



MANTEGNA
AND 15TH-CENTURY
COURT CULTURE

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITION

'Andrea Mantegna: Painter, Draughtsman and Printmaker of the Italian Renaissance'. An exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 17 January-5 April 1992, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 9 May-12 July 1992; and Suzanne Borsch, Keith Christiansen, David Ekserdjian, Charles Hope, David Landau and others, *Andrea Mantegna*, edited by Jane Martineau, London and New York: Electa, 1992, 553 pp., £25, ISBN 0 900946 40 7 (paperback).

Andrea Mantegna is one of the most intriguing artists of the Italian Renaissance. He was born in 1430 or 1431 in Isola di Caturo, half-way between Vicenza and Padua. While still a child, Mantegna moved to the university town of Padua, where he spent the first twenty years of his career (1440-60). He was apprenticed for six years (1441/2-48) in the leading Paduan workshop, led by Francesco Squarcione, an undoubtedly important, but still somewhat mysterious figure. The years in Padua seem not only to have defined Mantegna's painting style, which remained remarkably consistent for the whole of his career, but also the manner in which he approached and resolved the iconographic and compositional problems inherent in the process of painting. In the spring of 1460, Mantegna took up the post of Court Painter in the north Italian city of Mantua. Save a brief sojourn in Rome between 1488 and 1490, Mantegna remained in Mantua until his death in 1506, at the ripe, old age of seventy-six.

Sufficient records exist to provide a clear view of Mantegna as a man. He was strong-willed, pugnacious and litigious. But, the heightened drama and *bravura* of his personal and artistic style belies the fact that Mantegna was an incredibly slow, meticulous craftsman. He was an artist fascinated by detail, in the component structures of nature - both physical and theoretical. His concerns are typically those of a late fifteenth-century painter. For us this seems to translate into a certain intellectual fascination. Few modern viewers would consider Mantegna's paintings or prints attractive. They lack the strength of a Michelangelo, the sensuality of a Titian, the harmony of a Raphael or the luminosity of a Giovanni Bellini. It is important to remember that even Vasari, who praises Mantegna for his remarkable skill, still places him in the second part of his *Lives of the Artists* and amongst the imperfect painters and sculptors ('se non in tutto perfettamente, tanto almanco vicino al vero') who merely built upon the achievements of the first age of painting without making the leap to the final, perfected art of the High Renaissance. Still, there is a kind of rigour in Mantegna's forms, a confidence in the way he organizes space, a single-mindedness in the presentation of his figures that somehow verges on the moral. Looking at Mantegna's work, one always feels that one is in the presence of a great artist, but those qualities that make him great remain illusive and undefinable. As the late Lawrence Gowing phrases it in his introduction to the catalogue for the Mantegna Exhibition, '[Mantegna] is, no doubt, a prime exponent of something essential in the tradition [of painting] - one of the great

of 'Premier Engraver', 'Master of 1515', circles and followers and even an 'Anonymous' who seems not to have merited being cited as either a circle or a follower. One very quickly grew to empathize with Prof. Ernst Gombrich's summation of the catalogue's discussion of the various attributions surrounding these prints: 'I don't think that is terribly important, but it is confusing!' Even the more interesting prints, such as the differing versions of the *Deposition* and related drawings, or the successive states of the *Entombment*, might have been easier to study had they been displayed in a more intimate surrounding, such as the smaller galleries of the Royal Academy itself or in the Prints and Drawings Galleries of the British Museum.

One of the most common complaints aimed at recent art historical exhibitions has been the fact that the graphic panels often read too much like 'books on walls' - too much information pitched at too high a level. The Andrea Mantegna exhibition certainly did not suffer from this sort of excess. But, returning to the question of for whom was the show intended, for whom were these graphics and labels intended? The major message of the graphic panels seems to have been: if you want to know anything about Andrea Mantegna, you must buy the catalogue. In the solitary panel in the first room of the exhibition, for example, we were told to refer to the catalogue entries on specific topics *nine* times! Those visitors not sufficiently interested in Mantegna to invest £25 or those physically unable to carry such a heavy tome through eight hot and crowded galleries were left with the acute sense that they were certainly missing something. In several instances, the desire to limit the amount of written text (presumably to let the paintings and drawings 'speak for themselves') did generate a certain amount of confusion. For example, one reviewer of the London exhibition thought that the statement that 'Mantegna's passion for stone in all its forms ... led him to create a singular type of painting, now known as *grisaille*, that imitated carved relief sculpture' meant that Mantegna was 'credited with the invention of *grisaille* - painting in monochrome, specifically shades of grey, in imitation of bas relief sculpture' meant that Mantegna was 'credited with the invention of *grisaille* - painting in monochrome, specifically shades of grey, in imitation of bas-relief sculpture'.² The attempt to reduce text also led to a certain boldness in stating actually a very popular subject. Similarly, the idea that Mantegna's prints 'set the standard for all images in black and white' is difficult to sustain beyond a very limited frame of reference. Whereas the graphic panels and labels seem to have failed the non-specialist, the portable tape commentary, narrated by Paul Vaughan, was an excellent investment. For, despite a slight awkwardness with the pronunciation of certain Italian proper names (such as Squarcione and Brescia), the tape was informative, well-balanced and amusing.

The combination of objects selected and the restricted didactic material strongly suggested that the primary focus of the Andrea Mantegna exhibition was towards the specialist, the art historian if not, indeed, the scholar of fifteenth-century north Italian painting - for who else would be able to catch the importance of an oblique reference to Niccolò Pizzolo or appreciate the intent of

¹ T. Phillips and E. H. Gombrich, 'The shock of the new', *Royal Academy Magazine*, no. 34 (Spring 1992), 50-4, esp. p. 50.

² Marina Vaizey, 'Antique Modes Show' *Sunday Times Review. Section VI*, 19 January 1992, 12-13.

facts that, upon reflection, were probably not as true as they seemed. We are told that Christ's *Descent into Limbo* is a 'rarely depicted episode', whereas it is actually :

archetypes. But an exponent and archetype of what?' (p. 2). Mantegna is the type of artist who needs to be presented against some sort of larger context precisely because his work seems to provoke a series of 'big' questions. Given this, it seems slightly disturbing that the two major areas in which the Andrea Mantegna exhibition failed were in its steadfast refusal to present Mantegna in any sort of cultural or artistic context and its reluctance to ask any of the 'big' questions provoked by Mantegna's paintings, drawings and prints: of what is Mantegna an exponent? What is the rationale behind Mantegna's art? What is the point he is trying to make?

One very difficult aspect of the Andrea Mantegna exhibition was trying to resolve for whom the show had been intended. The works themselves were beautifully arranged and hung, helping to create an ambience of refinement and grace. Most of the works presented were relatively small-scale, with few of the paintings much larger than their printed and drawn counterparts, thereby reinforcing the overall harmonious nature of the display. The graphic panels and labels were discreet, in both their placement and in the amount of information they presented. In short, the dominant tone of the presentation was one of restraint and heightened aestheticism. Save during the most crowded periods of the week, one had the feeling that this was an exhibition specifically arranged to encourage the visitor to *look*. And, I would suppose, that there must have been a number of visitors who left the exhibition completely satisfied with what they had seen.

But what of the other visitors? Those who actually wanted to understand more about Mantegna and his *oeuvre* would have been disappointed on several counts. First, several of Mantegna's greatest works were not included in the exhibition. Most notably, all of his large-scale works (save the Hampton Court *Triumphs*) were not only missing, but were barely alluded to in the accompanying didactic material. Of course, one never expected either the ruined Eremitani frescos or the *Camera picta* to have travelled to London or New York, but it was surprising to find that the only reference to the most important work of Mantegna's Paduan period was a cursory 'see cat. 6' in the graphic panel covering the years 1440-60. One must assume that certain larger works, such as the *San Zeno Altarpiece* or the *Madonna della Vittoria*, were simply not available. But, regardless of the reasons behind the virtual lack of any large-scale works, the resulting selection of a series of nearly identically scaled smaller works, presented a distinctly biased view of Mantegna and his importance. Aspects of Mantegna's career and legacy which seem, at best, worth noting, were presented as if they were major art-historical concerns. I may be mistaken, but it seems this approach may have stemmed from the show's prehistory. One very much got the impression that the exhibition started its life as a show about Mantegna as a printmaker. Perhaps the venue or the patrons stipulated the widening of scope. But when the scope of the exhibition was expanded to include paintings, the underlying vision remained restricted, small-scale, personal and academic. It seemed as though many of the paintings displayed were chosen as counterparts to the prints - almost as illustrative, comparative material. It is somewhat ironic, then, that in the final analysis, the weakest part of the exhibition was the prints themselves. The numerous and tedious renditions of the *Labours of Hercules* or the copies of the *Triumphs* by Mantegna's assistants and followers did not come across as either interesting or attractive. One was assaulted by a bewildering bevy

a label that distinguishes between an engraved and a drypoint line? The possibility that the exhibition was intended primarily for specialists, however, does raise a different series of awkward questions.

One of the great difficulties in understanding an artist such as Mantegna is the fact that his works are now scattered all over the world. Naturally, the art historian welcomes the opportunity to see a number of works brought together, since even the best reproductions cannot match the real thing. But the art historian also knows that travelling can damage paintings. Minute vibrations, changes in climate, and even handling set a work of art at risk – particularly those works which are inherently fragile, such as paintings on panel and very delicate distempers. Many museums refuse to let panels travel for this very reason. It is an awkward dilemma. I, for one, was thrilled to be able to see again the fantastically well-preserved *Man of Sorrows with two Angels* from Copenhagen. This painting, perhaps more than any other in the exhibition, shows us what a very fine painter Mantegna was. But my pleasure was uncomfortably tempered by the knowledge that the reason that this jewel is in such uniquely fine condition is precisely because it has remained untouched for centuries. I was glad to see it, but I know it should not have travelled.

Another dilemma raised by this type of large, narrowly focused show is that it offers the organizers the opportunity to arrange what seems to be the definitive view of an artist, without being subjected to the attendant rigours of a proper monographic study. Necessarily, exhibitions are organized by committee and, obviously, certain compromises must be made. The foreword to the catalogue explicitly states that 'a purely monographic exhibition was neither feasible nor desirable' (p. x), but regardless of protestations to the contrary, the Andrea Mantegna exhibition and its attendant catalogue did set out to define Mantegna and his works for the 1990s. And who is this Andrea Mantegna?

On the one hand, there is the Mantegna represented by the works on display in the exhibition – a selective view somewhat biased towards the small-scale and intimate. In the catalogue, we are told that Mantegna is the epitome of the 'humanist artist', interested in classical script and the friend of learned men; but no discussion of what it might mean to be a 'humanist artist' or how 'humanist art' might differ visually from 'non-humanist art' was broached. Keith Christiansen, in his essay on 'The Art of Mantegna', tells us that 'a true estimate of Mantegna's art can only be made by someone willing to approach it as a system of values rather than as an aesthetic posture' (p. 350). And the two essays on Mantegna as a printmaker seem divided over the question of whether Mantegna did his own engraving or merely handed over completed designs to trained craftsmen. Perhaps one should applaud this plurality of vision, since it leaves the scholar completely free to reach his or her own conclusions about the material presented.

While appearing to feign a certain distance from the cut-and-thrust world of connoisseurship, the exhibition committee actually presented their version of the artist through the works they selected. This resulting image of Mantegna and his *oeuvre* is not without its problems. One particularly disturbing attribution, for example, was the *St Jerome in the Wilderness* from Sao Paolo, which Christiansen proposed as an early work by Mantegna, dating to c. 1448–9. The date suggested means that Mantegna was painting this oddly Ferrarese work at the same time he was painting the scenes of *The Calling of SS James and John* and *St*

James Preaching to the Demons in the Ovetari Chapel. The Ferrarese elements, such as the semi-transparent white highlights in the rocks above Jerome's head, which strongly recall the landscapes in Cosimo Tura's work of late 1460s, as well as the mannered forming of the saint's buttock and his awkwardly disjointed hands, are unlike anything else Mantegna paints. Similarly, could the slightly immature artist who painted the curiously pneumatic Christ Child in the Metropolitan Museum's *Adoration of the Shepherds* be responsible for the insipid and doll-like babe of the Biblioteca Marciana's *Chronicles of Eusebius*? Could the simplified and decorative spatial structure of the *Chapter of the Knights of the Order* in the *Life and Passion of St Maurice* manuscript be contemporary with Mantegna's dramatic depictions of *St James Baptising Hermogenes* or *The Trial of St James*? It seems unlikely.

More unlikely still is the attribution of a number of black chalk portraits to Mantegna. The explanatory graphics and complementary hand-outs to the exhibition state that 'during his lifetime Mantegna was famous for his skill as a portrait painter'. This may be true, but records suggest that this skill was by no means universally appreciated. We know that both Isabella d'Este and Galeazzo Maria Sforza rejected the portraits Mantegna had provided - Galeazzo Maria actually burning Mantegna's drawings in protest. If one considers the autograph portraits in the *Camera picta*, two things become clear. First, Mantegna approaches the form of the face in the same way he approaches all his subjects. The structure of the disparate parts are analysed and fit together. There is little sense of the face as an integral whole. Light and shade do not play across the features; instead, they define the transitions between one interlocking piece and the next. Second, Mantegna's attention to detail means that the personality of the sitter is often defined by their least flattering features. Identity is based on what is abnormal. The drawings attributed to Mantegna in the exhibition - such as the Albertina *Portrait of a Man*, the Christ Church *Portrait of a Man* and even the Dublin *Portrait of Francesco Gonzaga* - are extremely refined, subtle and polished drawings. The particular way in which the observations are rendered finds no analogy in any of Mantegna's other drawings, *grisaille* paintings or painted portraits. In all the instances cited, the most recent attributions to Mantegna seem ill-advised; the more traditional attributions to Francesco Bonsignori should be retained.

The attributions of a number of other painted works might also bear re-examination. It is hard to believe that Giovanni Bellini could paint a caricature as awkward as the right-hand figure of the Bristol *Descent into Limbo*. Both the Kimbell Museum *Holy Family with SS John the Baptist and Elizabeth* and *The Altman Madonna* contain some remarkably weak painting. And, despite its enviable provenance from Mantegna's own burial chapel in the Mantuan Church of Sant'Andrea, the so-called *Families of Christ and St John the Baptist* fully deserves the harsh critical judgement it has received for the past hundred years.

From a publicity point of view, the presentation of Mantegna's newly restored *Triumphs* must be considered to have been the crowning glory of the exhibition. These were the paintings upon which Mantegna's great fame rested. As the catalogue notes, Mantegna's *Triumphs* were one of the few 'Italian paintings before about 1500 whose status as masterpieces remained unchallenged throughout the 16th century and beyond' (p. 350). Freed from their dingy setting

in the Orangery at Hampton Court and rearranged in their proper hanging order, the *Triumphs* finally regained a certain degree of their original greatness. For the first time one was able to sense how splendid the *Triumphs* must have once been. Also, rather surprisingly, it became clear that the series must have been hung originally quite high, perhaps three feet higher than displayed at the Andrea Mantegna exhibition. It seemed as though the baseline of the *Triumphs* must have been set at eye level, just a bit higher than the similarly illusionistic scenes from the *Camera picta*.

For all the specific complaints one might have about the exhibition itself, compliments must be extended to Jane Martineau for having supervised yet another fine exhibition catalogue. The design of the catalogue is attractive, the layout easy to read, the quality of the reproductions is superb and the text itself is remarkably free of typographical errors or editorial slips. The addition of an index at the end of the text sets the catalogue apart from all its contemporaries. For the first time, art historians have been offered a catalogue that they can actually use as a reference work.

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