

E. H. Gombrich, (with Tom Phillips) The Shock of the New: Conversation with Tom Phillips in the Mantegna Exhibition, Royal Academy Magazine, Vol. 34, pp.50-4 [Trapp no.1992.K.1]

Tom Phillips talks with the eminent art historian Ernst Gombrich as they view the Mantegna exhibition
THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

Tom Phillips: Have you read the catalogue? I got very confused with all those various engravers and what they were not called!

Ernst Gombrich: I don't think that is terribly important but it is confusing. Did you read Lawrence Gowing's introduction? What do you think of it?

I wonder whether he put a position that never quite existed, certainly not in my mind. I've always thought of Mantegna as a friendly artist because he's witty, which palliates a certain sternness.

I think his introduction is very startling, he has this tremendous opening shot, that Mantegna is 'easy to dislike', but it's more a rhetorical device than the full truth. I always admired Lawrence, his thoughts were very personal, very perceptive, he directed attention to qualities one would otherwise not have noticed; but I cannot always agree with him.

He always was an 'agent provocateur', saying things which often startled you into thinking freshly.

So what is your image of Mantegna?

I'm thinking back now to what I first thought as a student: here is something exactly as taut and tight as I hoped art would be. Mantegna's always finding something to resist, which is probably why he likes engraving, and talking of hard stone. He is on the edge of doing something that you can't really do, being a sculptor as much as anyone painting flat could be; but without funny tricks.

I agree with you. I think this is absolutely crucial to our whole discussion because it was even crucial to Vasari who objected to Mantegna's paintings being so hard, because he was trained copying ancient sculpture, a criticism which has been repeated in one form or another ever since. His paintings look three-dimensional like sculpture, but I don't think he modelled his visual vocabulary on ancient statues.

Well, that implies Mantegna was stuck or cornered, and I don't think he was.

I rather had the feeling ever since I walked through the exhibition yesterday that Mantegna wanted to visualise, in his mind, what ancient painting was like — he had of course never seen any. He knew much less of it than we know now, since the discovery of Pompeii. I think he reconstructed ancient painting on the basis of what he knew of ancient sculpture, how else could he have done it? It is true that his starting point was sculpture, but I think if you look at the surface of his paintings the miniature finish and the enormous attention to texture — their sensuousness — they rival, in some respects, Netherlandish paintings. No sculpture ever looked like a painting by Mantegna.

But don't you think that sensuality is only possible when pictures are tight, as with Ingres where you get sensuality compressed or held back?

There are all sorts of types of sensuality, Correggio had another, he had a veiled sensuality, but there is nothing of that in Mantegna.

This is the one of energy on a tight rein.

Energy certainly there is and energy under complete control but at the same time his paintings give the impression of somebody who is looking for perfection.

It's an ambitious platonic quest which is why motifs are repeated to arrive at the vision of what an ancient painting might have looked like. Do you think he's responding to his early success? People mentioned Apelles early on, didn't they, very early on, far a guy of 19 or so? I can't ever remember saying to a student of mine, 'you're a new Apelles'.

Even Fra Angelico on his tomb is called the second Apelles, it was something you said about anybody. But Mantegna certainly wanted to achieve the stature of Apelles, meaning a great master who dominated his art.

But all the stories about Apelles are about illusion, aren't they? The funny thing about Mantegna's grisaille paintings of stone is that someone is representing the illusion of representation which itself would be illusory. So it's a double joke; a very serious joke but not grim.

But at the same time you are not deceived unless you look at the painting through a tube, in which case it is very hard for you to estimate the depth of this relief. There is an imagined distance between the foreground and background which of course isn't there, and we know it isn't there, but we still sense it, we are not deceived but we are unsettled.

For once we don't know what isn't there because it is an illusion of an illusion.

And I'm sure that many of his frames and arches he built around his pictures are of a similar quality, he enjoyed fooling the eye. Although there were grisailles before — the catalogue mentions Giotto's reliefs of Virtues and Vices in the Arena Chapel in Padua and grisailles existed in the Netherlands — the way Mantegna took to it is entirely original.

Yes, he brought it in to the centre of the argument from its usual place on the fringes of a painting. He's obviously incredibly interested in the problem that he set himself and the problem he sets the viewer. The viewer knows that if he moves he's not going to see something different, and yet he's poised as if he were.

You say that, but it isn't quite true. I have always been very interested in that masterpiece that alas is not here, the foreshortened Christ in the Brera, Milan. There you see the feet of Christ and the hands and in this kind of foreshortening the picture tends to follow you. If you move along, the foreshortened feet seem to follow. I have always believed that this was for Mantegna a spiritual experience, he wanted to show the wounds of Christ in this form to make the picture a miraculous picture, Christ displaying His wounds. Wherever you stand you still see them confronting you.

He actually owned that picture, didn't he? He kept it to more or less the end of his days.

I read in the catalogue to my disappointment that the evidence is a little shaky as to whether it was the same painting.

It was quite rare at the time to think of owning something in quite that way.

An artist not wanting to part with his own work, yes, I think that is rare. Just as he so loved his bust of the Roman lady, Faustina.

But that dead Christ is a very curious picture because Mantegna knows he isn't doing a strict foreshortening; he's doing an artifice of a foreshortening that doesn't look as if it is invented for the occasion.

If you construct the perspective you will see it is out of line.

We would not see a thing, only the feet. He's pretty good at feet anyway.

Yes, in his 'Judith' you see the feet of Holofernes.

Well, you see one foot which I think is very funny, just this one foot poking in that little gap. A giant is just referred to by this tiny device. Mantegna's feet are always on the ground. In the whole of the huge 'Triumphs', every foot is plonked right on the ground. Anybody who has done life drawing knows that that is one of the things you have most trouble with. A lot of students leave it to the end.

Well, I think it is true to say that images of the previous generation, of gothic art, were criticized for lacking this quality. Vasari said they always stand on tiptoes which is perhaps an exaggeration but it is true that you get feet standing firmly on the ground in Masaccio but not much before, hardly even in Giotto.

I think Mantegna is the best painter of feet on the ground. The Triumphs' are almost dependent on one thinking that there is a march going on, that dust would be raised by these feet. It roots you, you feel really comfortable with the picture.

That is his statuesque monumentality. Let's talk for a moment about his interest in ancient art. He saw himself as a purveyor of ancient artistic values.

That must have been as exciting at the time as the 'discovery' of primitive art in the early twentieth century. Everybody was talking about it and looking at it; news would go round the studios about where one could see some new piece.

While the primitive had, of course, its ideological side, the fashion and enthusiasm for Roman antiquity was even more ideological, the pride and nobility of our ancestors for instance, we derive from the noble Romans.

Especially in Mantua, which was the home of Virgil.

And Padua was the home of Livy. In the 'Camera Pieta' you see the pictures, the reliefs and busts of Caesars on the ceiling. Who were these Gonzagas? They were not all that noble but they were ennobled by association. The humanist Poggio Bracciolini in his dialogue 'De Nobilitate' (On Nobility) pokes gentle fun at his contemporaries who have no noble ancestors and who therefore surround themselves with Roman relics.

I suppose the excitement of classicism was paradoxically a romantic aspect of the art of the time: that boat trip that everybody mentions where Mantegna and his friends all gave themselves funny names like Tribune this and Emperor that and went to have a picnic among the ruins.

Of course it was romantic, it was also playful. But it gave them a sense of dignity, they were not just artisans.

Also it allowed painters to secularise themselves too.

Yes, that's entirely true, but I think they also conceived their mission, in applying these great achievements of ancient art to Christian imagery, as Mantegna truly did. Dürer said somewhere how sad it was that the theoretical writings of the ancients were lost, if we had them we would apply the proportions of Apollo or Venus to the Holy Virgin and to Christ.

So two things are going on — they are getting a new vocabulary, which is always good, subject-matter is terribly important to artists — gear, stuff which you can deal with. This new vocabulary can serve the mainspring of their art and their commissions. They're receiving a shot of new life.

And, after all, the story of Christ did happen in the ancient world. Even theologically it was a fact that the gospel was spread in the ancient world 'in the fullness of time' because at that time there would have been an audience for the message of the gospels all over the inhabited world as it were, so 'sacrosancta antiquitas' has a double meaning. You were not blasphemous or pagan for seeking out what antiquity was like. Mantegna was certainly not a pagan, not at all, in fact he is much less of a pagan than many others because there is very little pagan sensuality in Mantegna, is there?

Like Piero di Cosimo?

Like Correggio certainly, or Leonardo who is later. I think that is something quite different.

Leonardo would have been a secular artist at the drop of a hat, wouldn't he? I don't think Mantegna necessarily would be.

No, I think Mantegna felt the tradition of Christian art and he certainly painted his altar paintings with true devotion, I don't doubt it for a moment, or his Madonnas.

As in 'Man of Sorrows', it would be very difficult to make an insincere painting look like that, especially with the difficulty with which it's done; I think he had a lot of trouble painting that picture.

And 'Christ in Limbo', and other works of this kind, are certainly devotional paintings, aren't they, and they are meant to be used in the devotions of the patron. But he must have been very conscious of speaking an entirely fresh language, he gave them the shock of the new.

I think that 'Christ in Limbo' is the best illustration to Dante that I know, although it isn't a literal moment from Dante, it's got the feel of real human beings in a real action; a heartbreaking event. It really is a very excited picture, the stone, the drapery, the figures, the atmosphere, the expressions.

Salvation. It embodies this feeling of the Saviour coming, into the dark, descending.

Also, this drawing for the Christ figure is wonderful. Surely it is by Mantegna?

I don't see why it shouldn't be. It's marvellous.

The drapery reminds me of a phrase you quote in your book on Aby Warburg: 'Bewegtes Beiwerk' which you translate as 'accessories in motion'.

Aby Warburg used it for Botticelli, that's much lighter material.

Anyway, I'm glad you think it could be by Mantegna himself. I can't think of anyone else who could manage that configuration. Let's re-ascribe it.

I think this is a wonderful painting. The title 'Death of the Virgin' is theologically incorrect because the Virgin never died. It should be called the dormition, because her soul was taken to heaven where Christ received it.

He offsets this strange accusation of harshness, when you think of the lovely colours that he likes to introduce such as the pink and white of the stones, and the quiet lake. There's a special tension if make these really tight statements in terms of colours that are graceful, rather than if you have merely graceful statements in graceful colour.

Absolutely. This has an almost Byzantine character, the gold and the blue, like an icon. It is shaped into a complete realistic setting.

But no icon would have that burst of light just below the bed. He was an infant prodigy in as much as you can have that in the visual arts. We don't like to think about infant prodigies in painting as it seems a slow game compared with mathematics or chess.

There have been relatively few infant prodigies.

What's nice is when you find out that they weren't. Richardson's book on Picasso was very careful to make of him a wonderful young painter but quite muddled and not an infant prodigy.

I'm sure that Picasso was boasting when he said that as a child he could draw like Raphael.

[In front of the 'Cult of Cybele'] I always make a little tube with my hand, or with a roll of paper to look at pictures through — I love it. It's the only way of getting to be on your own in a show. Lots of people don't know the trick. It was useful, I remember, in the Monet show, to isolate the picture from its frame and its surroundings. The only light source then that you are looking at is that which inhabits the painting. Here, with all these lights and with something like this picture, that has a defined light source, the only way to inhabit its light source is to isolate it by making a little tube.

At the same time, when you see this strangely coloured background, do you see it as one wall or do you see it receding? I see the painting receding in the middle.

No, I see that as a configuration. I see it as two different sheets of different kinds of marble joined together and this one so figured, so crazy...

Sure, but isn't it further forward here than in the middle?

I don't see it like this. I was thinking that the bits of coloured marble behind the grisaille shows you what abstract painting missed when it didn't recruit Mantegna. It's true in Fro Angelico too, when you look at some tile on the floor it's absolutely beautiful. It's obvious they enjoy that business, just to toss off a little abstract in the corner. Here we come to 'Judith with the Head of Holofernes' with the foot we were talking about.

He always tries to articulate the floor making it rockier.

Do you think that's the way one can spot where someone else has done the painting? They don't care about the unstated surface, the floor. In Mantegna you always know where exactly everything that you might put on that floor would be. You could put a matchbox on that floor in 'Judith and Holofernes', you'd know exactly where it would land, how big it would look, where it would catch the light, because the floor is really there, not just some space of paper or bit of dull paint. Wonderful colours too.

This tent is marvellous.

This is another one which says 'after Andrea Mantegna'. Do we know that to be the case?

I don't know. There may be certain weaknesses here but I think it's a very fine painting, and the expression of Judith is most convincing.

It's pretty closely after, if it's after. There must have been some painting that no one else could have done that it refers to.

You know, I don't want to put forward a claim that I cannot absolutely substantiate but I think I'm the first person who noticed the faces in the cloud in this painting 'Pallas Expelling the Vices', though they are so obvious. I wrote about it in my book, 'Art and Illusion'. It is curious that in the older books about Mantegna it is nowhere mentioned.

But they are very particularised faces aren't they, that double profile.

There's no doubt about it.

I keep on looking for things in the rocks but can't quite find them. But they are pretty odd rocks.

They are collapsing aren't they? It's an earthquake, an eruption or something, it's a very mysterious light there. It's not a very endearing picture. A lot is happening and I think the pond is lovely. It's obviously a very detailed programme of what was to be shown, of Pallas chasing all of the vices.

Perhaps that's the problem with the picture, it's just over-programmatic.

Oh, I'm sure that's the problem. But the landscape again is very intriguing, very bleak. These two shepherds walking around, it's very mysterious. And the trees that look at first like sheep. They're the sort of trees you'd expect on Mars.

Not a very pastoral scene, even with the shepherds. Look at the face of Avarice, I'm sure he portrayed somebody here.

Some tax inspector, perhaps.

Or the Treasurer of the Marchesa who didn't want to pay him.

Nobody ever paid anybody, did they? It was much worse than now even, when nobody's in a hurry to pay anybody. But if people had always paid we'd have no letters from artists because they are always about 'when am I going to get the money?'

Well, ready cash was very rare, even people who were relatively rich had estates, they got their food from the peasants, but ready cash wasn't really easy to come by.

And the chap working in the court would have the facilities of the court so what does he need the money for? I suppose that is the argument. You get your meal at lunchtime, don't you?

Considering she is Venus the seductress, she's not very seductive is she?

I think she's trying to look cheeky, Carmen-like?

Defiant. What is actually going on with these putti carrying torches?

Do you think we quite often have problems reading the expressions on people's faces in paintings of this date because our rhetoric of expressions is different? I never know whether it is an anatomical difficulty. It's like when you get people singing in paintings, they never look like people singing, just people opening their mouths.

Well, so much in our sense of expression depends on movement and pictures, whatever they do, don't move.

It's one of the problems with 'Man of Sorrows With Two Angels' which we admire so much.

It is a tremendous problem, achieving an extreme expression.

Teeth are also a problem to paint, especially if they are white, because it almost competes with the very thing that you're trying to do, so it gives you an extra problem, something as bright as the highlights but yet inside the recess of the face.

I think the mournful expression of the blue angel is very convincing, isn't it.

We know that expression, we know what tension of the mind and body produced it. I suppose because he's looking up we get a sense of imploring as well. The one looking down has an odd face, it's concave.

Christ is not only suffering but He's also welcoming isn't He? He's showing His wounds, and pleading.

It's many things, I think its 'so be it', consummaturn est'.

The sky is yellow and these strange rocks again.

That yellow seems to be a Mantegna speciality. I think one has to be patient with those faces, because they often contain two or three expressions, but if you linger on them you begin to read the eyes and then the mouth, then you go back to the eyes.

Well, here we are in front of 'The Triumphs'.

It is wonderful that this show ends with a great kind of blast. It almost makes a noise doesn't it, this procession, you can hear everything. And it's bright and stately. It's strange because we are, so to speak, in an auditorium to a painting, aren't we. Prefiguring the world of baroque opera, even. And something quite different is happening here, there is a relaxation — because of the huge task, he's decided to drop the guard a little, hasn't he.

It's more decorative, it hasn't got this enormous concentration that there is in the small devotional paintings. Mantegna has used his imagination, turning the pageant into a series of individuals with their own participation in this ceremony. It's amazing.

An amazing range of visual events. It's such an easy thing to make monotonous, and such a difficult thing to keep varied, especially as he probably painted it two studios over an enormous amount of time.

But he kept it in his mind.

That is one of the characteristics of a genius, that he keeps a very big thing in his mind and he can turn it round in his mind too.

One is reminded of a remark by Jacob Burckhardt that pageantry was the 'transition from life into art', and this is a pageant so it is in a way an evocation of something which essentially had an artistic element in it, a triumph, any therefore he can evoke it as an artist. I think that he becomes his own stage manager.

And it's full of joie de vivre. It's the last thing you expect from Mantegna with all the things people say about him and yet when you see this it's not harsh.

It is a real triumph — but also there is Roman nobility in this.

And people getting their come-uppance as well, although we don't see those here. There's one missing, a bit of luck really, because this actual gallery is the perfect size to have it with one canvas missing. We're looking at the wreckage of a painting, but it's so compelling and with such love was it done, with such excitement was it conceived, that it all comes over. You don't feel a great lack, do you?

I don't feel a great lack. I'm slightly disturbed by certain passages. Can you see this placard being carried [The Triumphal Carts], how it sticks out, it's amazing.

It sticks out without a trick too, it's not some wild perspective, it's just occupying its space correctly. So that makes the air go either side of it and we're back into the procession.

And the same is true of that horse and the man talking to the horseman. It takes you a little time to dissolve into individuals, doesn't it?

That's exactly right, it's how you'd see that in real life. You'd see this great group of people coming along and then you'd realise each one of them is a human being, he's got his job, he's carrying this or he's doing that, or he had this role in the original event. So you sort it out in the order you'd sort it out

in lift, except it's all nicely frozen for you. Everything is stopped at their most elegant moment, too. And carrying a great huge urn isn't a very elegant task, like this man right in the middle here.

I wouldn't like to carry it, it is almost as heavy as the catalogue!

I think we're coming to marble catalogues eventually, as the final test, with trolleys to carry them around. But the catalogue's worth its weight. It gives the people who go to the exhibition a chance to get in on the business of art history.

It is a monograph. It's now probably the most informative book on Mantegna.

The idea of an exhibition catalogue used to be a condescending instrument, saying, this is for you lay chaps just looking at pictures. And now it is the latest scholarship, and people arguing as they are in this particular catalogue, there's actually a dialogue about these unnameable etchers again, with initials that don't seem to represent their names in any way. It's nice that people are now trusted with the doubts and confusion of art history.

- *Andrea Mantegna: Painter, Draughtsman and Printmaker continues until 5 April. The exhibition is presented by Olivetti.*