

# C.G. BOERNER

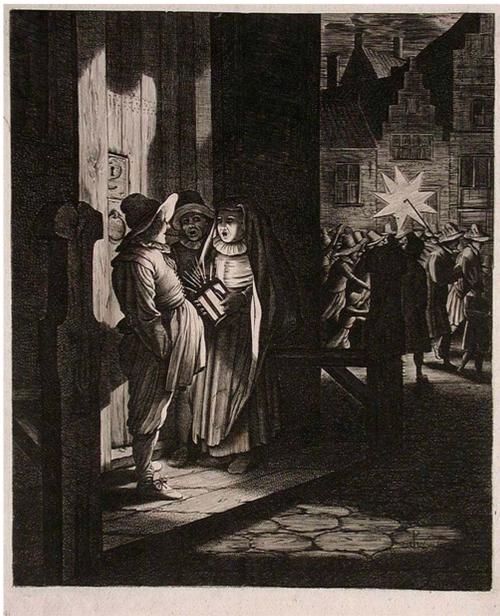
DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung  
6 January 2021

The Christian church of the West celebrates January 6 as the feast of the Epiphany, commemorating the day when the three magi arrived in Bethlehem to worship the newborn Christ Child. On the evening of this day, children in Europe have for centuries walked in the streets singing and carrying a lantern in the shape of a star. According to the Gospel of Matthew (2:1–12), it was the appearance of an unusually bright light in the eastern sky that had guided the magi to Bethlehem. These processions of *Sternsinger*, as they are called in Germany, are still a tradition in many countries. True to their culinary proclivities, the French add to this the *galette des rois*, the kings' cake that is eaten with great ceremony for this day's dessert.



In 1630 Jan van de Velde depicted Netherlandish "star singers" in a print after a design by Pieter Molijn.



Rembrandt was undoubtedly familiar with this tradition and might even have known Van de Velde's print. The overall composition with an entrance door to a house in the left foreground and the singers with their large star next to it reappears in a fluently drawn multi-figure scene that is usually dated to the mid 1640s.



British Museum, London, inv. no. 1910,0212.189

The drawing's horizontal format became the starting point from which Rembrandt then developed his wonderful nocturnal etching *The Star of the Kings* a few years later. He has now made the scene entirely his own and is, as so often, pushing the envelope of what printmaking is capable of. This time, he is exploring how far he can go in creating darkness in print by covering the surface of the plate with a dense web of etched lines and ultimately adding some finishing touches in drypoint.



As a result, one can hardly make out the majority of the surrounding figures. Only those closest to the light are clearly distinguishable. The star-shaped lantern sets the image aglow, an effect that is all the more pronounced the more richly inked an impression is. The luminosity of the paper becomes the source of light whereas the background remains veiled in etched darkness.



What is often forgotten about the feast of the Epiphany is that until the fourth century CE, it was actually the day when Christians celebrated the birth of Christ (and it remains so in the Orthodox Church). One of the reasons for this date shift was the cult of Mithras. Mithras was originally one of the angelic divinities within the Zoroastrian religion of ancient Persia. Mithraism later developed into a religion of its own and was widely practiced throughout the Roman Empire. The relationship, parallels, and differences between early Christianity and Mithraism are complex and the subject of ongoing scholarly debates. Their most crucial difference was that the latter was practiced in small exclusive circles that met in underground sanctuaries known as Mithraea. Participation required a multistep initiation, which promised knowledge that remained hidden from outsiders.



The Mithraeum in Capua (today's Santa Maria Capua Vetere, north of Naples)

Seen against the foil of such a religion of mystery, the Christian concept of Revelation gains a new and more literal meaning, since at its core stands the idea that the word of God is meant to be public and open to all.

Further undisputed is the fact that during these early centuries of the first millennium CE, Mithraism was an important rival to Christianity when it came to proselytizing and vying for new followers. And this competition for new worshippers must be seen as the main reason why early Christians moved the birth of the son of their god to a date closer to the winter solstice—the day when "Mithras Sol Invictus," the unconquered sun god, is reborn and a new cycle of life can begin as the days grow longer again. Once this switch was made, the original Christmas day was maintained as celebration of the moment when those three μάγοι (*magoi*, as they are called in the Greek original of the Gospel of Matthew) from the east arrived in Bethlehem. And this in itself was yet another clever move to supersede a rivalrous religious narrative. Not only did the Christian Messiah claim the date of the rebirth of the previously invincible Mithras; the Greek word *magoi* denotes, correctly translated, none other than Zoroastrian priests—and therefore ultimately worshippers of Mithras—who have now come to pay homage to the newborn Jesus.



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