

Andrea Mantegna

Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506) was an Italian Renaissance artist. A serious student of Roman archaeology and son in law of Jacopo Bellini. Like other artists of the time, Mantegna experimented with perspective as he thought best, e.g., by lowering the horizon in order to create a sense of greater monumentality. His flinty, metallic landscapes and somewhat stony figures give evidence of a fundamentally sculptural approach to painting. He led a workshop that was the leading producer of prints in Italy before 1500.

Mantegna was born in Isola di Carturo, close to Padua in the Republic of Venice, second son of a carpenter, Biagio. At the age of eleven he became the apprentice of Francesco Squarcione, Paduan painter. Squarcione, whose original vocation was tailoring, appears to have had a remarkable enthusiasm for ancient art, and a faculty for acting. Like his famous compatriot Petrarca, Squarcione was something of a fanatic for ancient Rome: he travelled in Italy, and perhaps Greece, collecting antique statues, reliefs, vases, etc., forming a collection of such works, making drawings from them himself, and throwing open his stores for others to study from, and then undertaking works on commission for which his pupils no less than himself were made available. As many as 137 painters and pictorial students passed through his school, established towards 1440 and which became famous all over Italy. Mantegna was Squarcione's favorite pupil. Squarcione taught Mantegna the Latin language and instructed him to study fragments of Roman sculpture. He also preferred forced perspective.

Mantegna at the age of seventeen separated himself from Squarcione. He later claimed that Squarcione had profited from his work without paying the rights. Padua was attractive for artists coming not only from Veneto but also from Toscana: such as Paolo Uccello, Filippo Lippi and Donatello. Mantegna's early career was shaped indeed by impressions of Florentine works.

His first work, now lost, was an altarpiece for the church of Santa Sofia in 1448. The same year Mantegna was called, together with Nicolò Pizolo, to work with a large group of painters entrusted with the decoration of the Ovetari Chapel in the abside of the church of Eremitani. After a series of coincidences, Mantegna finished most of the work alone. This work was almost lost in the 1944 Allied bombings of Padua. The most dramatic work of the fresco cycle was the work set in the worm's-eye view perspective, *St. James Led to His Execution*. The sketch of this fresco survived and is the earliest known preliminary sketch which still exists to compare to the corresponding fresco. Despite the authentic look of the monument, it is not a copy of any known Roman structure. Mantegna also adopted the wet drapery patterns of the Romans, who derived the form from the Greek invention, for the clothing of his figures, although the tense figures and interactions are derived from Donatello. The drawing shows proof that nude figures were used in the conception of works during the Early Renaissance. In the preliminary sketch, the perspective is less developed and closer to a more average viewpoint however. This worm's eye perspective, creating an effectively large and prominent setting, is also seen in his work *The Holy Trinity with the Virgin, St. John, and Two Donors*. Ansuino, who collaborated with Mantegna in the Ovetari Chapel, brought his style in the Forlì school of painting.

As the youth progressed in his studies, he came under the influence of Jacopo Bellini, father of the celebrated painters Giovanni and Gentile, and of a daughter Nicolosia; and in 1453 Jacopo gave Nicolosia to Mantegna in marriage.

Among the other early Mantegna frescoes are the two saints over the entrance porch of the church of Sant'Antonio in Padua, 1452, and an altar-piece of St Luke and other saints for the church of S. Giustina, now in the Brera Gallery in Milan (1453). It is probable, however, that before this time some of the pupils of Squarcione, including Mantegna, had already begun that series of frescoes in the chapel of S. Cristoforo, in the church of Sant'Agostino degli Eremitani, now considered his masterpiece. The now censorious Squarcione carped about the earlier works of this series, illustrating the life of St James; he said the figures were like men of stone, and had better have been colored stone-color at once.

Mantegna was no less eminent as an engraver, though his history in that respect is somewhat obscure, partly because he never signed or dated any of his plates, but for a single disputed instance of 1472. The account which has come down to us from Vasari (as usual keen to assert that everything flows from Florence) is that Mantegna began engraving in Rome, prompted by

the engravings produced by the Florentine Baccio Baldini after Sandro Botticelli. This is now considered most unlikely as it would consign all the numerous and elaborate engravings made by Mantegna to the last sixteen or seventeen years of his life, which seems a scanty space for them, and besides the earlier engravings indicate an earlier period of his artistic style. He may have begun engraving while still in Padua, under the tuition of a distinguished goldsmith, Niccolò. He and his workshop engraved about thirty plates, according to the usual reckoning; large, full of figures, and highly studied. It is now considered either that he only engraved seven himself, or none. Another artist from the workshop who made several plates is usually identified as Zoan Andrea.

Among the principal examples are: Battle of the Sea Monsters, Virgin and Child, a Bacchanal Festival, Hercules and Antaeus, Marine Gods, Judith with the Head of Holophernes, the Deposition from the Cross, the Entombment, the Resurrection, the Man of Sorrows, the Virgin in a Grotto, and several scenes from the Triumph of Julius Caesar after his paintings. Several of his engravings are supposed to be executed on some metal less hard than copper. The technique of himself and his followers is characterized by the strongly marked forms of the design, and by the oblique formal hatchings of the shadows. The prints are frequently to be found in two states, or editions. In the first state the prints have been taken off with the roller, or even by handpressing, and they are weak in tint; in the second state the printing press has been used, and the ink is stronger.

Giorgio Vasari eulogizes Mantegna, although pointing out his litigious character. He had been fond of his fellow-pupils at Padua: and for two of them, Dario da Trevigi and Marco Zoppo, he retained a steady friendship. Mantegna became very expensive in his habits, fell at times into difficulties, and had to urge his valid claims upon the marquis' attention.

In solid antique taste, Mantegna distanced all contemporary competition. Though substantially related to the 15th century, the influence of Mantegna on the style and tendency of his age was very marked over Italian art generally. Giovanni Bellini, in his earlier works, obviously followed the lead of his brother-in-law Andrea. Albrecht Dürer was influenced by his style during his two trips in Italy. Leonardo da Vinci took from Mantegna the use of decorations with festoons and fruit.

Mantegna's main legacy is considered the introduction of spatial illusionism, both in frescoes and in sacra conversazione paintings: his tradition of ceiling decoration was followed for almost three centuries. Starting from the faint cupola of the Camera degli Sposi, Correggio brought on his master and collaborator's research in perspective constructions, producing eventually a masterwork like the dome of Cathedral of Parma.

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