

Mantegna & Bellini
National Gallery, London

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Giovanni Bellini, *The Agony in the Garden* 1458-60



Andrea Mantegna, *The Agony in the Garden* 1455-56



Giovanni Bellini, *The Virgin with Saints Catherine and Mary Magdalene*, 1490.

Artistic rivalry is toxic. Amongst hundreds of famous artistic relationships, one only has to think of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera (who were married twice to each other), Picasso and Matisse, Michelangelo and Raphael, and more recently Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon ... the list is sadly endless. Artists are often fragile when it comes to their work and I should know. Marriage, friendship, shared goals and even family ties – as in the case of Andrea Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini – all go out the window when ideas, innovation, inspiration, technique, subject matter and patronage are sought, and collegiality is a rare virtue in the art world. I know about that too.

In 1453, Andrea Mantegna, the son of a lowly carpenter from near Padua, married Nicolosa Bellini from a highly respected and successful family in Venice. She was Giovanni's half-sister, and it's very likely that this was a dynastic marriage rather than a love match. The older Mantegna, who was to become the chief court painter to the noble Mantuan Gonzaga family, was a catch for the Bellini family as he was already highly respected in Venice and its environs. Giovanni's father Jacopo and elder brother Gentile were well known in the Venetian Republic, but their reputation did not equal that of Mantegna. Until young Giovanni grew to become its star and lodestone.

The energy created by the link between the two families created two of the greatest painters in the entire history of art. They were brothers both in law and in art; and were sometime friends, and often rivals. Their work can sometimes be very similar. They tackled the same subjects and it is their versions of *The Agony in the Garden* in London's National Gallery that gave the curators the initial concept of what is a magnificent show. Mantegna's version is from 1455-56 and Bellini's from 1458-60 and a comparison of the two is illuminating. A third of the paintings in this exhibition have never been seen before in Britain.

Where Mantegna is austere, adept at depicting built architecture, foreshortening and anatomy (Padua had the famous anatomy theatre and university), Bellini is clumsy with anatomy and fascinated by natural landscape, and he is always more emotional. His Christ is alone, praying in barren desolation with only the rosy dawn heralding the hope of resurrection. Mantegna is cool, intellectual, dry, virtuosic and emotionally removed. A brilliant draughtsman. A technical genius. But Renaissance art would not have developed the way it did later without both of their work. There would probably be no Titian, or Correggio or Veronese. It's the difference and the similarities between Bellini and Mantegna that create an artistic tension in 15th century Venice and creates a dynamic vibration in this exhibition.

I must end by saying that I must declare an interest here. Brought up by a mother who revered Mantegna and gave me "Andrea" as a middle name, I have always hitched my colours - literally - to the "rival" post. As anyone who knows me will attest, Giovanni Bellini is my hero. There has never been a moment in my whole life as an artist when I have not had images of the altarpieces in the Frari or San Zaccaria in my studio and when I am in Venice I do the Bellini run, from one church to another. Every day. And I always end up in the Accademia, in front of the great *Pietà* and what I know as the *Sacra Conversazione*, called here *The Virgin with Saints Catherine and Mary Magdalene*. Bellini captures the grief etched in the face of an elderly mother as she helplessly holds the body of her dead boy in the haunting *Pietà*. In the other painting, which looks utterly magical here in London, the beautiful young Mary's hands protect her very real and lovely baby from his future sacrifice, and her gaze is lost in sadness and motherly tenderness.