



13 March 2014

## Mantegna's Dead Christ : They Know Not What They Do

The first curators and directors of museums and galleries were titled "Keepers". It was a nicely ungrand reminder that the curator did not own but was merely required to guarantee the safe-keeping of collections. Those modest days are past. Today's museum is no longer the means by which interested members of the public are granted access to fine collections of art in circumstances conducive to tranquil contemplation and reflection. The Modern Museum is an instrument wielded simultaneously (and rarely coherently) on behalf of assorted vested interests. Governments can treat museums as tools of social engineering. Sponsors can use them as means of burnishing tarnished corporate personas. For many groups and interests they constitute both job-creation schemes and marketing or catering opportunities. Possession, notoriously, is nine parts of the law and today's museum directors and curators often act as if, for the duration of their tenures of office, they themselves own the works. For some, art collections constitute harvestable assets, a kind of tradable currency that can project institutional and personal brands/egos onto the global stage. No one retains a career interest in leaving well alone. Even when they are not being shuttled around the world, pictures can be physically or [virtually](#) "restored" so as to generate newsworthy "discoveries" and dramatically upgraded attributions. Even when circumstances preclude the generation of physical transformations and excitements, curators can, as our colleague, Michel Favre-Felix, the president of [ARIPA](#) (Association Internationale pour le Respect de l'Intégrité du Patrimoine Artistique), here discloses, deploy purely "presentational" techniques to identically detrimental effects. [M. D.]

### Michel Favre-Felix writes:

In her desire to give "more visibility" to Mantegna's Dead Christ (see Fig. 1), the iconic masterpiece of the Brera's magnificent collections, the museum's director, Sandrina Bandera, could have given carte blanche to a trendy museum designer or to a provocative artist. Instead, she chose the movie-maker Ermanno Olmi as "a humanist concerned by the human tragedies and a humble artist who would not try to hold his own with the painting." [See, bottom right: [Endnote 1](#).]

The result, as seen since late December, is that the Dead Christ is now housed in a special crypt-like dark room, stripped of His historic frame and visually isolated by spot-lighting, as if now embedded into a monolithic black wall – and at a height of only 67 cm from the ground. (See Figs. 2,



Above, Fig. 1: The Lamentation over the Dead Christ, circa 1480, distemper on canvas, 68 x 81 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milano.



3, 4 and 5.) This presentation is intended to be permanent and the film-maker, humility notwithstanding, declares **“This will last: I will fight for it”**. [1] (See Figs. 6 and 7.)

While not doubting the sincere empathy of the 83 years old film director with Mantegna’s tragic moving image, likely created in the mid-1480’s, after the loss of his two beloved sons, his declared ambition, after a **“deep intellectual research”** (**“profonda ricerca intellettuale”**) to **“present the painting just as its creator wanted”** [2] cannot be accepted. To begin with, Ermanno Olmi holds that **“the frame was a nuisance. It is a painting that would have been hung upon Mantegna’s bed or on its side, not a decoration.”** [1] This discarding of the frame (see Fig. 8) is a matter of no regret for the Brera, which states that it was documented **“only”** from the XVIIth century. However, the idea that a religious painting rightly becomes a **“decoration”** as soon as it gets a frame is a post-modern conception that rests on an inability to comprehend how paintings were conceived and viewed in the religious climate of the 15th century.

Far from being an alien ornamental addition, the frame is a device that serves as a gateway marking a separation between the surrounding real/material world and the depicted ideal world. It marks the step away from our daily views into the world of artistic and spiritual contemplation – both a border and a bridge: the intermediary moment that permits the introduction of the **“epiphany”** of the image.

Decorum was, on the contrary, a native part of the religious display and sincere piety was expressed through the **enriched appearance of images**. Dismissing **“decoration”** with Mantegna, who gave unequalled expressive importance to decorative elements in his own art by elevating ornamentation to the highest degree of artistic and spiritually expressive means, is singularly regrettable. (See Figure 9, which shows the outstanding subtlety and complexity of Mantegna’s design and its interrelationships between the carved gilded architectural frame and rich depicted ornaments.)

Clearly, in his quest of the essence of the image, Olmi felt **compelled to “liberate”** the Dead Christ from any kind of **“decorum”**. Instead, by acting without any self-critical distance, he has merely wrapped the sacred image in the **stereotypical “decorum”** of our modern times: the non-framing of modern paintings and the omnipresent practice, in books and on computers screens, of reproducing old paintings without their frames. Such a reading might have been acceptable had the museum announced: **“this is the creative movie-director’s own personal vision of the painting”**. But M. Olmi claims to have **“recovered”** Mantegna’s original intentions by means of new historic-scientific deductions.

He does so with contradictory explanations. First, he asserts that, historically, **“this painting has not been painted to be exhibited for all to see but was intended to remain hidden from any external sight”**. [3] (Giovanni Agosti, the art historian and Mantegna specialist at Milan University, refutes this account.) Why, then, has Olmi gone to such lengths to give **“more visibility”** to the painting – which was the very aim of the Brera’s project?

Other inconsistencies stem from Olmi’s singular and highly specific conviction that the *raison d’être* of the Dead Christ



Above, Figs. 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Fig. 2: The Dead Christ (top) isolated in the dark – in the forefront, Bellini’s Pietà. (Source: arte.sky.it.)

Fig. 3, 4 and 5: Other views of the painting embedded into the black wall. Source for Figs. 3 and 4: Milano.corriere.it



Above, Fig. 6: Ermanno Olmi in his new and, he hopes, permanent display in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milano.



was to be a private devotional image positioned on the side of the artist's bed at 67 cm from the ground – at which height he claims to insure a “correct” prospect for a viewer not in the bed but in a standing position next to it. As Olmi argues: “If I have placed the painting at 67 cm from the ground it is because, when it is placed at the eyes level, the Christ looks deformed and stunted as if he was hanging by his arms. It is true that one could feel inclined to kneel, but the viewpoint that I impose is not religious. It is the most adequate with the view chosen by Mantegna.” [1]

The film-director's attempts to “correct” the prospect with his disconcerting and precise 67 cm calculation fails to address the long established but puzzling fact that at least two, contradictory prospects were used in the construction of the scene. **Actually, Mantegna's representation is not bound to a formulaic appliance of mathematical prospect but, rather, used an expressive, sensitive one (in accordance with Alberti's conceptions). Should the Brera's visitors be instinctively inclined to kneel, M. Olmi might consider that they might instinctively be right, and that he is intellectually wrong.**

Let us test Olmi's calculations. The painting would have hung near Mantegna's bed, at 67 cm from the floor, as a devotional image for his own kneeling prayers. Nevertheless, the artist would have set the “correct” prospect for the viewpoints of rare visitors to his bedroom. And thus, every day, Mantegna, while kneeling would have, on Olmi's account, seen no more than a “deformed and stunted” Christ. That the Brera also asserts that this level is “the same that the artist wanted” [4] only illustrates the well-known phenomenon of collective misleading.

In truth, Mantegna's intentions are implicit within the painting. The key is the position of the three lamenting figures at the Christ's side. These three mourners (the Virgin, St John and the Magdalena) are not standing but kneeling. A recently rediscovered ink drawing, dated to the 1460's and which may be thought to be part of Mantegna's own steps towards his final composition shows figures, standing and leaning around the Christ (see Fig. 10). As Mantegna eventually chose kneeling figures, he thereby rethought the prospect. The resulting unusual viewpoint in the Brera masterpiece makes sense when we realize that it represents the prospect drawn from a position similar to that of the three mourners: Mantegna places the spectator as a fourth mourner looking from a similar kneeling position and point of view (See Fig. 1).

Now, there are not so many plausible solutions. In the first, the painting is positioned near the ground, hypothetically as in the artist's bedroom or – in another hypothesis – as it might have been placed on Mantegna's grave. In both cases the spectators are rightly situated when kneeling. But a museum is not a church, nor a graveyard, nor an artist's bedroom. In another reading, the painting hung at eye level and the standing spectators share the sight of the kneeling mourners. **Although dashing the Brera's hopes to revolutionize the traditional display, this solution works perfectly and is consistent with other sight level solutions by Mantegna, as can be seen in his “Wedding Chamber” of 1465-1474 in the Ducal palace of Mantua (See Figs. 11, 12**



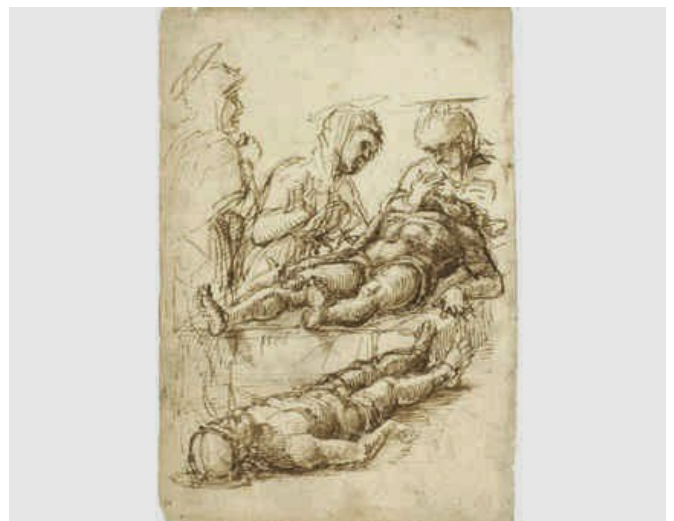
Above, Fig. 7: Ermanno Olmi during the presentation of his new display and debate held in the Sala della Passione of the Brera Palace on the 12th of December 2013. Source: Milano.corriere.it



Above, Fig. 8 Mantegna's masterpiece with its frame, before December 2013. Source: lacittanuova.milano.corriere.it



Above, Fig. 9: a detail of the central panels of Mantegna's The San Zeno Altarpiece of circa 1457-1460. This work of tempera on panel (the whole altarpiece being 480 x 450 cm) is housed in the San Zeno basilica, Verona. Source: en.wikipedia.org



and 13).

The only wrong choice is that of M. Olmi. Andrea Carandini, the archaeologist president of the Italian equivalent of the British National Trust, put it trenchantly: **“this means placing the body of Jesus at the level of the genitals that have everything except eyes” [5]**. The Italian professor further slammed Olmi’s failure to understand what a painting is and is not, by confounding an artistic representation of the sepulchre with a mimicked reproduction of a sepulchre room.

Of Olmi’s overly theatrical design, Carandini stresses that the painting is now dematerialized and degraded to a projected image. This new projected slide effect of the Dead Christ offends art historian Philippe Daverio who complains of a present resemblance to the reddish glow of a Pizza furnace [1]. Personally, I am even more struck by the similarity with a movie screen. Could it be that M. Olmi does not realize that he is here replicating the very situation, so familiar to him, of a cinema showing in the dark? Should a row of cinema chairs be put in the present gallery, the seated spectators would be at the perfect height for looking at his Dead Christ film.

As for the Brera’s desire to increase the “visibility” and to recover the “true” (original) the viewing of the Dead Christ, such aims coincide with current (controversial) definitions of contemporary restoration, which pretend to increase the “legibility” of the artwork [6] and to reveal its “true” colours, by some supposed recovery of its original state.

As with the numerous controversial restorations that have been the subject of critical analysis by ArtWatch and others, hypotheses that are cast up as alleged discoveries are given the status of facts and misleading calculations are supplied for “scientific” proofs. Ambitious restorations and spectacular displays alike are – however awkward their results – made in the name of retrieving the artist’s original intentions.

In both cases, close analysis shows a contemporary aesthetic prevailing over the artist’s own original one. Professed humility in restorers and exhibition designers is unable to constrain the contamination of the past by our present artistic prejudices. By similar processes, through invasive restoration or intrusive display, the old masterpieces are modernized and thus, for ongoing decades or even irreversibly, falsified.

Michel Favre-Felix

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Comments may be left at: [artwatch.uk@gmail.com](mailto:artwatch.uk@gmail.com)

Above, Fig. 10: A study for a Lamentation of Christ, circa 1460, ink on paper, 15,1 x 10 cm, Private collection. For further details : <http://www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/27819>  
Source: thehistoryblog.com

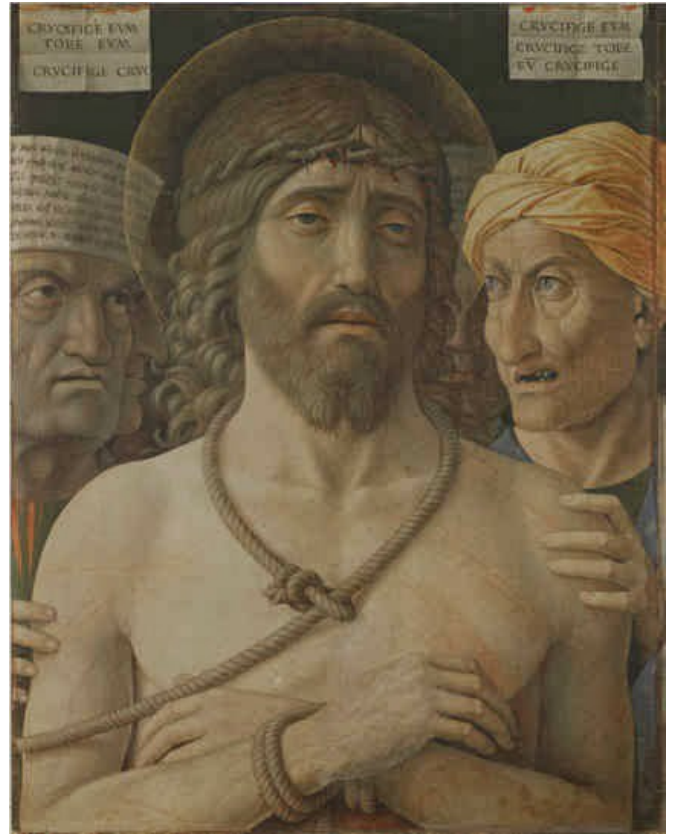


Above, Figs. 11 and 12: A view of Mantegna’s the Bridal Chamber (Camera degli Sposi) 1465-1474, frescoes, Ducal Palace, Mantova, indicating (top) the elevated viewpoint of the frescoes.



Above, fig. 13: A detail of Mantegna's the Bridal Chamber (Camera degli Sposi).

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Above, Fig. 14: Mantegna's *Ecce Homo*, circa 1500, distemper and gilding on canvas, 54 x 42 cm, Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris.

This distemper painting by Mantegna is one of the best preserved paintings in the world. It has never been lined. It has never been varnished and, so, has never been "dis-varnished". It retains its original panel on which the original canvas is glued only by its edges [7]. Crucially, we can see that this miraculous survivor of Mantegna's art displays the same subdued tones (albeit in even smoother and more delicate manner) as those found in the artist's *Dead Christ* (Fig. 1). As works painted with pigments bound in distemper (glue) not oil or tempera or resin, both the *Dead Christ* and the *Ecce Homo* belong to a kind of painting that inevitably looks slightly muted and darkened and which cannot be enhanced or "brought out" by any restoration means. Disappointing as this might be to the curators of the Brera, no cleaning could ever uncover – as is otherwise invariably promised by restorers – any bright colours under its subdued looking tones. Those tones are the birthmarks, the intrinsic pictorial characteristic of the distemper painting technique. However, it might seem that for the resourcefully modernising contemporary curator, the physical impossibility of brightening and colourising an historic work, need constitute no obstacle. As the above described (mis-)treatment of Mantegna's *Dead Christ* demonstrates, other substitute technological subterfuges exist in the displaying of paintings. The increasingly frequent curatorial resort to historically and artistically falsifying theatrical/cinematic/virtual techniques might deserve further commentaries.

ENDNOTES:

[1] "Le « coup » du Christ", by Philippe Ridet, *Le Monde*, 15/02/2014 [2] The Brera's website [3] "Capolavori meditazione da", Francesca Bonazzoli, *Corriere della Sera*, 3/12/2013 [4] "Brera, «processo» pubblico per il Cristo del Mantegna", Giacomo Valtolina, *Corriere della Sera*, 13/12/2013 [5] "Un Mantegna da vedere in ginocchio", by Andrea Carandini, *Corriere della Sera*, 11/12/2013 [6] For critical studies of the use of this term in conservation, see: Salvador Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005, and, Hiltrud Schinzel, "Visibility of Restoration - Legibility of Artworks : the Topicality of Compromise", in *Visibilité de la restauration, lisibilité de l'œuvre*, 5th colloquium ARAAFU, 2003 - Debate in the Italian restoration review *Kermes* n°44, 2001 / n°47, 2002 / n°50, 2003, with Antonio Natali, Giorgio Bonsanti, James Beck, Anna Maria Maetzke, Walter Schudel et al) [7] Andrea Rothe, "Andrea Mantegna's Adoration of the Magi", *Historical Painting Techniques, Materials and Studio Practice*, The Getty Conservation Institute, 1995

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