

Life of an Object of Art

Lamentation over the Dead Christ

Andrea Mantegna

c.1470s

Tempera on Canvas

68 cm × 81 cm (27 in × 32 in)

Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan Italy



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Introduction

During the Renaissance a new notion of the individual was created. This identity was formed through knowledge based on the relationship of the individual to the world in which they lived. At the time, new forms of knowledge were being pursued and old ones were being questioned or repositioned. The debate over the relationship of past and present knowledge of the divine or 'ideal' to science and nature changed the way that people viewed themselves. Individual identity is constructed in Andrea Mantegna's Lamentation over the Dead Christ through the confrontation of different forms of knowledge.

The body of Christ is the place where knowledge is deposited and discussed. At one time this figure is a depiction of God and the ideal body while at the same time it shows the mortality of the human being. Andrea Mantegna¹ was aware of the new

¹ Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) was an Italian Renaissance painter of well-regarded influence, who was known for his visual experiments in perspective and spatial illusion. His work is known to have some influence on great painters of the time, including the German artist Albrecht Dürer and Italian painters Giovanni Bellini and Leonardo da Vinci.

Much of his ambitious life as an artist branched off after leaving his birth home of Padua. Before that he was under the tutelage of another Paduan painter Francesco Squarcione (1397-1468) at eleven years old and was influenced by Squarcione's love of ancient Roman art. It was then, at the age of seventeen that he left Padua, never to return, exploring his ambitions in Verona, Mantua, Rome and possibly Venice and Florence.

His early work in Padua included an altarpiece for the church of Santa Sofia (1448) and decorations for the Ovetari Chapel in the church of Eremitani. Most of these works were lost during 1944 due to World War II bombings. He also completed two frescoes of Saints at the entrance of the Church of Sant'Antonio and a 1453 altarpiece in the Church of S. Giustina of Saint Luke. His fresco in the Ovetari Chapel survives in a sketch he had done and it shows an unusual worm's-eye perspective of St. James' Execution. In these early inklings of spatial experiments, he also used the worm's-eyed view in, *The Holy Trinity with the Virgin, St. John and Two Donors*.

Once Squarcione's favorite pupil, Mantegna's studiousness gained him favor while training under Italian painter Jacopo Bellini (1396-1470). Bellini even gave his daughter's hand in marriage to Mantegna in 1453. Before his position as court artist for Ludovico Gonzaga in Mantua, Mantegna painted an altarpiece of the Madonna with Angels and Saint in the Church of San Zeno Maggiore in 1459. He then created several masterful works, some that were portraits of the Gonzaga family, in what is known today as the *Camera degli Sposi*. He lived well in these years under Gonzaga's court.

Mantegna's life saw great distress in the years that followed though, as death fell upon his patron, Ludovico, his wife and also his son, Bernardino. Mantegna grieved for several years and it was not until Francesco Gonzaga of Mantua commissioned him that he fully re-entered his artistry. In Rome, 1488, he completed frescoes commissioned by Pope Innocent VIII for

consciousness about the individual. The evidence that exists in Mantegna's paintings has led many art historians to conclude that he was one of the leading historical thinkers of his time.

The relationship of man and nature was beginning to be articulated in new ways through the arts. A new interest in the anatomy of the human body sparked a debate about the relationship between body and soul that also called into question the role of man in the natural world. At this time the notion of the 'ideal' body was strongly held by those artists who depicted the human figure. These notions also changed the relationship of artists to the divine in their depictions. God was seen as being more personal to each individual. It is against this backdrop that around 1480 Mantegna painted the Lamentation over the Dead Christ (fig. 1).

Lamentation over the Dead Christ

The Painting

The Lamentation over the Dead Christ² is a 1470s painting by the Italian Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna.

the Vatican, but it was a stifling experience for an artist who enjoyed creative freedom in Mantua. He rediscovered it upon return to the city under Francesco Gonzaga's wife, Isabella d'Este's influential cultural presence in the court, to which Mantegna obliged to in works around the court.

Mantegna also created a number of Engravings, which the biographer Giorgio Vasari attributed to him; though the artist never signed or dated the works. His masterful collection of works are seen in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, The Louvre in Paris, The Dresden Gallery, The National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and in Museums, galleries and historic places throughout Berlin, Copenhagen, London, Milan, Madrid, Venice and Verona. (virtualuffizi.com)

² Since the painting had different titles in the centuries and naming it is an important part of my research, for the purpose of this paper I will refer to the painting as Lamentation over the Dead Christ or just Dead Christ.

It portrays the body of Christ supine on a marble slab. He is watched over by the Virgin Mary, St. John and somebody in the upper left hand corner just behind Virgin Mary who are crying for his death.

Dating and naming *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*



Fig. 1. Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. c. 1470-74. Tempera on Canvas. 68 cm × 81 cm (27 in × 32 in), Brera Pinacoteca, Milan.

No firm documentary evidence exists to help us establish the exact date of the Dead Christ, nor we know details of whom it was painted for or where it was to be found for decades, though we know it was in Mantegna's studio on the time of his death. It has been suggested that Mantegna intended it for his own tomb in the church of Sant'Andrea in Mantua. (Boorsch, 1992)

It bears many stylistic affinities with the artist's Camera degli Sposi (Camera Picta) in the Ducal Palace at Mantua (1468-72). On the other hand, it also has similarities with Mantegna's St. Sebastian, which would mean that the Dead Christ

could also have been painted around 1481. A sketch of a man reclining on a stone slab, in the British Museum in London and dating from around 1470, seems to have been a preparatory sketch for Mantegna's Dead Christ, suggesting that the painting may have been done between the 1470 and the 1474. Dating the painting in these



years would provide support to the thesis that it had inspired some other examples of lamentations.

For example, in the 1475 fresco by Melozzo da Forlì (fig. 2), the figure of the green apostle show great similarities with the Christ of Mantegna.

Fig. 2. Melozzo da Forlì. Detail of Head of Apostle, 1475. Fresco. Vatican Museum.

A copy of the painting of the Dead Christ in the De Navarro Collection (Glen Head, New

York) complicates the story even further.

In any case, the canvas is in many ways a unique piece, doubts surrounding its date do nothing to distract from its forceful impact (Camesasca, 1981). The Glen Head version doesn't help us to fill the gap in spite of the accolade bestowed by some experts, since it is a modest copy dating from the end of the XVI century or even later. But it does diverge in several details from the Milan painting and does not include the three mourners, so that if we take it to be an exact copy, it must imply the former existence of another original.

We actually never even really know the exact title of the painting. Art historians refer to it as Lamentation over the Dead Christ or just Dead Christ: even in the Italian Language it has been called "Compianto sul Cristo morto e le due dolenti", "Cristo

Morto” o “Cristo in Scurto”, basically just describing the subject matter of the painting.

Cristo in Scurto (Christ in foreshortening) is mentioned in a letter written on October 2, 1506 to the Duke of Mantua, by the Mantegna’s son, Ludovico (Camesasca, 1981) among the works still in the artist studio at the time of his death in 1506, which may or may not be the same one. Quite certainly, Cardinal Sigismondo Gonzaga bought that painting shortly after Mantegna’s death.

That the letter is genuine has never been doubted, but it is equally true that clues gleaned from the archives would seem to indicate that there were two versions of the Dead Christ. In 1531 the painting was installed in the apartments of the new Duchess Margherita Paleologa, always in the Gonzaga family. (Facchinetti, Uccelli, 2006). And in 1626 it was still in the Palazzo Ducale, in the Camerino delle Dame (the Ladies’ Room), as the inventory tells us (Zeri, 1990). But in 1626 a picture conforming in all respect to the Brera Dead Christ is listed in the Aldobrandini collection. The 1665 Aldobrandini’s inventory specifies that the Dead Christ was painted on a canvas mounted on a panel. The painting can be traced there in guidebooks until the late 18th century.

Questions about the life of this painting finds finally some answers thanks to the catalog of the Brera Pinacoteque by Federico Zeri (1990), who citing the study by R. Lightbrown reveals that the painting went from Mantua to Rome at Cardinal Mazzarino’s Palazzo, then to Camillo Pamphili (Olimpia Aldobrandini’s second husband), and eventually to King Louis XIV in France. Giuseppe Bossi (a neoclassic Italian painter) bought the painting on March 21st 1807 from Louis XIV heirs.

There have been a lot of difficulties connected to the exportation of the paint, but finally in 1807 a box concealing the Dead Christ filled under close supervision of Antonio Canova was shipped to Bossi, in all likelihood with the original glass to protect the canvas³. The glass was functional in order to warm the dark color pallet of the delicate glue tempera used for the painting (Facchinetti, and Uccelli, 2006).

The Painting in the Aldobrandini Inventory, the second Lamentation, was instead a completely different painting: first of all it was painted on wood and it was in a vertical format. We don't have any other information about this last wood panel, which is still missing.

Lamentation over the Dead Christ in Brera

The splendid coated version of the Dead Christ acquired by the heirs of Giuseppe Bossi for the Brera Pinacoteque in 1824 for 3000 Lire is still today the result of the restoration by Giuseppe Molteni in 1858, the same artist who restored the Madonna and Child by Raphael always in Brera. The conservation of the painting is considered good, even if there is a general consumption due to the delicacy of the painting technique and to a series of point-like drops of color, especially on Christ's chest, revealed by infrared photography recently performed. (Zeri, 1990)

After 1898, under the new Brera's director Corrado Ricci, the *Dead Christ* could be admired together with works by Giovanni Cellini and Carlo Crivelli, catalogued by the training school of the painters. In 1908, Ettore Modigliani will become the new director of the museum and change the position of all the paintings. In 1976 the

³ Bossi cites the glass in a letter to Canova on December 16th 1806 "*This is the moment where you can give me the privilege to receive my beloved Mantegna. If you think it will arrive to me without any damages, please include that glass whose color helps the painting so much*". (Facchinetti, Uccelli, 2006)

exhibition “Trial to Brera Pinacoteque” organized by Francesco Russoli included the Dead Christ, which was put side by side to a graphic copy by the painter Renato Guttuso (fig. 3), in a section where modern painters were asked to create something inspired to masterpieces of the Museum.



Fig. 3. Contemporary artists and Brera. Exhibition "Trial to Brera Pinacoteque". Lamentation over the Dead Christ by Mantegna and Guttuso's graphic version, 1976.

After 1983 the Brera museum started a remodeling project thanks to the director Franco Russoli. The architect Vittorio Gregotti designed an incredibly suggestive system of open doors in order to create a huge anticipation for the canvas and finally a unique space for the Dead Christ (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Lamentation over the Dead Christ, Vittorio Gregotti's Design for the Sala II, Brera, Milan, 1983.

Right now the painting is conserved into a particular techa built for it. It is a retractable showcase that the Central Institute for Restoration and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure suggested for delicate kind of paintings like the Dead Christ. The techa developed by Brera Pinacoteque's laboratory completely encloses the paint, allowing the object of art to be displayed with its original frame. The reduced thickness of the theca is hidden partially by the frame, giving the viewer the feeling of watching a picture not enclosed.

The original frame is fixed to the structure of the device case with removable adhesives, not-aggressive resins and neutral silicon. Brera Pinacoteque utilizes this kind of techa in order to allow inspections of the backside of the painting, without having to open the whole showcase thanks to a retractable glass case.

The back of the theca is in glass and the fixing of the same display case to the wall allows its rotation around one of the vertical sides by a hinge. (Central Institute for Restoration and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fuc304AWQTw)

Techniques

The canvas is a fine linen weave. Although no sample could be taken, *distemper* is probably the technique used⁴. No *gesso* preparation could be found. Further, while this painting appears to be unvarnished, there is a very slight surface gloss that might indicate remains of a coating material or fixative. Finally, even though the painting is documented as being under glass since the beginning of the 19th century (Bossi, 1839) it displays a characteristic grey layer, and the colors have darkened.

The presence of vertical pointed stripes on either side of the composition is puzzling, yet in keeping with the painted porphyry frame around the St. Sebastian in the Louvre and the Presentation in Berlin, both by Mantegna (Christiansen, 1994).

On the right side of the painting there is a thin black strip on the inside and dark grey one on the outside, while on the left only a white strip can be discerned. The halo of the Christ is painted in shell gold.

A careful examination of the edges shows pronounced stretch marks and tack holes with remnants of rust, which exclude the possibility of it being glued to the support by its edges like Mantegna's Ecce Homo in Paris. Most likely the painting

⁴ Distemper is a term with a variety of meanings for paints used in decorating and as a historical medium for painting pictures. The binding element may be some form of glue or oil; these are known in decorating respectively as soft distemper and oil bound distemper.

was mounted on a strainer, like the Presentation in Berlin, with a flat woven insert in the back, which gave the appearance of a panel. (Boorsch, 1992)

Critique

Interpretations and Iconography



Fig. 5. Detail of Christ's foot in the Lamentation over Dead Christ

The Dead Christ is viewed in steep foreshortening, foot to head, laid out on a slab of marble with, crowded into the narrow space at the left, the mourning figures of his mother, Saint John (the beloved apostle), and a third figure, and, to

a barren room -probably the tomb chamber- and the dark opening of a door.

The Christ's feet (fig. 5), with their lovingly described nail wounds, project beyond the marble slab into the viewer's space; the hands, also marked by the nails that pierced them on the cross, gently posed on the folds of the linen sheet that covers the lower half of the corpse; the head, turned slightly to the side, hauntingly peaceful in the way it is propped against a rose-colored silk pillow with an elegant watermarked decoration.

Then, we see the audacious cropping of Saint John's head, turned inward toward Jesus, with the partial view of his tightly clasped hands; the grief-stricken face of the

Virgin, who raises a cloth to wipe away the tears that course down her aged cheeks; and the open mouth of the third figure, forming an almost audible moan.

All this cannot help but move the susceptible viewer, who finds himself at Christ's feet - in the position of Mary Magdalene, who washed those same feet with her tears. The picture is a tour de force of artistic ingenuity and accomplishment, and it is no wonder that it has had such a lasting effect on so many later artists.

But what sets Mantegna's painting apart is the way we see, at the far edge of the marble slab on the right, a beautifully depicted ointment jar (for the preparation of Christ's body) poignantly silhouetted against the empty corner of the chamber with that bleak, dark opening.

No Renaissance artist other than Mantegna has ever treated the theme of the Dead Christ mourned by his followers with an equal sense of loss as they confront the frightening silence and emptiness of death. Certainly not Bellini, whose emotional world did not admit such dark, brooding feelings. Nor Piero Della Francesca, whose most memorable painting conveys the certainty of the Resurrection. Nor even Michelangelo, whose marvelous drawing of the Pietà in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, with its inscription from Dante "*They think not how much blood it has cost*" is too heroically and eloquently tragic to have this kind of shattering impact. (Christiansen, 1994)

The theme of the Lamentation is common in medieval and Renaissance art, although this treatment, dating back to a subject known as the Anointing of Christ is unusual for the period. Most Lamentations show much more contact between the mourners and the body. Rich contrasts of light and shadow abound, infused by a profound sense of pathos. The realism and tragedy of the scene are enhanced by the

violent perspective, which foreshortens and dramatizes the recumbent figure, stressing its anatomical details. In particular, Christ's chest. *The stigmata* in Christ's hands and feet, as well as the faces of the two mourners, are portrayed without any concession to idealism or rhetoric. The sharply drawn drapery that covers the corpse contributes to the overall dramatic effect. Unique to this painting is a design that places the central focus of the image on Christ's genitals - an artistic choice that is open to a multitude of interpretations. Mantegna managed to paint a very specific representation of physical and emotional trauma.

In a masterful synthesis between technical ability and depth of the content of the painting, Mantegna presented both a harrowing study of a strongly foreshortened cadaver and an intensely poignant depiction of evangelical tragedy. On the one hand, this painting is one of many examples of the artist's mastery of perspective: at first glance, the painting seems to be a strikingly realistic study in foreshortening. However, careful scrutiny reveals that Mantegna reduced the size of the figure's feet, which, as he must have known, would cover much of the body if properly represented. Through this stylistic expedient, the viewer's attention is drawn over the *actual* figure represented: not any cadaver, but the cadaver of Christ, and the drama surrounding it.

It is typical of Mantegna's art that the simple window-like framing of the confined space in this painting architecturally defines it as the cold and dismal cell of a morgue. Looking at the painting we see an almost monstrous spectacle: a heavy corpse, seemingly swollen by the exaggerated foreshortening. At the front are two oversized feet with stigmata; on the left, some tear-stained, staring masks. But another look dissipates the initial shock, and a rational system can be discerned

under the subdued light. The face of Christ, like the other faces, is seamed by wrinkles, which harmonize with the watery satin of the pinkish pillow, the pale granulations of the marble slab and the veined onyx of the ointment jar. The damp folds of the shroud emphasize the folds in the tight skin, which is like torn parchment around the dry wounds. All these lines are echoed in the wild waves of the hair.

Mantegna's realism prevails over any esthetic indulgence that might result from an over-refined lingering over the material aspects of his subject. His realism is in turn dominated by an exalted poetic feeling for suffering and Christian resignation. Mantegna's creative power lies in his own interpretation of the "historic", his feeling for spectacle on a small as well as a large scale. Beyond his apparent coldness and studied detachment, Mantegna's feelings are those of a historian, and like all great historians he is full of humanity. He has a tragic sense of the history and destiny of

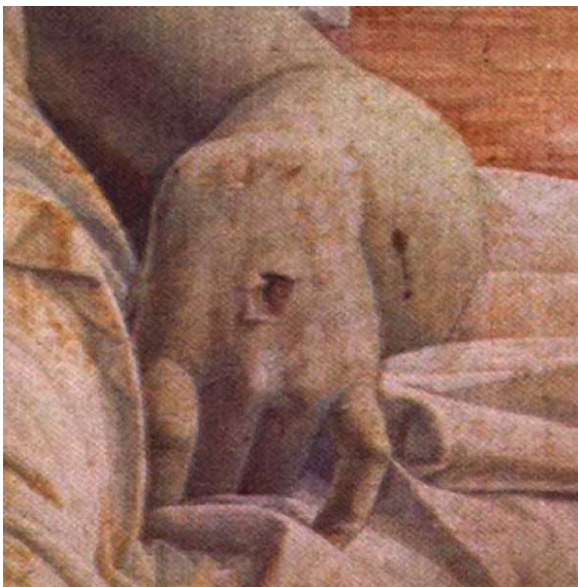


Fig. 6. Detail of Christ's hand in the Lamentation over the Dead Christ

man, and of the problems of good and evil, life and death.

The position of the left hand (fig. 6) of Christ is also rather peculiar. The hand index finger and pinkie looking tense, and the remaining fingers bent toward the inside of the palm can be interpreted as a mocking, insulting, or superstitious gesture.⁵

⁵ In Italy, "fare le corna" (literally to make the horns), that is putting your fingers in a horn-like shape, has been for centuries an insulting, mocking, or superstitious gesture.

Unjustly one could believe that this gesture is blasphemous, the true ancient and universal significance of this gesture is actually protection. Since ancient times many were the remedies of protection adopted by the popular tradition and in medieval times. The most popular were wear necklaces of garlic's cloves, sea shells, or bits of agate; setting behind the door horseshoes, big rooster's nails or wolf tails will prevent evil to enter and good fortune for the house.

Among the religious protections that protected from evil there were the sign of the cross, holy water, rosaries and medals blessed. The most powerful signs against the evil eye was "fare le corna" with your hands, or take small "horned hand" as pendants. *Fare le corna* shows the hand with the index and little fingers tense and the rest of the fingers bent toward the inside of the palm. This is a typically Latin gesture characteristic of Italy, Spain, Portugal and southern France. (Gherardi, 2009)

Anamorphic Correction

Within Andrea Mantegna's Lamentation over the Dead Christ, the image of Christ has been similarly anamorphically manipulated in order to reconcile the idealized compositional and aesthetic harmony of the scene with the anatomical correctness of Christ's body. Owing of the unusual viewpoint from which the viewer observed the recumbent Christ, adopting an intimate location at Christ's feet, Mantegna's composition yields a distortion in the body of Christ that is not proportionately or perspectively correct.

Mantegna used his masterful knowledge of perspective to alter the perceived spatial situation of the scene. If Mantegna had applied perspective as doctrine, then the resulting composition would have revealed an accurate index of the

geometrically correct scene; however Mantegna altered the painting's perspective so as to represent "*what is there, and not what*". (Brisbin, 2010, Chapter 3)

Mantegna did not apply a purely mathematical and formulaic approach to composing the painting. Mantegna was applying Alberti's concept of *Historia*⁶ in order to offer a more dramatic and empathetic representation of the Dead Christ.

Alberti's *Historia* is imbued with "*expressions, gestures and emotions of the figures ... leaving more for the onlooker to ignore about his grief than he could see with the eye.*" (Greenstein, 1992)

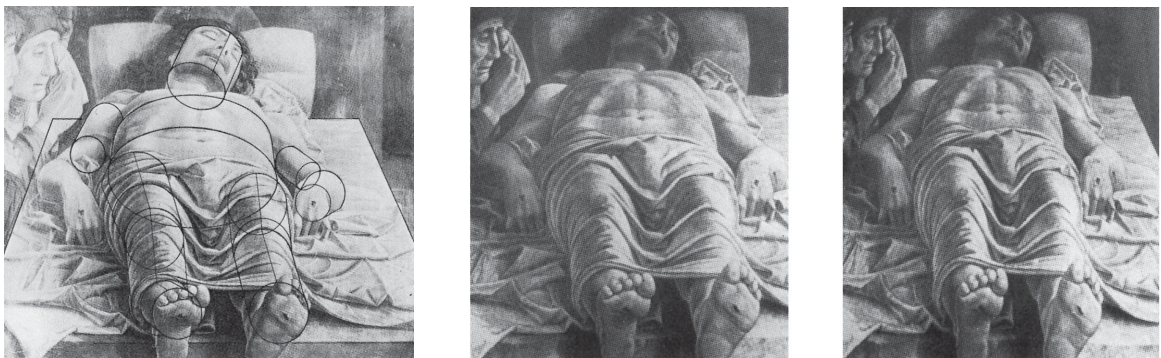


Fig. 7. Diagram showing the acute foreshortening of the painting - The overlaid circles expose the acute foreshortening.

In Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, the spectator's emotions are clear: intimacy and shock (fig. 7). Mantegna's manipulation of the canon of perspective has been executed in order to bring Christ's head forward, so that it appeared closer in the foreground and therefore with a greater immediacy and intimacy than would conventionally be achieved had the painting simply been rendered through the systematized application of perspective alone.

⁶ Alberti defined the concept of *Historia* in his second book *On Painting* as a compositional ideal, observing that "painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living". (Greenstein, 1992)

The point here is that although perspective provides a very rigorous and definitive spatial framework through which to compose a pictorial artwork, Alberti himself had never proposed that it be used in such a formulaic way. It is through Alberti's humanist desires, and in particular his acclamation of *Historia* as the overriding compositional technique and goal in painting, that artists were empowered with "*moral worth which could be realized through a command of beauty, expression and significance.*" (Brisbin, 2010, Chapter 3).

Mantegna's Dead Christ is an example of the kind of pictorialism that began to develop late in the Renaissance that deployed Alberti's system of perspective but denied its systematic control over the pictorial composition as a whole through the painter's commitment to the composition's *Historia*.

The horizontal plane is organized, traced out through a grid, with bodies arranged in a tableau of balanced gesture, posture, and mannerism.

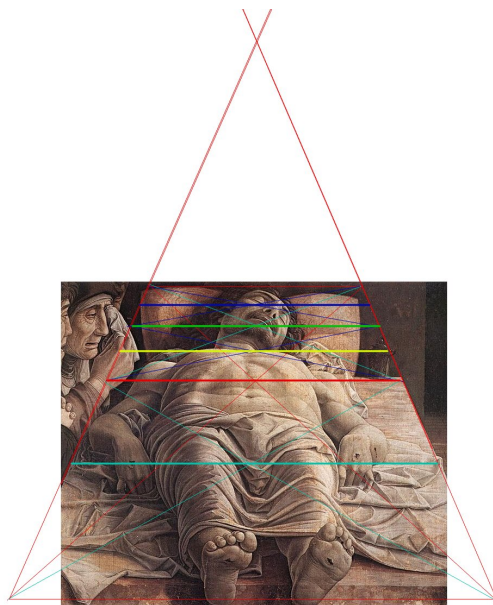


Fig. 8. Perspective Grid

The horizontal grid, therefore, is not just a means through which to allow for the operation of the perspective system but also a means to an end: the deployment of *Historia*. Mantegna here, according to Puttfarcken (2000), applied the "*perfect application of Alberti's principles of composition: variety of movement, or expression, or gender and*

dress provides interest and pleasure, yet every part and every figure is geared to the 'performance', the representation of a single story." (Puttfarcken, 2000)

Perspective, although used today and widely accepted as the fundamental representational structure in drawing and computer-based visualization, did not dominate as a definitive agent in Art for very long. Using the technique of perspective centre⁷ (fig. 8), we can easily reach the same kind of perspective that Mantegna's utilized. Just dividing the length of Christ's body into eighths. These should correspond with the standard body proportions, with the lines falling roughly at chin, nipple line, navel, hip joint, and knees. As you can see, they don't.

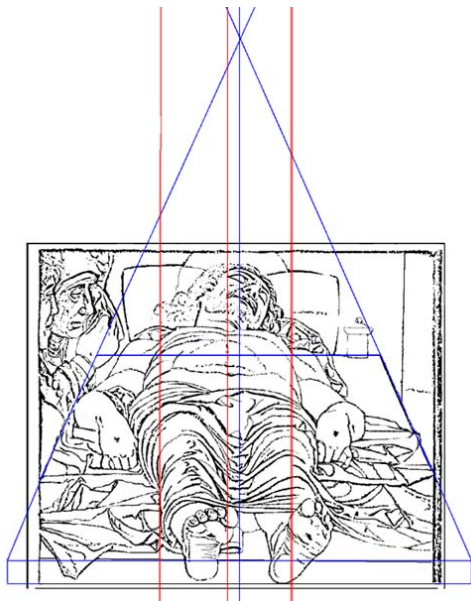


Fig. 9. Double Point of view (blue lines)

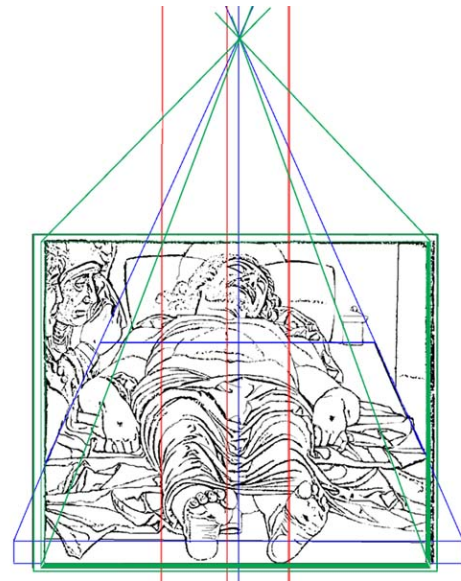


Fig. 9a. Relative Point of View (red lines)

It is probable that Mantegna was using a double point of view (fig. 9-9a-9b). The first (blue lines) is relative to the marble bed, coinciding with the frame (green lines), the second (red lines) is just relative to the body of Christ. (Gherardi, 2009)

⁷ The point of origin or termination of bundles of rays or projecting lines directed to a point object, for a photographic image or drawing, respectively.

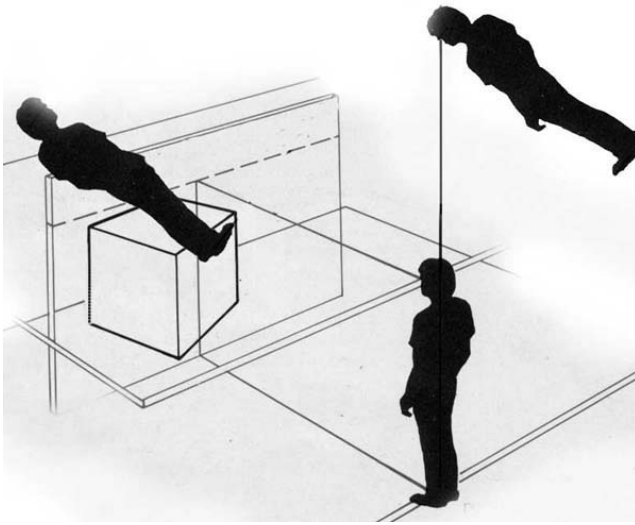


Fig. 9b. Double point of view used by Mantegna

Under a proper perspective
Mantegna's Christ would have been
very awkward: tiny head and legs
taking over most of the painting.
But people are usually more
interested in faces than feet, hence
Mantegna struck a balance between
dramatic foreshortening and
showing the face of Christ.

Robert Smith has demonstrated through photographs (Brisbin, 2010) that the figure of Christ corresponds to the proportions of a figure seen at a distance of 25 meters. The slab on which the figure is lying contradicts this calculation because it has the perspective scheme of a distance of approximately 2 meters. When a real figure is viewed at a distance of 2 meters the body's proportion appears distorted; the size of the feet become very large when compared with the size of the head. One interpretation of this contradiction is that Mantegna did not apply the perspective distortion to the figure because it does not have the same linear qualities of the slab.

Conclusion

At first glance the Dead Christ is a devotional image: the culmination of Christ's suffering. The history of the image is somewhat unknown and it has been speculated that it was a personal devotional image for Mantegna. What appears certain is that the very nature of the painting centers on the individual.

The dramatic foreshortening in Mantegna's image has intrigued many critics and has been analyzed for its pictorial devices. Craigie Aitchison, a Scottish painter and one of the better known critically esteemed Royal Academicians, recalls the Lamentation over the Dead Christ as his favorite painting, stating, "*I like it because it tells a Story... It's a wonderful reddy colour and terrifically drawn... If ever a painting was clear, it's this one. It's fantastically clear about the story it's telling - there's no muddling about. It couldn't be any other way*". (Highbeam Research, www.highbeam.com)

Mantegna's Dead Christ is regarded as an indispensable art piece and he deserves the acclaim for the merit of these essentials in his work of art.

APPENDIX

Post Modern Mantegna

Cinema

Lamentation over the Dead Christ and “Mamma Roma” by Pier Paolo

Pasolini



Fig. 10. Ettore Garofalo's death. Final scene of the movie "Mamma Roma" (1962), by Pier Paolo Pasolini

The Italian filmmaker, writer and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1965) had a true passion for painting. He had learned to love it at the University of Bologna, attending lectures on the history of the great art critic Roberto Longhi, who had passed on his passion for Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Caravaggio and Mantegna. Not by chance in an episode of the film *Decameron* (1971), starring the Giotto, Pasolini has interpreted the great fourteenth-century painter.

In his films it is always possible to recognize the influence of painters, so he is considered one of the most "artistic" Italian filmmakers: he frames the shots as the painted scenes, with specific references to the great figurative tradition.

It should be emphasized that Pasolini was never interested in just and aesthetic mention of the painting. He wanted to recreate the complex emotional or intellectual image synthesis.

The painted image expresses in a clear, simple and effective way a very complex content, and makes it understandable to all. Not only that: the paintings of the past are intended to highlight the meaning of the present and make it more "real".

In the dramatic finale of *Mamma Roma* (fig. 10) Pasolini mentions Mantegna's Dead Christ: it is clear that in this way, he wanted to emphasize a common theme throughout his career, namely his love for the marginalized, the underclass, for the "different" to whom he feels closer. (www.cafepellicola.com)

When Pasolini was asked to indicate the models that had influenced his cinematic language, he always indicated pictorial models. The fact that the shot in his films was conceived as a framework, clarifies Pasolini's preference for the fixed camps.

He himself explains in the director's notes for *Mamma Roma* "*...it is like I am in the painting, but in this painting the figures around me cannot stay still. I can turn my eyes and look around to see new details*". (Giulia Grassi, www.scudit.it)

Multimedia

Renato Meneghetti: Investigation x-ray. Biennale of Venice 2011



Fig. 11. Renato Meneghetti. *Sotto Pelle*, Investigation x-ray on Lamentation over the Dead Christ 2011, alcohol on canvas, cm 68x81 - Venezia, Padiglione Italia - Tesa 99 - Arsenale Novissimo.

Sotto Pelle is an X-ray investigation by Renato Meneghetti around the Lamentation over the Dead Christ, sees the work of Mantegna pictorially investigated by overlapping transparencies x-rays to create new ideas, new works of art (fig. 11).

Meneghetti's exhibit was exposed at the 54th Biennale in Venice in 2011 as a special initiative at the International Exposition of Art for the 150 years of Italian Republic. The exhibition starts with a copy of Mantegna's painting in its original format, and Meneghetti's radiography. The light will guide the viewers to discover

an art gallery of unrecognized artists. A space to meet the work of four unknown artists with superimposed action of Meneghetti's x-rays.

The visitors are in front of a series of works emphasized by the radiographic intervention of Meneghetti (fig. 12-13-14). This effect upsets the starting point of each work. But the original is still visible, thank to transparency the plexiglas sheets superimposed on the paintings. The overall effect gives birth to an entirely new piece of art.

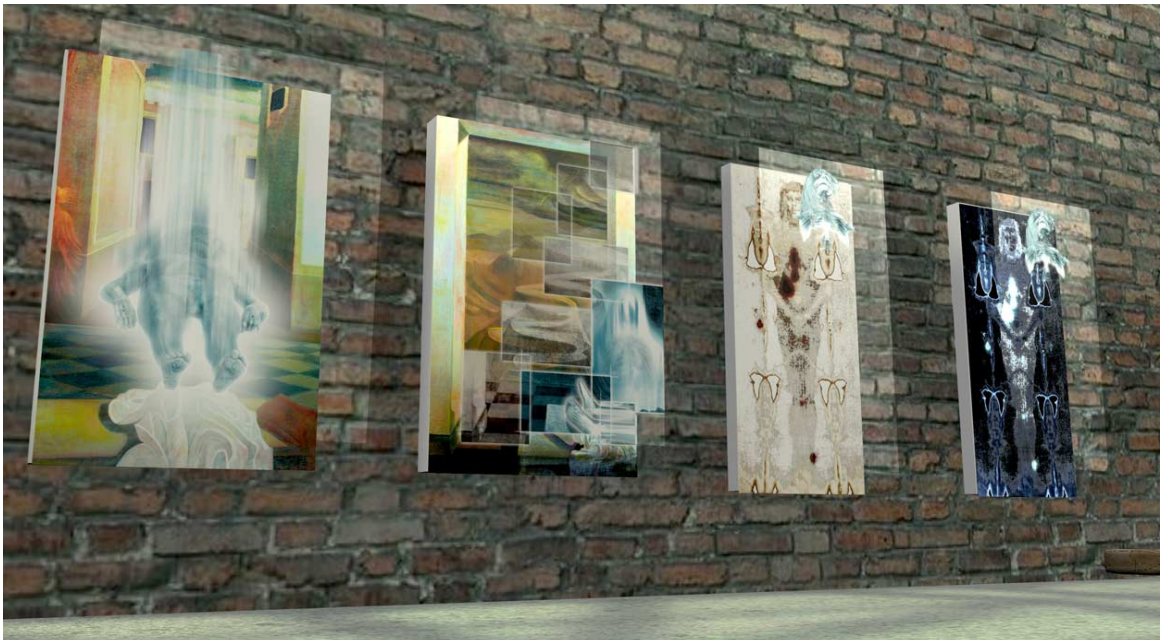


Fig. 12. Renato Meneghetti, *Sotto Pelle*, 2011, Venezia, Padiglione Italia - Tesa 99 - Arsenale Novissimo.

The X-ray means transmutation and sublimation, but also an image of a tragic dissolution. The polarity between sublimation and dissolution is an equilibrium point and yet another element of the intervention of Meneghetti (Don Giuseppe Billi Contemporary Art reporter for CEI, www.meneghettirenato.it).

The installation is a metaphor for Art as an active force, a step toward the possible constellations of knowing oneself, through knowing our body (Ibid).



Fig. 13. Renato Meneghetti, *Sotto Pelle*, 2011, Venezia, Padiglione Italia - Tesa 99 - Arsenale Novissimo



Fig. 14. Renato Meneghetti, *Sotto Pelle*, 2011, Venezia, Padiglione Italia - Tesa 99 - Arsenale Novissimo

The large slabs of Renato Meneghetti form a choral work, impressive and dramatic, designed to express extreme tension and expressive poetic vision fragmented and syncopated via superposition of x-ray plates and paintings.

The infinite possible combinations force the eye to an incessant movement to grasp the inexhaustible energy.

Photography
Benetton's HIV Ad



Fig. 15. Oliviero Toscani, *David Kirby's final moments*. Photograph, 1990.

United Colors of Benetton ventured into controversial territory in 1990 with the publication of an HIV campaign (fig. 15): a photographic expose of the reality of the illness.

The photo of HIV activist David Kirby was taken in his room in the Ohio State University Hospital in May 1990, with his father, sister and niece at his bedside. The photograph was taken by Oliviero Toscani and included in LIFE magazine in November 1990, and won the 1991 World Press Photo Award.

Photography can sometimes be cruel and tragic, yet it is often one of the few truly effective means to transmit a message. This is the case of Benetton advertising campaign, signed by Oliviero Toscani, which relies on the tragic figure of a

terminally ill man with HIV in delirium, using the iconic reference of the Dead Christ by Andrea Mantegna.

The construction of the image is almost the mirror image of the painting. With it, the Benetton exceeds the limits established for the social role of advertising. For the first time the pain of a man rather than happiness is used in advertising.

Here this is the poetry that moves behind the photographs by Oliviero Toscani, and open a gate or perhaps simply a way to open people's eyes to the various faces of reality, changing the point of view and showing the downside.

The pain on display as the unveiling of a reality and his reference to the pictorial tradition of horror but also to that of the fifteenth century Italian sublime. Through aesthetic if a single image we confronted with an image that becomes the mirror of our thoughts.

Photography

Lamentation over the Dead Christ and Che Guevara's corpse



Fig. 16. Freddie Alborta, *The Corpse of Che Guevara*, 1967. Photograph.

Combining the famous painting by Mantegna with the crude revolutionary photograph of Che Guevara (fig. 16) captured and killed, has an inherent power of expression as well as a symbolic one. To the point that it is not even an original idea but a kind of archetype, a Platonic idea slipped through the mass media in the collective experience of all who have seen both figures.

The artistic value that makes a link to this seemingly arbitrary juxtaposition or even blasphemous one, is the forgotten feeling of Pietas. A concept, if we want to restore in its authentic old matrix language, full of something irretrievably lost today: the depth of respect to both human and religious devotion.

Che Guevara disappeared from the political scene in April 1965 and his whereabouts have been much debated since. The day after his execution on October 10, 1967, Guevara's body was then lashed to the landing skids of a helicopter and flown to nearby Vallegrande where photographs were taken, showing a figure described by some as "Christ-like" lying on a concrete slab in the laundry room of the Nuestra Señora de Malta hospital.

The above iconic shot was taken by Freddy Alborta. It is probable that Che would have been compared to Christ being taken down from the cross in any case. He was in his 30s when he died, he had long hair and a beard, and he gave his life for the cause of the working class and the peasants in a deeply Catholic country. And probably his image would only grown in its inspiration – that change would arrive in Bolivia and that the poor could eventually live in dignity.

No one is sure how Alborta's post-mortem photograph of Che Guevara was released, but English art critic John Berger observed that it resembled Andrea Mantegna's Lamentation over the Dead Christ. (John Berger, 1975)



Fig. 17. Zbigniew Libera, *Che. Next Picture*, photograph, 2003, 120 x 175 cm.

What were Alborta's feelings and impressions? Did he know of John Berger's interpretations of his own photo? Alborta did not, but he was very aware that this was not simple photojournalism. The photographer said he worked very carefully, knowing that he was in the presence of an already legendary figure, a Christ figure even, and that such a moment comes once in a lifetime.

Some images today are striking for their strength, relevance and ability to concentrate on one scene an event. Below the photo, the icon: under the picture of the lifeless body of Che Guevara, here is the figure of Christ painted by Mantegna, as if the representation was provided with an unconscious, a repressed memory brought to light and revealed.

Post Modern Mantegna



Fig. 18. Robert Morris, *Prohibition's End or the Death of Dutch Schultz*, 1989, Encaustic on aluminum panel.



Fig. 19. Muntean-Rosenblum, *Shroud*, 2006, video still.



Fig. 20. Kehinde Wiley, *Lamentation Over The Dead Christ*, 2008, Oil on canvas 131x112.



Fig. 21. Osvaldo Zoom, *Post-modern Mantegna*, 2008, photography.



Fig. 22. Katie Maldonado, *Die Happy*, 2009. Photography.



Fig. 23. Lionel Le Jeune, *Christ Mantegna*, 2009. Computer graphic.



Fig. 24. Mariusz Kucharczyk, *Lamentation of Christ*, May 2011. Photography. Barcelona, Spain

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