



Chapter I

In Search of Mantegna's Poetics: An Introduction

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Andrea Mantegna is without doubt one of the most studied and as a result one of the best known figures in Italian Renaissance art.¹ The quantity of scholarly articles and monographs dedicated to the artist have only increased in recent years, as well as the number of exhibitions (Padua, Verona, Mantua, Paris) especially since 2006, the 500th anniversary of the artist's death. His life, his career, the range of his artistic competencies (painter, architect, draftsman, and – more controversially – engraver, illuminator, sculptor), his relations with his patrons and the artists and humanists of his age, his historical *fortuna* are all now relatively well understood thanks to more than a century of research on his works, on the archival documents, and on literary records.² The present collection of essays will attempt to address an important dimension to scholarship on the artist, and on Renaissance art more broadly, which has largely been sidelined in publications dating from and subsequent to the 2006 anniversary: for several decades, Mantegna's painting has been an important locus for experimental approaches to the interpretation of pre-modern art, that address what might be called the 'poetics' of Renaissance painting. 'Poetics' refers to the entire ensemble of pictorial effects (technical, stylistic, representational, meta-representational, iconographic, ornamental) through which meaning or meanings are produced, above all through their address to historical beholders in particular contexts of viewing.³ Art history has tended to locate meaning at the level of textual sources or iconographic conventions, or in recent decades at the level of a patron's intentions, and to conceive style in largely formalist terms. Attending to pictorial poetics does not preclude iconographic analysis, but calls into question orthodox distinctions between form and content in a work of art. In other words, poetics or poesis – making or bringing forth – is broadly inclusive of both the imaginative and material aspects of the work of art. The call to address questions of meta-representation and the hermeneutics of style has especially been felt in the case of an artist whose work gives such prominence to inscription, to fragments of architecture and statuary, to images within images and 'images made by chance' and to curious analogies between unlike substances (e.g. stone and clouds).

Answering this call seems all the more urgent because contrary to other artists of the Renaissance (Fra Angelico, Bosch, Bronzino, Brueghel, Dürer, Leonardo, Simone Martini, Michelangelo, Tintoretto...) – who have all been the focus of innovative and influential reinterpretation⁴ the work of Mantegna has for the most part been treated according to the rubrics of connoisseurship, the philology of style, and iconology. There are of course notable exceptions in the literature on the artist (Pierre Francastel,

**Detail from Andrea
Mantegna, *St James Led to
Execution*, c. 1450 (plate I).**

Andrea Mantegna Edited by
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Yves Bonnefoy, Hubert Damisch, Jack Greenstein, Daniel Arasse, Klaus Krüger, Felix Thürlemann, Marzia Faietti, Andreas Hauser), yet these studies, however productive, have remained surprisingly neglected, if not ignored altogether by the Mantegna specialists.⁵ Needless to say, their reception among exponents of a revisionist (but not necessarily progressive) art history, which relocates attention from artists to art markets/trading networks and from artworks to 'objects' has not been much better.

In general, Mantegna scholarship at present seems preoccupied with the same old questions: are the origins of Mantegna's style to be located in his Paduan formation under Francesco Squarcione, or to the vanguard of Tuscan artists active in Padua, such as Donatello? Was Mantegna influenced by his brother-in-law Giovanni Bellini, or was the influence in the other direction? What was his involvement with the production of prints after his designs? How did his workshop operate? What is Mantegna's role in the broader history of Renaissance art, above all to the formation of the 'maniera moderna'?⁶ And what is his legacy? In his review of the 2008 Louvre exhibition, Luke Syson found himself (like Erika Tietze-Conrat nearly sixty years earlier) having to confront positions taken by Roberto Longhi in the early twentieth century, newly reaffirmed by the curators.⁷ In 1926 Longhi wrote a brilliant and devastating response to a study of Mantegna by Giuseppe Fiocco, which – while full of insights about the artist, and in some ways quite attentive to what we are referring to as Mantegna's poetics – was ultimately damning for Mantegna's critical fortune in Italy. We include it here, translated for the first time, not only as an important episode in the formation of Mantegna's modern reputation, but as a characteristic example of Longhi's ambitious and synthetic thinking about the early Renaissance and his revisionist attack on prevailing views of the geography of art. Far more is at issue here than just Mantegna. In fact, Longhi exploits Fiocco's Tuscan-centric view of the Renaissance in Northern Italy, where Mantegna is largely defined in terms of 'progressive' influences from Florence, to produce a counter-narrative on the vitality of late Gothic and the centrality of the Venetian workshop of Antonio Vivarini. Francesco Squarcione, Mantegna's early mentor, is re-defined as a Vivarini follower; Squarcione's young protégés – Carlo Crivelli, Cosmé Tura, Giorgio Schiavone, and Mantegna himself, are transformed by exposure to the art of antiquity and to Donatello's monumental sculptures in Padua. Rather than being 'influenced' by Donatello, however, the naïve and fanatical *squarcioneschi* make something entirely new and alien to the spirit of both Tuscan art and the organic vitality of the Venetian tradition, from Vivarini to Giovanni Bellini.

Thus for Longhi the Renaissance was indeed a process of modernization, but Mantegna was on the wrong side of Renaissance modernity. The future of European art lay in the craft of painting the transformation of form and colour by light, and this almost magical formula was passed on by Piero della Francesca to Bellini on the one hand and the painters of Lombardy on the other. Bellini, therefore, had little to learn from Mantegna: rather, according to Longhi, Mantegna owed his own sensibility for light to his Venetian brother-in-law. Otherwise, he remained a kind of irascible antiquarian pedant trafficking in stony figures and obscurely erudite iconographies, and as such was to be aligned with the waning tradition of Latin scholarship, losing ground to the new literature of the vernacular by the 1500s. Lost in his 'primitive idolatry of materials' and his 'fetishism' of the fragment, Mantegna failed to achieve the 'classical' moment of the high Renaissance. Seen in this way, the art of Mantegna is not analyzed in itself but in relation to a certain idea of the History of Art. As Syson notes, the questions addressed in Mantegna scholarship are subtended by a teleological vision of art history, essentially not amounting to more than a further propagation of Vasarian thinking.⁹

I Andrea Mantegna, *St James Led to Execution*, c. 1450. Fresco (destroyed). Padua: Church of the Eremitani (Ovetari Chapel). Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.



Notwithstanding some real scholarly gains (notably the technical examination and cleaning of the San Zeno polyptych in Verona, a re-examination of the production of illuminated manuscripts in the circles of Mantegna and Bellini, the incorporation of new findings on the export of works by Mantegna to Southern Italy, new documents about the artist's activity and that of his associates¹⁰), the recent array of exhibitions and associated publications have not noticeably challenged a long-standing view of the artist, and one that continues to prevail. Mantegna still serves art as a readymade illustration of key concepts such as 'quattrocento painting', 'perspective', 'humanist art', the 'learned artist', or as an example (however problematic) of the influence of Alberti's art theory on pictorial practice. The monographic exhibition, a labour-intensive and costly enterprise entailing risks to fragile art objects, is nonetheless a crucial forum for art-historical inquiry, an indispensable opportunity for the re-thinking not only of chronologies and attributions but of historiographies. That said, it remains to be seen whether the time and effort of curators, conservators, and archival historians can lead to a new image of Mantegna, rather than serve the repristination of an old one.

Under such conditions (that of the monographic show in particular), the singularity of Mantegna's poetics cannot but escape from view. To point this out is not by any means to deny the importance of documentary research, connoisseurship or the contextual study of Mantegna through his social relations, but to note that such approaches tend in some way to displace the question of visual poetics, even while appearing to believe that they confront it. A brief look at some recent publications and in particular at the Paris show is necessary here.

To take the authors of the catalogue *Mantegna* (Paris, 2008) at their word, the 'poetic' dimension of the painter from Padua was to be at the very heart of the exhibition. The term 'poetry' and its derivative 'poetics' proceeds frequently from the pens of the two curators and authors of the catalogue. Seeking to characterize the exhibition, Giovanni Agosti explains that there have been 'exhibitions in prose and exhibitions in poetry'. 'Ours', he continues, 'seeks to place itself in the second category.'¹¹ Thus it is apparently promised that the poetic dimension of Mantegna's work would be addressed. Yet the reader soon wonders if this is really Mantegna's own poetics, as distinct from a highly rhetorical, metaphoric, and self-reflexive tradition of writing about Mantegna in the twentieth century, one which emerged as a reaction to archival and positivistic scholarship. Agosti admits as much: the 'historical fundamentals' on which the work of the art historian rests 'do not exclude the possibility of a poetic interpretation of the artist.'¹² Thus, we will be confronted rather with a 'poetic portrait' of a historical individual.¹³

It is worth dwelling on this point a little, since the choice of vocabulary is not by any means accidental, even as it risks considerable confusion. To define the exhibition, Agosti makes use of an antithesis: poetry, not prose. Through this opposition, he delivers his conception of poetry: poetry is that which is opposed to that not subjected to the rules of versification. The sign of poetry would thus essentially be its formal and rhythmical turn, its regulated ornament. But is this not a rather incomplete, if not reductive, conception of poetry? Since the *Poetics* of Aristotle, it has been well known that the poetic art does not have to limit itself to versification (and that in fact many poetic works are not written in verse).¹⁴ According to Aristotle, that which allows a work to be placed under the rubric of poetry is representation: that is, the way the mimetic action or representation is composed. Alberti will refer to this in his *De pictura* as *historia*. But this representation – whether for Aristotle or for Alberti – is based both on arrangement (in the mimetic regime to which the work of Mantegna belongs, the arrangement of figures, objects, actions) and, above all, on tropes ('metaphor' and 'metonymy').¹⁵ This aspect of poetry turns out to be very remote from the 'poetic' of the Louvre exhibition. And it so happened that by privileging a chronological over a thematic presentation, the exhibition rendered impossible any recognition of visual correspondences or connections between the works painted at different points in Mantegna's career.

One might be surprised then that Agosti draws upon none other than Marcel Proust to support this position, especially given that the novel sequence *La recherche du temps perdu* is built on a complex temporality which is anything but linear. It is perhaps useful to recall here that the 'singularity' of Proust's novel (and here one might also think of James Joyce's *Ulysses*) rests on precisely this departure from causal and chronological paradigms. The Nobel Prize novelist Claude Simon has carefully analysed the rupture introduced by Proust and Joyce into the narrative economy of the novel at the beginning of the twentieth century. 'With Joyce and Proust', Simon writes, 'the novels (or at least a certain current within them) went through a revolution' in their putting together of 'fragments according to a combination

that creates rough links through juxtaposition, leading to the building up of a unity where elements are no longer fitted together, as they were in the French novel of the 19th century, according to a causality, to a series of causes and effects allegedly determining and determined on a social or psychological level, but according to their particular qualities (i.e. harmonics, dissonances, slip-ups, contrasts etc.).¹⁶

Taking account of these transformations, Simon reminds us that all poetic endeavour aims to make visible those ‘correspondences’ which would remain invisible, or even impossible, in the simple logical sequence of a chronological narrative. Simon continues to pursue this in his text by stating that:

That which brings about the necessarily linear layout of a series of written events, that which determines their succession (or their recurrences) in the text, will be . . . , as in the case of paintings, what Baudelaire called ‘correspondences’, so that the traditional chronological order (we could call it ‘order by the clock’) will give way to a chronology belonging exclusively to the text itself (exactly as elements in a painting are arranged (composed) according to the surface of canvas).¹⁷

It is the very materiality of the text that holds this creative power and not the ‘timekeeper’s concatenation of cause and effect’. The complex temporality created by the novelist through the montage of different times is infinitely closer to reality, closer to the paradoxical experience of time, than the logical sequence of events – one might think of parallels in the conception of history as ‘simultaneity in duration’ shared by Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Henri Focillon, George Kubler or Reinhart Koselleck. The poetic enterprise gives birth to the interweaving of sensation and memory, in creating, desiring and imagining beyond physical contingency and logical contiguity.

The case of Mantegna is no different. His poetics cannot be grasped without envisioning the possibility of a ‘contemporaneity of the non-contemporary’ (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*)¹⁸ and without being sensitive to the secret correspondences which, in a ‘poem’, connect its various elements. It is on this system of similitudes and signatures that (in some pre-modern thinking about nature) the coherence of the world depended, and to which we can refer to grasp correspondences, analogies and even exchanges between the appearances of things and substances (marble/cloth; clouds/rocks; rock formations/faces) that traverse the entire work of the painter from Padua.¹⁹ Equally, it is this complex conception of time that one must adopt in order to understand the imaginary rapport signalled by Mantegna between Rome and Mantua, the empire of the Romans and the marquise of Lodovico II Gonzaga. And if this conception might appear anachronistic, it is sufficient to remind ourselves that the trope of *synkrisis* in rhetoric is authorized by the cyclical character of time, the principal of the ‘eternal return’ which responds, during the quattrocento, to the *renovatio* of humanists and to the much older tradition of typological interpretation in scriptural exegesis.²⁰ Returning to the programmatic self-positioning of the curators of the Louvre exhibition, it is finally quite clear that they are aiming at entirely another sense of the word ‘poetic’.

By assimilating the exhibition to a ‘poetics’, Dominique Thiébaud and Giovanni Agosti seek above all to dissociate their project from other exhibitions or scholarly studies that qualify as ‘prose’, not to mention from ‘prosaic’ exhibitions. Without stating it overtly, it is quite evident that the two authors really mean contextual and iconographic approaches, otherwise referred to as *iconologie*. The argument of the Paris

exhibition could not have been clearer on this point. Thiébaud explains that the 'very principle of the exhibition' rested on 'the clear, articulate presentation of the career of the artist, accessible to everyone',²¹ and that, for that reason, approaches of 'a more interpretative nature' had been excluded.²² This admission suggests that the non-specialist public is by definition uninterested in these other approaches, or worse incapable of grasping their subtleties. Perhaps it is necessary to recall here, at least as far as France is concerned, the considerable success of the works of Daniel Arasse with the same public – an indication that the demands of theoretical approaches do not always scare this public away. Moreover, we must also remember the fact that Mantegna produced primarily for a relatively well-educated audience, or at least for an audience he thought capable of understanding his poetics.

The exhibition, in any case, was far from being a simple didactic enterprise. It was freighted with a particular scholarly agenda, visible in the lengths it took to re-invent the early career of Giovanni Bellini, in order to vindicate Roberto Longhi's view of his seniority to and influence on Mantegna. The point is not that



2 Andrea Mantegna, *The Trial of St James*, c. 1450. Fresco (destroyed). Padua: Church of the Eremitani (Ovetari Chapel). Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

it should have been free of such agendas – the fact that it carefully sought to stage such an argument is what distinguishes it, as a real scholarly exhibition, from a mere blockbuster. Our concern is with the more unspoken ideologies at work, the severance of ‘poetics’ from a concern with meaning of any kind (let alone with context), along with the need to valorize Mantegna in terms of a kind of mystical inscrutability (thus making him, as it happens, more like Longhi’s conception of Bellini or Piero della Francesca).

However, it is not as if we can simply turn to ‘iconography’ in order to make the picture more complete. No less the case than with connoisseurship or archival scholarship, traditional iconology fails to satisfy with regard to the poetics of Mantegna’s images. Research in this direction may involve textual sources, the context of a commission, and the tracing of connections to literary and religious culture. Yet here again, despite the importance of the results obtained (see, for instance, the essays in the recent volume *Mantegna a Roma*²³), an address to the poetic dimension is lost sight of. Treating the work as an illustration grounded in a textual source is the most effective way of ignoring the dynamics of invention in a plastic or figurative sense.²⁴

The essays in this issue of *Art History* seek to pursue a ‘third way’ which, far from opposing itself to stylistic and iconographic approaches, attempts on the contrary to bring them together by recalling that pictorial poetics is a matter of pictorial organization, of a visual play between conventions and inventions, of a dialogue between transparency and opacity – that is, between a work’s ostensible subject and its elaboration, its ornamental *Beiwerk*.

It is also an approach that can be grounded in the humanist culture of Mantegna’s own era when writers from Cennino Cennini around 1400 and Paolo Pino more than a century later characterized painting as *poetic invention*. Alberti’s formulation of painting as invention in his treatise *De Pictura* (1435) is the best known, although his assertion that an invention was a literary theme that could stand by itself even without realization by an artist has been over-emphasized in art history: Cennini and Pino make it clear that the poetic dimension of painting also encompasses the painter’s creation of form, his power as a maker of fictions.²⁵

The necessity of this approach rests on the fact that the work of Mantegna insistently calls out for interpretation. Considering his production in its entirety, it is plainly evident that Mantegna returns almost obsessively to certain iconographic and formal preoccupations – the very foundation of his poetics – over which he exercises his pictorial inventiveness.²⁶ If one wants to understand why Mantegna fascinated his contemporaries, to the point of making him, if not the most cited in literary sources (and here we should pay homage to the labour of Giovanni Agosti on the literary and documentary references to Mantegna in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries),²⁷ at least the most admired, these are the obsessions that one must address: why these fantastic rock formations (variations on the theme of the ‘marvels of nature’), why these ‘reality effects’ (the broken branch in the *Martyrdom of St James*, the child putting his finger in his mouth and St Joseph, seized as it were by a reminiscence of his own circumcision, clutching the front of his robe), these differentiated levels of reality (the ‘real’ and sculpted garlands in the Ovetari Chapel and the San Zeno altarpiece), the breaking of the frame by St Mark, by the Virgin in the *Berlin Presentation*, by St Sebastian in the *Ca’ d’Oro Martyrdom*, these references to nature as artificer (the anthropomorphic clouds in the *Vienna St Sebastian* and the *Louvre Pallas and the Vices*), the constant presence of children as witnesses in the violent hagiographical narratives of the Ovetari Chapel, or the persistent dialogue with the culture of writing and inscription?

The various contributions brought together here attempt to answer such questions or related ones by bringing together several different lines of thought:

Beyond 'Ut pictura poesis'. With an unparalleled theoretical and artistic consciousness, Mantegna constantly interrogated the relationship of painting with its supposed models (nature, the art of antiquity, sculpture, poetry) but mostly bringing about an alteration of the paradigms, and transforming the image into an interpretative or exegetical apparatus. By this means, as an object of knowledge, a pictorial work appears as efficacious as a text.

Painting in its reflexive dimension. As Louis Marin has observed, 'every representation presents itself representing something.'²⁸ Far from assimilating the representation to a kind of illustration, or to a window open upon the world, Mantegna affirms the autonomy of his painting, organizing a constant back-and-forth between surface and depth, between materiality and representation, between opacity and transparency. Consequently, his work cannot be studied without analysing 'everything which [in the representation] thwarts its transparency to things in the world, to the being which it re-presents to the gaze, just as to the explicit and deliberated intentions of its subject.'²⁹

Mantegna's visual inventiveness. With Mantegna, form constitutes meaning and his figurative thought transforms his painting into a 'system of signification'.³⁰ From this point of view, it is fundamental to recognize the degree to which the painting of Mantegna is conceived in terms of a gaze that seeks to seize hold of, to capture, and to 'involve' (in the fullest etymological sense of the Latin *involvere*, to enfold or envelop) its object. Not only does Mantegna seem to address a certain number of cues or 'winks' to the viewer, thus drawing his attention to particulars extrinsic to the subject or narrative (for instance, as Daniel Arasse has shown, the evocation of a secret or of knowledge withheld in the *Camera Picta*, where the index finger of the prince Ludovico Gonzaga is extended towards a letter mostly concealed by the knob of his chair), in such a way as to make him an accomplice in the representational system grounded in fictive illusion. And again (through a subtle *mise en abyme*), Mantegna casts the spectator within the representation itself (as with the *oculus* of the *Camera Picta*) inviting him to question his own position with regard to the representation. Sometimes the beholder's consciousness might recall Albertian principles – for instance, that of a *storia* conceived to affect the viewer's emotions – and, at other times, the more long-standing efficacy of the sacred image exhorting the spectator towards an *imitatio Christi*, arousing devout love and sorrow. By securing the observer's participation, Mantegna casts him as a witness to that which bears on the religious and political meaning of his works, but also so that he will discover its properly artistic significance.

As with Philostratus, who makes of the imagination an image-creating power – it is our sense of sight that identifies a face in the clouds and not the clouds that make an anthropomorphic form – Mantegna makes the beholder participate by playing with the figurative potential of his arrangements of form. The spectator, that is, must make sense of the image by considering the formal analogies that Mantegna proposes between the different components of the representation: the veins of marble with the *moiré* of princely silks in the *Camera Picta*; the gaping wounds of Christ with the perforations of the rocks in the Copenhagen *Pietà*, the craggy mountain top and the ragged clouds in *Pallas and the Vices*.

The approaches to Mantegna presented here might differ in their methodological orientation, but tend to share a conception of pictorial discursivity positioned at the confluence of ancient, Renaissance, and modern poetics (especially reception

aesthetics). In their original form, two of the essays included long precede the 2011 Renaissance Society of America conference panels that gave rise to this issue of *Art History*, but they are published here in English for the first time. Daniel Arasse's classic essay on the varying forms of Mantegna's signature was a pioneering approach to the question of self-consciousness, the sense of an ironic masquerade or fashioning of a *persona* that haunts Mantegna's work, and is perhaps paralleled only in the oeuvre of Michelangelo a generation later. Klaus Krüger's essay, a revised version of a chapter from his 2001 book *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren*, demonstrates an approach to Renaissance art that addresses the problem of pictorial fiction as medium. Krüger explores Mantegna's engagement with religious painting in the context of late medieval and Renaissance image theory in the Christian tradition. He shows how the emphatic presence of framing effects in works largely from his Paduan period take on the almost paradoxical imperatives of 'withholding' and 'making present' which are key to the efficacy of the Christian icon. Mantegna's enterprise therefore is shown to be something more than yet another birth of Renaissance artistic self-consciousness under new conditions of pictorial reflexivity, and to lend itself to alternative histories of Renaissance art other than the 'modernization' narrative of Vasari and more recent writers.

Guillaume Cassegrain's essay seeks to re-examine the largely unexplored potential of some of the more experimental late twentieth-century critical writing on Mantegna, especially those based on semiotic theories emerging from structuralist schools of thought. While they tended to remove the art of Mantegna from its historical and social context, these theoretical interventions (by Pierre Francastel and Felix Thürlemann) revealed a distinctive and original aspect of Mantegna's art. Cassegrain probes the ways in which semiotic theory might offer an address to the painterly poetics of Mantegna, showing in particular how such approaches facilitate investigation of the skewed rapport between the effect of the whole and the impact of the detail.

Two essays offer alternative but complementary approaches to Mantegna's most famous work. While generally considered in terms of its typicality – as group portraiture, princely propaganda, courtly wall decoration, demonstration of perspective illusion – Mantegna's 'painted chamber' in the Gonzaga palace is considered as a metadiscourse on art's origins (Koering) and on its phenomenological impact (Campbell). Koering explores how Mantegna's 'vegetal' self-portrait in the leafy ornament of a pilaster can be seen as a figuration of the generative power of the artist. Together with the language of the dedicatory inscription in the room (in particular the term *absolutiv*), with the inscription of a date in the feigned marble decoration, as well as several poetic inventions in the murals, the *Camera Picta* emerges as a reflection on the porosity between art and nature. Campbell's essay treats the ensemble as a visual discourse on the pictorial technologies of portraiture and of perspective. The painting embeds princely portraiture in a poetical dialectic, confronting it with remarkable figurations of the *pathos* such portraiture had normally excluded, and supplements perspective virtuosity with embodied personifications of *spiriti visivi* in the form of winged erotes. Mantegna here will be shown to have resisted a particular Albertian dispensation of *pictura* defined entirely by the geometric character of vision.

Mantegna's interest in the visual impact of his works, of painting as a condensation of forces directed at the observer, is also taken up in the contribution by Andreas Hauser, which finds its point of departure in the recurring motif of the mask in the murals of the Ovetari Chapel in Padua. Hauser identifies the masks with effects

such as the petrifying glance of the Medusa, the prophetic regard of the seer, and the penetrating gaze of the lion, and identifies the theme of masking with a particular anthropological and theological vision on Mantegna's part of the body as a prison of the soul. Hauser's interpretation of this 'Medusan' iconology reveals a forceful and even belligerent conception of art's mission on Mantegna's part.

Bolland and Fletcher both consider Mantegna's relation to the world of humanist literary culture, showing how this relationship concerns a great deal more than iconographical source texts. Both focus on works associated with the later career. Fletcher treats Mantegna's painted simulations of relief sculpture as meditations on the fraught nature of historical inquiry, the moral value of antiquity and the role of the visual artist as cultural mediator. Rather than presenting authoritative narratives of ancient subjects, the paintings embrace the ambiguity of the historical record and confront the viewer with interpretive challenges that cannot easily be resolved. Through provocative juxtapositions and an insistently fictive technique, Mantegna compels the viewer to dwell on the falsity or conceit of his illusionism and to contemplate the limits of imitation, both artistic and moral. In choosing to represent highly contested female exemplars such as Dido, Mantegna and his patron were engaging not only with the genre of famous women but more broadly with problems of moral philosophy as defined by humanist intellectuals of the period. Bolland explores Mantegna's later stylistic preoccupations in the light of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century debates on the arts (the so-called *paragone*) and literary language (the *questione della lingua*). The particular hardness or harshness remarked upon by his contemporaries and later historians is read as both an affirmation of art's capacity to endure, and as a deliberately artful (artificial) artistic language. The latter casts it in opposition to the universally pleasing, natural language of art advocated by Alberti in the earliest years of Mantegna's life, and by Leonardo da Vinci during its final decades.

These approaches all show that it is not enough to accept the importance or canonical status of any artist from the past without actively seeking to renew our understanding of this importance. Humanist contemporaries of Mantegna themselves understood that to study any topic was to re-vivify the object of study. Needless to say, such an understanding will inevitably be grounded in the concerns of the time when the scholarly encounter takes place. It is not enough to frame Mantegna scholarship with melancholy nostalgia for a lost scholarly past – even while Mantegna's poetic of ruins might all too easily lend itself to such.³¹ Reflecting on the contested nature of the Longhi thesis, at the hands of the 'revisionists of our age' who assign Bellini a later birth date, Giovanni Agosti writes as if the edifice of scholarship itself were at stake: 'Such a chronology has no end of consequences for the interpretation of the *quattrocento* as a whole; one of them being to foreclose the possibility that Bellini's modernizing leap results from his contact, sometime in the mid-1470s, with Piero della Francesca, that is to say the keystone of the entire critical enterprise of Roberto Longhi. And who knows but that this is not the deeper motive for this demolition enterprise?' (34) To be sure, Anglophone scholars need to know more about Longhi and the lengthy shadow he still casts in the work of their Italian colleagues, but an animus against his institutional standing is certainly not the reason for resistance to his 'pan-Piero' thesis.³² We live in an age less accepting of history arranged in regular arcs of cause and effect, where everything slots neatly into its assigned place in a sequence: a historiographic mentality in which (to cite Francesco Arcangeli's characterization of Longhi) 'there is no work or circumstance which would not be concretely situated within the context of an inexorable network

of causes and effects.³³ In a supposedly globalizing world order and its reifications of identity (national and otherwise), art history can choose to provide alternative accounts grounded in difference, multiplicity, discontinuity, anachronism. A phenomenon like Mantegna can be narrated as a history of ruptures, swerves and resistances rather than a smooth arc inclining '*verso la maniera moderna*'. In such an account the relationship of Mantegna and Bellini would not need to be characterized in one-directional and evolutionary terms. Nor would we need to take it as axiomatic that Donatello 'influenced' Mantegna: the relation between the two artists might be more complex and require a new set of terms to describe it. Agosti notes correctly that every textbook in the history of art asserts that 'the style of Mantegna is born from the desire to translate the sculptures of Donatello into painting', a formulation by Longhi that few art historians have questioned. Among the few who did, however, was Erika Tietze-Conrat: 'I, too', she wrote in response to Longhi's view, 'recognize Mantegna's contacts with Donatello, but in my opinion [the Ovetari] frescoes show a struggle with him rather than a dependence on him.' Contrasting Donatello's tendency in



3 Donatello, *Virgin and Child*, from the Santo Altarpiece, 1446–53. Bronze, 159 cm (height). Padua: Basilica del Santo. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

his Paduan reliefs (Mantegna's alleged models) to immerse individual figures into a continuum of bodies with Mantegna's isolation of his protagonists, 'perform[ing] with dignity their task of being present', she insists that 'Mantegna's purpose is here so radically different from Donatello's that any stimulus he may have received from him remains peripheral.'³⁴ Attempts to show Mantegna's derivations from the Santo reliefs are correspondingly laboured and unpersuasive.³⁵ Yet, it is possible to recognize the relationality of Mantegna to Donatello, one fraught with irony, with striving rather than complacency. The most conspicuous reference to Donatello in Mantegna's art is not to the 'local' Donatello of the Santo altarpiece in Padua, but to a work in Donatello's native city of Florence, which Mantegna is not known to have visited before 1466. The shieldbearer in the centre of *St James Led to Execution* (plate 1) is an unexpected appropriation of the *St George* from Orsanmichele: Mantegna's main alteration to the figure is to its most distinctive feature, its bold outward stare, which is now averted. Mantegna here shows a command of Donatello's larger oeuvre rather than a beholdenness to local exemplars. As regards the Santo altar, the one reference in the Ovetari frescoes can be seen as a gesture of displacement: in the *Trial of St James* (plate 2), the tyrannical judge's throne with its carved sphinxes is modelled on the throne of the Virgin in the Santo altarpiece (plate 3). Yet the connection does not end there: standing to the rear of the throne is a female figure with a distinctively Grecian profile and hairstyle – the kind of model, in other words, that Donatello employed for his Santo Virgin, whom she closely resembles. It is as if the Virgin has been displaced from her throne, or that she waits to re-occupy it. Not only does Mantegna's gesture here show a considerable degree of self-consciousness regarding what it means to borrow from another artist – to borrow clearly means to appropriate and, above all, to exercise a transformative will upon what is borrowed – but the sense of the profane occupying the place of the divine is utterly appropriate to the agonistic relation of paganism and Christianity that Mantegna dramatizes in the cycle as a whole.

Notes

- 1 Dominique Thiébaud, 'Le "premier peintre du monde" au Louvre', in *Mantegna 1431–1506*, exh. cat., Paris, 2008, 26. The author continues 'Mantegna n'est certes pas un artiste à "redécouvrir".'
- 2 Essential surveys of the artist's work are Paul Kristeller, *Andrea Mantegna*, trans. A. Strong, New York and London, 1901; Erika Tietze-Conrat, *Mantegna: Paintings, Drawings, Engravings*, London, 1955; Ronald Lightbown, *Mantegna: With a Complete Catalogue of the Paintings, Drawings and Prints*, Oxford, 1986; Alberta De Nicolò Salmazo, *Andrea Mantegna*, Milan, 2004; Giovanni Agosti, *Su Mantegna I. La storia dell'arte libera la testa*, Milan, 2005. Also important is the exhibition catalogue *Andrea Mantegna*, eds Suzanne Boorsch and Jane Martineau, New York and London, 1992. In addition to the Paris exhibition catalogue cited earlier, see also *Mantegna e Padova 1445–1460*, eds Davide Banzato, with Alberta di Nicolò Salmazo and Anna Maria Spiazzi, Padua and Milan, 2006; *Mantegna e le arti a Verona 1450–1500*, eds Paola Marini and Sergio Marinelli, Venice, 2006; *Mantegna a Mantova 1460–1506*, ed. Mauro Lucco, Milan, 2006; *Andrea Mantegna e I Gonzaga: Rinascimento nel Castello di San Giorgio*, ed. Filippo Trevisani, Milan, 2006.
- 3 Among a considerable literature, see for instance Meyer Schapiro, 'On some problems in the semiotics of visual art: Field and vehicle in image-signs', (1969) in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, New York, 1994, 1–32; Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, (1972), Stanford, CA, 2002; Hubert Damisch, 'Eight theses for (or against?) a semiology of painting', (1977) *Oxford Art Journal*, 28: 2, 2005, 257–67; David Summers, 'Contrapposto: Style and meaning in Renaissance art', *Art Bulletin*, 59: 3, 1977, 336–61; David Rosand, *The Meaning of the Mark: Leonardo and Titian*, Kansas City, KS, 1988; Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg, eds, *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History*, Minnesota, MN, 2003.
- 4 We might think of critical interventions by Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, Chicago, IL, 1995; Reindert Falkenburg, *The Land of Unlikeness: Hieronymus Bosch, 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'*, Leiden, 2011; Maurice Brock, *Bronzino*, Paris, 2002; Ethan Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise*, Cambridge, 1999; Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago, IL, 1993; Daniel Arasse, *Leonardo da Vinci*, New York, 1998; the numerous articles by C. Jean Campbell about Simone Martini and other early Renaissance painters; Alexander Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art*, Cambridge, 2000; Guillaume Cassegrain, *Tintoret*, Paris, 2010.
- 5 As Guillaume Cassegrain indicates in his essay, Arasse, Damisch, Francastel, and Thürlemann are omitted from the bibliography of the 2008 exhibition catalogue. Even if Dominique Thiébaud ('Le "premier peintre"', 26) explains that the bibliography is not exhaustive, such an oblivion is revealing.
- 6 Giovanni Romano, 'Towards the modern manner: From Mantegna to Raphael', trans. Clare Dorey, in *The History of Italian Art*, 2 vols, Cambridge, 1994, II, 373–488.
- 7 Luke Syson, 'Reflections on the Mantegna exhibition in Paris', *Burlington Magazine*, 151: 1277, 2009, 526–35.
- 8 Roberto Longhi, 'Lettera pittorica a Giuseppe Fiocco', in *Saggi e ricerche*, vol. I, Florence, 1967, 77–98.
- 9 Syson, 'Reflections', 526: 'These values establish what is essentially a systematic, autonomous and teleological mode of classification founded upon a notion of unifying progress, which can be used to determine both chronology and attribution.'
- 10 The forthcoming volume Giovanni Agosti, Daniela Ferrari and Andrea Canova, eds, *Andrea Mantegna nei documenti del suo tempo*, will be a compendium of 750 documentary sources, more than doubling the number of entries in Paul Kristeller's 1901 monograph.

- 11 Agosti, 'Mantegna 2046', in *Mantegna 1431–1506*, 29–30.
- 12 Agosti, 'Mantegna', 29. Agosti continues: 'Notre vision ne renonce pas pour autant à certaines prédilections personnelles, d'où l'accent mis sur quelques thèmes utiles qui favorisent l'interprétation, appelons-la poétique, de l'artiste.' Agosti, 'Mantegna', 32.
- 13 Thiébaud, 'Le "premier peintre"', 20.
- 14 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447 a et b.
- 15 For Jackie Pigeaud, 'la poésie consiste à déplacer le nom et à mettre ainsi en évidence la ressemblance entre les choses, à dévoiler les rapports, à révéler l'être. De toute éternité les choses avaient un rapport entre elles de ressemblance qui aurait pu, sans le poète, rester caché.' Jackie Pigeaud, 'Introduction', in Aristote, *L'homme de génie et la mélancolie. Problème XXX.1*, Paris, 2006, 51. We might think equally of the poles of the 'metaphoric' and the 'metonymic' around which, according to Roman Jakobson, the poetic dynamic comes into being. R. Jakobson, 'Deux aspects du langage et deux types d'aphasies (1)', in Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale; 1. Les fondations du langage*, Paris, 1963, 43–67.
- 16 '... avec Joyce et Proust, le roman (tout au moins un certain courant du roman) opère une révolution [en regroupant des] fragments selon une combinatoire aboutissant à une mise en rapports directe (une confrontation) qui vise à la construction d'un ensemble dont les éléments ne vont plus être articulés, comme dans le roman français du XIX^e, en fonction d'une causalité, d'une série de causes et d'effets prétendus déterminants et déterminés sur le plan social ou psychique, mais en fonction de leurs qualités (c'est-à-dire les harmoniques, les dissonances, passages, dérapages, contrastes, etc.).' Claude Simon, "'L'absente de tous bouquets'", in *Quatre conférences*, Paris, 2012, 59. Trans. Stéphane Bouquet.
- 17 '... ce qui va commander l'agencement, forcément linéaire, d'une série d'événements écrits, ce qui va déterminer leur succession (ou leur réapparition) dans le temps du texte, ce ... sera, comme en peinture, ce que Baudelaire appelait les "correspondances", de sorte qu'à l'ordre chronologique traditionnel (cet ordre que l'on pourrait qualifier d'"horloger") va se substituer une chronologie propre au texte lui-même (de même que les éléments d'un tableau sont ordonnés (combinés) en fonction de la surface du tableau).' Simon, "'L'absente de tous bouquets'", 59–60.
- 18 Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times [Erbschaft dieser Zeit (1935)]*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1991, 97–117.
- 19 Michel Foucault, 'The prose of the world', in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London, 1970, 19–51.
- 20 On *renovatio* and *nachleben*, see Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt, ed. Kurt W. Forster, Los Angeles, CA, 1999, 2 vols; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*, Paris, 2000, 9–95; Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, 2002, 11–90; Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York, 2010, 9–10. On typological interpretation, see Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, Paris, 1959–64; English trans. *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, 2 vols; Jean Daniélou, *Sacramentum futuri, Études sur les origines de la typologie biblique*, Paris, 1950.
- 21 Thiébaud, 'Le "premier peintre"', 21.
- 22 Thiébaud, 'Le "premier peintre"', 21, note 20.
- 23 *Mantegna e Roma. L'artista davanti all'antico*, eds Teresa Calvano, Claudio Cieri Via and Leandro Ventura, Rome, 2010.
- 24 See, for instance, Hubert Damisch, 'La peinture prise au mot', (1978) in Meyer Schapiro, *Les mots et les images. Sémiotique du langage visuel*, Paris, 2000, 5–27.
- 25 Stephen J. Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*, New Haven and London, 2009, 149–68.
- 26 Agosti notes this kind of obsession: '[la] propension à l'illusionnisme, l'intérêt pour l'Antiquité, la prédilection pour les pierres, quelques jeux d'esprit amers, la fascination pour les jeunes gens en uniforme, le goût pour les inscriptions.' Agosti, 'Mantegna 2046', 33.
- 27 Giovanni Agosti, *Su Mantegna I. La storia dell'arte libera la testa*, Milan, 2005, ch. 1.
- 28 Louis Marin, *On Representation*, (1994) Stanford, CA, 2001, 380.
- 29 Louis Marin, *De l'entretien*, Paris, 1997, 66–7.
- 30 Pierre Francastel, *La figure et le lieu. L'ordre visuel du Quattrocento*, (1967), Paris, 1980, 13.
- 31 Agosti's *tour-de-force* *Su Mantegna I*, a highly entertaining performance of labyrinthine erudition and witty personal reminiscence devoted to the artist's legacy in art and in scholarship, is fraught with a sense of scholarly values under threat, and with longing for a lost Italy of cultivated left-leaning intelligentsia united by literary and artistic enthusiasms. Agosti himself characterizes the book as the 'cultural autobiography of a generation' (8).
- 32 The expression is Keith Christiansen's. See his preface to Longhi, *Piero della Francesca*, trans. David Tabbat, New York, 2002.
- 33 'era altrettanto in lui un aspetto... in forza del quale non c'era opera o situazione che non trovasse una collocazione concreta, entro il contesto d'una rete inesauribile di fatti e di rapporti.' Quoted in Giovanni Romano, 'Il Cinquecento di Roberto Longhi: eccentrici, classicism precoce, maniera', in Romano, *Storie dell'arte*. Toesca, Longhi, Wittkower, Previtali, Rome, 1988, 26, which provides a critical account of Longhi as a historical thinker.
- 34 Tietze-Conrat, *Mantegna*, 7.
- 35 For instance Martha Dunkelman, 'Donatello's influence on Mantegna's early narrative scenes', *Art Bulletin* 62, 1980, 226–35.