

Claudia Cieri Via

About the New Iconology The Geology of Images: Looking at Mantegna's Work

In this essay about the new Iconology the author takes into account the role that style plays in Mantegna's work, discussing this in the light of geology and archaeology. Interest in the art work as object (artefact) and as image is at the centre of contemporary theoretical research; the artistic approach intersecting the anthropological one and that of "visual studies". Through the analysis of the artistic object in its stylistic and structural materials it is possible to capture the artist's intentionality. The challenge of this study is to reflect on theoretical presuppositions, linking art, anthropology and visual studies in relation to art in the 15th century, a period when new theoretical and artistic-operative models were taking hold.

The author discusses how Mantegna produces 'agency'; then more particularly how his works of art, analyzed stylistically and materially, express his own intentionality, within the social and cultural context of his time, in the meaning of *art-nexus*. The rocky landscape packed with jagged stones of most of Mantegna's paintings is no conventional cypher; rather it becomes an indicator of the artist's own scientific research. In this regard we need look no farther than Mantegna's rocky landscapes crowded with jagged crags and outcrops. These are no mere conventional stylistic feature. Instead, the landscape becomes an emergent element (or index) of the work; it activates the relationship between artist and viewer, intensifying the involvement of both. Right from the Paduan artist's first works, a 'lenticular' interest can be found regarding the Veneto region's geological formations. This recalls the 'dendrology' Michael Baxandall ascribes to 15th century limewood sculpture of lower Germany. Mantegna's experimental interest in this regard is linked with a stratigraphic research into materials, as is evident in the geology of his paintings. Mantegna's observation of natural phenomena is also linked with the ancient ruins remembered from his trip to Lake Garda. This relationship between nature and culture, between physical places and intellectual excursions in search of antiquity, endows a special significance to the artist's experimentations as he observes the basalt-type rocks by Lake Garda, these featured in works such as *The Prayer in the Garden* in London, the *Crucifixion* in the Louvre and the *San Sebastian* in Vienna, in all cases archeological stratification being clearly visible.

Along with Mantegna's interest in ruins goes his research into stratification in order to recover materials in the essence, at the same time incorporating their nature and history into his own painting. Hence Mantegna's cracked and fractured walls appear as a conglomeration of geological processes, while the fragments of sculpture and monuments bear witness to the survival in time of historic and artistic processes. It is not only a matter of citing ancient models but of observations of these models by the artist who infers from them the original material make-up and therefore temporal and material history which their display impresses on the viewer.

This interplay between the processes of Nature and Time also informs the reflections of Alberti in his treatise *De Re Aedificatoria*, finding in the same period a perfect pictorial counterpoint in Mantegna's paintings such as *Saint Sebastian* in the Louvre. In particular the *grisaille* technique is used by Mantegna to indicate memory of antiquity from which he recovers not only materiality, colour and form, but also pictorial density. Through *grisaille* Mantegna draws on the original pathos of the ancient, so going beyond involvement with the story narrated, as demonstrate the five paintings in monochrome commissioned by the Venetian cardinal Francesco Cornaro at the beginning of 16th century.

Therefore, Mantegna views antiquity from his own historical present. Style is thus "a phenomenon of the germinative order" – to quote Roland Barthes – an expression of an artistic intentionality as a function of a social need within a geological and cultural context.