



Berlin, 28 February 2019

WALL TEXTS

Mantegna and Bellini. Masters of the Renaissance

1 March – 30 June 2019

An exhibition of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the National Gallery, London in cooperation with the British Museum

Presentation in the Temple

The point of greatest proximity between Mantegna and Bellini is undoubtedly reached in these two versions of the »Presentation in the Temple«, even if they are not contemporary works. Mantegna's version was painted shortly after his marriage to Giovanni's sister Nicolosia Bellini, who is seen on the far left, while Mantegna represented himself at the other end of the painting.

Some twenty years later, Bellini made a tracing of Mantegna's work to transfer its contours: his painting is nevertheless different from its model – the painted frame has become a parapet, the colours have changed and another figure has been added to each side. Are they family members? We do not know. In this altered copy, lies all the subtlety of the dialogue between Mantegna and Bellini.

Jerome

The earliest two surviving paintings by Mantegna and Bellini represent the same theme: Saint Jerome, the hermit and scholar who, having withdrawn to the desert, translated the Bible from Greek into Latin. Mantegna's painting already betrays his attention to mineral forms and to the laws of perspective.

Bellini's painting is as much influenced by Mantegna as by his father Jacopo, yet the landscape flooded with light anticipates the atmospheric rendering of his later paintings. This is the first masterpiece of the painter, who insisted on signing it with his own hand.

Mantegna in Padua

Mantegna moved to Padua at the age of ten, where he was placed as an apprentice to the painter Francesco Squarcione (1397-1468), who undoubtedly passed on to him the taste for antiquity that was prevalent in the university town Padua. But it was the presence there of the Florentine sculptor Donatello (ca. 1386-1466) that was decisive for the young painter. Mantegna transcribed in his own works Donatello's interest in mathematical perspective, in rich narratives, and in classical architecture. His sculptural style brought him great success: he soon became the main artist responsible for the fresco decoration of the Ovetari chapel in the Church of the Eremitani in Padua.

Bellini in Venice

Giovanni Bellini may have been born out of wedlock, but his father Jacopo reserved for him the same future as for his legitimate son Gentile: both would be painters like himself. Giovanni's apprenticeship in his father's workshop was therefore with an experienced artist still indebted to the International Gothic style. Nevertheless, Jacopo's drawings reflect an ear-

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ly interest in two key aspects of the Renaissance: mathematical perspective and a taste for classical antiquity. Unlike Mantegna, Giovanni was not a natural born genius but a young painter with an initial style intimately linked to his father's art.

Figures of Saints

During the 15th century, depictions of saints were among the most frequent commissions for a painter's workshop, along with Madonnas. The polyptych, an altarpiece composed of several panels, was still the rule in Veneto around the middle of the century. Traditionally, the saints are depicted individually as full figures in front of a gold ground. They are provided with various attributes as identification.

It was not until the end of the century that a single continuous panel was to prevail. On it the saints gather in a uniform picture space. Both Mantegna and Bellini played a major role in the development of these paintings known as *sacra conversazione* (sacred conversation), examples of which are on view later on in the exhibition.

The Agony in the Garden

The scene of the Agony in the Garden is one of the most harrowing of Jesus' passion: Christ prays to his father next to his sleeping disciples, while the Roman soldiers, led by Judas, are on their way to arrest him and to crucify him. This theme was chosen by Mantegna for the predella of a large altarpiece for the church of San Zeno in Verona; later, he also used the same subject in this stand-alone painting.

It is under Mantegna's influence that Bellini made an apparently similar version. To be sure, Bellini's rendering of the foreshortened bodies is not as convincing. However, he easily wins the prize for the landscape; the soft light of the awakening dawn points towards his future masterpieces.

The Virgin and Child

In 15th-century Italy, practically every home contained an image of the Virgin and Child – painted, sculpted or simply printed – which served as a focus of devotion. Offering protection, the Virgin Mary acted as a model of purity and courage. Often her expression is melancholy, as she foresees her son's untimely death.

Like all the painters of their time, Mantegna and Bellini would frequently render this theme, each in his own way: as Mantegna constantly strove to create new compositions, he seldom repeated himself; Bellini, on the contrary, would use the same motifs without ever becoming monotonous.

Fragments

Although they appear to be independent paintings, the two panels reunited here are in fact fragments from the same altarpiece, painted by Giovanni Bellini for the Venetian church of Santa Maria della Carità. While the Crucifixion occupied the uppermost part (or *cimasa*) of the altarpiece, the scene with the stories of John the Evangelist and Drusiana occupied the lower part (or *predella*). The main register of the altarpiece, probably with a depiction of John the Evangelist, is missing today. In the *predella*, the progression of the narrative from right to left – the reverse of the usual direction – was dictated by the altarpiece's position in relation to the high altar of the church.

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The Descent into Limbo

The scene of the Descent into Limbo is not mentioned in the Gospels but was well known to the faithful of the 15th century: between his burial and his Resurrection, Christ descends into the realm of death. He opened the gates of Hell to free from the so-called Limbo the souls of the righteous held captive there, beginning with those of Adam and Eve.

The theme fascinated Mantegna, who transcribed it into drawings and an engraving but also paintings. It is over a drawing from Mantegna's studio that Bellini painted his own version, further testimony to the continuing exchange between the two painters, even after Mantegna's departure for Mantua in 1460.

Marco Zoppo

Marco Zoppo (1433–1478) is an intermediate figure between Mantegna and Bellini: trained, like Mantegna, in Padua by Francesco Squarcione, who adopted him as well, he soon settled in Venice and showed great sensitivity to Bellini's brighter painting style. His »Pesaro Altarpiece« (1471) is a fundamental step in the evolution of altar painting in Northern Italy: Zoppo combines in a single panel the Virgin and Child and the saints. Mantegna and Bellini would soon use the imagery of the *sacra conversazione* for their compositions.

Landscape

Landscape plays a crucial role in the artistic evolution of Mantegna and Bellini, even if the sensitivity of both painters is often diametrically opposed: Mantegna invents improbable rock formations and ancient cities with incredible precision, while Bellini is more interested in the atmospheric effects of light on nature. Bellini's landscapes therefore appear more realistic to us. And yet, the only identifiable landscape in this exhibition is by Mantegna in his »Death of the Virgin«.

The Body

The human body is the focus of some of Mantegna's and Bellini's works. In renderings of Christ suffering or resurrected or of St. Sebastian, both artists explored human anatomy. Similarities in types and poses suggest that the artistic exchange between Mantegna and Bellini also extended to representations of the body.

Nevertheless, each artist emphasized different elements. Bellini's figures are characterized less by inner tension than by an aura of quiet introspection. Mantegna was fascinated by details and the dramatic effects of foreshortening. The expressiveness of his nudes influenced subsequent generations of artists.

Grief and Death

The death of Jesus is a central event of Christian religion. It is thematized artistically not only by Christ on the Cross, but also in multiple representations of Jesus' lifeless body, supported by his mother, angels or saints. Mantegna and Bellini frequently engaged with this subject matter, which combines two pictorial traditions: that of the icon, marked by timelessness, and that of the narrative, based on action.

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Dead Christ supported by Angels

Renderings of the dead Christ, mourned by angels and intended to arouse our compassion (Italian *pietà*), play an important role in both Mantegna's and Bellini's oeuvres. In most cases, the tormented body is presented to the observer as a half-figure in immediate close-up view. The gesturing angels contrast with the motionless body, while pointing to the wounds of the crucified or looking at them in deep mourning. Their childlike expressions are particularly suited to appeal to the compassion of the viewer. Building on an older pictorial tradition, the sculptor Donatello gave new impulses to the theme with his depictions in relief. Mantegna and Bellini take up this theme in their own way. What their pictures have in common is the painterly charm emanating from the nuanced colour accents of the angel's wings.

Portraits

One of the fundamental concepts of the Renaissance is humanism, which holds man as the measure of all things. It is not surprising that this philosophy caused an unprecedented expansion of portrait art, in which Mantegna and Bellini were actively involved. The powerful patrons of the two painters no longer simply commissioned religious paintings to ensure their fame; they asked to be the very subjects of these paintings.

The Triumphs of Caesar

These monumental paintings are among the most influential works in European art. Mantegna drew on ancient sources as well as the latest archaeological research to re-create a parade celebrating Julius Caesar's victory over Gaul. But his skill as a painter made the works seem alive and fresh, rather than a mass of academic details. The nine episodes of the set were installed in the Ducal Palace in Mantua but subsequently suffered damage by weather and underwent numerous early restoration campaigns. The three canvasses exhibited here, however, show how much they retain their original vitality. In its cabinet at the Gemäldegalerie the Kupferstichkabinett is currently showing the presentation on »Mantegna and Goethe. ›The Triumphs of Cesar‹ seen from Weimar«.

The Renaissance of Antiquity

The most important aspect of the Renaissance (French for rebirth) is arguably the reevaluation of ancient civilization, which was reborn thanks to humanists, scholars, and artists. Although classical antiquity was not totally forgotten in the Middle Ages, it is true that this period was studied in 15th century Italy like never before. Throughout his life, Mantegna was fascinated by ancient culture, to which he referred in numerous works. Bellini also represented ancient themes, always keeping in mind the inventions of his brother-in-law.

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