

# Two Masterpieces Compared

## BELLINI / MANTEGNA

### *Presentation at the Temple*

#### Venice, Fondazione Querini Stampalia

#### 21 March - 1 July 2018

#### Exhibition curated

Brigit Blass-Simmen, Neville Rowley, Giovanni Carlo Federico Villa

#### Exhibition design

Mario Botta

#### Exhibition installation and informative panels

We Exhibit

Press view: 20 March, noon

Opening: 20 March, 6pm

Further information and images: [www.studioesseci.net](http://www.studioesseci.net)

#### Press release

Two paintings, identical in their compositional structure, painted by two great artists of the Renaissance: Andrea Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini. Two incredible works, the same but different.

It is fascinating for a layman to look for the differences between the two *Presentation at the Temple* works hanging side by side in this elegant exhibition at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice.

Project supported by the **Fondazione Querini Stampalia and the Berlin Gemäldegalerie with the expert assistance of the National Gallery of London.**

It is the first time in the modern age that Mantegna's tempera on canvas, housed at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, and Bellini's oil on panel, housed at the Querini Stampalia, have come together.

Marigusta Lazzari, the director of the Querini Stampalia, states: *"It is the result of one of those alchemies that happen every now and then in history. In our case, the impossible has become possible after our complex negotiations came to a happy conclusion, leading us to loan our Bellini for the major Andrea Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini exhibition, which opens at the National Gallery in London on 1 October 2018 before transferring to the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin on 1 March 2019. The comparison between the two *Presentation at the Temple* paintings is one of the cardinal points of these exhibitions.*

*The Berlin institute has reciprocated our loan with one of its own and thus we are thrilled to finally present the two masterpieces side by side at the Querini to an Italian and international public before the London exhibition".*

Yet what induces a painter to adopt a compositional layout used by another artist?

*“But - as the exhibition co-curator Giovanni Carlo Federico Villa explains - it would be wrong to think of them standing next to each other as they painted the same subject. Undoubtedly the cartoon, whose creation required great artistic virtuosity, bewitched both of them, but a considerable arc of time - about a decade - separates the two masterpieces”.*

**Andrea Mantegna** spent his early years in Padua, while Giovanni Bellini worked in his hometown of Venice for his entire life.

The two masters are also bound by family ties: Andrea Mantegna married Giovanni Bellini's sister Nicolosia.

The painting was probably conceived in Mantegna's workshop in Padua. His *Presentation* precedes Bellini's by about twenty years. Andrea and Nicolosia had recently married, in 1453. It would appear that Mantegna and his wife are the figures standing to the sides of the scene. Perhaps a pregnancy or the birth of a child inspired him: a sort of wishful state of mind full of faith and trepidation common to most parents.

The very human Mother Mary is reluctant to part with her Child, as though she were resisting the fulfilment of Christ's tragic and glorious destiny, which the elderly Simeon envisions in the Gospel of Luke: *“This Child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many... and a sword will pierce your soul as well.”*

The swaddling Jesus is wrapped in the swaddling clothes of a new-born baby, but they evoke the cross and entombment. Joseph looks worried and serious as he gazes at the prophet. He stands in the background, though in the centre of the painting: it is the role he had in the story of the salvation - that of the silent custodian.

**Giovanni Bellini's** Venetian version is wider, making room for two other lateral figures who have never been definitively identified.

Mantegna's *Presentation* is an imposing 4/3, while Bellini's is a cinematographic 16/9. This family 'photo' around the Holy Family appears to be an affectionate - and slightly more crowded - homage to the earlier painting.

Giovanni distances himself from Andrea's style. Mantegna closes the scene in an imposing marble frame. Haloes, beards and precious fabrics have a calligraphic affectation that is still Gothic. The colours are contrasted; the cushion rests 'outside' the painting. At the end of the fifteenth century, Ulisse Aleotti wrote that Mantegna *“sculpted in paint”*.

Bellini's revisit is lightened by the wide spectrum of reds. The marble frame has disappeared; instead there is just a stone parapet. The black background is more dilated and the group stands out in enigmatic abstractedness and modernity.

The panel, mentioned in the Querini Stampalia inventory from 1809, is attributed to Giovanni Bellini. However, it was inventoried as a work by Andrea Mantegna when it entered the Querini collection two centuries ago.

The solidity of the structure is his: Bellini reinvented this uniting of an experimental tension to a classical composure, a technique he would continue to use until the end of his career.

Visitors have the thrill of entering a universe of one of the most powerful and illustrious families in Venice, where they can admire room after room teeming with artistic treasures and precious furnishings. The museum home contains eighteenth-century and Neoclassical furniture, porcelain, *biscuit*, sculptures and globes, as well as paintings from the fourteenth

to the twentieth century, much of it from the Veneto school, conveying the atmosphere of a patrician home full of Murano glass mirrors, chandeliers and fabrics based on antique designs.

Among the works exhibited are paintings by Lorenzo di Credi, Jacopo Palma il Vecchio, Bernardo Strozzi, Luca Giordano, Marco and Sebastiano Ricci, Giambattista Tiepolo, Pietro Longhi, and Gabriel Bella.

The exhibition is an absorbing dialogue between two masters of the Renaissance, but also a discovery - or rediscovery - of the treasures housed in the Fondazione, which was established in 1869 at the bequest of the last Querini, Giovanni, in order to “*promote the cult of good studies and useful disciplines*”. Preparations for the Fondazione’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary are underway, celebrating its collections, library and architectural additions designed over the last fifty years by Carlo Scarpa, Valeriano Pastor and **Mario Botta**.

The Querini Stampalia entrusted Mario Botta with installing this ‘magical comparison’. This is the first time that the Swiss architect has taken on the challenge of an exhibition focussing on just two works. The exhibition is located in the last three rooms of the museum home and is the culmination of the entire exhibition route.

The two paintings are exhibited on two surfaces converging at the centre so that they are facing each other, thus establishing a silent dialogue that viewers can observe.

Using projected and non-reflecting lighting by **ERCO**, a company specialising in lighting art, he has adapted the light distribution to the characteristics and dimensions of the works with precise slivers of light imbued with soft and nuanced contours. The individually-selected digital LED lights have high chromatic quality, allowing the regulation of light intensity and the precise calibration of the lighting values with the aim of preserving the works over time. This creates an atmosphere which allows the visitor to discover the minutest details of the two works thanks to an element as intangible, delicate and important as light.

The visitor arrives prepared for this sort of ‘epiphany’. The two introductory rooms have an unusual layout focussing on the suggestion that the Child in his swaddling is a prefiguration of the adult, lacerated body of Christ wrapped in his funeral bindings.

The material placed on the floor-to-ceiling informative panels, is split into three ‘bands’: these parallel strips give the historic setting of the paintings and the artists’ biographies, but also explain the subjects dealt with in the two paintings. The upper and lower ones talk about Bellini and Mantegna respectively, while the central band deals with events they have in common and offers elements of reading and comparison between the two works.

This triple account set out before the visitor’s eyes should recall in its ‘unravelling’ the rolls of the scripture containing the final part of the story of the salvation.

An **exhibition catalogue published by Silvana Editoriale** contains essays by Brigit Blass-Simmen, Caroline Campbell, Babet Hartweg, Neville Rowley, Babet Trevisan, and Giovanni Carlo Federico Villa.

## **Technical information**

### **Title**

Masterpieces Compared  
BELLINI / MANTEGNA  
*Presentation at the Temple*

### **Project curated by**

Brigit Blass-Simmen, Neville Rowley, Giovanni Carlo Federico Villa

### **Supported by**

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with the expert advice of the National Gallery of London

### **Exhibition design**

Mario Botta

### **Exhibition design and informative panels**

We Exhibit

### **Location**

Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice,  
Campo Santa Maria Formosa, Castello 5252

### **Exhibition dates**

21 March - 1 July 2018

### **Opening**

20 March 2018, 6 pm

### **Opening times**

Tuesday - Sunday, 10am - 6pm  
Closed Mondays

### **Tickets**

Entry to the exhibition is included in the Fondazione Querini Stampalia entrance ticket:  
Full price €14; reductions €10  
Free entrance for under-18s  
Free entry on Sundays to Venetian residents

### **Catalogue**

Silvana Editoriale

### **Fondazione Querini Stampalia**

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