

EXHIBITS

Special Exhibits Bring Masters of Metaphor to U.S.

The current 1992-93 season offers many opportunities to Americans and visitors to the United States to come face to face with the art of great masters of metaphor in painting and sculpture. These opportunities, coming to most major cities, are afforded by special exhibitions as well as by the permanent collections of the major American museums, such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington, which has just undergone a two-year-long rehanging of its permanent collection of paintings from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Classic and Classical Art

The year's most spectacular special exhibits are two which sharply pose the issue of Western civilization's heritage from Greek and Roman antiquity.

The first, now closed, is the grand retrospective of "Andrea Mantegna" which was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from May to July. Andrea Mantegna (1430-1506), born in Padua in northern Italy, was the fifteenth century artist most preoccupied with antiquity, and he spread his reflections all over Europe, being the first artist of genius to occupy himself with engraving, the "mass media" of that era.

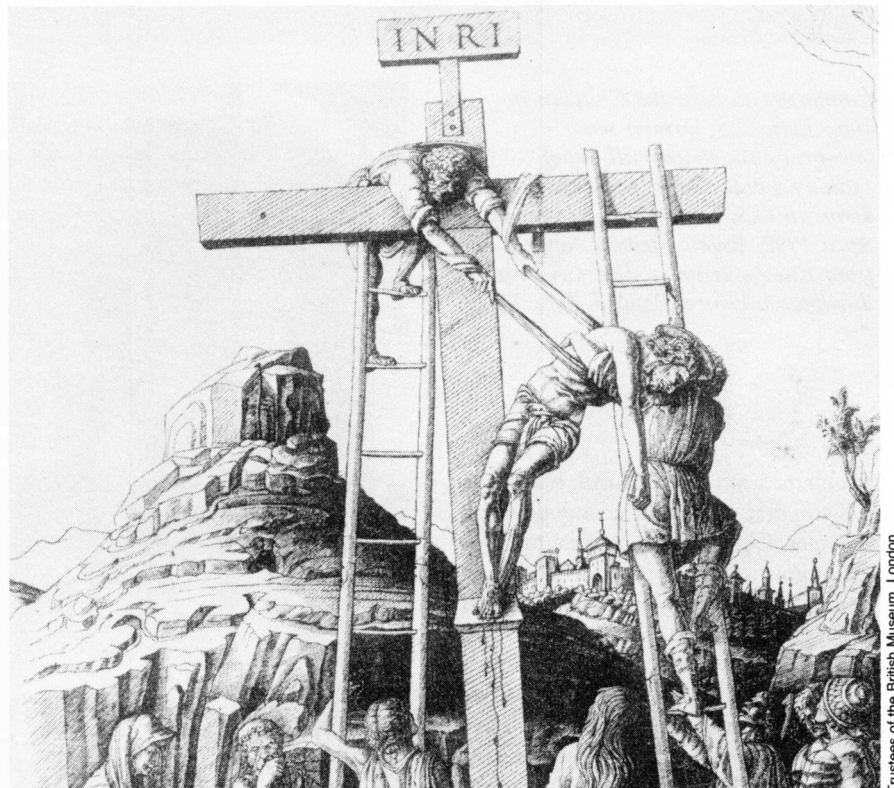
Mantegna was not only the first artist outside Florence to claim for himself the prerogatives of creative genius—demanding his work be counted as among the liberal arts, rather than mere crafts—but he was one of the greatest masters of classical tragedy in any medium, in any era. In his engraving of the "Deposition from the Cross," the despair of the apostles who gesticulate upwards at the foot of the cross is counterposed to the inert lifeless body and the dead weight of Christ's arm. These means, applied to Christian subjects, come from Mantegna's passionate study of ancient sculpture.

His sense of the importance of conveying weight in the "weightless" medium of two dimensional art should also be thought of in relation to the great scientific minds of the day—from Nicolaus of Cusa to Leon Batista Alberti to Paolo Toscanelli. They all wrote treatises on the subject of *weight*, both from the standpoint of engineering challenges, and as the means of conducting rigorous scientific experiments, such as Cusa's precocious proof of what later became known as photosynthesis. Cusa showed that something weightless—light—could turn into weighty living matter. Mantegna, the most lapidary of painters, used optical means to suggest weight, in order to point up the irony of the immaterial soul's overcoming ponderous flesh.

The second major exhibition in this

vein is called "The Greek Miracle, Classical Sculpture from the Dawn of Democracy, the Fifth Century B.C.," and will be held at the National Gallery in Washington and the Metropolitan in New York over the fall and winter of 1992-93. It will include twenty-two objects, most of which have never before left Greek soil, and eleven more from Europe's leading museums, "representing the great sculptural innovations and achievements in the depiction of the human form that followed the birth of democracy in Athens 2,500 years ago."

This show will present in sculpture the only surviving examples of the Greek ideal of humanity which directly and indirectly inspired the Golden Renaissance, since all the originals of famous Greek paintings have vanished.



Andrea Mantegna, "Deposition from the Cross," c.1495 (detail).

Trustees of the British Museum, London.

These two loan exhibitions involve the once-in-a-lifetime or once-in-a-generation gathering together of the work of a particular artist, or works which illustrate a particular theme or period.

A Glimpse of Dublin's Treasures

Another kind of loan show, to which this reviewer is very partial, takes a sampling of a great collection. It is like getting an almost-free trip to another country, and makes

one ask questions like, "How did these pictures get into this gallery? Who bought them? When did it happen?"

Such is the case for the show of "Mantegna to Goya: Master European Paintings From the National Gallery of Ireland," at the Chicago Art Institute until Aug. 9, which will go on to San Francisco (September-December), Boston (January-March 1993) and New York (April-June 1993). The Mantegna of the title is the small monochrome picture of "Judith and Holofernes," which was therefore not included in the New York Mantegna show although it is one of his masterpieces.

The Dublin gallery, founded in 1854, cannot compete with much older and richer institutions, but it has some unique treasures which are among the forty-four pictures lent for this show. The selection, while broad ranging, happily favors the human visage, whether simply portrayed in daily life, or as part of a sacred scene.

Several works are by Renaissance artists who specialized in portraiture, such as the quietly moving "Portrait of a Widower with His Two Children" by G.B. Moroni, painted around 1565. The comparison to the pompous superficiality of many of the eighteenth century portraits is telling—like the Irish aristocrats who blended into the British establishment, such as the fatuous "Earl of Bellamont" painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in a tall plumed hat and pink satin cloak in 1773.



Diego de Silva Velázquez, "Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus," 1618/19.

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

The "Portrait of a Musician" of c.1480, attributed to Filippino Lippi is worth the admission by itself. A musician is shown tuning a *lira da braccio*, a bowed, stringed instrument which is one of the ancestors of the violin, and which was used most commonly by poets who accompanied themselves while singing poetry (in his day, Leonardo da Vinci was the most famous virtuoso in this). The thoughtful expression on the musician's face, whose eyes do not focus on the spectator but on some distant object of thought, suggests that while he is tuning his *lira* to accord with the physical harmonies of the universe, he is also thinking about the composition of his poem. On the shelf behind him are a lute, another *lira*, musical scores, and two small wind instruments. These objects, implying other players, form a mute dialogue that enriches our concept of the unnamed musician's identity.

For its poetic depth, one of the most rewarding paintings in the traveling Dublin show is an early work by the Spanish painter Velázquez (1599-1660), "Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus," which would have been painted around 1618-19 while Velázquez was still a youth in Seville. The artist takes up the theme of the *bodegón*, a type of painting which combined still-life and *genre* in a kitchen or tavern setting. These were popular in Flanders and Spain.

Mannerist artists, a generation earlier in the sixteenth century, had often reversed their compositions, in order

to introduce arbitrary variety into a sacred subject. The major theme would be cast into the background, while purely secondary figures and objects loomed large in the foreground.

Velázquez inverts this Mannerist trick to create a true dialogue. The portrayal of the Moorish kitchen maid, who pauses at her work to listen to what is taking place in the background, connects the humblest daily activity to the miraculous. Christ's revelation of himself to two disciples in an inn at Emmaus was one of his appearances after the Resurrection, which made palpable the promise of eternal life to Christians.

Velázquez was a master of the science of optics; many books on this subject were in the inventory of his possessions when he died. He conveys the surface textures of glazed and burnished vessels by his handling of light in the foreground. The girl's face is divided into light and shadow, the brilliantly lit half of it turned toward the miracle behind her. There is a relationship between the natural light in the kitchen, and the "super-natural" light of the radiant Christ in the room at the back.

There were many slaves in Seville in the early seventeenth century who converted to Christianity. The painting would seem to imply not only that salvation is possible for this lowly slave, but indeed by her position in the picture, that for Velázquez she is the *primary* beneficiary of that promise.

—Nora Hamerman