

DESCRIVEDENDO

DESCRIVEDENDO THE MASTERPAINTINGS OF BRERA

The Lamentation over the Dead Christ by Andrea Mantegna

Pinacoteca di Brera, Room 6

Formal Description

Christ Dead in the Tomb with Three Mourners is the official title of this picture painted by Andrea Mantegna, probably around 1483. It is a work in tempera on canvas painted in a realistic manner and is quite complex to describe.

The painting is rectangular in shape, its horizontal side slightly longer than its vertical side. It is 81 centimetres wide and 68 centimetres high.

The scene depicted takes place in the tomb, where Jesus Christ's lifeless body has been laid on a slab of marble to be cleaned and oiled with perfumed ointment before burial. Besides Jesus, on one side of the canvas, we see the grieving faces of a man and two women.

The physical presence of Jesus's body dominates the painting, filling most of the available space. Jesus is shown as though we were observing him from a slightly higher viewpoint, not by his side but facing him from the feet up. His body is thus painted entirely along the canvas's vertical axis and so we see the soles of his feet in the foreground close to the lower edge, while if we lift our gaze we move up his body as far as his head in the distance, close to the upper edge. It is as though Jesus's whole body were compressed between the upper and lower edges of the canvas: the painter depicts his anatomy realistically, but in a distorted manner in which he has slightly changed the dimensions of the body's individual parts so as to make the perspective he adopts believable.

To make it easier to understand the painting, we should now try to imagine it split into 9 equal sections obtained by crossing three columns with three lines, like a noughts and crosses grid. We can number the sections using a telephone keypad layout from left to right: 1, 2, 3 above; 4, 5, 6 in the middle; and 7, 8, 9 below.

We can start our examination of the painting with the section closest to us.

In the lower central part of the canvas, in section 8 and partly also in section 9, we have Jesus's feet facing us, protruding beyond the slab of white-veined red marble on which his body has been laid. On both soles we can clearly see where his feet were pierced by the nails driven through them to nail him to the cross. In fact we can even see the raised folds of torn skin around the edges of the wounds.

Moving up from section 8 to section 5, our gaze travels over the outline of his straight, parallel legs covered in a white shroud, or sheet, reaching to his hips. The shroud, with its many folds, extends beyond the sides of his naked body, clinging almost completely to it, as far as the edges of the marble slab.

Jesus's forearms and hands rest lifelessly on the shroud. His hands, with the palms facing downward, are half-open and his knuckles are resting on the shroud. We can see the holes that the nails made in the flesh on the back of his hands, as well. His arms are slightly bent at the elbows and we can perceive the muscle structure beneath the skin of his arms and on his chest, while his ribcage frames his almost concave stomach.

Lastly, in the upper central part of the canvas, in section 2, we see Jesus's head inclining to the observer's right, framed by a very thin golden halo and resting on a cushion of the same reddish colour as the slab of marble. His eyes and lips are closed and his stubbly beard and moustache are barely hinted at while his long, wavy dark hair frames his face.

At the top of the slab, in section 3, we see a small, dark marble container holding the perfumed ointment for anointing the bodies of the deceased before burial.

In section 1, in the upper left-hand corner, more or less level with Jesus's face, we see the grief-stricken faces of three figures, a man and two women.

The man, closest to us, is St. John the Evangelist, weeping as he gazes at Jesus. We can only see part of his face in profile, with short dark hair. His mouth is open, a tear runs down from his half-open eyes, and his hands are crossed on his chest.

Behind him we see Jesus's mother Mary, wiping her eyes with a white handkerchief. She is old, her skin is deeply lined, her head and neck are swathed in a light-coloured cloth and a dark mantle is draped over her head.

The woman behind Mary is traditionally identified as St. Mary Magdalen. We can only see the lower part of her face, from the nose down. Her mouth is open in an expression of grief.

The backdrop to the scene consists of a grey-brown wall opening up onto a totally dark space in section 3, in the upper right-hand corner.

The pale light illuminating the scene comes from an invisible source situated at 2 o'clock, emphasising the shadows cast by the bodies and highlighting the folds in the shroud.

The artist achieves the composition's dominant hue, with its earthy nuances, by using dull, opaque colours that help to shroud the scene in a sorrowful atmosphere. Parts of the linen canvas on which the picture was painted show through in several areas, with colours midway between ochre and orangey yellow.

The formal description, drafted in February 2019 was produced by the Pinacoteca di Brera's Education Department in conjunction with the *Descrivendo* team and with the not-for-profit Associazione Nazionale Subvedenti, thanks to the support of the Lions Clubs International Milano Borromeo and Milano Duomo.

Art Historical Description

Mantegna, who was court painter to the Gonzaga family, the Dukes of Mantua, for over forty years, painted the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* around 1483. The painting, which was probably intended for his own private devotion, is thought to have been devised at the time the relic of the Stone of Unction – on which Jesus's body is reputed to have been laid so that it could be anointed with perfumed ointment before burial – reached Mantua from Turkey. The scene shows the body of Christ lying on a hewn stone with his mother, the apostle John and a third, almost invisible figure half-hidden in the shadows, grieving over it. We are struck by the skilful handling of perspective giving us a foreshortened view of a supine body seen, the painting's true focus, from the front. Mantegna was not new to this kind of experiment, having already tried his hand at it in his first major works in Padua. The cherubs staring down at us through the hole in the ceiling in the *Camera Picta* (Painted Chamber) in Mantua reveal the artist's interest in this bold approach to perspective and set the *Lamentation* in the context of his development of what was a consistent feature of his artistic career. In this case Mantegna very probably resorted to the "parallel projection" technique permitting the foreshortened depiction of a horizontal body without it appearing excessively distorted. So we may consider the *Lamentation* to be a visually effective depiction, its minor incongruities being due to the artist's wish to show the various parts of Christ's body in proportion so that the overall figure can still be appreciated without the feet, for example, being far larger than the head.

The immense popularity that Mantegna's bold experiment was to enjoy with painters of the 16th and 17th centuries is apparent in another painting in the Brera collection, Tintoretto's *Miracle of St. Mark*, and in the echoes we find of it in work by artists of the Bologna school or by Caravaggio's followers, for instance Annibale Carracci and Orazio Borgianni.

The painting's history is somewhat intricate and at times even mysterious. It was discovered by Mantegna's son Ludovico in his father's workshop on his death in September 1506. Mantegna was heavily in debt when he died and so Ludovico begged the Gonzaga family to purchase some of his paintings. A "foreshortened Christ" ended up in Duchess Margherita Paleologa's dressing chamber in the Ducal Palace. When the Gonzaga collection was sold off in 1627, Mantegna's picture passed through several private collections before Giuseppe Bossi, the Secretary of the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, bought it in Rome in 1801 with the idea of bringing it back to Milan to add to his collection. The painting finally joined the Pinacoteca di Brera's collection for good on 3 July 1824, after lengthy negotiations between Bossi's heirs and the Accademia di Brera.

Biography

Andrea Mantegna was born into a family of carpenters in Isola di Carturo, now known in his honour as Isola Mantegna, in the province of Padua in 1431.

He was apprenticed to Francesco Squarcione's workshop in Padua at the age of ten. During his time in Padua he met Antonello da Messina, Flemish and Tuscan painters and Donatello and his assistants working in the Basilica of St. Anthony. He himself painted a cycle of frescoes in the Ovetari Chapel and the *San Zeno Altarpiece* for the church of the same name in Verona. He married Nicolosia, Giovanni and Gentile Bellini's sister in 1453, when he was 22 years old, thus consolidating his bond with the Bellini family of Venetian painters.

Ludovico II Gonzaga invited him to settle in Mantua in 1460, offering him board, lodging and a generous annual salary. Mantegna was to remain at the ducal court until his death in 1506, and it was there that he produced his most celebrated masterpieces, the works on which his reputation still rests today: the *Camera Picta* (Painted Chamber) in the Castello di San Giorgio, the *Triumphs of Caesar*, the *Studiolo of Isabella d'Este* and the

Lamentation over the Dead Christ.

He is buried in a chapel in the church of Sant'Andrea surmounted by a bronze portrait in the classical style which he himself designed and modelled.