

Andrea Mantegna: An Ethic, An Aesthetic*

In a novel published fifteen years ago with the enigmatic title of *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, which is narrated in the first person, I imagined that my main character, a mediocre portrait painter traveling through Italy, went one day to the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, later on leaving a record of what he saw in the pages of a journal that he, the narrator, so to speak, kept, perhaps to reinforce that illusion of verisimilitude that novelists tirelessly pursue even more than the truth itself. After suggesting with no little pretension and complacency that the paintings in Padua lacked the descriptive freshness of *The Life of St. Francis* cycle in Assisi, both of which were painted by the same artist, Giotto, my character, not having to demonstrate any other expertise, passes directly to what he felt and thought, availing himself, it goes without saying, of what the author of the novel, the very one speaking to you now, thought and felt when he went to Italy and was in Padua. My portrait painter, identified in the book simply with the letter H., wrote:

The figures appear aloof and at times almost priestly. For Giotto they belong to an ideal world of premonition. In a world thus described the divine extends serenely over the concerns and vicissitudes of this world, like some predestination or fatality. No one there knows how to smile with their lips, perhaps because of some flaw in the painter's powers of expression. But the open eyes, with long, heavy eyelids, often light up and exude a tranquil and benign wisdom which causes the figures to hover above and beyond the dramas narrated in the frescoes.

As I strolled through the chapel, once, twice and for a third time, examining the three cycles in chronological order, a thought suddenly occurred to me which I still have not been able to unravel. It was a wish rather than a thought: to be able to spend a night there in the middle of the chapel and wake up before dawn in time to see those groups slowly emerging in procession from the shadows, like ghosts, their gestures and faces, that translucent blue, which must be one of Giotto's secrets, for it is not to be found in any other painter. At least not in my experience.

Let no one imagine I am betraying some deep religious feeling. I am simply trying to find out in the most mundane terms how an artist can create such a world.¹

Quoting oneself is a narcissistic act that authors always try to justify either by alleging the supposed or actual impossibility in the moment of saying it better or by insinuating that the quotation contains all that could be said on the subject without the need, therefore, of endeavoring to go further, seeking more precision. In this case, the intentions are different. In the first place, this passage situates me at the outset, thanks to an elementary literary device, in the very city of Padua where I would like to take us. In the second place, it leaves a favorable and benevolent idea in your minds, which is that having written a novel fifteen years ago in which painting and painters live and appear in abundance on every page, then perhaps I am capable of speaking to you here today about the life of one of those painters—Andrea Mantegna—and a little bit about his work, not with the authority that I lack, but, if such a word is appropriate here, with the abundant love that I have.

How old was Andrea Mantegna when he, as well, saw Giotto's frescoes for the first time? He was a child, for we know that he had not yet reached eleven years of age when he joined the workshop of the painter Francesco Squarcione in Padua. Before this he had been a shepherd, tending sheep probably for some lord or rural property owner from the village where he lived with his family—Isola di Carturo—which then belonged to the territory of Vicenza and where he had been born in 1431.

How Francesco Squarcione, a painter, a contractor, a collector and dealer of objects of classical art with a shop frequented by humanists from the University of Padua, met the young Andrea, son of the carpenter Biggio Mantegna, we do not know, just as we do not know what remarkable signs of artistic vocation and precocity were shown by the little boy that made Squarcione determine to take him with him. Another mystery is what led Andrea's father either of his own initiative, or as the result of a proposal from Squarcione, to expressly renounce his paternity, for it was as Squarcione's adopted son that Andrea left his native village and went to live until the age of seventeen in the house of the man who would become his father and his master. The clarification of these obscure elements of Mantegna's biography may perhaps have no particular importance for the study of the work of the painter, but it would certainly help us understand the man that he was.

In any case, we know today that the entrance of a child at so young an age into a painting workshop was not exceptional, but that it was a rather common practice at the time. As in the nineteenth century when so much capital would so often be invested in scientific and technological investigation, something quite similar, considering all of the differences in goals and methods, was done in the fifteenth century in the area of artistic activity. The demand for painters, sculptors, architects, and engravers attracted to artistic careers many people who in other circumstances would never have thought about it. A son of peasants or artisans who showed some talent had many opportunities to be noticed and encouraged by a lord or a rich merchant from the neighborhood. Of course, recruitment was much easier among families of artisans—goldsmiths, jewelers, painters, decorators, blacksmiths—that already possessed their own professional traditions and offered their sons the advantage of an early apprenticeship. Until this time, only the Church had sought its artists in the different social strata, only the Church had been capable of gathering within it such a great variety of human types. The fact that this practice now had expanded to civil society, in particular to the world of nobles and wealthy merchants, would have to have, as it did in fact have, a productive effect on artistic expression.

Accompanying his father (the carpenters of that time certainly had an artistic origin), or perhaps on the occasion of what we would call today a guided tour (Squarcione giving a master class to the apprentices in his workshop), Andrea entered one day the Scrovegni Chapel and saw Giotto's frescoes. Upon seeing them, please allow me to repeat the hyperbole, he saw the world that the painter of my novel wanted to see born, and it pleases me now to imagine that, before Raphael would utter the phrase in front of Correggio's *Santa Cecilia*, our little shepherd, still reeking of the flock of sheep that he had grazed, said softly to his soul: "Anch'io son' pittore" (I too am a painter).

He would be one, as we well know, but he would still have for seven more years to pass through the rigorous and difficult experience of workshop apprenticeship, which would go from the total mastery of drawing and perspective to the preparation of paints and the intimate knowledge, through prints and copies, of the painting and sculpture of classical antiquity, which, as we have seen, comprised most of the contents of Squarcione's workshop.

This Squarcione, whose work has practically been lost (we only have by him a signed *Madonna and Child* in Berlin and an altarpiece in Padua), occupies in spite of this a place of exceptional importance in the history of *quattrocento* painting,

for he trained more than one hundred and thirty painters in his workshop, where it is thought in all likelihood that the so-called *Paduan* style was born, a style that would culminate in Mantegna and that would spread throughout northern Italy.

Years later, after the break between master and pupil, Squarcione would still tell his most rebellious students: “Ho fatto un uomo de Andrea Mantegna come farò di te” (I made a man of Andrea Mantegna, as I will make one of you). Now, if it is true that it was with Squarcione that Mantegna was made into a man, the least that can be said is that Squarcione, taking into account the differences of character, did not make him into the man that he probably had wanted to make of him. And, as for the painter, Mantegna’s own genius made him one.

Genius, yes, but also Italy. When the son of the carpenter Biggio was born, artists by the name of Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Donatello, Fra Angelico, Paolo Uccello, Pisanello, Alberti, and Piero della Francesca were alive in Italy, and one could almost include Masaccio among them, but he had died just three years earlier. At the time, Italy was an immense construction site and an immense workshop where all of the arts flourished with a perhaps inimitable vigor, because this was the era par excellence of the invention of the new from fragments and memories of the ancient, when the reencounter with classical art and its study provoked the rupture that would lead to modernity. It was on the shoulders of those men, of Andrea Mantegna and his generation, that the Leonardos, the Raphaels, and the Michelangelos of the future would stand when their time came.

If this were the theme of the lecture, to give the biographical facts that we currently possess, I confess that I would gladly use all of the time that is allowed to me here describing the seven years of Mantegna’s apprenticeship. I should note, however, that there are good reasons to believe that this long period was not entirely peaceful as regards the relationship between the student and the master: we would need no better proof of this than the already cited phrase of Squarcione.

Many very difficult battles, implicit as well as declared, would have been fought in that workshop inhabited by such noble vestiges of antiquity, battles initially caused by the natural clash between an authoritarian temperament, as was Squarcione’s, and a proud personality, as was Mantegna’s. Moreover, it is not too much to imagine that Mantegna’s artistic and creative maturation process, aided by his truly extraordinary intuition, would become, sooner rather than later, a new source of conflict not only in their relationship as men, but also in their competition as painters. The adolescent who at seventeen years of age accompanied his master to Venice was already a complete painter preparing to meet his

own destiny that would be characterized by neither servitude nor dependence, except that which came with the social status of an artist of that time, a status that, furthermore, was in the process of transformation and that he would never resign himself to accept with bowed head. It was at the beginning of the following year, in 1448, when Mantegna took the first steps that would carry him into the world of adults and responsibilities: he left Squarcione's house and went to live in another neighborhood in Padua, the *contrada* of Santa Lucia, signing an agreement with Squarcione according to which he could, having already become independent, keep for himself all of the money that he would earn. And the first money he earned was likely what was paid to him for the polyptych, now lost, that he painted around that time for the Church of Santa Sophia.

Having arrived at this point, we should here introduce, to honor and praise the institution of the family, and also to acknowledge the grace of the always ready imagination, an edifying episode: the visit Andrea's parents would pay to their son's new house during which the carpenter Biggio would certainly congratulate himself for the results of his having renounced paternal authority. Perhaps with this episode we would know something more about Andrea's feelings, the assessment that he himself would make of these seven years spent serving and learning. However, we know nothing.

When Andrea, alone at home, because it would take time for him to have his own workshop and students, would finish the day's work perhaps he might visit his other family, Giotto's frescoes, his ancestors from a century and a half earlier, or he might knock on the door of a man who was almost seventy years old, a man called Donatello, who had been in Padua for five years and who would remain there for another five years, to watch him work on the altar of the Basilica of Sant'Antonio in which the miracles of the saint are represented, or it could be that Andrea might in the end take advantage of the fading light of the afternoon to look one more time at the equestrian statue of Gattamelata, recently installed.

Mantegna's vision is one of reliefs, which the eyes touch and surround as though they were hands and which the hands recognize and identify as though they were eyes. Drawing and modeling in light and shade taught him to create on the surface of a wall or a panel the visual impression of volume. But Mantegna seems always to have pursued what we could call a *supreme degree of illusion*, a flat image that the hands refuse to touch from fear of passing through the surface that reason still affirms is there, but that the eyes have already broken through to move beyond: it is our gaze that contemplates us from the vanishing point of a

perspective or from the other intangible and irrefutable wall that lies behind the statues that the painting simulates. Squarcione's teaching had imposed on his students, as a model to follow, the extraordinary remains of a revived classical antiquity, but I doubt I would strain verisimilitude too much by imagining that the personality and work of Donatello, who had arrived in Padua two years after Andrea had begun to work with Squarcione, would have powerfully drawn the attention of the young apprentice.

Now, in the exact moment when Andrea, already expert in his trade and free from guardianship, presents himself on the labor market, it so happened that an illustrious Paduan woman, Imperatrice Ovetari, determined to have constructed for herself a chapel in the Church of the Eremitani, which is not far from the Scrovegni Chapel. It is known that at that time when one said chapel, one said painting, and it was because of this that once the masons had finished their part of the work, the painters would move in. The painters charged with decorating one half of the chapel were the Venetians Antonio Vivarini and his partner Giovanni d'Alemagna, whose workshop in Venice was as well-known as the Bellini family workshop. Squarcione's two best students, Andrea Mantegna and Niccolò Pizzolo, who was ten years older than his colleague, were contracted to decorate the other half of the chapel.

(It is appropriate here to offer, in passing, a consideration that will in some way put into perspective what has been said about the abundantly documented bad relations between Mantegna and Squarcione. Since it is hardly credible that Imperatrice Ovetari possessed, on her own, such thorough knowledge of Mantegna's work that she would have confidently entrusted responsibility for such an important part of the decoration of her chapel to a young painter, it seems most likely that it was Squarcione himself who, consulted on the matter, had suggested his two most capable apprentices. We should not forget that Squarcione's importance in Padua at the time was not limited to the realm of the arts, but was also social.)

What was done by the fifteenth century was undone by the twentieth century. On March 11, 1944, the planes came and dropped bombs on Padua. The Church of the Eremitani was struck and part of the frescoes by Mantegna were destroyed and buried in the ruins. This is how my painter from the *Manual* recorded his impressions of his visit there:

The church of the Eremitani was virtually destroyed and Mantegna's frescoes depicting the life of St James either disappeared or were severely damaged (the

painter was seventeen when he first stood with his paints and brushes before the bare surface of a wall). I look at what remains of Mantegna's pictorial world: monumental architecture, human forms as ample and robust as rocky landscapes. I am alone in the church. I can hear the sounds of a city which has forgotten the war, the drone of aeroplanes and explosion of bombs. Just as I am about to leave, an elderly English couple arrive, tall, dried up, wrinkled, so alike. As if in familiar surroundings, they head straight for the Ovetari Chapel painted by Mantegna and there they stand, lost in contemplation.²

Now, I ask myself, what led me to write that the English couple, husband and wife, head to the Ovetari Chapel "as if in familiar surroundings." The logical reason would be that they had already been there before, that they belonged, for example, to that category of cultured travelers who always return to where they have been because it keeps the hope alive that they will come to know it better. But another explanation occurs to me today, one that is certainly more romantic and even more comforting, because it allows for the possibility that a person may repent of the evil that they did and be capable of acknowledging their fault in the place where the offense was committed: it might have been that old Englishman who had manned the destroyer bomber thirty years earlier and who with the thumb of his right hand had pressed the button to drop the bombs. You will tell me that this is too much of a coincidence, and I will respond by saying that life, all of it, is pure coincidence. However, I will have to admit that I am wrong if the planes which on that day had bombed Padua were not, after all, British, but American...

Man, fortunately, first invented photography and only later aerial bombings. Thanks to that foresight, the images that have disappeared left their shadows among us, now that, almost fifty years later, the memory of the actual paintings is fading in the memory of the survivors until it is definitively extinguished with the last one.

All of Mantegna is already here, a style of theatrical though austere solemnity, the sense of the intrinsic minerality of the world, the need to balance this irreducible hardness by appealing to the fruits and the flowers, the garlands, and the graces of an occasionally generous nature. The enormous frescoes of St. James (each one measuring almost three and a half meters) were destroyed in thunder and fury, in dust and fire. They described scenes from the saint's life, his calling, his preaching to the demons, his baptism of Hermogenes, his trial, the way to martyrdom, and his death by stoning.

In addition to Mantegna and Pizzolo and to Vivarini and d'Alemagna, other painters, such as Ansuino da Forlì and Bono da Ferrara, worked in the Ovetari Chapel: so many square meters of wall could not be in the hands of only one painter, otherwise the pious soul of Imperatrice Ovetari would not have been able to experience the rapturous and consoling joy of praying in her chapel completely enveloped in the colors and representations of the lives of her favorite saints, St. James and St. Christopher. The frescoes of the latter saint were painted later, after Mantegna's brief Venetian period, and they were more fortunate, for they escaped the bombing. More, perhaps, than the frescoes of St. James, the *Martyrdom and Burial of St. Christopher* arrogantly displays all of Mantegna's perspectival science and, in this specific respect, it can be placed on a par with Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ*, painted around the same time.

Despite all of the participants and assistance, work on the Eremitani took seven years to complete. This Andrea who passes his eyes over the recently completed frescoes of the Ovetari Chapel is now the main figure of Paduan painting and one of the most important of all of northern Italy. It is certain that he painted the final brushstroke: in 1451, with Giovanni d'Alemagna having died the previous year, Antonio Vivarini finished painting the arch with the evangelists and returned to Venice; in 1453 Niccolò Pizzolo disappears, killed as he returned at night from working on the chapel. Vasari says that he was "afrontato e morto a tradimento" (attacked and killed by treachery), but it is more likely that it had been a fight with swords and daggers like so many others that Pizzolo had been involved in during his life, for he had a fiery and irascible temperament.

With the same violence and the same passion, Mantegna likewise entered and would continue to enter, not only a few times, into fights such as these, for he was no less sensitive than Niccolò regarding questions of honor and precedence. Endowed with little of the Christian virtue of patience, these Renaissance artists easily put their future masterpieces at risk: the slash that could cut the thread of life would also kill the colors and forms that were about to be born. The hand that was still stained with paint from a crucifixion and that was going to deliver the final blow could, in turn, never again hold a paintbrush: they knew this and nonetheless they did not shy away from death, stealer of life and executioner of art.

It was toward the end of his work in the Eremitani when, to escape from the war that Squarcione, already overshadowed by the successes of his former apprentice, had declared against him, Mantegna decided to leave Padua and go live in Venice where the Bellinis, "grandi pittori," in the words of Vasari, and men

of culture, welcomed him as an equal. Jacopo Bellini's two sons, Giovanni and Gentile, were nearly the same age as Andrea, but it was Andrea, the youngest, who would leave signs of his strong influence in the paintings of the two Bellini brothers, particularly and persistently in the work of Giovanni. The panel *The Agony in the Garden*, which was painted by Giovanni Bellini in 1465 and is now in the National Gallery London, powerfully recalls Mantegna's painting of the same subject, which is found in the same museum.

It was also among the Bellini family that Mantegna met the woman who would become his wife, the daughter of Jacopo, Nicolasa, with whom he would have five sons, all of them painters, though rather mediocre ones. One of these sons, Francesco, would give him serious grief at the end of his life, for he would be expelled from Mantua for his undesirable behavior. But those days of bitter sadness are still far-off: now Andrea works in the workshop of his new relatives, his father-in-law who esteems him, his brothers-in-law who admire him, and, loosening somewhat the shackles of the imagination, we can see from here Nicolasa approach her groom from behind to watch him paint as the moment arrives for them to walk through the streets and canals of Venice as he had promised, with her as the guide.

Mantegna's marriage to the daughter of Jacopo Bellini exacerbated the hostility that pitted him against Squarcione. Resentful, the old master began to disdain what was also in some way his own work: the style of his apprentice. Here, for example, is the commentary he offered on the frescoes of the Ovetari Chapel: "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, which have nothing living about them."

Mantegna, whose character was as hard as the stones that were thus imputed to him and who did not easily accept criticism, decided to demonstrate his ability to paint real figures and populated one of the scenes in the Ovetari Chapel with intensely lifelike portraits of characters from Padua's cultural elite, assigning them various roles as protagonists of the martyrdom of St. Christopher. Vindictive, he also represented Squarcione as the miserable, fat, and stupid warrior located behind the saint: the image, however, is not a portrait, but rather a caricature. Mantegna would continue to ridicule his old master on other occasions, in engravings such as *Bacchanal with Silenus* and, especially, in the atrocious allegory that is *Ignorance and Mercury*. Their bad relations account for the fact that at the end of 1455 Mantegna had presented a complaint to the court of Padua

demanding payment from Squarcione for the paintings that he had executed during the years when he worked with him.

During his Venetian period, Mantegna painted a cartoon of the *Death of the Virgin* for the mosaic of the Mascoli Chapel in the Basilica of San Marco. In Padua, at the same time as the *Martyrdom of St. Christopher*, he painted for the Church of San Zeno in Verona, where it can still be found, a polyptych of *The Virgin and Child and Saints*. This was his first major pictorial statement outside of the medium of fresco and it shows the persistent influence of Donatello, in this case, of Donatello's altar of Sant'Antonio in Padua from which Mantegna learned and then here applied Donatello's lesson on how to arrange and articulate, plastically, masses and figures.

Earlier, in 1456, Ludovico III Gonzaga, the Marquis of Mantua, had invited Mantegna to work at his court, but it was only three years later, in 1459, after a new request from the lord of Mantua that the painter decided to accept the invitation. The Gonzaga offer him "fifteen ducats of provision per month, housing for him and his family, cereal for six persons, in addition to all of the wood that he needs and still more." The financial conditions are favorable and the affective and cultural environment that will soon surround Mantegna explains why he does not again return to Padua, except for a brief period in 1461.

In Mantua with the Gonzaga, Mantegna will be admired and respected much more like a friend than a court painter, and these sentiments, which are first expressed by Ludovico Gonzaga, will be likewise shared and exhibited by the marchioness, Barbara of Brandenburg, as well as the couple's ten children. The meeting between this prince and this painter undoubtedly constituted one of the most extraordinary and moving artistic and human events of the Italian renaissance.

With the move to Mantua, Mantegna begins a new and productive period of creative work. The triptych, today in the Uffizzi, that represents the *Adoration of the Magi*, the *Ascension*, and the *Circumcision* was executed during this first phase of Mantuan activity. Also from this time is *The Agony in the Garden* (National Gallery, London), which quite clearly exemplifies the artist's interest in a scenographic type of representation on different narrative levels with an evident concern for historicity. And *The Death of the Virgin*, of which the Prado is the proud custodian, is also likely from this period, though there are those who assert that Mantegna painted it in 1492, after the trip that he had then taken to Rome. Be that as it may, it is Mantua that is represented in the background of the panel with its towers and walls, its lakes, and the San Giorgio bridge, one of those that Ludovico Gonzaga had built over the marshes that then surrounded the city.

As court painter of Mantua, Mantegna is invited to travel to other places. With the permission of the Gonzaga, he will go to Florence to give advice on the chorus of the Santissima Annunziata, to Pisa to paint a wall of the Camposanto, he will later go to Rome, but wherever he is, he will always long to return to his city of Mantua where they esteem him, indulging his demands and excusing the eccentricities of his character that with the passing of time were becoming more pronounced.

Nothing infuriated him more than the improper appropriation of the fruits of his labor. Upon discovering that the engraver Andrea Zoan, who belonged to his workshop, engraved and sold his drawings without authorization, Mantegna expelled him and forced him, it seems with violence, to hand over to him “the prints and plates.” Later, upon learning that the same Andrea Zoan had used for identical purposes the services of another engraver, Simone Ardizzoni, from Reggio Emilia, his wrath turned against him, first with threats, then with persecutions, to the extent that this Simone Ardizzoni had to write a letter to the Marquis Ludovico Gonzaga in which he said: “Since the diabolical Andrea Mantegna learned that I was reproducing the prints, he sent a Florentine to threaten me, swearing that I was going to have to pay for them. And as though this were not enough, I was attacked one night by the nephew of Carlo de Moltone and ten more armed men, Andrea Zoan and me, in order to kill us...” There were no deaths, as far as is known, but the violence only ended when the appropriation ceased. The response that Ludovico Gonzaga sent to this Simone Ardizzoni was the same more or less that he had already given, earlier on, to a gardener who had presented a complaint to him about Mantegna’s alleged arrogance: “I am more fond of the tip of the toe of this Andrea than I am of a thousand cowards like you.” However, do not think that it was only in cases that involved people of little significance that the Marquis Ludovico Gonzaga came to Mantegna’s defense: he was no more receptive to the denunciations of important subjects who protested to him about the harsh character of the master.

As a man and as an artist, Andrea was in full maturity on the day when Ludovico Gonzaga charged him with the execution, on the main floor of the north tower of the Castle of St. George, of the great mural decorations that we call the *Camera degli Sposi*. Other decorations completed by Mantegna at this time have disappeared. However, what has come down to us, the result of a task that we can easily imagine as immense, constitutes one of the most beautiful and perfect works in the history of painting, irrespective of time and place. The date when work began is still being debated, but it can, in any case, be situated

between 1465 and 1473. Nevertheless, there appears to be no doubt, if we accept as reliable the dedication painted above the door leading out of the *camera*, about the date of completion, which would be 1474, though some scholars maintain that work on it continued until 1484 or even 1488.

In front of the frescoes of the *Camera degli Sposi* one can better understand, as Giovanni Paccagnini says, “the internal significance that the systematic search for formal perfection, which is present in each one of his works, would have for Mantegna, a search that did not respond to an external formalism, but to a severe ethical conception of expression as conquest that only the virtue of industriousness can attain through an assiduous and grueling exercise.” The powerful historical portrait that Mantegna represented in the *Camera degli Sposi* is the highest fruit of this assiduous and ardent search for universal values, one that rejects the ephemerality of the sentiments in favor of the intense yearning, never entirely extinguished in us, for an expression fixed in immutable relations, removed from the perpetual flow of time. There are not many figures, whether painted or sculpted, in the *History of Art* that so irresistibly summon in our spirit the designation of *eternal*.

Ludovico III died in 1487, but the relations between Mantegna and the Gonzaga did not change in any way. Mantegna found favor with the successor to the house of Gonzaga, Federico, that was the equal to what he had until then enjoyed. And when a son of the painter fell gravely ill in 1480, the new marquis recommended him to a then famous doctor, Gerardo da Verona, who, nevertheless, was unable to save him. It was after this event, and perhaps because of it, that Mantegna painted the *St. Sebastian* that today is in the Louvre and that at the time was taken by Chiara Gonzaga, daughter of Ludovico III, to Aigueperse when she married the Count of Montpensier. Mantegna would take up the theme of *St. Sebastian* two more times: shortly thereafter in the small panel that can be seen in the Vienna Museum and once more toward the end of his life in the dramatic panel, today in the *Ca' d'Oro* in Venice, which, according to Fiocco, is an example “of the most abstract linear metaphysics.”

The paint in the *Camera degli Sposi* was still wet and Andrea Mantegna had already thrown himself, to satisfy a request from Federico Gonzaga, into the enormous task of painting on canvas the *Triumphs of Caesar* (Hampton Court, London), a set of nine paintings of massive dimensions (in total 27 by 3 meters), intended to decorate a room where theatrical pieces were staged. These canvases, in addition to their evident artistic and decorative quality, can also be seen as a magnificent inventory of Mantegna's manifold knowledge of Roman

antiquity, from the clothes and insignias to the weapons and objects, but it is, above all, possible to perceive in them something that without excessive error of generalization we could call the spirit of Romanness.

In 1489, Mantegna wrote from Rome, where he had gone at the request of Pope Innocent VIII with the purpose of painting frescoes in a chapel of the Belvedere in the Vatican, to the Marquis of Mantua recommending that he safeguard the canvases of the *Triumphs of Caesar* at the same time as he expressed his hope to be able to continue and finish the work. But it is Francesco II Gonzaga, grandson of Ludovico III, who, in December of this same year, with his marriage to Isabella d'Este approaching, wrote to the pope asking that he authorize Mantegna's return to Mantua for the preparations for the wedding. Quite ill, Mantegna could not make the journey, and he would only return to Mantua nearly a year later, once he had, despite the circumstances, finished work on the Belvedere chapel, which would be destroyed in 1780. In April 1492, there were still two canvases to be painted for the *Triumphs of Caesar*, but Mantegna would not complete the work.

From the representation of the authentic triumph of an emperor, Mantegna turned, in 1495, to the commemoration of the triumph of Francesco II Gonzaga over Charles VIII of France at the battle of Fornovo—a victory that was, however, highly questionable, for Charles VIII was able to withdraw with almost all of his army, which was smaller than that of the victor, and he suffered fewer losses. One year later, the *Madonna della Vittoria*, today in the Musée du Louvre, was exhibited in Mantua with great solemnity in the chapel constructed precisely for the purpose.

Mantegna's life was drawing to a close. Recognized, loved, and respected by all, he was visited in his house by the most important figures of his time, such as Ercole d'Este, duke of Ferrara, and even Lorenzo de' Medici, il Magnifico. Infirm, embittered by grief, Mantegna would continue to paint until he ran out of strength. When, finally, on September 13, 1506, he closed his eyes, never to open them again, he had in his house the *St. Sebastian* (Ca' d'Oro, Venice) and the *Dead Christ* (Brera, Milan), two tragic representations of the interminable sufferings of mankind, two representations as well of the superior and always deferred dignity of human beings.

Élie Faure said one day that the primitive painters always put all that they knew in their works. In his painting, Mantegna not only put all that he knew, but he also put what he certainly was: a complete man in his hardness and in his sensitivity, like a rock that was able to cry.

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NOTES

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1. Saramago, José. *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy: A Novel*. Translated by Giovanni Pontiero. (Carcanet: Manchester, 1994), 98-99.

2. Saramago. *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, 97-98.

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