

BALTHAZAR

A BLACK AFRICAN KING

IN MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE ART

According to the Gospel of Matthew, “magi from the East” paid tribute to the newborn Christ with offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Revered as wise men, they came to be known as three kings because of the number and richness of their gifts. Beginning in the fifth century, European Christian theologians identified one of the magi—eventually called Balthazar—as African, sometimes describing him as having a dark complexion. But it would take nearly a thousand years for European artists to represent him as a Black African. Why?

Networks of exchange had connected Africa and Europe since antiquity. Commerce in gold and ivory brought inhabitants of both continents into frequent contact, and Black African soldiers served in the courts of medieval European rulers. Yet in the fifteenth century, even as the Papacy in Rome welcomed Christian delegations from Coptic Egypt and the kingdom of Ethiopia, Europeans escalated the brutal institution of enslaving non-Christian Black Africans. The rise of the slave trade devastated West Africa and brought thousands, ultimately millions, of enslaved peoples into Europe (and later, the Americas).

This exhibition provides a close look at fifteenth-century images of Balthazar, the African king, against the backdrop of enslavement. Case studies highlight Europe’s colonial desires for Africa’s riches and acknowledge the long histories of Africans in Europe.

Medieval Europe and Africa were far more diverse than is commonly acknowledged, not only in terms of race but also in language and religion. This exhibition uses the phrase “Black African” to underscore the racial diversity across the African continent and to address the theme of Balthazar’s Blackness in European art.

We invite you to explore these themes further and join the conversation online at getty.edu/balthazar.



Non-flash photography and video for personal use are welcome in the exhibition.

#BalthazarLA



The J. Paul Getty Museum

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The Adoration of the Magi

Provence, France, about 1480–90

ARTIST **Georges Trubert**

Book of hours (text in Latin)

Following late medieval tradition, the illuminator Georges Trubert depicted the magi as rulers from each of the three continents known to Europeans at the time—a propagandistic portrayal intended to emphasize the global reach of Christianity. The kneeling king represents Europe, while the standing kings correspond to Asia

and Africa. The latter are distinguished by their turbans, used stereotypically in art to identify Muslims, Jews, or peoples of the eastern and southern Mediterranean and beyond. Notably, the African magus is shown as Black. Such racialized images of the figure became common in Europe only around the end of the fifteenth century.

The J. Paul Getty Museum

Ms. 48 (93.ML.6), fols. 58v–59



Map of Africa

Magdeburg, Germany, 1597

AUTHOR **Heinrich Bünting**

Travel through Holy Scripture (text in Latin)

Protestant scholar and cartographer Heinrich Bünting designed a map of Africa marked by real and imagined kingdoms. In West Africa, we encounter the realm of Mansa Musa of Mali (died in 1337), whose famed wealth in gold and piety as a Muslim continue to inspire artists, writers, and filmmakers today. Mediterranean North Africa features numerous cultures, including the Ottoman kingdoms in Tunis and Egypt (visible at the top). In East Africa, near the

horn of the continent, we read the name of the legendary Christian king Prester John, who was said to reign in Ethiopia or India (reflecting Europeans' vague understanding of world geography at the time). Beginning in the 1440s, Portuguese sailors embarked on searches for this mythical ruler and violently enslaved non-Christian Black Africans along the way. European mapmakers often relied on Portuguese descriptions of Africa.

Getty Research Institute

44-2

KINGSHIP, REAL AND IMAGINED



During the Middle Ages and Renaissance (500s–1600s), the waters of the Mediterranean were busy with trade and travel, transporting goods, peoples, and ideas between Africa and Europe. Muslim and Christian rulers in Africa gained international fame, including Mansa Musa of Mali (died in 1337); the kings of Axum (Eritrea and Ethiopia); and Qaitbay, the Mamluk sultan of Egypt (1416–1496). All the while, many Europeans clung to the belief that a mythical Christian priest-king called Prester John lived in Ethiopia, a tale that typified the European fantasy of a wealthy African ally (though one version places him in India). In the fifteenth century, religious embassies from the courts of Christian Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt journeyed to Europe for church councils. While histories of Afro-European contact have traditionally focused on the three faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Africa was home to many other religions and traditions, both literate and oral.

This map of Africa, Europe, and Asia, created by a Spanish Jewish cartographer, contains a rare medieval depiction of the Muslim king Mansa Musa of Mali. He appears as a crowned Black figure holding a scepter and golden disk at the bottom of the second panel. The ruler's vast expenditure of gold poured so much of the precious material into the Mediterranean economy that it devalued European currencies for generations to come. The sixth panel of the map includes the biblical magi, shown as three crowned White kings on horseback.

Catalan Atlas, Majorca, Spain, 1375, Abraham Cresques. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Ms. Espagnol 30. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

THE MAGI IN MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS

The Bible does not specify the number or names of the magi who journeyed from the East, following a guiding star, to pay homage to the infant Christ. *Magos* was an ancient Greek word for a Persian priest-astrologer or dream interpreter. In the Middle Ages, European Christian writers described the magi as three kings

and named them Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. The individual identity, origin, age, and gift of each magus could vary by region or author, but by the late fifteenth century Balthazar was often depicted as a young Black African ruler bearing the gift of myrrh. Before that time, all three kings were traditionally shown as White,

as exemplified by the images in this case. Such treatment was not exclusive to the magi. Medieval European artists typically (and potentially inaccurately) represented biblical figures as White, often indicating cultural or racial difference through costume or attribute.

The Adoration of the Magi

Regensburg, Germany, about 1030–40

Benedictional (text in Latin)

Painted nearly one thousand years ago, this page shows the interchangeability of the magi in the early Middle Ages. All three kings are crowned, bearded, and dressed in the same pastel color palette as the Virgin Mary and Christ child. Only the eldest magus is distinguished by a gray beard and long robes. Ancient Roman artistic sources inspired the scene of kneeling dignitaries paying tribute to a ruler or god.

The J. Paul Getty Museum
Ms. Ludwig VII 1 (83.ML.90), fols. 25v–26

The Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi

Lake Van, historic Armenia, 1386

Gospel book (text in Armenian)

The illuminator differentiated the three magi by age, showing one as youthful and clean-shaven, another with dark facial hair, and the third with a white beard. The kings' clothing may reflect the garments worn by local Muslim or Mongol rulers or Christian priests in historic Armenia, where this manuscript

was made. The region was a vibrant crossroads of cultures that connected Europe and Asia. The paper for these pages derived from goods or technologies imported from China via trade networks with cities such as Tabriz (Iran) and Baghdad (Iraq).

The J. Paul Getty Museum
Ms. Ludwig II 6 (83.MB.70), fols. 5v–6

The Adoration of the Magi

Paris, France, about 1420–30

ARTIST **Master of the Harvard Hannibal**

Book of hours (text in Latin)

European artists often conveyed the magi's foreignness through luxury objects. Here textiles and golden vessels, as well as the two standing kings' headdresses, suggest an imagined Eastern origin. Profuse gold enlivens the scene of gift giving and provides a reminder of one of the key materials transported along the Mediterranean trade routes linking Europe and Africa.

The J. Paul Getty Museum
Ms. 19 (86.ML.481), fols. 49v–50

BALTHAZAR'S GIFT

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the East came to Jerusalem. . . . And when they opened their treasures, they presented gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

—Gospel of Matthew 2: 1, 11

Myrrh, the gift traditionally ascribed to Balthazar, was a prized material in the ancient world, used as perfume, incense, and medicine. An aromatic resin of the *Commiphora myrrha* tree, myrrh was sourced from the Arabian Peninsula and parts of Africa. Christians employed it as an anointing oil for certain sacraments and church ceremonies. It also held associations with death: according to the Gospel of John, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea embalmed Christ's body with myrrh and aloe.

Earlier accounts emphasized the royal nature of the magi's gifts. The book of Isaiah, in the Hebrew Bible, predicted that upon the restoration of Jerusalem, nations and kings would bring gold and frankincense in praise of God. These items also had resonance in the Greek and Roman world. In 243 BC, the Hellenistic king Seleucus II Callinicus made offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the temple of Apollo in Miletus (present-day Turkey).

Alabastron (Oil Jar)

East Greece, about 425–400 BC

Alabaster

Bowl

Qift (Koptos), Egypt, 300–100 BC

Agate

The J. Paul Getty Museum

71.A1.205, 72.A1.38

In the first century AD, Roman author Pliny the Elder reported that vessels made from alabaster provided suitable containers for unguents and medicaments like myrrh, which was often mixed with oil. The banded stone of Balthazar's vessel in the painting nearby may represent alabaster or agate, both of which allowed light to pass through their intricate striations.

Wan (Bowl) with Lotus Petals and Floral Scrolls

Jiangxi Province, Jingdezhen, China
(Ming dynasty), about 1368–1450

Wheel-thrown porcelain with blue
painted decoration under clear glaze

Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The Ernest
Larsen Blanck Memorial Collection, 53.41.5

L.2019.20

This finely painted blue-and-white bowl typifies Chinese porcelain exported to Europe during the Renaissance. Collectors greatly desired such objects, primarily because local artists lacked the knowledge to create them. These valuable trade goods gradually traveled from the Pacific to the Atlantic, largely through Islamic lands.

Some examples started to reach Europe in the fifteenth century, although they remained relatively rare at that time. In the painting nearby, the bowl held by the eldest king, Caspar—one of the earliest representations of Ming porcelain—signals his place of origin as Asia.

BLACK AFRICANS AND THE PARADOX OF THE RENAISSANCE

While the Renaissance is often called the Age of Exploration, when Europeans collected newly excavated antiquities as well as contemporary objects from distant lands, the painting at left points to a different, and difficult, aspect of the period.

At the time this work was created, Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506), one of the most famous Renaissance artists, was court painter to Francesco Gonzaga (1466–1519) and Isabella d'Este (1474–1539), rulers of Mantua, in northern Italy. Mantegna's position may provide insight into the objects and people he represented in his later life. Isabella, an avid collector of antiquities, acquired enslaved people as well. Letters document that she purchased a number of Black African children to be raised as servants (who were nominally freed upon baptism into Christianity). Could the figure of Balthazar in Mantegna's painting have been based on an individual in her household? While Mantegna had encountered both enslaved and free Black Africans in the region around Venice since the 1450s, he would have come into regular contact with servants at the Mantuan court near the end of the fifteenth century. Just as Balthazar's African origin was intended to demonstrate the universal reach of Christianity, Black Africans among Isabella's or Francesco's retinue were meant to showcase the couple's worldliness.

The Adoration of the Magi

Mantua, Italy, about 1495–1505

ARTIST **Andrea Mantegna**

Distemper on linen

This scene of gift giving builds on a thousand years of medieval Christian thought regarding the origins of the mysterious magi, said to come from the far reaches of the world to pay tribute to the Christ child. The eldest king, Caspar, holds Chinese porcelain that identifies him with Asia. In the center, Melchior carries a Turkish incense burner and wears a turban associated with eastern Europe or Asia Minor. Balthazar wears a leopard-skin headdress evoking Africa. His vessel is made of banded alabaster or agate, recalling the containers used in antiquity for precious oils, such as those infused with myrrh.

The J. Paul Getty Museum

85.PA.417

THE MEDIEVAL CHRISTIAN KINGDOM OF ETHIOPIA

By the end of the third century AD, the four great powers of the ancient world were considered to be Rome, Persia, China, and the African kingdom of Axum—which occupied parts of present-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. The later kingdom of Ethiopia, an early adopter of Christianity,

developed a vibrant artistic tradition that included liturgical crosses and illuminated manuscripts. In the fifteenth century, successive Ethiopian *nägäšt* (rulers) sent church delegations to Italy in an attempt to forge alliances, both religious and military, with Rome.

The frontispiece on view shows the Virgin Mary and Christ child flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. The Ethiopian emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob (died in 1468) reportedly had an honor guard that similarly stood to either side of his throne, holding drawn swords.

The Virgin and Child with the Archangels Michael and Gabriel

Ethiopia (possibly Gunda Gundé), about 1504–5

Gospel book (text in Ge'ez)

The J. Paul Getty Museum

Ms. 102 (2008.15), fols. 19v–20

Cross

Ethiopia (Zagwe or Solomonic dynasty), about 1200–1400

Bronze

Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Purchased with funds provided by the Ancient Art Deaccession Fund and the Decorative Arts and Design Deaccession Fund in honor of the museum's 50th anniversary, M.2015.18.1

L.2019.13



CONNECTING CONTINENTS

Trade was an essential way people knew the world during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. African elephant ivory and gold circulated across the Sahara Desert and up the Swahili Coast into the Mediterranean and Europe. Gold coinage also fueled Afro-European economies. The objects in this case attest to centuries-old trade networks connecting Africa and Europe.

Plaque

Rhine-Meuse region, Germany, late 800s

Ivory, gold leaf, brass, and glass from a lectionary binding

The J. Paul Getty Museum
Ms. Ludwig IV 1 (83.MD.73), cover.a.ivory

Virgin and Child

France, about 1300–1350

Ivory and silver

Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.
Gift of Mrs. Herbert Fleishhacker, 45.33.3
L.2019.16

Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe witnessed a boom in the ivory trade and the production of ivory luxury objects, including combs, reliquary caskets, and chess pieces. Sculptors often had to contend with the curve of the tusk. Here this curvature created the effect that the Virgin Mary is leaning to the side.

■ ■ *Sūrat al-Anām* (The Cattle) 6: 108–9

Tunisia (possibly Kairouan), 800s

Qur'an (text in Arabic)

The J. Paul Getty Museum
Ms. Ludwig X 1 (83.MM.118), fols. 4v–5

The luminous lettering of this North African Qur'an constitutes an early example of chrysography, or writing in gold. The scribe first traced the shapes of the letters on a ground layer and then applied thin sheets of gold leaf.

Ducat

Venice, Italy, 1500s

Gold

The J. Paul Getty Museum
93.NJ.53

The minting of gold coins had a long history in Afro-Eurasia (the interconnected regions of Africa, Europe, and Asia). The ducat was a type of currency used in Venice and exchanged abroad. It features the Venetian doge, or chief magistrate, kneeling before the city's patron saint, Mark.

The Adoration of the Magi

Naples, Italy, about 1460

Book of hours (text in Latin)

In this scene of the magi bearing gifts for the infant Christ, the two standing kings are dressed in garments suggesting Asia Minor and Africa. The purple-robed figure dons a peaked headdress worn by the Byzantine emperor on his visit to Italy in 1437, an event commemorated in prints and medals that circulated widely. The young, beardless figure wears a turban of Mamluk-sultanate

Egypt made of pink-striped *tiraz*, a fabric associated with North Africa and the Middle East (see right). The white-haired, kneeling magus is cloaked in cloth-of-gold silk, perhaps a reference to European fashion. Ships in the background evoke the kings' journey as well as the port of Naples, where this manuscript was created.

The J. Paul Getty Museum

Ms. Ludwig IX 12 (83.ML.108), fols. 256v–257

Tiraz (Inscribed Textile) Fragment

Egypt (Fatimid dynasty), 1000s

Silk tapestry on plain linen

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, *tiraz* (Persian for “embroidery”) entered Europe as diplomatic gifts and opulent trade goods from Fatimid Egypt. Decorated with bands of Kufic script, these textiles often bore the name of the ruling caliph. They were valued as luxury objects in both Egypt and Europe, and many made their way into European church treasuries.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Mr. and Mrs.
Allan C. Balch Fund, M.55.12.6

L.2019.14

THE LANGUAGE OF SLAVERY, RACE, AND RELIGION

Europeans and Africans had engaged in the trade of captive humans since antiquity. But in the 1440s, with the Portuguese incursions into West Africa, the slave trade escalated in unprecedented ways, industrializing the practice and bringing thousands—ultimately millions—of subjugated Black Africans into Europe and the Americas. While there were small numbers of free Black Africans in fifteenth-century Europe, by the 1480s the vast majority were not free.

It is difficult to parse the entangled language of slavery, race, and religion from written records, partly because the linguistic terms shift readily depending on context. The word “slave” comes from the medieval Latin *sclavus*, a term that originally referred to enslaved Slavic peoples and came to be used more broadly. In thirteenth-century northeastern Spain, in the kingdom of Aragon, “Saracen” and “Moor” were applied interchangeably and derogatorily to Muslims and Black Africans. In late fifteenth-century northern Italy, at the court of Mantua, the marchioness Isabella d’Este received a letter about a *negra*, or Black girl, and responded by calling her a *moretta*, another term employed inconsistently for both Muslims and Black Africans. Across Europe, documents regularly referred to Black “servants,” enslaved individuals who were nominally freed once baptized into Christianity.

Scholars are now grappling with the full meaning of “servant,” “slave,” and “page” when seeking to uncover the realities of Black Africans living in medieval and Renaissance Europe. Their histories can be hard to trace, as forcibly Christianized individuals were given new—and often cruelly ironic—names. One enslaved child who entered Isabella’s household in 1499 was renamed Maystro Petro, or Master Peter.

Initial *E*: The Adoration of the Magi

Veneto region, Italy, 1470s

ARTIST **Franco dei Russi**

Leaf from a gradual (choir book)

European artists often alluded to the African identity of Balthazar by depicting him with a Black attendant. On this leaf, Balthazar's geographic origin is reinforced by the camels visible in the background. The African magus himself appears as a young White king. This frequent juxtaposition of White ruler and Black servant in fifteenth-century images of the magi reflects the very real commodification of Black Africans in Europe at the time.

The J. Paul Getty Museum

Ms. 83 (2003.114), recto

■ ■ The Magi Approaching Herod

East Anglia (possibly Norfolk), England,
about 1190–1200 and about 1480–90

Illustrated *Life of Christ* with devotional supplements
(text in Latin and English)

This manuscript was first painted in the twelfth century, when the African magus was traditionally represented as White. In the fifteenth century, the book was refurbished with added prayers and illuminations, and Balthazar's face was tinted with brown wash in several images. Such changes to

illuminated manuscripts reveal the evolving worldview of their audiences. Could the increased number of Black Africans in England at this time have driven the later artist to revise the figure of Balthazar in the older manuscript?

The J. Paul Getty Museum

Ms. 101 (2008.3), fols. 35v–36

■ ■ The Adoration of the Magi Border with the Queen of Sheba before King Solomon

Bruges, Belgium, about 1525–30

ARTIST **Simon Bening**

Prayer book of Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg
(text in German)

The illuminator Simon Bening followed an artistic tradition of identifying each magus with a different part of the world. Here the eldest wears brocaded silk associated with Asia. The middle king kisses the Christ child in an intimate position that suggests the primacy of Europe. The youngest is represented as a Black African ruler.

On the right page, the biblical Queen of Sheba, thought to be from Ethiopia or

the Arabian Peninsula, appears as a White woman wearing a European cloth-of-gold dress and ermine-edged robe. She and her two attendants bring offerings to King Solomon, forming a narrative link between this episode from the Hebrew Bible and the scene from the Christian New Testament at left. In medieval Christian belief, the Queen of Sheba's journey foreshadowed that of the magi bearing gifts.

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Ms. Ludwig IX 19 (83.ML.115), fols. 36v–37

■ ■ **Initial Q: A Woman with Bread Loaves; Initial S: The Baptism of a Muslim**

Huesca, Spain, about 1290–1310

AUTHOR Vidal de Canellas

Feudal Customs of Aragon (text in Navarro-Aragonese)

The J. Paul Getty Museum

Ms. Ludwig XIV 6 (83.MQ.165), fols. 242v–243

When this manuscript was made, the Islamicate world stretched as far west as the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), a region contested by Christians and Muslims for nearly six centuries. This book contains feudal laws under King James I of Aragon and Catalonia (ruled 1213–1276), which regulated many of the daily activities of Jews and Muslims living in Christian territories. The second illumination on the left page accompanies a statute for baptism,

a Christian rite of symbolic purification with water. The decree refers to Muslims by two pejorative terms: *saracenos* (Saracens), usually signifying North African Muslims; and *moros* (Moors), often indicating Black Africans. The text makes clear that Christians and Jews were forbidden to return enslaved *moros* to their homelands, and that Muslims converted to Christianity could enjoy certain privileges.

HERALDRY AND RACE

European coats of arms often served as scorecards for victories over defeated foes. Heraldic images of black-skinned men wearing a crown or white headband signified Muslim adversaries from North Africa or the eastern Mediterranean: the sultans of Egypt and Syria during the Crusader era of the eleventh

through thirteenth centuries, followed by the Mongol and Turkish forces in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These peoples were not Black, and in European heraldic contexts the crown did not signal their power. Blackness became a visual strategy for the dehumanizing depiction of vanquished foreigners rather than an

indicator of sub-Saharan African heritage. The objects in this case reveal how systems of oppression were historically linked to pictorial representation. They provide insights into the role of Black imagery as grim markers of White Christian status.

Covered Vessel

Hall, Austria, about 1536–40

ARTIST **Possibly the Glashütte of Wolfgang Vitl**

Free-blown colorless glass with applied decoration, gilding, and cold painting

Black figures on luxury vessels served as symbols of European colonial and imperial power. Here the bishop's miter above indicates a Christian church patron, the Black king at left emblemizes the bishopric of Freising in Bavaria, and the shield at right signifies the house of Wittelsbach in Bavaria.

The J. Paul Getty Museum
84.DK.548

The Mocking of Christ

Paris, France, about 1500

ARTIST **Master of Cardinal Bourbon**

Poncher Hours (text in Latin)

The coat of arms of the aristocratic French Brosset-Poncher family appears to hang by a belt strap from golden architectural tracery. Half of the shield, containing the emblems of Denise Poncher, features the head of a Black man with a white headband on the red bar.



Detail showing the coat of arms at bottom

Moses Defeating the Moors

Regensburg, Germany, about 1400–1410

AUTHOR **Rudolf von Ems**

World Chronicle (text in German)

Clad in European armor and a pink tunic, the biblical Moses leads the Egyptian pharaoh's army against Princess Tharbis and the Kushite-Ethiopian people. A bannerman holds a pennant depicting a Black African king. In the text, Rudolf von Ems (1200–1254) anachronistically refers to the Black Africans as "Moors," a derogatory word also used to describe Muslims, adherents to a religion established thousands of years after Moses's time.

The J. Paul Getty Museum
Ms. 33 (88.MP.70), fols. 66v–67

EPILOGUE

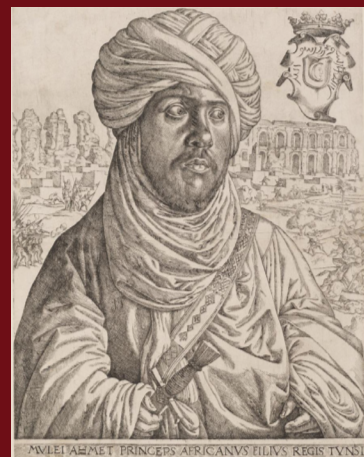
CONSTRUCTING BALTHAZAR

The immediacy and vibrancy of Rubens's figure at right, with his parted mouth and gaze directed to the side, suggest an individual captured in a moment of speech and motion. Was this seventeenth-century depiction inspired by an actual person, and if so, whom?

We know that Rubens often drew from life. One of his patrons in Antwerp had Black African servants in his household, and Rubens made other studies using them as models (see right). The Flemish city of Antwerp was a major center for the slave trade. Much research remains to be done on the status of forcibly Christianized Black Africans living there, specifically their positions and rights within domestic settings.



Four Studies of a Man's Head, about 1617–20, Peter Paul Rubens
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels



Mūlāy Ahmad, about 1535–36, Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam



Mūlāy Ahmad, about 1609, Peter Paul Rubens
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
M. Theresa B. Hopkins Fund, 40.2.
Image: www.mfa.org

We also know that Rubens used an earlier print of Mūlāy Ahmad, the Hafsid Muslim ruler of Tunis (died in 1575), as inspiration for other works (see left). The Tunisian turban in Rubens's *Head Study for Balthazar* casts the biblical character as a sixteenth-century North African king.

Thus Rubens's Balthazar may be an amalgam of an unidentified sitter, likely a servant or enslaved person, and a nearly contemporary ruler. The artist's image speaks to the intersections of power, faith, and race in commercial Antwerp at the height of its global reach.

Head Study for Balthazar

Antwerp, Belgium, about 1609–11

ARTIST **Peter Paul Rubens**

Oil on paper laid down on panel

This study helped Rubens (1577–1640) refine the figure of Balthazar for a large painting of the adoration of the magi, commissioned by the town council of Antwerp, in Flanders (northern Belgium). The biblical story of three kings traveling from afar with gifts for the Christ child resonated in Catholic Antwerp, Rubens's home city and a center of international commerce. The cult of the magi so captured the imagination of local inhabitants that many children were named Balthazar, Melchior, or Caspar after the kings. This oil sketch was painted on repurposed ledger paper; the marks of mercantile transactions are visible through the figure's robe, face, and turban.

The J. Paul Getty Museum

2018.48

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