustrating the integration of "inhabitants from the non-European world into the Western Christian universe, where a noble and 'wise black ruler comes of his own volition to the white man's land and lays down his wealth and power at the feet of the Christ Child."¹⁷ However, this fails to acknowledge the other two Magi. Even if king Balthazar, the black Magus, subordinates to the Christian faith symbolized through the baby Jesus, the other two Magi also do so. King Melchior has taken off his crown and slightly bowing in veneration to the baby Jesus. The most valid reason as to why

¹⁴ Kaplan, "Isabella d'Este and black African women," 135.

¹⁵ Kaplan, 127.

¹⁶ Peter Erickson, "Representations of Blacks and Blackness in the Renaissance," *Criticism* 35, no. 4 (1993): 499-527.

¹⁷ Alберт Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 9.

King Balthazar is portrayed as Black is to include Africans in the Christian faith and if anything, provide a more accurate representation of him as the “king of Arabia or sometimes Ethiopia.”¹⁸ All cultures are meant to be portrayed as accepting and subordinating to the Christian Faith.

Compared to the portrayal of the black woman in *Judith*, it is safe to assume that the black Magi in the *Adoration of the Magi* is portrayed as a person worthy of respect. Despite the above interpretations that claim a level of African inferiority, the black Magus in the *Adoration of the Magi* is not as inferior when compared to the artworks that Isabella d’Este commissioned, where the black characters played explicitly subordinate roles. This suggests that Isabella d’Este may have not commissioned the work. For the audience, there is no impression that the black Magus is received with malice. Instead, the audience is left with a sense of normalcy.

Isabella’s Attitudes

It must be made clear that Isabella saw Africans as ornaments, meant to display wealth and status that could easily be conveyed on her. Therefore, the argument that she may be the patron of the *Adoration of the Magi* because she commissioned more works that included black figures lacks weight. Isabella d’Este lived from 1474 to 1539.¹⁹ During this time period, she encountered paintings that incorporated black figures. This is where the difference is noted—Isabella, a marchesa, had the authority to protect women and children in Mantua from violence and crimes.²⁰ However, she did not have a problem with “purchasing black children captured in

¹⁸ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Magi Biblical Figures,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, Dec 6 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Magi>.

¹⁹ Deanna Shemek & Daniela Ferrari, “Profile of Isabella d’Este.” Creative Commons Attribution. July 2015. Accessed, April 20th 2018. <http://isabelladeste.web.unc.edu/profile-of-isabella-deste/>.

²⁰ Isabella d’Este and Deanna Shemek, *Isabella d’Este: selected letters* (Toronto, Ontario: Iter Press, 2017), 22.

Africa as ornaments for her court.”²¹ This is further illustrated in a letter to Giorgio Brognolo, who was probably a servant, in which he was ordered to purchase a black child and other goods:

Also get: a black border ribbon; a cap; a new black cap; a dark cap; and another black cap.... As for the Moorish girl, spare no diligence in finding her...we want you to have the whole city searched... If you cannot find [a child] who is just two years old, we won't mind if she is two and a-half years or so, provided that she is pretty, very black, and meets without approval. Even if you should have to bring her forth from the womb...²²

Through this quote, there is a sense of urgency and value placed on Africans, in this case, a black child. The value placed on the child is based on how dark she is and whether she is attractive.

The sense of urgency is shown because if the servant cannot find a black child, he should start looking at pregnant mothers who can produce a child that fits Isabella's desires. This demonstrates Isabella's attitudes towards Africans, demonstrating why she requests black figures in her paintings—to exemplify the status and wealth of the Gonzaga family in owning Africans.

Marquis Francesco and Black Figures

Marquis, like Isabella, was also interested in black figures. He requested that Mantegna add a black soldier to *The Triumphs of Caesar* (see fig.3).²³ The portrayal of the black African in *The Triumphs of Caesar* is different from *Judith and her maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*. In *The Triumphs of Caesar*, the audience notices how heroic the black soldier looks. The black soldier (see fig. 3) is the focus despite him not being centered.²⁴ He is dressed in beautiful golden patterned armor, with a golden colored cloak. He is the only figure whose facial

²¹ d'Este, *Isabella d'Este: selected letters*, 22.

²² d'Este, 41.

²³ Kaplan, 148.

²⁴ Andrea Mantegna later Andrea Andreani, *The Triumphs of Caesar (I): Trumpeters, Bearers of Standards and Banners*, 1486- 1492, tempera on canvas, 274 x 274 cm., ARTstor Slide Gallery, University of California, San Diego, accessed March 25, 2018.

features are clearly noticeable to the audience. He has a serious face and is looking back towards the opposite direction of the way he is marching. It has been argued that he wears a golden cloak because it is symbolic of the riches Africa holds, yet simultaneously shows “their [African] inferiority in European context.”²⁵ This may be true, since explorers who first encountered Africans saw them wearing gold earrings, bracelets, and other gold accessories.²⁶ However, in *The Triumphs of Caesar*, the golden color is meant to bring attention to the black figure and to adorn him; it does not perform the role of showing him as inferior. Mantegna wanted to exalt the beauty of a Roman soldier; however, he altered this tradition a bit.²⁷



Figure 3. (Right) *The Triumphs of Caesar (I): Trumpeters, Bearers of Standards and Banners*. Created by Andrea Mantegna later Andrea Andreani. [c1486-1492]. From ARTstor Art Gallery.

https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000591279;prevRouteTS=1555450143953.

²⁵ Kate Lowe, “The stereotyping of black Africans in Renaissance Europe,” in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. by T.F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 24.

²⁶ Lowe, “The stereotyping of black Africans in Renaissance Europe,” 24.

²⁷ Ronald William Lightbown, *Mantegna: with a complete catalogue of the paintings, drawings and prints* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 152.

The black soldier in *The Triumphs of Caesar* is meant to mimic Francesco's aide.²⁸ In the preparatory drawings for *The Triumphs of Caesar*, the black soldier was not included.²⁹ This means that Francesco requested that his aide be included in the painting. The way this African man is portrayed is like the way the black Magus is portrayed in the *Adoration of the Magi*. The figures serve the purpose as retainers, however, there is more respectability. Unlike *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, the painting commissioned by Isabella, the African woman serves the purpose of a retainer, but is portrayed in a derogatory way. The difference lies in the level of objectification. For Isabella, black figures were instruments used to illustrate her own wealth and status, while Francesco may have considered his retainers similarly, he requested that they be portrayed with dignity.

The Gonzaga Court: Marquis Francesco and Isabella d'Este

As established previously, Mantegna was a court artist who worked for Lodovico Primo, who died in 1478, then for Federico, who died in 1484, and then finally worked for Marquis Francesco.³⁰ Since the *Adoration of the Magi* was created in his lifetime, Marquis Francesco should be considered a possible patron. Isabella d'Este was Marquis Francesco's wife and they could request the court artist to create something to their liking. In the case of the *Adoration of the Magi*, based on how Marquis and Isabella portrayed Africans, it seems more probable that Marquis was the patron.

It is imperative to understand that Mantegna, with permission of the Gonzaga, could accept other offers of work. Therefore, the possibility that he accepted work from other people that were not the Gonzaga does exist. This means that there is a chance that another patron

²⁸ Kaplan, 148.

²⁹ Kaplan, 148.

³⁰ David Peet, "Mantegna: Court Painter of Mantua," *The Contemporary Review* 260, no. 1515 (1992): 206-207.

commissioned Mantegna to create the *Adoration of the Magi*. However, the chances of this are minimal because while Mantegna continued to accept invitations for work from other people, he never completed them.³¹ The *Adoration of the Magi* was most likely for the Gonzaga court due to Isabella's belief that Mantegna had many unfinished works because of his lengthy process that delayed completion.³² Therefore, Isabella d'Este did not want Mantegna to accept offers for outside work, forcing him instead to prioritize the family's commissions. Therefore, the *Adoration of the Magi* is meant for a member of the Gonzaga court.

Conclusion

This essay provided arguments as to why Marquis Francesco II from the Gonzaga court of Mantua should be considered as a possible patron for Andrea Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi*. In Kaplan's article, "Isabella d'Este and black African women" he comments that most historians tend to believe Isabella d'Este usually is the patron of paintings that includes black figures drawn by Mantegna. To counter this notion, he provides the example of *The Triumphs of Caesar* where two black figures are shown, and it has been proven with evidence that Marquis Francesco II is the patron. This is the extent to Kaplan's argument. This essay sought to deduce who the patron is by providing an analysis of both *Judith and her maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* and *The Triumphs of Caesar* and compare them to the *Adoration of the Magi*. Marquis should be considered a possible patron because of the time period, and the way he portrayed African retainers in paintings he commissioned.

The first step in deducing who the patron is for the painting is acknowledging the simple fact that Mantegna was a court artist. While court artists tended to only work for their court, a possibility exists that the patron of the *Adoration of the Magi* was outside the Gonzaga court.

³¹ Peet, "Mantegna: Court Painter of Mantua," 208.

³² Peet, 208.

However, the possibility is minimal since Isabella d'Este complained that Mantegna's work was "in much arrears," meaning Mantegna probably focused on working for the Gonzaga court and could not take work from other patrons.³³ However, just because Isabella d'Este complained does not alter her chances of being the patron of the *Adoration of the Magi*, this just means that the probability of Mantegna working for others at the time the painting was completed is minimal.

From the Gonzaga court, two possible patrons exist—Isabella d'Este and her husband Marquis Francesco II Gonzaga. *Judith and her maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* and *The Triumphs of Caesar* were chosen to deduce the patron of the *Adoration of the Magi* because they run along two themes: the roles and the portrayal of black figures. The appeal of the African retainers in *The Triumphs of Caesar* is like the black Magus in the *Adoration of the Magi*, which is why I believe that Marquis Francesco is the patron of the *Adoration of the Magi*.

³³ Peet, 208.

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