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Mantegna's *Crucifixion* contrasts the distracted soldiers vying for Christ's tunic with the mutual support among the grieving women beneath the cross.

Casting Lots

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The *Agony in the Garden*, *Crucifixion*, and *Resurrection* are the three scenes in the *predella*, the horizontal band beneath the major altar panel, of Andrea Mantegna's *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints*. The latter remains the high altarpiece in the monastic church of St. Zeno in Verona, Italy, but the original *predella* panels, taken by Napoleon, are now in French museums. I will focus on the *Crucifixion* scene, which prominently features the soldiers casting lots for Christ's tunic.

We know a lot about its young artist because archives in the cities where he worked, Padua and Mantua, are well-preserved.¹ Andrea Mantegna was only twenty-six when he received this commission. After starting his professional career at a very young age (his first contract had to be signed by his older brother because he was too young), he became the leading northern Italian mainland painter of the fifteenth century.

Born and raised in the university town of Padua, Mantegna's interest in classical antiquity was encouraged by a circle of university scholars and professionals. He was greatly influenced by *Gattamelata*, the monumental equestrian sculpture in the Piazza del Santo executed by Donatello from 1443-1453, and by paintings of Jacopo Bellini of Venice, whose daughter he would marry when he was twenty-three. Mantegna also studied works by the Tuscan artists Andrea del Castagno, Filippo Lippi, and Paolo Uccello. Mantegna's own work is characterized by an unprecedented use of Roman architecture to organize and frame his compositions. He became known for precise and meticulous execution, and for his use of perspective (demonstrated in this altarpiece) and foreshortening (later in his career).

Gregorio Correr, abbot of the Benedictine monastery of St. Zeno, Verona, was the patron for this altarpiece. Mantegna probably came to Gregorio's attention because his uncle, Cardinal Antonio Correr, had enlisted the artist to paint another altarpiece at St. Giustina, Padua, the year before.

The composition of the high altarpiece extends over three painted sections united by the splayed architecture behind them. Yet, this original frame of classical columns divides the three sections in traditional triptych fashion. Saints Peter, Paul, John the Evangelist, and Zeno (bishop and patron saint of Verona) appear in the left panel. The right panel contains Saints Benedict, Lawrence, Gregory Nazianzen, and John the Baptist. Seven of these saints

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Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), MADONNA AND CHILD ENTHRONED WITH SAINTS, SAN ZENO ALTAR-PIECE (1456-1459). Tempera and gold on panel. Height: 220 cm. S. Zeno, Verona, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

hold books to reflect the devout Christian humanist learning of Gregorio Correr and the monks of St. Zeno. In the central panel Mantegna modernized the Madonna and Child Enthroned type, a visual tradition that dates back to Giotto (1266/7-1337). The varied positions of the putti at the base

of the throne and their placement in bas relief behind the halo of the Virgin exemplify the technical skill of the artist. The entire altarpiece was commended for its logical design, integrating figures, architecture, and numerous decorative details.

The setting of the *Crucifixion* is a rocky plateau outside the walled city of Jerusalem (in the background). Mantegna's attention to archeological detail appears in the costume and armor of the soldiers. According to Gabriele Finaldi, Mantegna seems to have been the first artist to realize that the Romans did not have stirrups.²

The three crosses are balanced, but the unequal lighting places the unrepentant thief in the shadows while Christ's head and body leans towards the penitent thief on his right. The symmetry continues through the composition: John the Beloved on the left balances the mounted soldier on the right; the group of women (with Mary, the mother, prominent in the center) balances the group of soldiers casting lots. We can recognize the artist's iconographical knowledge in the partial tomb with skull to the left of John, and his technical skill in painting the soldiers walking down the hill into the valley created by the two cliff-like formations.

The Roman soldiers, except for the one on the right and another one standing behind the women, are nonchalant and distracted from the grisly torture they are inflicting. To emphasize this, the artist contrasts the competition among the soldiers casting lots to the mutual support of the grieving women.

All four Gospels report the soldiers vying for Christ's tunic (Matthew 27:35, Mark 15:24, Luke 23:34, John 19:23-24), but John makes the most of the event, identifying it as a fulfillment of prophecy in Psalm 22:18. In this painting Mantegna interprets John's more extended account, showing Jesus' tunic in the hands of the standing soldier while three other soldiers throw dice on a wheel with alternating yellow and red triangular patterns. Scripture does not describe the process of casting lots; the two-colored wheel must be a result of the artist's imagination and contemporary interpretation of the biblical event.

Scholars rightly call attention to important differences between modern gambling and the ancient practice of casting lots, which was a way to guarantee the impartiality of a decision.³ Yet the practice of casting lots shares with gambling the element of chance, and in Mantegna's image it shares the element of distraction from more important concerns.

NOTES

1 Biographical information on Andrea Mantegna is from Gabriele Finaldi, "Mantegna, Andrea," *Grove Art Online* (Oxford Art Online, accessed June 2, 2011), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T053902.

2 Ibid.

3 Kevin Moore, "Would a Good and Faithful Disciple Gamble?" *Gambling Culture, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 40 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2011), 11-18.