

On José Saramago and Andrea Mantegna

For José Saramago, the Italian painter Andrea Mantegna was clearly a kindred soul. Both began their lives in circumstances as far removed as possible from the “fine” arts of writing and painting, Mantegna as a shepherd, Saramago on a small farm. Neither ever lost that primordial sympathy with nature, however sophisticated their work became, and neither harbored any illusions about humanity after seeing so many sides, so many levels, of human society.

Saramago immediately denies any claim to expertise about Mantegna; he ventures to speak to an audience at the Museo del Prado, he protests, “not with the authority that I lack, but, if such a word is appropriate here, with the abundant love that I have.” It is a love built on the purest empathy, and empathy is clearly what compels Saramago to seek out the man as well as his work. As another great painter, Paolo Veronese, told the Venetian Inquisition in 1572, there is a “certain license” granted to madmen, painters, and poets. That same license allows Saramago to venture where professional scholars fear to tread, to try to fathom what made Mantegna see the world so differently from anyone before him. He speaks poignantly about the fatherly relationship that first bound Mantegna to his master Squarcione, turned sour when they both realized the vast gulf between their talents. Squarcione’s parting shot, first recorded by the artist-biographer Giorgio Vasari, is infinitely telling:

“His figures always have the hardness of stones and never the tender suppleness and softness that flesh and natural things have. He would have done better if he had painted marbles.”

Mantegna, the self-made man, gave his figures, all of them, the dignity of antique statues, rebelling against the graceful Gothic lines of courtly predecessors like Pisanello, the supreme master of Squarcione’s generation, whose knights and ladies gracefully dispose themselves on lush greenswards with perfect manners. Only Pisanello could have cast a medallion of Cupid teaching a lion to sing, reading from a musical score. Pisanello’s world was one where chivalry still thrived and Arthur was still king of Camelot, but Mantegna, the former shepherd, lived among the stern herdsmen who built ancient Rome. His figures

look like statues because they hark directly back to Romulus, Tanaquil, Cloelia, Cincinnatus, citizens of an ancient world that venerated republican virtues rather than the elaborate conventions of courtly life. It is no accident that the least successful of his paintings is *Parnassus*, the allegory he painted for the arch-aristocrat Isabella d'Este as she breathed down his neck.

Saramago concentrates on the grievously damaged chapel that Mantegna painted between 1448 and 1457 for the Paduan notary's widow Imperatrice Ovetari, whose name, "Empress," bespeaks the spirit of an age that had begun to discern dignity in all human beings. The mid-fifteenth century in Italy was an era when girls, and not only aristocrats but also merchant girls, were given exultant names like *Splendida*, or queenly classical names like *Sofonisba*, rather than religious horrors like *Humiliana* or *Crocefissa*. Imperatrice Ovetari was rich rather than noble, but she felt like an empress nonetheless: she eventually sued Mantegna for painting only eight apostles in her stunning chapel rather than twelve, and lost the case because the magistrates agreed that there was no room to include them in Mantegna's majestic scheme, one of the greatest painting cycles of any century, in any place. Saramago shows his novelist's insight by rejoicing in the fact that humanity devised photography before inventing airborne bombs, so that some record survived of the Ovetari Chapel's frescoes before the Allies destroyed them in 1944, aiming, badly, for the train station. Mantegna's artistic weaponry makes no such mistakes: famously, one of the chapel's images shows an incident from the life of St. Christopher in which the King of Samos, who has ordered his archers to dispatch the saint, receives a deflected arrow in his own eye. That arrow in the eye has long been understood as Mantegna's symbol for the power of perspective. But Saramago attributes to this stern man of the people a still more sovereign power, recalled when he visited the ruined Chapel at the same time as the elderly English couple. Perhaps, Saramago muses, the courteous old man was once part of the RAF squadron that nearly obliterated Mantegna's masterwork, drawn back to repent by the tameless compassion of art. Mario Pereira's translation has captured both the delicacy of Saramago's vision and its steely core.

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