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"To be an Infidel or an Unbeliever…"

Five Wise Men: Edmund Dulac, W. B. Yeats, and The Magi

This paper examines the treatment of the Adoration of the Magi in a 1917 painting by Edmund Dulac (1882–1953). By rendering its subject in a Persian painting style and combining Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian elements, Dulac correlates East and West, secular and sacred, Christian and non-Christian. Coming in the midst of the First World War, the painting shows a suffering public in England turning to exoticism as a means of escaping a dismal reality. However calm and serene the figures appear, they mask the tension and angst of the outside world. The artwork illuminates the artist's time period as well as his own intriguing beliefs, influenced by Theosophy, spiritism, esotericism, mysticism, and occultism.

A scene unfolds under a starry night sky. Approximately the same size as a standard sheet of paper, the watercolor painting on cold press illustration board renders a common Christian subject. It is the Adoration of

Jaimee K. Comstock-Skipp received her MA from the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art in 2012. This paper is dedicated to David Park, whose spirit will never get jet-lagged as he soars the astral planes.

the Magi (Figure 1). Small in stature and plain in dress, the holy family clusters on the left while more colorful figures enter from the right. These three Magi represent all the world by symbolizing Asia, Africa, and Europe. Velvets, silks, plumed crowns, gold accents, and fringed sashes bedeck the towering, exotic gentlemen. The bearded African Balthazar garbed in red carries a censer with wisps of frankincense arising from it, and looks like a Persian nobleman who has walked off the pages of a Safavid manuscript from sixteenth-century Iran. The youthful Asian Caspar in yellow clutches a lidded vessel housing myrrh. The serenity of his features masks the length of his overland journey from the Far East, and his robes also call to mind those of tribute bearers in Persian miniature paintings of the Safavid era. The aged European Melchior, garbed in green, resembles portraits of Shah Jahan, emperor of the Mughals in India. He kneels to offer a box containing gold to the seated infant. But a distracted eye might confuse the Virgin's larger hands as additional arms of the child's own, making Jesus look like a Nataraja: a dancing Shiva from the Hindu pantheon.

The Artist and his Influences

The painting rests in the Williams College Museum of Art where it has languished in storage since its acquisition. To date, there has been no trace of this work in published materials, nor are the details known of its transfer across the Atlantic Ocean between England and the United States. Painted by the British artist Edmund Dulac, its title is *The Three Wise Men* and it dates to 1917.[1] Notably, it emphasizes the biblical wise men, or the three kings, and diverts attention from their object of adoration. Baby Jesus has to share the stage. Is this illustration an Adoration of the Magi subject, or is the work itself the artist's adoration of the Magi as individuals? *The Three Wise Men* painting came at a significant moment in the artist's life, in the midst of World War One, in which he looked to artistic traditions derived from

[1] The painting is currently in the collection of the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts. To date, nothing has been mentioned of this work. Upon seeing it, Dulac's biographer, Colin White, stated, "nowhere in my researches over the years have I come across any reference to it" (private correspondence dated 14 February 2012). Nowhere is it featured in published materials, nor are the details known of its transfer from the artist to New York's Knoedler Gallery (according to a label on the backing) and in turn to the donor Kathryn Hurd (1907–1982) who left it to the museum after her death. The artwork is erroneously titled *Epiphania* in the catalogue to the Sotheby's Estate of Kathryn Hurd auction, sale no. 217, from May 1982.

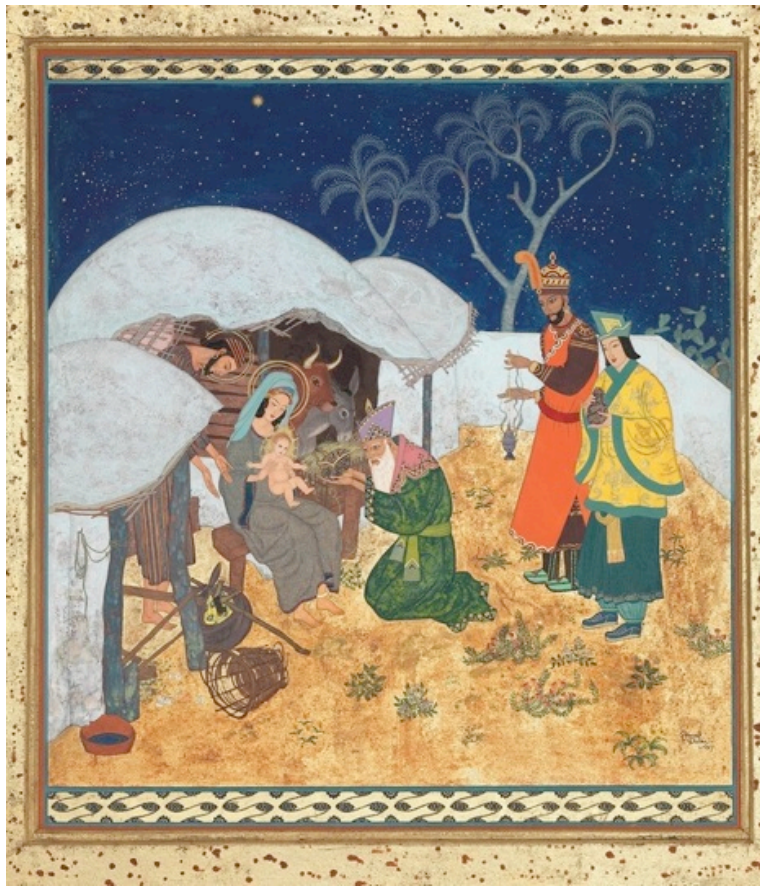

Figure 1. Edmund Dulac. *The Three Wise Men*. 1917. Image from the Williams College Museum of Art.

other times and places and intensely studied Persian art. His Magi emerged at a time when he also attended séances, communicated with ghosts, and befriended occultists and accused Satanists. How then does one categorize the painting's Christian subject and its Persian style when the artist was neither Christian nor Persian? Given this geographic and religious ambiguity, the artwork further complicates the categories of pagan and pious so as to reveal their interconnections and imbrications in each other, and ultimately denies the semantic differences these terms claim to assert.

The painting is a portal into the artist's spiritual beliefs, artistic influences, intellectual assertions, and lived experiences during the First World War. Around this time, the foundations for what would evolve into New Age neopagan beliefs were being laid. Dulac was a part of a Victorian (and later Edwardian) society which sought spiritual and cultural renewal. He and his contemporaries developed a global sensibility through increased contact with regions and spiritual systems beyond their own cultural traditions. Cultural encounter took place through a variety of means, from colonization and global wars to academic interest in world cultures and historical texts and arts. In addition to this interest in different places, an interest in different times also permeated this society. If a simplistic definition of the medieval is anything that is "not modern," then Dulac can be considered a medievalist due to his interests in the historical and the non-contemporary. The medieval can be identified in popular imagination as imagery relating to the age of kings and codices; in the Western tradition, the medieval is chronologically placed between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Enlightenment. Dulac's medieval imaginary however is of the shahs and manuscripts of Safavid Iran and Mughal India, even though temporally these empires' heights (sixteenth and seventeeth centuries, respectively) come after the ascribed dates of the Middle Ages in Europe.

Born in France in 1882, Edmund Dulac later became a naturalized English citizen and lived in London until his death in 1953. He was famous in his day as an illustrator of fairytales and stories from *The Arabian Nights* and Persian poetry from *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam*.[2] Dulac's early works were characterized by watercolor washes and volumetric figures, mirroring his rival in children's book illustration, Arthur Rackham. Dulac rendered a version of the Magi/Three Kings in this darker, early style that was published in a 1912 interview (Figure 2).[3] Here his Magi wear the trappings of the exotic and ancient Babylonian dress. Although the surface of the artwork is two-dimensional, the figures are rendered as three-dimensional. Their facial features are proportionate and realistic, and Dulac goes to the effort of delineating the wrinkled brow and hands of his foremost Melchior figure as well as the folds of brocade and velvet enveloping him.

[2] Dulac was commissioned by the London publisher Hodder and Stoughton for these titles: *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* (1909); *Stories from the Arabian Nights* (1907); *Sinbad the Sailor and other stories from the Arabian Nights* (1914).

[3] Hugh Stokes, *Art Chronicle* 8 (1912), 229. This same artwork would be titled *Three Kings of Orient* to illustrate the lyrics of the Christmas Carol in Edmund Dulac's picturebook for the French Red Cross from 1916.

Figure 2. Edmund Dulac. *Three Kings of Orient*. 1912. Image reproduced in *Edmund Dulac's Picture-Book for the French Red Cross* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1916).

But that was his early style. A few years later a significant change in his attitude towards illustration occurred. His three-dimensional work would become flatter, more stylized, geometric, and indebted to Persian artistic traditions.[4] By comparing his two sets of Magi, the 1912 version and the 1917, one can detect how he later brightened his colors and enclosed them in dark outlines by emulating Persian miniatures.[5]

[4] Mappin Art Gallery, *Edmund Dulac, Illustrator and Designer, 1882–1953: A Centenary Exhibition* (England: Sheffield Printing Services, 1982), 8.

[5] Ibid.

Dulac's identity and his art practice were products of many cultures. In 1916 he wrote about a transformative experience in which he first encountered the arts of China and Japan at the age of fourteen: "It was [then] I first came under the influence which has subconsciously fought out every other that has come to me."[6] After his art training at the Académie Julian in Paris in 1903, "a closer acquaintance with Chinese and Japanese art, Persian miniatures and later early Greek art definitely removed the obstacles to the development of early influences."[7] Dulac was known to have delighted in cultural juxtapositions in art. His friend R. H. Wilenski reported that he had hanging in his later studios Chinese paintings and Japanese prints showing Europeans in 1860 clothes.[8] Moving from Chinese brush painting to medieval woodcuts, over the course of his artistic career Dulac derived inspiration also from Japanese woodblock prints, early Greek art, and Persian miniatures to name a few.[9] This dabbling fulfilled his desire to synthesize spirit, form, emotion, and character in art.[10] During the time he painted *The Three Wise Men* in 1917, he had confined himself to one branch of art: Persian manuscript painting.

Dulac's infatuation with Persian miniatures at this time manifests itself in several works. Dulac turned to Persian and Mughal art to express narratives in flat forms as opposed to making illustration appear as a window.[11] Persian influence is evident in a 1916 caricature of his friend Sir Edward Denison Ross (Figure 3), who was the director of the London School of Oriental Studies and professor of Middle Eastern languages and history. Ross was purportedly taken aback at Dulac's familiarity with Persian miniatures when they first met as the topic was not well known outside of the scholarly com-

[6] Letter written by Dulac to Martin Birnbaum, October 5, 1916, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Martin Birnbaum Papers, Microfilm 1023.

[7] Ibid.

[8] R.H. Wilenski, *Edmund Dulac: Catalogue of a Memorial Exhibition* (London: Leicester Galleries, December 1953).

[9] Ibid.

[10] In the letter from Dulac to Martin Birnbaum, cited above, Dulac writes: "Circumstances allowed me to try in succession [as] many different experiments as I wished.… Three books done since 1912 [*Princess Badoura* (1913); *Sinbad the Sailor* (1914); *Picture-Book for the French Red Cross* (1916)] are in progress towards a better method of synthesis. Though confined to one branch of art at present I feel anxious to develop ambitions in every possible field of aesthetic activity. My aim: a satisfactory synthesis for the communication of Emotion through Character" (Dulac's own emphasis and punctuation).

[11] Phrasing of Dulac's practice at this time derived from Colin White, letter to author, 14 February 2012. Dulac surely worked on his *The Three Wise Men* contemporaneously with his illustrations for the book *Tanglewood Tales* which were carried out between 1916 and 1918.

Figure 3. Edmund Dulac. *Caricature Portrait of Sir Edward Denison Ross*. 1916. Image from a Christie's auction sale, 18 July 1975. The artist has crafted his name and his friend Ross's using Arabic characters although it is readable in English.

munity.[12] There exist Mughal miniatures of the Christian Adoration subject in the early seventeenth century, and one wonders if Ross acquainted Dulac with this type of material in the collection of miniatures at the institution that would later become the School of Oriental and African Studies.[13] Dulac's artistic experimentation continued in illustrations for the book *The Kingdom of the Pearl* published in 1920.[14] In his illustration "The Talisman Pearl"

[12] Colin White, *Edmund Dulac* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 86.

[13] The School of Oriental and African Studies, as it exists today, has extensive collections of Mughal miniatures. For more on these Mughal Magi, see J.M Rogers's section on the Jesuit presence in Akbar's court in idem., *Mughal Miniatures* (London: British Museum Press, 1993) and also Friederike Weis's study, "Christian Iconography Disguised: Images of Childbirth and Motherhood in *Mer'at al-Qods* and *Akbarname Manuscripts*, 1595–1605," *South Asian Studies* 24 (2008): 109–18.

[14] According to White, "Persian and Indian art meet" in Dulac's *The Kingdom of the Pearl* (*Edmund Dulac*, 108). For more on the analogy between Dulac's method and Persian miniature painting, see Rebecca Bruns, "Arabian Nights—and Art Nouveau," *Saudi Aramco World* 30, no. 4 (July/August 1979).

(Figure 4), the compositional similarity to his *The Three Wise Men* suggests concurrency. Dulac's turn to the miniature arts for book illustration caused his contemporaries and some scholars today to liken him to the sixteenth-century Islamic masters and illustrators of books themselves. By using paper and paint to depict figures and settings, both Edmund Dulac and the Persian miniaturist are working in the book arts and dealing with representation and the conversion of three-dimensional forms onto a two-dimensional surface.Dulac's interviewer Hugh Stokes in 1912 even suggested he was a reincarnation, producing pictures that recalled "the rich illuminations of the earlier Persian craftsmen, but [with] a technical skill which Oriental artists never reached."[15] However laudatory, Stokes's compliment exposes the hostility to non-Western arts that was widespread at the time.

Figure 4. Edmund Dulac. *The Talisman Pearl*. Illustration from Léonard Rosenthal, *The Kingdom of the Pearl* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1920). The same white, thatched architecture here and in the 1917 *Three Wise Men* echoes the bulbous tents of a Persian miniature showing an Iranian encampment from 1520 which similarly hangs over a mother and child (Figure 7).

[15] Stokes, *Art Chronicle*, 229.

Combatting Eurocentrism: Individualist versus Universalist Art

Dulac protested the glorification of Eurocentric ideals and aesthetics promoted by scholars who denigrated the flatness of miniatures as a failure to accommodate the "advancements" and "progress" of western art developments.[16] The artist's work made frequent use of the Persian miniature tradition as a means to contrast the "Hellenist and Renaissance eras, when these devices of convergent lines, receding planes, and chiaroscuro … were wrongly held to be the standard by which artistic perfection should be judged."[17] Dulac left notes on his conception of art as it moved across time periods and regions. Ahead of his time, he did not resort to the problematic labels of Eastern and Western in his classifications. Instead he created his own categories premised on ways of looking (as in linear perspective and illusionism), as opposed to culture or geography. This allowed him to define oriental and medieval art as existing in the same category based on their multiple viewpoints. The religious and ethnic affiliation of the artist was unimportant. Dulac delineated two strands: the Individualist and the Universalist. For him, Individualist art exemplified by Renaissance realism was a type of distortion, rendering the dynamism of movement and life to a single, static, and frozen portrayal. Unapologetically, Dulac defined the Individualist strain as leading "nowhere, being a series of uncorrelated experiments."[18] He dismissed artists working in realist styles as unimaginative and likened their creations to photography that left nothing to the imagination of the onlooker.[19]

Contrasting the Individualist was his Universalist category. Dulac would place Mughal manuscripts and Gothic book illumination under the Universalist heading. To him, Universalist art captured visual experience in a different way. Architecture is opened up to reveal multiple angles of perspective in one form. Dulac praised the Universalist artist who "paints things not *as*

[16] E. Blochet uses the following adjectives to describe Persian painting: "stiff," "angular," "awkward," "primitive," "worthless." Also worth mentioning is his deriding Persian and Indian art when it does incorporate and experiment with Renaissance ideas. He dismisses them as "clumsy imitations of European drawings" ("Mussulman Manuscripts and Miniatures as Illustrated in the Recent Exhibition at Paris," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 3 (December 1903): 276–85). Changes to these aesthetics would come about in 1931 with the London exhibition of Persian Art at the Royal Academy. See Barry D. Wood, "'A Great Symphony of Pure Form': The 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art and Its Influence," *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000): 113–30.

[17] White, *Edmund Dulac*, 72.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

they happen to appear but *as he knows them to be*.... Its process is rational and intrinsic ... capable of endless developments."[20] Dulac found such traditions to be liberating and better suited to express universal and cosmic themes. In abandoning three-dimensionality and one-point perspective, he insisted that Universalist artists did not ignore nature. Rather, they demonstrated that reality was and is more than that which can be observed from a single point of view. Dulac lauded the Universalist arts for most of his life, but one must not forget that he himself began his career as an Individualist. The artist's "epiphany" then in choosing Universalist art over the Individualist is traceable in the transition from his *Three Kings* of 1912 to his *The Three Wise Men* of 1917.

The Magi

The Biblical trio has been referred to as Magi, kings, wise men, or the Zoroastrian priests of ancient Persian empires.[21] The Magi have meant different things at different times and are at once timeless and timely despite, or due to, their ambiguous status in the Gospel of Matthew.[22] Aligning with and diverging from the Gospel has always been an issue in Adoration iconography because the wording offers itself to differing interpretations. Mark Allen Powell cautions that readings of the scripture (both textual and pictorial) develop through exploiting "narrative gaps via imposition of ideology foreign to the world of the story and to the discourse setting of the narrative."[23] Despite the range of adoring Magi in artworks across time and media, the tropes most often shared among them reinforce the Magi's foreignness and exoticism relative to the Holy Family. The story's changing visual iterations add information not found in the text so as to serve the needs of the moment when the art is produced. Dulac's work inserts itself into and diverges from the

[20] Dulac, "Modes of Thought," 89 (Dulac's emphasis).

[21] *Magus* as a term is flexible and pluralistic, encompassing ethnographic, religious, and political classifications to categorize religious priests who also gave political advice to the Persian kings in the Achaemenid, Median, Parthian, and Sassanian empires. Dulac seems to be restoring Persianness to his Magi, but it is done in an anachronistic way, for Persian miniature painting is a much later tradition.

[22] The Magi became known as the Three Kings in the seventh century when the Matthew account was paired with Psalm 72:10, which reads: "all kings of the earth shall adore him: all nations shall serve him" (quoted in Paul H. D. Kaplan, *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art*, Studies in the Fine Arts, Iconography 9 [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985], 21).

[23] Mark Allen Powell, "The Magi as Wise Men: Re-examining a Basic Supposition," *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000), 20.

established iconography popularized by European artists in the Renaissance. A brief analysis of British and French renditions by Edward Burne-Jones and James Tissot respectively helps situate Dulac, as a French-born Englishman, in his regional and temporal context.

The nineteenth century marked the abundance of Orientalist genre scenes in Europe that responded to the urge for the exotic in art that the Magi in prior centuries had satisfied.[24] Biblical exoticism in art continued but there emerged debates about the aestheticism or realism attributed to the rendered scenes. The French painter James Tissot produced *The Journey of the Magi* in 1894, thanks in part to new archaeological discoveries that made it possible to reconstruct biblical times on canvas. Tissot executes his Magi with ethnographic accuracy as three men in billowing yellow robes heroically ride their dromedary transport. The artist was among the nineteenth-century travelers to the Holy Land who endeavored to find and experience the living presence of the Scriptures to aid historical reconstructions of biblical scenes in art.[25]

Around the same time, the British Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones created his canvas *The Star of Bethlehem* in 1890. Known to celebrate Medievalism, members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood defined their association as a primitive and spiritual movement, and their canvases aimed for the visual language of primordial emotion as opposed to academic conventions brought about in the Enlightenment. Burne-Jones was indifferent to the biblical analysis and scrutiny the Magi and star were receiving. Asked whether he believed the miraculous nativity story, he simply stated: "It is too beautiful not to be true."[26]

For a Victorian public nostalgic for the piety of the pre-industrial age, the Bible could be treated alternatively as legend or historical truth. Biblical art could take on Burne-Jones's medievalism and fantasy or Tissot's archaeological authenticity.[27] The latter proved to be more popular among the public as it combined religion and reason.[28] A similar reconciliation of faith with science would come to serve the New Age movement in decades to come.

[24] Dennis Geronimus, personal conversation, 5 December 2011.

[25] More on Tissot's religious paintings in Gert Schiff, "Tissot's Illustrations for the Hebrew Bible," *James Tissot: Biblical Paintings* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1982).

[26] Quoted in Malcolm Warner, *The Victorians: British Painting 1837–1901* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1996), 32.

[27] Warner, *The Victorians*.

[28] Christopher Wood reports the popularity of spiritualism as well as the Catholic revival in France during the last quarter of the nineteenth century: *The Life and Work of Jacques Joseph Tissot: 1836–1902* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1986), 144.

Indeed, both the Victorian age and the New Age sought a middle ground, seeking a paradigm that built on new scientific insights while still acknowledging ungraspable mysteries.[29] Tissot's and Burne-Jones's artistic examples demonstrate the various stylistic modes of portrayal available to European artists at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. With these two means of rendering biblical events, one grounded in realism and science, the other in emotion and mysticism, Dulac's selection of Persian pictorial representation tellingly renders the Bible as a blend of legend and truth. It accesses a composite legendary truth by eschewing both organized religion and pictorial verisimilitude at the same time.[30]

Reappropriating the Arts of the Book

Diverging from the precedent of Renaissance realism, Dulac employed a painting style reserved for manuscripts, and not those of the Christian Gothic tradition but of the Persian and Mughal. His aged European Melchior, garbed in green, parallels a portrait of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (Figure 5); the bearded African Balthazar, garbed in red, bears a resemblance to a painted Safavid nobleman reproduced in a *Burlington Magazine* article[31] that Dulac might have read (Figure 6); the youthful Asian Caspar, garbed in yellow, has a less distinct stylistic provenance, but might parody the Mongolian influences on Timurid art. Indeed, scholars in the decades leading up to Dulac's painting were differentiating each of these strands of Persian art.

Dulac's *The Three Wise Men* asserts the artist's wide-ranging interests and explorations of world art, for within his Christian subject he includes iconographies from other traditions. Dulac wrote of viewing objects in the British Museum, and his experience surely expanded through visiting other museums and gallery exhibitions in England and France, or as reproductions in survey books on Indian and Islamic art published between 1904 and 1917. Dulac likely had access to F. R. Martin's *The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia, India and Turkey* published in 1912.[32] Martin's book plates include

[29] This description of the New Age's aims is derived from Nevill Drury, *The New Age: The History of a Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2004).

[30] My thanks to Karolyn Kinane for suggesting a blend of truth and legend.

[31] Persian miniature from the Safavid period, attributed to Aqa Mirak, ca. 1530, in Claude Anet, "Exhibition of Persian Miniatures at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris-II," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 22 (November 1912), 116.

[32] 2 vols (London: Quaritch, 1912). Robert Irwin comes to the same conclusion in his *Visions of the Jinn: Illustrators of the Arabian Nights* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010).

(a) (b)

Figure 5. (a) Portrait of the Emperor Shah Jahan in old age. Late seventeenth century. Image from the Williams College Museum of Art. (b) Detail of Dulac's Melchior in *The Three Wise Men*.

(a) (b)

Figure 6. (a) Persian miniature from the Safavid period attributed to ʿAbd Allāh, circa 1530-1550, Bukhara. Image from Claude Anet, "Exhibition of Persian Miniatures at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris-II" *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 22, no. 116 (November 1912). (b) Detail of Dulac's Balthazar in *The Three Wise Men*.

ample copies that could have easily inspired Dulac's inclusion of haloes and the golden ground on which figures appear to float rather than stand. In Martin's reproduced manuscript page of Nizami's *Laila and Majnun*, executed for Shah Tahmasp (Figure 7), a tent hangs over a mother and child seated in an Iranian encampment that echoes the bulbous thatched architecture over Dulac's Holy Family.[33] Besides book publications, academic journals such as the aforementioned London-based *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* covered exhibitions of the Islamic and miniature arts and European archaeological missions excavating Buddhist and Hindu sites at the time.[34] Dulac could very well have obtained his material from all of these sources.

Dulac's Magi composition makes cross-cultural blending explicit, akin to the New Age's holistic worldview and penchant for integration and adaptation. Like the Vedic, Buddhist, and Sufi wisdom teachings influential to New Age thought,[35] the artwork draws on a plurality of iconographies derived from Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity so that it correlates Christian with non-Christian, Western with non-Western. The long-fingered hands of the figures evoke mudra gestures in Buddhist and Hindu art.[36] The gilded haloes sanctifying Mary and Joseph are concentric circles resembling divine markers on Rajput and Mughal miniatures which Dulac could have found in Martin's *Miniature Painting*. The fiery rays of the infant's pointed nimbus is derived from the Islamic artistic tradition, examples of which are found in period *Burlington* publications.[37]

Dulac's looking to other traditions to achieve the artistic synthesis he sought repeats the claim of the philosopher of Indian art, Ananda Coomaraswamy, in a 1912 *Burlington* article on Rajput and Mughal miniatures. Coomaraswamy proposed that miniatures are for "those who care for pure

[33] I am grateful to Dr. Jaimee Uhlenbrock who has pointed out that Dulac's architecture is reminiscent of *hammam*-style bathhouses that the artist could have seen while on his travels to port cities in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean in 1913. For more on this trip and its shaping Dulac's art afterwards, see Mappin Art Gallery, *Edmund Dulac*, 8–9.

[34] Reviews of Dulac's illustrated books are mentioned in this publication, further suggesting he would have been interested in it.

[35] Overview of perennial wisdoms influencing the New Age found in Drury, *New Age*, 11.

[36] K. Coomaraswamy, "Hands and Feet in Indian Art," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 24 (January 1914): 204–11.

[37] The Islamic tradition demarcates holy figures with flames. The usage of haloes in Moghul painting confers both royalty and divinity. Including illustrations of such flamed coronas, the British historian of Islamic art T. W. Arnold attributed saints' flame haloes to Buddhist art in a July 1917 article: "Some Persian and Indian Miniatures," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 31 (July 1917): 25–27.

Figure 7. Detail from "The Old Woman Bringing Majnūn to the Camp of Lailā from a manuscript of Nizāmī executed for Shāh Tahmāsp, A.D. 1539-1543 Signed Mīr Sayyid ʿAlī." Image from F. R. Martin, *The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia, India and Turkey, from the 8th to the 18th Century* (London: Holland Press, 1912).

expression rather than mere representation, or are in some other way prepared to understand and sympathise with Indian thought.... These paintings are the key to the door of an enchanted land which, once entered, can never be forgotten."[38] This looking to other cultures and time periods was redolent of the moment when the art was executed. It came at a time when many were spiritually and ideologically reaching out for unity as armies raged in the most horrendous conflict yet witnessed: the First World War.

[38] Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Rajput Paintings," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 20 (March 1912): 324.

Wartime Spiritualities

As a case in point, in October of 1916 Dulac stood in his backyard in London with a pair of binoculars. He watched the shooting down of a Zeppelin during an air raid amidst the blossoming fields of Holland Park. Although the aircraft was of the enemy German side, Dulac was traumatized as he watched the aircraft's immolation and the plight of the crew burning alive inside. Desiring the end of the war and the beginning of a better future, he took refuge in his belief in cycles and transitions from one epoch to another. He wrote, "we live in a barbaric age. With the coming of this new element of truth and civilization the next age must either crack or become more civilized. Let's hope the latter."[39] The New Age would echo his cyclical and optimistic rhetoric. From an economic standpoint, the war brought about financial stultification for Dulac, but with it also came artistic freedom since he had few commissions. Free to study Persian painting, Dulac's rendering of the Magi rejected reality (as defined by Renaissance pictorial realism) and also retreated from it.[40] As markers of pursuits fulfilled and goals achieved, the Magi signal a hopefulness for peace and stability.[41]

So what was Dulac trying to express when he employed the stylization of Persian painting as opposed to realism in order to depict his 1917 Magi? The visuals vocalize a sort of artistic and spiritual dissatisfaction with what has gone before, which fed into New Age discoveries and incorporations of other traditions to "bring enchantment and mystery into a world that has grown tired, depressed, and disenchanted."[42] Clearly, Dulac used Christian iconography in his painting. But rather than reflecting the artist's piety, Dulac's writings vocalize his skepticism towards organized religion. For the

[39] Edmund Dulac, "Instability in Artists," Edmund Dulac Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

[40] The onset of WWI cancelled his illustration contracts from Hodder and Stoughton, leaving Dulac without work. Regarding these cancelled publications: "Les commandes prévues pour les années 1915, 1916 et 1917, ne pouvant être exécutées en raison de la guerre, les difficultés, financières des Dulac deviennent inévitables, même si l'aisance antérieure ne les rends pas encore dramatiques" (Pierre Nouilhan, *Edmund Dulac 1882–1953: de Toulouse à Londres* (Rodez: Éditions du Rouergue, 2008), 58.

[41] The Magi are "not only Christianity's archetypal travelers, they were its archetypal protected travelers. They were the ones who went to worship in a foreign land and came back safe and sound" (Gary Vikan, "Pilgrims in Magi's Clothing: The Impact of Mimesis on Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art," in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. Robert G. Ousterhout, Illinois Byzantine Studies 1 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 105.

[42] David Tacey, "Jung and the New Age—A Study in Contrasts," The C.G. Jung Page, http://www.cgjung.com/.

artist, Christianity in isolation was not the only path to the divine. Scientific and evolutionary theories emerging in the late nineteenth century fueled religious agnosticism in America and Europe. Characterizing the period as secular mistakenly collapses secularism, science, and progress into one definition. On the other side, it unfairly makes religion, tradition, and regression synonymous terms. Instead, some expanded—not excised—their beliefs. Theosophy, the "wisdom religion," was a movement founded by Helena Blavatsky in the 1870s that is widely accepted to be among the forerunners of the New Age.[43] Theosophy alleged to be the single truth behind all religions and was at once a philosophy, a religion, and a science. It emerged along with spiritualism and other metaphysical organizations such as the London-based Ghost Club and the Society for Psychical Research, exploring ghostly spirits that could also be interpreted as holy spirits.[44] Such organizations were founded to reconcile rational and supernatural explanations for strange and debatable phenomena using "unimpassioned scientific investigation."[45] They endeavored to connect science and religion and create, as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle said, a "new human race in religion and science … by making religion a real, living thing."[46]

Friendships with Yeats and Ross

Together with his good friend the Irish national poet William Butler Yeats, Dulac intensely explored intellectual and spiritual pursuits.[47] Close friends since 1912, Dulac and Yeats believed in a concept of universal knowledge

[43] According to J. Gordon Melton, "by the end of the nineteenth century, all of the major components of the metaphysical/occult traditions … found organizational stability.… Theosophy became the seedbed that nurtured the important new movements that would emerge so forcefully in the twentieth century" (*New Age Almanac* [Michigan: Visible Ink Press, 1991], 6). For more on the Theosophical roots of the New Age, read Drury's section "Theosophy: Divine Wisdom" in *New Age*, 20–27.

[44] This time period also saw the rise of psychology of the unconscious, Egyptology, and the Order of the Golden Dawn. See collected essays within George Mills Harper, ed., *Yeats and The Occult* (Canada: Macmillan Company, 1975).

[45] Wall text from British Library exhibition, *A Hankering after Ghosts: Charles Dickens and the Supernatural*, Folio Society Gallery, 29 November 2011–4 March 2012.

[46] In an audio archive from 1931, Arthur Conan Doyle explains how séances can add to religious creeds. He notes how the basis of séances and many organized religions is a belief in life after death. According to Doyle, spiritualism removes the fear of death, bridges people with lost loved ones, and encourages spirits to return to help and comfort but only with God's permission. *A Hankering After Ghosts*.

[47] Yeats's lover Ethel Mannin called Dulac "probably Yeats's greatest friend" (David A. Ross, *Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats* [New York: Facts on File, 2009], 182).

across time and place that fused the artistic, the spiritual, and the intellectual into one. As Dulac himself declared, "magic and art [are the] root of intellectual activities in religion, philosophy, and science."[48] Yeats and Dulac shared intellectual and spiritual pursuits, embracing paranormal phenomena, Theosophy, spiritualism, esotericism, mysticism, occultism, astrology, palmistry, Jung's work, philosophy, human destiny, marginal sciences, and tarot.[49]

Dulac might have thought of himself as akin to the Magi as knowledge-seekers when he affirmed: "The circumstances of my life and my own natural inclinations have induced me to place the greatest reliance upon intellect."[50] Whereas Dulac downplayed the role of religion in his life, Yeats was "never satisfied with the role of agnostic, confessing that he was religious by nature."[51] He turned to Theosophy in the 1880s as a "surrogate for the Christianity that nineteenth-century science had undermined for him."[52] But Yeats's dislike for the abstraction of the esoteric teachings led him to leave the society in 1889 to seek concrete experiences in séance settings, and in 1913 he joined the Society for Psychical Research. In March 1917, Dulac accompanied Yeats and the same Edward Denison Ross, the Orientalist, on a foray into the supernatural seeking to communicate with spirits.[53] At this séance, Ross was to act as a linguistic intermediary for any Turkish, Arab, or Persian apparitions they might encounter. The results of ghostly, garbled Middle Eastern languages were inconclusive to them, but the experiment testifies to the poet, artist, and scholar's joint attempt to connect the living and the dead and link the past with the present. Like other intellectuals living in London at this time, Dulac's active pursuit to communicate with other planes of existence was a means of uncovering hidden truths of the universe and spiritual answers. Dulac wrote: "We are all endeavouring to reach a state

[48] Edmund Dulac, "Lecture on Art and Magic, 1924," Edmund Dulac Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

[49] List of Dulac's interests compiled using information from White, *Edmund Dulac* and Nouilhan, *Edmund Dulac*.

[50] Edmund Dulac, "Why I Shall Not Mind Old Age," Edmund Dulac Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

[51] Christopher Blake, "The Supreme Enchanter: W.B. Yeats and the Soul of the World," (Ph.D. diss., Georgia State University, 1997), 68.

[52] Ibid., 29.

[53] Christopher Blake, ed., "Ghosts in the Machine: Yeats and the Metallic Homunculus, with Transcripts of Reports by W.B. Yeats and Edmund Dulac," *Yeats Annual* 15 (2002): 69–101.

where understanding of the outside world is complete because our communication with it is perfect. Therefore, the greatest desire of man in all ages has been the establishment of a means of communication with the rest of the universe."[54] But he conceded, "our physical senses cannot reach [beyond external appearance and] our powers of communication are limited.... Our knowledge will always be incomplete."[55] Dulac's goal then was to continue chasing after wisdom even if he knew fully attaining it while living was impossible. Collaboration with others, as opposed to isolation from them, could increase the amount of insights gained while on earth. Questing for knowledge but with a spiritual zeal, Dulac and Yeats sought to tap into what they perceived as the Universal Mind.[56] The two men's mutual interest in the paranormal went beyond established religion. By relaying messages from the spirit realm, séances were the new oracles.[57]

The one reference I have ever found to Dulac's 1917 painting is in a letter addressed to him by Yeats from December 14 of that year. It reads:

> My dear Dulac, ... Madame Gonne ... is longing to have a talk with you over the Persian miniatures.... I wish we could go & see your Magi but I am afraid it is impossible.... We met Dr. Bosschere last night and he was saying it was one of the best things you have ever done. I suppose it is for the princess, perhaps she will let you bring me to see it sometime.[58]

Most piquant is the reference—perhaps an inside joke—to a princess, who remains unidentified. But Madame Gonne is Yeats's friend Maud Gonne

[54] Edmund Dulac, "Lecture on Art and Magic."

[55] Ibid.

[56] It is significant that they seek a universal *mind* and not the more common universal *soul*.

[57] With Yeats, Dulac strove to unite what were commonly held to be opposites. In addition to séances, in the months surrounding the time in which Dulac painted *The Three Wise Men* the pair collaborated on stage performances of Japanese No theatre. It was a genre of drama with the "power of uniting, so long as the dramatic exaltation lasts, the worlds of the living and the dead into a single whole, whose intensity exceed[s] anything possible in either half alone" (Kathleen Raine, "Hades Wrapped in Cloud," in *Yeats and the Occult*, ed. George Mills Harper [Canada: Macmillan, 1975]: 92–93). Yeats and Dulac worked on a series of mythological plays culminating in *At the Hawk's Well*. Dulac helped with makeup, costumes, music, staging, and the creation of masks (White, *Edmund Dulac*, 81.)

[58] Transcribed letter generously provided by Professor James Pethica of Williams College.

whose daughter Iseult was the student of Professor Ross at the time.[59] The doctor is the Belgian Symbolist painter and accused Satanist Jean de Bosschère whom Dulac and Yeats befriended years earlier.

Given the close contact and collaboration between Dulac and Yeats surrounding the time period of Dulac's producing *The Three Wise Men*, it is worth mentioning Yeats's own literary works about the Magi, a subject he returned to several times.[60] Yeats wrote a short story entitled "The Adoration of the Magi" published in 1897 in his series of poems *Mythologies* and returned to it in a condensed poem from 1914 entitled "The Magi" in his poetry collection *Responsibilities*. This 1914 poem reads:

> Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
> In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
> Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
> With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
> And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
> And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
> Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
> The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.[61]

For Yeats scholar Christopher Blake, the terseness of the later poem recalls the apocalyptic foreboding of 1890s occult fiction, "but with the difference that the birth at Bethlehem (and, by synecdoche, all of Christianity) is repudiated

[59] Letters to W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound in *Iseult Gonne: A Girl that Knew all of Dante Once*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares, et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), letter no. 23. Iseult was studying the Bengali and Sanskrit languages with Ross.

[60] Yeats wrote a poem in August 1920 entitled, "On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac," further suggesting the certainty of poetic and artistic exchange between them. According to John Untrecker, Yeats mined his 1897 work "The Adoration of the Magi" to prophesy "the end of the Christian era in a return to an antithetical harsher civilization" (*A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* [New York: Noonday Press, 1959], 185). For Blake, the work can "justifiably be deemed his best work in fiction" ("Supreme Enchanter," 216). Yeats's Magi text "marks a midway point in Yeats's poetic use of the World Soul, for it looks back to the apocalyptic vision poems … and forward to the lyrics based on the System such as 'The Second Coming'" (241).

[61] W.B. Yeats, *Responsibilities* (New York: Macmillan, 1916). Some sources trace its publishing date to 1914 (W.B. Yeats, *Responsibilities: Poems and a Play* [Dublin: Cuala Press, 1914]. According to Ross, the Magi here are "less sentinels of a final peace than of an endless unrest, sentinels of the violent death and rebirth that is the savage pulse of the universe.… Yeats's magi look to the birth of Christ, though less with reverence and hope than with something like lust for the frenzy of apocalypse" (*Critical Companion*,147).

for an antithetical annunciation."[62] Just as Dulac's painting style transitioned from painterly washes to angularity and contour, so too did the critic Ezra Pound detect a new phase in Yeats's career, identifying a "'gaunter' style" seeking a "'greater hardness of outline.'"[63] Scholars have commented on the poem's apocalyptic foreboding that interprets Christianity as having run its course and that a different type of annunciation (perhaps a Second Coming?) will soon take place.[64] Together "in their stiff, painted clothes," with "ancient faces like rain-beaten stones" and all their eyes fixed on the Christ child, Yeats's 1914 Magi and Dulac's 1917 Magi subvert Christianity's authoritative claim that it is the only valid religion. Instead, the artist's and the poet's Magi are avatars in a mediating zone merging matter and spirit, "this-worldly" and "other-worldly."[65] Both poetic and painted Magi are from an intermediary plane straddling pagan and Christian, unique and collective, material and spiritual dimensions.[66] The New Age would laud Dulac's and Yeats's Magi for eroding the barriers between religious and philosophical systems. Nomadic and unrooted, the Magi inhabit liminal spaces and they cannot be completely affixed to mainstream Christian traditions.

Dulac on Religion

Dulac had a discordant relationship to Christianity. Disenchanted with organized religion, Dulac wrote: "For the Roman Catholic anyone who does not worship according to the rites of the Church of Rome is more or less damned, not to mention a great number of virtuous men like Plato, Socrates, Buddha, Confucius etc., who had no opportunity of becoming Christian. To credit God with such an absurd mentality is … nothing less than blasphemy."[67] Although communicated through Christian images and vocabulary, Dulac's Adoration of the Magi is a conflicted gesture of piety. Dulac recognized a commonality among the great historical figures of Zarathustra, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Thales, and Pythagoras. For Dulac, all their "intellectual activities had repeated one continually universalistic spirit that is to say …

[62] Blake, "Supreme Enchanter," 242.

[63] Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 212.

[64] Blake, "Supreme Enchanter," 242.

[65] Ibid., 291–92.

[66] Ibid., 216.

[67] Edmund Dulac, "Difference Between Spirit and Matter," Edmund Dulac Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

all the creatures of the universe, animate and inanimate are closely linked by certain fundamental laws."[68] New Age pursuits of Enlightenment through a synthesis of many spiritual paths parallel Dulac's own assertion: Christianity alone is not the only path to the divine. As a Universalist, defined by his perspective in art as in his worldview, Dulac imbued his art with a cosmological dimension to fuse the spiritual, the intellectual, and the artistic into one. "Now as at all times," Dulac's "unsatisfied" Magi are at once anachronistic and timeless, pagan and pious. As seekers of wisdom, the artist joins his painted subjects in hopes of finding once more the uncontrollable mysteries transcending the bestial floor.

Dulac's spiritual beliefs can be interpreted as early stages of contemporary New Age tenets. His painting is a visual articulation of the nascent New Age, demonstrating that the New Age is not a rupture but a continuation of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century occult and metaphysical spiritualities and philosophies ranging from pantheism to atheism.

In conclusion, can Edmund Dulac's *The Three Wise Men* really be defined as a Christian subject? The Adoration subject is about the religious encounter between Jesus and the Magi, Jew and Gentile, Christian and non-Christian, believer and heathen. Amidst the annotated pages of the artist's notes, palimpsests of edits and thought processes, a stray line is scrawled: "To be an infidel or an unbeliever …"[69] This succinct phrase uses the charged language of the Crusades and could be interpreted as Dulac's quandary about two paths he could take. He could be considered an infidel, unfaithful to the Christian creed because he recognized and acknowledged in writing the validity of "different truths—all equally great—of a hundred different beliefs."[70] If this can be read as complete affirmation, one can also detect his pondering total rejection through atheism. But there is neither question mark nor period attached to the infidel or unbeliever phrase. It oscillates between everything and nothing, alternately in the void and in the infinite.

[68] Edmund Dulac, "Notes on Diffusion," Edmund Dulac Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. These remarks by the artist make me wonder if he might have included a bearded Greek philosopher in his Melchior figure, or an Asian thinker in his Caspar depiction. It is impossible to know.

[69] Edmund Dulac, "Difference Between Spirit and Matter."

[70] Edmund Dulac, "Symbolism," Edmund Dulac Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.