

The “Autograph” Engravings of
Andrea Mantegna
and the Question of Authorship in Italian
Renaissance Printmaking

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Background and Definition: The "Autograph" Controversy in the Prints of Andrea Mantegna

Since the very origin of art history with Georgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*, the Fifteenth century Mantuan artist Andrea Mantegna has fascinated the viewers of his work, not only with the magnificence of his painting, but equally with the virtuosity of his engraved work. In the eyes of Vasari and countless subsequent historians of Italian Renaissance art, Mantegna served as the ultimate example of the "Peinteur-graveur", the painter who also created original compositions in the printed media. Such an artist differed markedly from those who became known as "reproductive" engravers, those who created prints based on or wholly copied from the work of other artists working in the elevated media of painting or sculpture. For generations of art historians, Mantegna's engravings exemplified the ability of a truly genius artist to elevate the generally "low" art of printmaking to the status of fine art through composition, subject, and technical skill.

While the body of engravings associated with Mantegna and his workshop has always been quite sizeable, art historians have generally acknowledged that certainly not all of these works were executed by Mantegna's hand. A large number of the printed works related to Mantegna through similarities in style and subject matter must have been created by members of the artist's workshop under Mantegna's general direction. Noticeable variances in both style and quality exist between different engravings attributed to Mantegna and his circle. Further, Vasari himself, writing in the 1550's less than 50 years after Mantegna's death, indicates that the artist employed professional "reproductive" engravers to make prints from some of his drawings. Based on these facts, Paul Kristeller in his 1901 monograph on the artist attempted to differentiate between those engravings executed by Mantegna himself and those made by other artists at his direction. The result of Kristeller's extremely influential findings was the creation of the seven canonical "autograph" prints, namely the *Battle of the Sea Gods* (consisting of two separate plates), the *Entombment*, the *Bacchanal with Silenus*, *Bacchanal with a Wine Vat*, *Virgin and Child*, and the *Risen Christ Between St. Andrew and St. Longinus*. Kristeller chose these seven works not only because he believed them to represent the highest quality works of the group, but also because Vasari mentioned these works by name in his account of Mantegna's renown as a printmaker.

This group of seven prints held its privileged position essentially unchallenged for the proceeding ninety years.

Over the past six years however, a renewed interest in Mantegna's engravings has caused some scholars to question the veracity of Kristeller's canonical group and the underlying assumptions that brought about its acceptance. Interestingly, the art historians who have taken up this task have reached quite contradictory conclusions, ranging from Suzanne Boorsch's belief that all of the works attributed to Mantegna were in fact executed by members of his workshop or other professional engravers, to David Landau's speculation that considerably more works than Kristeller's seven might reasonably be considered to be by the hand of Mantegna.

Statement of Purpose

In joining this academic dispute in progress, I have two primary goals. First, through the study of primary sources, specifically the engravings associated with Mantegna and his school and through analysis of the secondary literature (see annotated bibliography) I intend to determine which prints, if any, can be positively identified as works by the hand of Andrea Mantegna. Secondly, using the information I have gathered, I intend to consider the implications of my conclusion on the art historical conception of "authorship," that is an emphasis on the autograph nature of works of art, and its relation to the Italian Renaissance print shop.

Methodology: Analysis of Primary Sources

Clearly, the single most important step in any art historical research is a thorough visual analysis of the object in question. Bearing this in mind, my primary tool in researching this complex issue will be first hand examination of the works in question. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. each possess extensive collections of engravings by Mantegna and his school that can be made available for my study. Utilizing the resources of these institutions, it will be possible for me to examine each of the autograph engravings as well as many works currently attributed to Mantegna's school first hand. I will also be able to examine all of the autograph prints, and many of the school engravings in more than one impression. It is extremely important that multiple impressions of these works be examined as differences between impressions from

the same plate can often indicate drawing on a print after it has been printed. Study from the original works of art is absolutely crucial, particularly to a detail oriented project of this type, in which subtle nuances of technique and style can decide the attribution of a work to one artist or another. Of course, not all of the visual material necessary to my research will be available for first hand study. The drawings of Mantegna and his school, which served as prototypes for these prints, are extremely valuable as points of comparison in determining the autograph nature of the engravings. These drawings, however, are extremely rare and not generally accessible. In this case, photographs of the drawings will have to suffice. Luckily, several good sources of reproductions are available. These publications are listed in my annotated bibliography.

This comparative analysis of the engravings and drawings will require me to have a strong understanding of the technical processes of printing techniques. While I have a good general understanding of the techniques involved, I intend to familiarize myself intimately with the engraving process before beginning my hands on research with the works of art. I will accomplish this, not only through reading about the engraving process and its history (see annotated bibliography), but also through actually attempting to produce engravings myself. As my father is a printmaker, and a printmaking studio is located at my home, this will not be difficult to arrange.

Secondary Sources: Scholarly Literature

While it is important that I begin my research armed with a sound understanding of the technical elements of the objects that I will be studying, it is equally important that I have working knowledge of the scholars that have worked on this problem before me. A thorough reading and analysis of the preceding debates on the autograph controversy will help me to find a starting point for my own research, to hone in on the specific elements of the works in question to which special attention should be paid. Similarly, an objective reading of this scholarship will enable me to steer clear of potential false assumptions and errors of methodology. It is always best, after all, to avoid making mistakes that others have already made. It is my hope that the secondary literature on this topic will help me to gain a better understanding of the workings of the Renaissance print shop as a whole. I also hope that these scholars can point me in the direction of primary literary sources and documents which would prove useful in understanding the autograph controversy within its proper historical context.

Implications: Our Assumptions About Renaissance Art

The issue of the autograph nature of Mantegna's engravings is a currently unsettled controversy. My proposed research would make a valuable contribution to the scholarship centered around this issue, not only in regards to my findings as to the authorship of the particular prints, but also through a careful analysis of the greater implications which this controversy holds for the field of Renaissance art history. Mantegna's autograph engravings have been valued so highly by art historians largely due to the belief that they give us direct insight into the masters drawing technique. If it can be proved that some or all of these works are not by Mantegna's hand at all, we must call into question our reasons for valuing Renaissance prints, as well as the reasons of Mantegna's contemporaries and successors for their valuation of these art objects. On the contrary, if it is shown that more prints than the traditional autograph seven can be firmly attributed to Mantegna's hand, we must ask why these canonical images have held their special place in the art historical canon for over a century. The autograph controversy forces us as viewers of art to evaluate how we appreciate Renaissance art as a whole.

My Education

This project will provide me with the chance to do first hand research on Renaissance works of art at some of the most important institutions in the country. It will also allow me to try my hand at a current controversy in the field. As I am planning to pursue my PHD in Italian Renaissance art history immediately following my graduation from UNH, this experience will be particularly beneficial to me both as preparation for the research I will do in graduate school and as a particularly impressive addition to my resume.

Outcome:

I will use this research as the basis for my senior honors in major thesis in art history. I intend to begin the writing of my thesis during fall semester 1998, while I am attending Regent's College in London.

Location:

My base of operations for this project will be my home in Keene, NH. This location will provide me with access to the University library system through the Keene State College library. The library will provide me with access to the necessary discourse on the autograph controversy as well as providing a

source for more general background literature on Italian Renaissance printmaking. The inter-library loan system will allow me to attain further primary source literature which is uncovered by my examination of the secondary literature. In Keene, I will read the secondary literature on the subject as well as analyze the data I will have collected from my examination of the actual works of art. My location in Keene will also offer me access to the print studio so that I can familiarize myself with the technical aspects of the engraving process.

In addition to Keene, I will need to travel to several other locations. I will require one trip to the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. to examine prints there as well as one trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Due to the large number of engravings in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston I will require at least two, and possibly three separate visits. My first trip to Boston would focus on the canonical autograph engravings, while my subsequent trips would allow me to examine engravings currently attributed as “school of Mantegna.” I will also be able to compare my findings from the New York and Washington trips to the works of art in the Boston museum’s collection. See attached list of prints by location.

My Role:

I will personally carry out all of the aforementioned research. I feel that I am well prepared to undertake research of this type. I am an honors in major art history student with a strong concentration in the Renaissance. I have taken a total of five courses in the area of Renaissance art history, including an honors course in Renaissance printmaking and drawing taught by my faculty sponsor, professor Emison. I have achieved a 3.97 GPA within my major and through my previous experience with research projects and papers I feel that I have a strong ability to digest and coalesce large amounts of scholarly discourse. I am also well qualified to undertake the task of first hand analysis of works of art. I am currently a fellowship student at the University Art Gallery and have now had a year of experience handling and researching original works of art, including the supervision of other students utilizing the Gallery's print room. I am also currently involved in an independent study project with three other art history students, which involves researching original works for an upcoming exhibition in the gallery.

My faculty sponsor, Prof Patricia Emison will provide me with guidance on my project as well as helping me to arrange for the use of the print rooms at the aforementioned institutions. I will remain in contact with her through e-mail, as well as a number of face-to-face meetings over the course of my

research. As an expert in Renaissance prints, and one of the foremost scholars in the field of Mantegna studies, Prof. Emison will provide me with invaluable counsel on all aspects of this project.

Timetable

- Week One:** Meet with faculty advisor concerning arrangements to visit print rooms in Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C.
Begin familiarizing myself with the secondary literature, starting with the early writers on the issue such as Vasari and Kristeller.
- Week Two:** Continue reading secondary literature, primarily recent scholarship (David Landau, Suzanne Boorsch, Evelyn Lincoln, Patricia Emison, Keith Christiansen).
Follow up on primary sources suggested by the early secondary literature.
Begin actively planning trips and arranging appointments at print rooms.
- Week Three:** Begin reading literature on the engraving process.
Begin experimenting with the engraving process.
- Week Four:** Continue work on technical processes of printmaking.
Travel to MFA in Boston to examine autograph prints.
Meeting with faculty advisor to discuss success of Boston trip, make any corrections in method necessary for upcoming New York trip.
- Week Five:** Trip to Metropolitan Museum in New York.
Begin examining general sources on Renaissance print shops (Landau & Parshall, Emison.)
- Week Six:** Trip to National Gallery in Washington, D.C.
- Week Seven:** Second trip to Boston to examine “school of Mantegna” works.
Meeting with advisor, evaluate current state of my first hand research with the prints; determine necessity of third trip to Boston.

Week Eight: Possible third trip to Boston.

Analyze data collected from my primary source research.

Construct thesis from this data.

Week Nine: Consider implications of proposed thesis.

Evaluate success of research.