

Ambrosius Benson and Studio, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*

oil on panel
35 ¾ by 31 inches (91 by 78.8cm.)

provenance: With Paul Cassirer Gallery, Berlin, 1922 (according to Marlier);
Acquired by Raul Edwards Mac-Clure Esq., during the early part of the 20th
century;
Thence by direct descent to his daughter Mrs. Carmen Edwards de Ferrari;
Thence by descent to her nephew, until sold, (“Property from a Private
Collection”), London, Sotheby’s July 7, 2005, lot 110, for £70,000;
Private collection, United Kingdom

literature: G. Marlier, *Ambrosius Benson et la peinture à Bruges au temps de Charles-
Quint*, Damme 1957, p. 287, no. 22 (as Ambrosius Benson and Studio).

note: Though Ambrosius Benson is considered a southern Netherlandish painter, he was actually born in Italy, most likely Lombardy in the late 15th century.¹ In 1518 he acquired Bruges citizenship, and in 1519 he was admitted to the guild of painters and saddle makers there as an independent master, with the comment that he was ‘from Lombardy’. He may have been from Ferrara, although he was originally called Ambrogio Benzzone, taking his first name from the patron saint of Milan, the capital of Lombardy. He was probably attracted to Bruges by its commercial and artistic reputation. Initially he worked in the studio of Gerard David, by whom he was profoundly influenced, but after a few months the relationship went wrong and the younger painter brought a case against David. Benson’s first marriage was to Anna Ghyselin, who bore him two sons, Willem Benson (1521/2-1574) and Jan Benson (before 1530 – before 1581), both of whom became artists. Benson twice received commissions from the city magistrates to decorate their new country hall and was a member of the city council on three occasions; he also held important offices within the painters’ guild, including dean (1537-8 and 1543-4) and governor (1540-41).

Despite a detailed knowledge of Benson’s life in Bruges, there are no documents confirming his works, and none remain in the city. Many turned up in Spain. That most of the artist’s works ended up in Spain can be explained by the fact that Bruges in the first half of the 16th century was an important trading center: painters worked more for the open market and for export than on commission, and Benson was no exception. The religiosity and simplicity of the Bruges school of painting was very much to the Spaniards’ taste, and Benson’s southern origins probably facilitated dealings with Spanish clients and also influenced the style of his oeuvre.

¹ Biographical information taken from Veronique van Passel, *The Grove Dictionary of Art*.

Benson's Lombard origins would have enabled him to adapt Italian prototypes and to paint naked figures better than his Flemish counterparts. His familiarity with Italian Renaissance models is clear from his later mythological scenes and history paintings of classical subjects, in which he represented scantily clad figures and nudes, such as Judith, Lucrezia and Caritas. In his more numerous devotional pieces, by contrast, Benson followed the established Bruges tradition, which relied on such Flemish examples as Gerard David, Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden and Hugo van der Goes and favored such subjects as Mary Magdalene and the sibyls. The latter theme gave the painter the opportunity to depict beautiful young women, half life-size, dressed according to current fashions, although he introduced an exotic note with turbans of striped voile in the Italian manner.

Benson painted relatively few portraits, although these may be considered his best works. He individualized the sitters through facial expressions and free and varied positions. However, his background landscapes and architectural and decorative forms show the artist at his most backward, untouched by the new Mannerist ornamentation. The landscapes are often copies after other artists, and Benson probably entrusted this work to his assistants. His style can best be seen in the facial characteristics, lighting and color in his work. Male figures often have a furrowed brow with a few locks of hair falling forward, the eyebrows form one line across the nose and the eyes are almost closed although the pupil is still visible. Most distinctive are the large ears and extended thin fingers with emphasized joints. Like Italian artists, he used light and chiaroscuro effects to define form. His coloring is warm and dominated by brown, but with significant amounts of dull red and dark green. Benson died in Bruges before January 12, 1550.

This unusual nocturnal *Adoration of the Shepherds* is also known through a variant, of slightly small dimensions (approximately 71.5 by 84 cm.), which forms the central panel of a triptych (the wings representing Saint Jerome and Saint Anthony of Padua), listed by Marlier as in the Town Hall, Segovia (op. cit. Marlier, pp. 280-81. cat. no. 2. reproduced plate LIV). The author attributes both versions to Ambrosius Benson and his studio. A number of significant differences exist between the two works, the most notable of which is that the Segovia picture is set during the daytime with an entirely different depiction of the Annunciation to the Shepherds in the distance; and the scene includes the addition of another angel above the Christ Child and an extra shepherd beside the piper, both absent in the present work.