

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

Teaching Support Sheet

presenter: Leah R. Clark

work: Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1495-1505, 48.6 x 65.6 cm, distemper on linen, The Getty Museum, Los Angeles

In this short film, Dr Leah Clark discusses the global dimensions of a painting by the Renaissance court artist Andrea Mantegna. There are a variety of activities to get students thinking about close-looking around a Renaissance painting. There are also different themes that you can use to tease out some of the main issues the film raises: visual analysis of a painting; the Italian Renaissance's relationship to the larger world; collecting practices in the Renaissance; diplomacy and gift giving; cross-cultural exchanges; devotional paintings; the court artist.

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-mantegna-adoration-magi-c-1495-1505-getty-museum-la>

Before watching the film

Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work [here](#) that you can use to show to your class. The Getty provides a very high resolution image, where you can zoom in closely to view the details: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/781/andrea-mantegna-adoration-of-the-magi-italian-about-1495-1505/>

Questions to ask your students before watching the film.

1. What do you know of the Renaissance as a time period?
2. What do you think the painting depicts? Can you identify any recognisable elements?
3. In what location do you think the painting is taking place? Why? What do you think the three people on the right are holding?
4. What function do you think this work might have served?

After watching the film

Questions to ask your students after watching the film.

1. What effects (aesthetic, social, political etc) do you think the artist and patron were trying to achieve in this work?

The work showcases the artist Mantegna's ability to render materials in a realistic manner. The choice of subject matter—the Adoration of the Magi—was a particularly important biblical narrative that had a relationship to contemporary diplomatic and collecting practices. These were important in terms of its function and its relationship to both artist and patron.

2. Has the film helped you define some of the formal elements of the work? Consider scale, subject matter, medium, and other formal elements

The painting depicts a religious narrative—the biblical story of the Nativity, of Christ’s birth when the three Magi bring gifts from the East. Jesus Christ is at the centre, in an act of blessing to the three Magi. He is held by his mother the Virgin Mary, and Mary’s husband Joseph is nearby. The Holy family have haloes to mark their holiness.

The three magi are: **Caspar**, bearded and bareheaded at the front; **Melchior**, the younger, bearded king behind Caspar; and on the right **Balthasar** depicted as an African.

It also depicts collectibles that might have been in the Gonzaga collections in Mantua: Caspar holds a rare Chinese blue and white porcelain cup, made of delicate Chinese porcelain and filled with gold coins. Melchior holds a Turkish censer for perfuming the air with incense; and Balthasar ‘the Moor’ carries a covered cup made of agate—a hardstone. All of these items would have been highly prized collector’s objects.

Other prompts: How has Mantegna rendered the space and the materials? Does it give any indication where it is taking place? In other words, what are the formal techniques employed here?

We as the viewer are very close to the action: Mantegna has really compressed the action within a shallow space—this may have been based on his study of ancient Roman reliefs. There isn’t much background detail—we don’t actually know where it’s taking place. He used a neutral background and this really focuses the viewer’s attention on the Magi’s adoration of Christ. This makes us, the viewer, as if a privileged member of this audience. There is an emphasis on 3s: the three magi, the three persons of the Holy Family, the three gifts.

Students might pick up on the detailed rendering of materials, as mentioned in the film—individual hairs on the furs and beards; material qualities of the vessels; gems and jewels.

The painting is distemper on linen. Students might have picked up on the brief discussion about distemper. It is made from animal glue, which allowed for a less glossy finish than oil or egg tempera painting and evoked qualities of fresco painting (a technique that uses wet plaster). The distemper provides a more matte quality. Even though Mantegna is not using oil, he’s managed to portray the glitter and the qualities of reflected light on the objects, such as the jewels the magi wear, but there is a softness, almost a pastel-like quality to the painting, because of the medium. If you look closely, you can see some of the weave of the linen has come through where the paint is slightly abraded.

3. Does it have a recognisable purpose or function? Does this relate to the time period in which it was made?

We don’t know where it was originally located, but Mantegna worked at the court of Mantua, in the northern part of Italy. Mantua was overseen by the Gonzaga family and this family were well known for their collections. Because it has a sacred subject matter, it was probably used in devotion. It may have been placed in the interior spaces of the home, perhaps in an oratory (a small chapel in a room).

The particular subject matter, though also points to the collecting and diplomatic practices of the Italian courts. The Gonzaga were well known for their collections, in particular Isabella d’Este, who married into the Gonzaga family had an incredible collection of art objects which ranged from paintings by famous painters to hardstone vases and antiquities and she even owned a few porcelain pieces. She was the granddaughter of the King of Naples, who was in constant diplomatic relations with the Ottoman empire

and Mamluk Sultanate, and she would have heard tales of these sorts of diplomatic exchanges. Her mother, Eleonora d'Aragona, Duchess of Ferrara, also had a large collection of porcelain, as did Isabella's brother, Alfonso d'Este

The painting probably operated on a number of different levels. It could have been used in devotion, even as an altarpiece, where the focus on Christ's body—during the performance of the Mass—would have been emphasised. It could also be a showpiece celebrating the collections of the family.

4. How has this film helped your understanding of the global dimension of the Renaissance? How has the film helped your understanding of the Renaissance as a period? How and why? How has it helped you identify formal elements of a painting? Can you identify elements of what makes this work a Renaissance painting?

There are no real answers to these questions, but students might comment on the fact that Mantegna uses antique models—so a traditional approach to understanding the Renaissance as a time of rebirth of Classical antiquity. His attention to detail and to observing nature might be another more 'typical' Renaissance feature of the painting.

Students might not have been so aware of the global connections of the Renaissance. They might also pick up on the religious subject matter—and its role in devotion, something discussed in other Open Arts Objects films, in particular, Bellini's *Madonna of the Meadow*, Roberti's *Este Diptych* and Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*.

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

5. What is its relevance for today?

There are at least six variants of the painting in existence, so it obviously had quite an impact in the past.

It's important to study because it highlights the cross-cultural interactions in the fifteenth century. It opens up the idea that the Italian Renaissance wasn't just about Italy or the revival of antiquity but also about cross-cultural interactions. The great collections of the Renaissance were filled with antiquities and contemporary paintings, but also novel objects that were increasingly making their way into Italy along the trade routes of the silk roads—Chinese porcelain, Islamic metalware, silks etc. This isn't simply an Italian painting, but one that points to larger, global connections. Goods travelled into Europe from the East, but they took a long time. Individuals only knew about these luxury objects through the objects themselves, through paintings such as Mantegna's, or through oral descriptions and word of mouth, that were often not necessarily very accurate. This is different from today when encyclopaedic resources are available online and we can easily see reproduction of images and objects online.

It also shows the relationship between secular and sacred realms. These were less divided than they are today, so a religious painting might be used to show off a ruler's collections.

Additional question in terms of skills:

What skills have you learned or refined by looking closely at this painting? What might the differences be between a Renaissance interconnected world and today's global world?

Students might pick up on visual analysis or historical analysis and variations of those skills but also analytical skills--the ability to identify elements of a painting and relate those to contemporary issues.

Comparative analysis

There are a number of options you could do for comparison. You could compare it with the plaquette of *Apollo and Marsyas* and consider the hardstones and porcelain as collector's items, as well as the painting itself as a work of art. In this comparison you might think about Renaissance responses to antiquity. (The

plaquette is a direct copy of an antique original; Mantegna's painting uses motifs inspired by classical antiquity, such as the sculptural quality of the drapery and figures, and here the open arts objects film on the *Laocöon* might also prove useful).

You might also compare it with other Adoration scenes from the Renaissance, of which there are numerous. In particular, Gentile da Fabriano's *Strozzi Altarpiece* (*Adoration of the Magi*) from 1423 now in the Uffizi offers a useful comparison as it is also filled with numerous references to the East—with lavish textiles and exotic animals depicted (see grid below). <https://smarthistory.org/gentile-da-fabriano-adoration-of-the-magi/>

Online Activity

1. One of the earliest representations of Chinese porcelain in a Western painting is Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*, which was owned by the Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso d'Este (Isabella d'Este's brother). The painting depicts a complex mythological subject matter (taken from a classical text). View the painting online on the National Gallery, Washington DC's website: <https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.1138.html> Zoom in and look closely at the porcelain bowls—there are three, one on the ground just right of the centre of the painting, which holds fruit, and two held by individuals at the centre of the painting. Were you able to see the fine details of the blue and white designs painted on the bowls?
2. The objects that the Magi hold in Mantegna's painting and those depicted in Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* were highly prized collectables, reflecting an interest in 'Eastern' objects—Chinese porcelain as well as Islamic ceramics that mimicked Chinese porcelain. Try to find similar objects in a museum's collection today. The British Museum's website is a useful resource (go to [Collections Research](#)). Conduct a search for 'Ming China porcelain cup' or 'Ming China porcelain bowl' for example and compare the types of existing objects with the ones depicted in the paintings. Are there similarities in the designs? What about shapes? Can you find one that matches those that are depicted in the paintings?

Further Info:

You can view works by Andrea Mantegna in collections in the UK at the following institutions:

-The National Gallery in London and you can read more about him on the National Gallery website:

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/andrea-mantegna>

-*The Triumphs of Caesar* at Hampton Court

<https://www.hrp.org.uk/hampton-court-palace/explore/mantegna-gallery/#gs.DgJz8B0>

You can find out more about some of Mantegna's other paintings here:

<https://smarthistory.org/andrea-mantegna-dead-christ/>

The Ming China exhibition at the British Museum:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/ming.aspx

One of the curators of the Ming China exhibition discusses the painting in relation to the exhibition at the British museum (note she incorrectly states it's an oil painting)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzM87-f80i8>

On Isabella d'Este's collecting practices (at the court of Mantua):

<http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/units/unit-8/essays/isabella-deste-collects/>
http://womenshistory.about.com/od/medievalitalianwomen/a/isabella_d_este.htm

on the court artist:

http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth200/artist/court_artist.html

On Chinese porcelain between East and West:

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ewpor/hd_ewpor.htm

On global influences in the Renaissance:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/style-guide-renaissance-influences-from-beyond-europe/>

on Renaissance devotional paintings:

<http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/units/unit-1/>

For an OpenLearn course (free and open access) at the Open University on Venice's relationship with the East:

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/visual-art/art-renaissance-venice/content-section-0>

Renaissance Resources online

<http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/> : This is a comprehensive site on a number of different issues related to the Renaissance provided by the National Gallery in Washington, DC

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/r/renaissance/> : This is a comprehensive site on a number of different issues related to the Renaissance provided by the Victoria and Albert Museum

Bibliography/printed material

On Collecting practices in the Renaissance:

Christian, K. W. (2010) *Empire Without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c.1350–1527*, London and New Haven, Yale University Press.

Clark, L. R. (2013) 'Collecting, exchange, and sociability in the Renaissance *studiolo*', *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 171–84 [to request a free copy, click here: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/41418/>]

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Porcelain:

Carswell, John. *Blue and White. Chinese Porcelain Around the World*. London: British Museum Press, 2000.

Emerson, Julie, Jennifer Chen, and Mimi Gardner Gates, eds. *Porcelain Stories. From China to Europe*.

Seattle and London: Seattle Art Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2000.

Finlay, Robert. *The Pilgrim Art. Cultures of Porcelain in World History*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2010.

Kerr, Rose. 'Chinese Porcelain in Early European Collections.' In *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500-1800*, edited by Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer, 45-51. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2004.

Comparative analysis:

Works of art	Andrea Mantegna, <i>Adoration of the Magi</i>, c. 1495-1505, The Getty Museum, Los Angeles	Gentile da Fabriano, <i>Adoration of the Magi (Strozzi Altarpiece)</i>, 1423, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
date	1495-1505	1423
What is it?	A painting	A painting
material	Distemper on linen	Tempera on wood
Size/scale	48.6 × 65.6 cm	300 x 282 cm
Subject matter	Adoration of the Magi	Adoration of the Magi
Original location in the Renaissance	Probably in the ducal palace in Mantua	Santa Trinità, Florence, for the private family chapel (also the sacristy) of Palla Strozzi
How are the figures depicted?	-3/4 length; focus on faces -emphasis on the exoticness of the magi—attention to headgear, and clothing	-full body; lots of figures; lots of action -central Magus has a slight contrapposto pose, which conveys a realistic quality -still attention to exotic headgear and clothing, but third Magus is not black
Composition	-very close up -three figures on left mimicked by three figures on right -focus is on the moment of gift-giving -no identification of where this is taking place	-a lot of action -hard to know where to focus, except that all the chaos leads to a focus on Christ -shows a grand procession, where the whole story of the Nativity is recounted, from Herod's Palace on the hill -narrative is thus extended, rather than focused on one part of the story --inclusion of all sorts of exotic animals, such as monkeys, lion, camel etc...
Condition	-fairly well preserved with some abrasion	-well preserved with the gold and brightness of colours still very vivid
Function	-probably used in devotion -also used to showcase Gonzaga collections -also an aesthetic work of art, produced by a well known court artist.	-altarpiece; therefore focus on Christ is important for the Eucharist/performance of the Mass -also showed off the wealth of the Strozzi family