

Words and pictures : reflections on the concept of mode

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WORDS AND PICTURES REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF MODE

A partir de quelques exemples pris dans l'art de la Renaissance, l'auteur analyse le concept de mode. Le mode reflète en effet un cas particulier de la relation entre texte et image : construite comme un discours, l'image s'inscrit dans les limites d'une rhétorique. La liberté de l'artiste, au-delà des contraintes du support, du commanditaire ou du public, se manifeste précisément dans la liberté, dans cette rhétorique, du choix du mode.

A large part of European art and imagery, from the earliest beginnings to the eighteenth century, consists of pictures that illustrate texts, as a rule narrative texts. The artists who produced these images, and the audiences who looked at them, understood and accepted what they saw, were thus, in fact, continuously faced with the task of translating the verbal story into a pictorial narrative, of transforming words into images. The process of translation, as we know from studies in different disciplines,¹ is complex and many-faceted. In the present essay I shall restrict my comments to a question which has fascinated me. What goes on in the mind of an artist who has to perform the task of translating words into images? What are the questions he could ask himself?

It goes without saying that in many cases of retelling in images a story known in words, no explicit questions were asked by painters, illuminators, or sculptors. Artists often copied a well known and ac-

1. The literature on the subject is very large. For a historical view of this problem, see recently Rita COPELAND, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge, 1991.

cepted model, or they took a certain pattern for “natural”, so that it almost seemed to have been given by God. It is sufficient to think of a scene as often represented as the Crucifixion to be instantly convinced that for long periods no questions were asked by artists representing this, the greatest and most central, theme of Christian art. But observations of this kind, correct as they usually are, do not solve the problem we are here indicating. If for centuries nobody asked how to depict the Crucifixion, at some earlier time, as we know, this question *was* asked, and later it obviously was asked again. A pictorial solution, articulate and “final” as it may seem, presupposes questions.

In the creative process most of the basic conditions and characteristics are given, so much so that with regard to them artists could ask hardly any questions. In most periods the artist would not ask himself in which style he should create his work.² Imagine a Carolingian illuminator pondering in what style he should embellish the manuscript he was working on. It is enough to propose this question to see how utterly out of place it is. Style comes as something natural to the artist, it is something like the mother tongue. This principle holds true even for periods in which a plurality of styles flourished, as for instance the Renaissance or the Baroque. In a rather precise sense we can say that an artist does not choose his style. The few exceptions in which artists consciously tried to adjust to a style other than their own (think of Gentile Bellini’s *Portrait of a Turkish Boy*, in the flat manner of Islamic art) only prove the rule. To put our conclusion simply: there is no room for the artist to choose his style.

Subject matter, that is, what we would now subsume under the heading of “iconography”, is even less than style a matter of the artist’s choice. It was not only the tremendous power of custom and tradition that determined what should be represented in a work of art. In many periods it was organized society and culture, assuming an institutional pattern, that in fact prescribed, in forms reaching from “advice” to censorship, what, and frequently also how, the artist should show in the painting he was commissioned to do. Many of the great works of narrative art, the stories from Scripture or from history, the Passion or the battle scene, were done on commission, and

2. There is a well known debate about what is actually referred to by the term “style”. I shall not enter this discussion hereby proposing yet another definition. I shall only say that I use the concept broadly in the line of Meyer Schapiro’s description (see his article “Style” in *Anthropology Today*, ed. A. L. Kroeber, Chicago, 1953, p. 287-312, and frequently reprinted).

were carried out under a supervision that was sometimes more liberal, sometimes more stringent, but always effective. In the vast field of subject matter there was, as a rule, little room for the artist's choice.

What, then, *was* a matter of the artist's own decision, even if only to a limited extent? Among the aspects that offered room for choice, there is one that, though difficult to define conceptually and to grasp firmly in the course of analysis, may well be of crucial significance for the work of art and its effect on the audience. It is the overall expressive character of the subject—scene, figure, face—represented. Here the artist had more scope, and could deliberately shift from one way to the other. Therefore, it is the questions arising in this domain that must have occupied his mind. In the classical tradition of art theory, this overall expressive character has sometimes been called *modus*. What precisely is *modus*, and how can we know that the artist is able to shift it? Though the main concern of the present paper will be to show this in concrete examples, we shall begin by briefly outlining the concept in general.

For our purpose it may be best to start with classical reflections on style, and the need to make forms fit the experience they attempt to articulate and convey. How to make words fit the emotions they are meant to express—this was a question Aristotle asked, and tried to answer in his *Rhetorics*. The speaker's, or the rhetorician's, language will be "appropriate if it expresses emotions and character, and if it corresponds to its subject" (1408a 10). The crucial notion here, of course, is that of correspondence. Thus Aristotle instructs his pupils that "to express emotion you will employ the language of anger in speaking of outrage; the language of distrust and discreet reluctance to utter a word when speaking of impiety or foulness; the language of exultation for a tale of glory" (1408a 15 ff.).

Aristotle seems to have in mind two kinds of relationship, or, to use his own term, two kinds of "correspondence." One kind of correspondence is explicitly stated in the text we have quoted—it is the conformity, or similarity, between the emotion or character described and the words or literary forms employed in describing it. If you transfer the philosopher's demand for "correspondence" from language to the visual arts, from words to images, the inherent difficulties become more evident. Anger and distrust in themselves are not visible or tangible, and thus it is difficult to make them correspond to something that is visible and tangible, such as the shapes, compositional features, and colors of a work of art.

Another type of correspondence, equally present and articulate in the rhetorician's or artist's mind, is the relationship with the audience, of listeners or spectators, that they are addressing. It is only within that relationship, in the contact between speaker and listener, that the first correspondence, that between emotions and words, is enacted, as it were, and becomes a reality. Aristotle best summarizes this indivisible link between the two types of correspondence by saying that it is the "aptness of language that makes people believe in the truth of your story" (1408a 20).

A student of the visual arts reading this venerable text cannot help making still another observation. He will note that in this context Aristotle and his followers, the great tradition of rhetorics and the theory of art that drew so much from it, did not even explicitly mention subject matter and meaning in a precise sense; that is, all those themes that in modern parlance go under the label of "iconography." For rhetoricians, and for later teachers of art who took rhetorics as their model, correspondence was not a matter of properly employing the symbols or attributes of a mythological figure or a personification. Note that "correspondence" applies to an important, but to a limited and well defined, segment of the reality represented, to "emotion and character." Since in discussing this ancient text I have used the modern term "iconography", I may be permitted to employ still another term belonging to the language of modern criticism, namely, expression. Put in modern terminology, what Aristotle had in mind when he spoke of the effects of the correspondence between emotions and shapes, is what we now call expression.

Almost two millenia after Aristotle, when Leon Battista Alberti formulated the Renaissance theory of painting, the Aristotelian concept of "correspondence" was fully alive, or revived, even though under a different name. One example will suffice. In his doctrine of *istoria*, the greatest and most noble type of picture, Alberti expressed the same ideas several times. "The *istoria* which merits both praise and admiration will be so agreeably and pleasantly attractive that it will capture the eye of whatever learned or unlearned person is looking at it and will move his soul. That which first gives pleasure in the *istoria* comes from copiousness and variety of things."³ Variety (*varietà*), it turns out, is thus a central concept of aesthetics. Variety in what? one immediately asks oneself. Reading Alberti's treatise it

3. Leon Battista ALBERTI, *Della Pittura*, ed. L. Malle, Florence, 1950, p. 91.

becomes obvious that what he has in mind is not only a variety of objects and compositions, but primarily a variety of moods and characters.

The painting ought to have pleasant and graceful movements, suitable to what is happening there. The movements and poses of virgins are airy, full of simplicity with sweetness of quiet rather than strength; ... The movements of youths are light, gay, with a certain demonstration of great soul and good force. In men the movements are more adorned with firmness, with beautiful and artful poses. In the old the movements and poses are fatigued; the feet no longer support the body, and they even cling with their hands. Thus each one with dignity has his own movements to express whatever movements of the soul he wishes.⁴

The various distinctions of movement, and the various kinds of figures Alberti refers to, or has in mind, are subsumed under the general term of *varietà*.

Alberti, then, believes that in a picture *varietà*, that is, the depiction of figures distinguished from each other, is an artistic value. It follows that an artist's ability to represent figures and compositions of different kinds, character, and movement, is a precious talent. What this ability boils down to is the artist's power to shift, more or less at will, from expressing one mood to expressing another, from the depiction of one distinct character to the rendering of an altogether different one. The concept of *varietà* as an artistic value, and the belief that the artist can achieve it in his work, is more important in what it implies than in what it explicitly states. One of the implications clearly is that the artist is not altogether subject to a single force, be it an external one, like the stars, or an internal one, like his own character or personality. Were this the case, he would not be able to change the theme and mood of his work, and could thus not attain *varietà*.

This idea also has had its roots in the ancient doctrine of rhetorics. In the present context I should particularly stress the rhetoricians' demand for what they called "versatility". Cicero, praising the "grand style" of oratory, says of speakers representing this type that they "were forceful, versatile, copious and grave, trained and equipped to arouse and sway emotions" (*Orator* 5: 20). None was more so, he adds, than Demosthenes.

4. L. B. Alberti, *Della Pittura*, p. 97.

A modern reader may well wonder why the ancient teachers of rhetorics gave versatility and copiousness pride of place, and counted them among the primary gifts of the orator. So highly were these faculties valued that it was believed that they made it possible for the orator to sway the audience's emotions. Now, versatility, that is, the ability to present different issues and attitudes convincingly, is a manifestation of the orator's independence and sovereignty. This becomes particularly clear when we look at how Renaissance theory of painting adopted certain principles of rhetorical doctrine to its own needs. Transferring the terminology of classical doctrines of rhetorics to the art of painting, we should say that the versatile painter is the one who can portray different characters and evoke different kinds of emotions in his painting. The artist's style may be determined by his school or his personality,⁵ the ability to present different moods follows from his own decision.

It was mainly in the middle of the seventeenth century that the notion of artistic form began to break up into two distinct concepts, style and mode. So far as I know, the seventeenth century Padre Agostino Mascardi was the first to distinguish between style and what we here call mode. The style is the comprehensive but unintentional formal unity of a work of art, resulting from the overall conditions of its creation; what he calls "character" (*carattere*), on the other hand, is a freely and intentionally selected *modus*. "To ask somebody in which style he will write is foolishness; because he cannot compose in a style other than that proper to him [that is] following from his nature (*ingegno*)."⁶ The *modus*, on the other hand, one can change. The question of what mode to select must be uppermost in the mind.

An essential fact that should always be remembered in discussing our problem, is that the expressive possibilities, whether called "characters" or "modes", were not believed to be infinite. Both in fact and in theory they were rather limited. It was Nicolas Poussin who, in a famous letter to his friend and patron Paul Fréart, Sieur de

5. In the fifteenth century it was probably generally believed that an artist's style is determined by the "school" in which he is trained, while in the sixteenth century the impact of the personality on his style was given greater importance.

6. Agostino Macardi composed his work in 1646. It is now available in a more recent edition. A. MASCARDI, *Dell'Arte Istorica*, Firenze, 1859. For the sentence quoted, see p. 288. While writing this paper Mascardi's work was not available to me. See Nicola IVANOFF, "Stilo e Maniera", *Saggi e Memorie di Storia dell'Arte* (1957), p. 107-63, especially p. 117 ff.

Chantelou, written in November 1647, both applied the concept of modes to painting and presented their limited variation.

Our wise ancient Greeks, inventors of all beautiful things, found several Modes by means of which they produced marvellous effects.

Hence the fact that the ancient sages attributed to each style its own effects. Because of this they called the Dorian Mode stable, grave, and severe, and applied it to subjects which are grave and severe and full of wisdom.

They [the ancients] also decided that the Lydian Mode lends itself to tragic subjects because it has neither the simplicity of the Dorian nor the severity of the Phrygian.

The Hypolidian Mode contains a certain suavity and sweetness which fills the souls of the spectators with joy; it lends itself to subjects of divine glory, and paradise.

The ancients invented the Ionic, with which they represented bacchanalian dances and feasts in order to achieve a festive effect.

We need not go into the details of Poussin's list of modes.⁷ I might only remark that these modes, apart from being based on ancient music theory, as revived by late sixteenth century Venetian scholarship,⁸ follow in principle a doctrine developed in the schools of rhetorics in Antiquity. Ancient rhetorics handed down to the medieval and mainly to the Renaissance artist a rather narrow scheme of expressive possibilities. The best known formulation of this scheme, a centerpiece of rhetorical theory found in several classical writings on the theory of speech, is the arrangement of the rhetorical modes in an hierarchic spatial model. I shall here quote only one of these famous statements, perhaps the first extant division of styles into three. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, in the Renaissance still considered an authentic work by Cicero, claims that.

There are, then, three kinds of style, called types (*figuras*), to which discourse, if faultless, confines itself: the first we call the Grand; the second the Middle; the third the Simple. The Grand type consists of a smooth and ornate arrangement of impressive words. The Middle type consists of words of a lower, yet not of the lowest

7. Poussin's letter has been discussed several times. I shall only mention Paul ALFASSA, "L'Origine de la lettre de Poussin sur les modes d'après un travail récent", *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de l'Art Français* (1933), p. 125-43, and Jan BIALOSTOCKI, "Das Modusproblem in den bildenden Künsten", in his *Stil und Ikonographie: Studien zur Kunstwissenschaft*, Dresden, n. d. [1965], p. 9-35, especially p. 18 ff.

8. Giuseppe ZARLINO, *Istituzione harmoniche*, Venice, 1591.

and most colloquial, class of words. The Simple type is brought down even to the most current idiom of standard speech (IV, VII, 11).

The *figura*, here translated by "type", is the beginning of the thought that Poussin presented as theory of modes.

It would go beyond the scope of this essay were we to attempt a discussion of the many questions arising here. I should only like to briefly present some conclusions that the painter would draw from what we have indicated so far. First, it has become manifest, I hope, that the theory of "modes" is essentially a theory of expression in the arts. What is here distinguished are moods and characters represented in, or evoked by, works of art. We speak only of levels of experience and a hierarchy of characters. A second conclusion, of particular significance for the artist, is that expression is not a matter of merely subjective experience or vague individual emotion. Any given mode has the same meaning both for the artist and for the spectator. Because it has a clear identity, it fits a certain figure or theme, and is not appropriate for another. A final conclusion is that the mode is unchangeable. An artist's or a period's style may change, but the character of the individual modes, and the system of modes as a whole, does not change. The high and the low may be expressed by different means, but the distinction between them, and the specific character of each, will not vary.

So far I have outlined, in a very general way, what the concept of *modus* may have meant for Renaissance artists and audiences. We were moving in an abstract sphere of aesthetic reflection, not clearly enough linked to the history of the arts, that is, to the artist's workshop and the audience's response to any work it is shown. If *modus* is indeed a general principle of artistic creation, the history of art, as we know it, must reflect it in many ways. Now, in the following comments I shall contend that this is indeed the case. Surveying European art with this question in mind, we may well be overwhelmed by the wealth of examples that history offers for artists' conscious, deliberate use of *modi*. I shall devote the second part of this essay to comments to some examples that in my mind cannot be understood otherwise than as the recording of the artist's conscious use of modes. Since I wish to stress this particular aspect, I shall take some very well known works of art as my illustrations.

Let me begin with an example that has made a stir among students of Renaissance art, and has opened up a debate that is not yet concluded. The bronze figure of *David* (Fig. 1) and the wooden *Mary Magdalen* (Fig. 2) are both famous works by Donatello. They can easily be compared, since they are both life-size representations of

the single figure of a saint. For generations, the obvious difference in character and style between the two statues was explained by the change in the artist's style, a development that took place in the fifteen or twenty years separating the one work from the other. The *David* was done between 1430 to 1440, possibly in the first half of this decade, that is before Donatello went to Padua for a ten year stay (1443-1453). The *Mary Magdalen*, it was unanimously agreed, was done after his return from Padua. It was generally dated around 1455. The difference in "style", the term generally used, seemed to reflect the master's change of heart and mind as he grew older.

Now the disastrous flood that in 1964 endangered so many works of art in Florence brought about some surprising revelations. Donatello's wooden *Mary Magdalen* had to be carefully handled to be preserved. (As a result she now has a room to herself in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, and can be seen as never before.) In the course of saving the delicate statue, the thick coat of brown paint that covered it was removed. Slightly later it was decided to clean another statue by Donatello, the *St. John the Baptist* (Fig. 3) in the Frari Church in Venice, obviously closely related to the *Mary Magdalen*, and therefore believed to have been executed at the end of Donatello's Paduan period, that is, in 1453. But the cleansing of the *St. John the Baptist* uncovered a date—and this date was 1438. By 1438 Donatello had not yet gone to Padua. Donatello scholars do not doubt the authenticity of the inscription, nor do they question the affinity of the *St. John the Baptist* to the *Mary Magdalen*. They, therefore, have concluded that if the *St. John* was done before the artist's departure for Padua, so was the *Mary Magdalen*. This, to quote a fine Donatello scholar, placed the *Mary Magdalen* "uncomfortably close" to the *David*.⁹

Now, considering the revised datings, a new question imposes itself: how can we understand the profound difference between the *David* and the *Mary Magdalen*? The decades that were once believed to have passed between the two works, with all the experience and changing outlook they were assumed to carry, have now shrunk to a few years, and can no longer serve as an explanation. I would risk the suggestion that it is not the change in the artist's personality, in his character and inner world, that should be considered as the reason of the difference between the two works, but rather his deliberate

9. H. W. JANSON, *Form Follows Function—or does it?* Maarssen, 1982, p. 13.

choice, and conscious and consistent use, of different modes : one the mode of the elegance and beauty of the boy-hero (the terms most often used by Renaissance authors to describe this figure); the other the mode of ascetic life, of “fasting and abstinence”, to put it in Borghini’s words.¹⁰

I have mentioned the two statues by Donatello because the new dating of the *Mary Magdalen* so clearly calls for an explanation of her expressive character. I shall now turn to some examples where different modes are employed in the same work of art. Such, too, are not rare ; I shall, therefore, begin with one well known piece, the so called *Ludovisi Sarcophagus* in the Museo delle Terme in Rome. Students generally agree that it was produced in the middle, or second half, of the third century A. D. This period, as is well known, is now considered a “time of crisis” marking the beginning of what is called Late Antiquity.

The *Ludovisi Sarcophagus* (Fig. 4), like all sarcophagi, was one of a mass-produced series, and thus represents what Alois Riegl called *Kunstindustrie*. No wonder, then, that the forms, types, and composition of this sarcophagus are largely conventional. Here we find nothing of Donatello’s vivid search for forms. No matter how dramatic the scene represented, the pattern underlying its depiction is ready made, rigid and stiff. As a student of gesture I could not help noting that, in spite of the crowd of fighting figures that cover the whole surface (an early but clear instance of the *horror vacui* that was to come in the following generations), a distinct pattern, clear in formal as well as in social regards, underlies the composition. It seems to be an almost precise material embodiment of the high, the middle, and the low style in rhetorics. The pictorial field is so clearly divided into different layers that a student of Roman imperial art could say that “in spite of the solid conglomeration of the figures [the layers] often lack actional contact with each other”.

The lowest level, the most interesting one from an artistic point of view, is completely filled with the figures of the barbarians defeated by the Roman legions. This layer abounds in lively and expressive details. Look at the dying barbarian falling from his mount, or the “ethnic” characterization of the shaggy barbarians at the bottom of

10. For a collection of Renaissance texts describing works by Donatello, see H. W. JANSON, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, Princeton, 1979, p. 77 f. (*David*), p. 187 (*St. John the Baptist*), p. 190 (*Mary Magdalen*), p. 191.

the scene. A second layer, above the barbarians, consists of the figures of the Roman soldiers. Their movements are restrained, their placing more regular than those of the barbarians. A single detail will show the distinction. To the left, a barbarian is raising himself towards a Roman soldier. It is not clear what his intention is: is he going to fight or to surrender? While the figure's intention may not be clear, the difference in character and appearance of these representatives of the battling groups is manifest: discipline, self assurance, and reserve in the Roman soldiers; wild disarray, despair, and uncontrolled movements in the barbarians. The third level consists of the figure of the commanding general. The general (whose head is a little too small for his body, perhaps also an indication of elegance) is actually detached from the scene, as many scholars have noted.¹¹ His gaze is directed far beyond the battle scene, his hand thrusts no weapon at the foe, his uniform is not disordered, his flying cloak forms a majestic background to his outstretched arm, and his body has lost contact with the horse he rides. Looking at the commanding general, one cannot help thinking of the formulations of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. The Grand style, says the author of this classic text, "consists of smooth and ornate arrangement of impressive words".

Our two final examples come from the domain of physiognomics, though I am well aware that facial expressions are more complex, and hence more difficult to grasp and hold, than many other themes. Let me select a single topic, the dramatic meeting of two modes, or two moral forces, expressed in different typical forms.

Again I revert to one of the best known works of Renaissance painting, Titian's *Christ and the Pharisee* in Dresden (Fig. 5). The development of the *Halbfigurenbild*, of which Titian's painting is one of the most famous examples, need not detain us here.¹² The division between absolute Good and complete Evil, between Christ and the Pharisee (or Judas?) is obvious at first glance. Looking at Titian's painting one cannot help being struck by the fact that the two faces, although they meet, are seen from different angles, and

11. E. g. Per Gustaf HAMBERG, *Studies in Roman Imperial Art*, Copenhagen, 1946.

12. Sixten RINGBOM, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting*, Abo, 1965. Though Sixten Ringbom concentrates on the Suffering Christ and does not mention Titian's painting, his study is of value also for our subject.

hence display different views. Christ is seen from a viewpoint that reveals both sides of the face, even if they are not fully symmetrical; the Pharisee's, or Judas's, face is seen almost as a *profil perdu*. What I wish to stress here is that such a juxtaposition of the full, or almost full, view of Christ's face versus the profile view of the Pharisee's is what one would call a "modal" factor.

It goes without saying that such basic patterns as the frontal or profile view of the face cannot have a single meaning, they cannot be used as entries in a simple vocabulary, as it were. Yet we also know that, at least in the Middle Ages and their influence on the Renaissance, the profile of a face was perceived as carrying some demonic connotation. Meyer Schapiro has adduced an interesting text composed in the early thirteenth century by a Spanish bishop, Luke of Tuy (died in 1250), who condemned the profile representation of the Virgin. Such a picture, the bishop believed, is the work of heretics, because it shows a one-eyed Virgin.¹³ In medieval culture, as we know, a missing limb was often taken as an indication of a demonic character.¹⁴ The Anti-Christ was imagined as one-eyed. It is also for this reason that in western medieval art the profile was attributed to Judas, mainly in depictions of the Last Supper. It hardly needs pointing out that in such a classic work of the Renaissance as Leonardo's *Last Supper*, Judas has both the characteristic features displayed by Titian's: he is represented in profile, and his face is dark, covered by a shadow (Fig. 6).

One wonders what was typical of demonic and other evil figures in medieval and also in Renaissance art. It may well be, as has been suggested, that the indented and asymmetrical shape of the profile was felt as suiting a twisted, irregular, and unstable nature, while the roundness and completeness of the frontal face suggested regularity, closure, and stability.

It is significant that in many representations of Christ, the evil figure is usually seen in profile, the Redeemer in frontal view. As an example we can take the fresco in the church of St. Francis in Assisi

13. Meyer SCHAPIRO, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text*, The Hague / Paris, 1973, p. 42 ff.

14. For some material on one-eyedness as a sign of a demonic nature, see an old study of mine on a Crusader monument, now reprinted in Moshe BARASCH, *Imago Hominis: Studies in the Language of Art*, Vienna, 1991, p. 208-29, especially p. 224 ff.

where this scene is represented (Fig. 7). When Giotto, a generation later, wished to emphasize the drama in this encounter, he cast the faces of both figures, Judas and Christ, in profile (Fig. 8). Christ's profile is placed slightly higher, it is regular and motionless, while Judas's is irregularly indented, and expressive of active movement. Even here, then, where the juxtaposition of frontal and profile views is abandoned as the typical manifestations of the figures' inner nature, the straight and indented contours of the respective profiles represent modes.

I should like to conclude this brief series of pictorial examples with a picture that, in the context of the present investigation, poses difficult questions, but also indicates an additional dimension of our problem. What I have in mind is the juxtaposition, not of formal features, but of character types, or, more correctly, of the noble versus the plebeian. As an example I shall take the Louvre version of Mantegna's *St. Sebastian* (Fig. 9). While no student doubts the authenticity of the painting, scholarly opinion differs widely with regard to its dating. Some students place it as early as the late fifties of the fifteenth century, others as late as 1489. While the date of the picture has been a topic of scholarly discussion, little attention has been paid to the important physiognomic juxtaposition between the saint's face above and the soldier below that is one of the painting's central, and striking, features. To be sure, the juxtaposition of these two faces lacks the dramatic character of confrontation of two profiles, as we saw it in Giotto's work. In Mantegna's picture the face of the saint is placed in the uppermost level, that of the soldier in the lower left hand corner. But the difference in the character of the two faces is so accentuated that, I believe, it calls for the comparison to be made.

St. Sebastian's face, though looking upwards with a gaze that became a hallmark of Christian devotional imagery, is in its physiognomic features close to the tragic mask of the ancient stage. The eyebrows are raised towards the middle of the forehead (a feature frequently found in tragic masks), the corners of the closed mouth are slightly pulled down, the surface of the face is smooth and regular, in spite of the sadness in glance and movement, and the overall expression is one of nobility. Compare a typical tragic mask pertaining to the ancient Roman theater, with its pathetic expression, yet without any distortion, to the face of Mantegna's *St. Sebastian*. The affinity of the two cannot be disregarded. I do not want to suggest that Mantegna knew this particular mask, but, being a well known

collector of antiquities, he was certainly familiar with the artistic language of these masks.¹⁵

The magnificent face of the soldier in the lowest level of Mantegna's painting is of an altogether different character. Some of its features should be emphasized. First, there is the slight, but distinct, deformation of the traits. To be sure, these deformations are not exaggerated to the point of caricature, as Jerome Bosch's faces of the Pharisees leading Christ to the Crucifixion (Fig. 10). But the face in the Mantegna shows irregularities that suggest deformation. See particularly the mouth. This same face, with some slight variations, is known from another of Mantegna's paintings, in juxtaposition to Christ's saintly countenance: we find it in the *Ecce Homo* in the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris (Fig. 11). The facial contortions in both the soldier in the *Sebastian* painting and the turban wearing heckler in the *Ecce Homo* indicate the figure's evil nature.

The other feature characteristic of the soldier's face is the emphasis on realistic detail. Look at the wrinkles covering his face. This network of crooked lines and creases, in clear contrast to the suavity of Saint Sebastian, has no narrative, objective reason in actual reality. A man still able to serve as a soldier could not have had such a wrinkled face. The wrinkles obviously have another function than to indicate age. The same seems to be true for the bristly beard on the soldier's face. They are still another reminder of the characteristic lack of smoothness. I am not sure that these wrinkles and bristles are explained by seeing them as signs of "realism" (particularly as this term is notoriously vague and ambiguous). Rather than seeing them as showing reality, they may be understood as an indication that the figure so shown belongs to a low class of individuals, and has the character traditionally attributed to people of that sort. One is reminded of the formulation by the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herrenium*. "The Simple type", we there read, "is brought down even to the most current idiom of standard speech". Visually, wrinkles and bristles are such "current idiom".

15. Mantegna's affinity to classical masks has already been stressed by Fritz SAXL. See his influential study "*Rinascimento dell'Antichità: Studien zu den Arbeiten A. Warburgs*", originally published in 1922, and now best available in *Aby Warburg: Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen*, ed. D. Wuttke, Baden-Baden, 1979, p. 347-91, especially p. 349 ff.

I have adduced a few works of art which, I believe, call for the concept of mode for an explanation of their structure. No student of art need be told that such works can easily be multiplied. They are all based on written texts, or on stories narrated orally. In many cases of translating these texts or stories into images, the modes, and the ways of representing them, are not prescribed, they are not perceived as "natural". The question what is the mode of a figure, and how it can be expressed, therefore occupies the artist's mind, and is an important element in the difficult transition from words to image.

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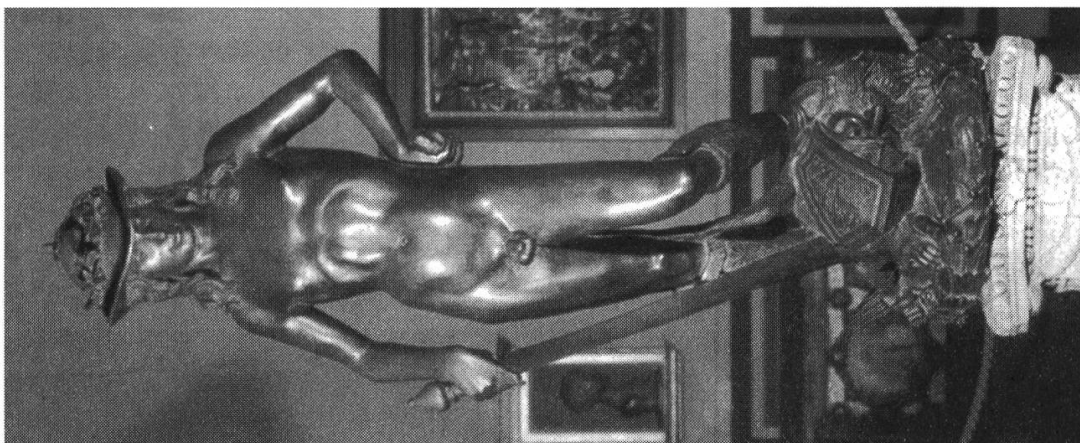


Figure 1. Donatello, *David*, 1430-1435
(Florence, Uffizi)

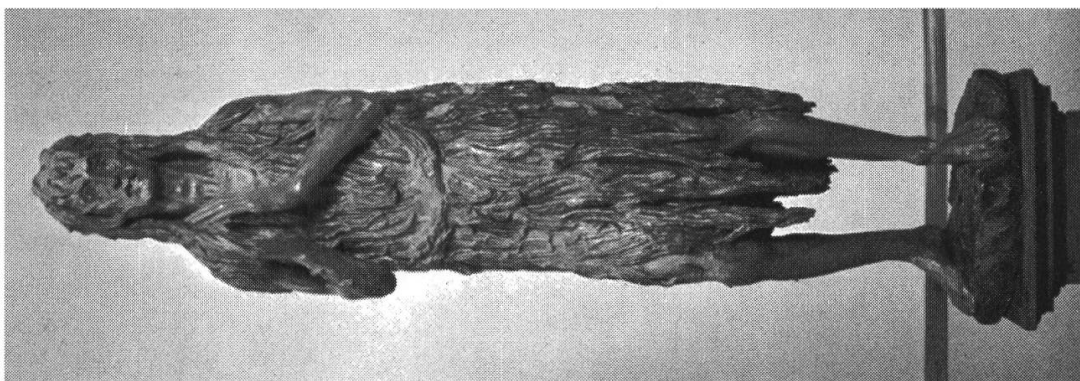


Figure 2. Donatello, *Mary
Magdalen*, ca 1440 (Florence,
Museo dell'Opera del Duomo)



Figure 3. Donatello, *St. John the
Baptist*, 1438 (Venice, Santa Maria
dei Frari)



Figure 4. Ludovisi Sarcophagus, 251 (Rome, Museo Nazionale)

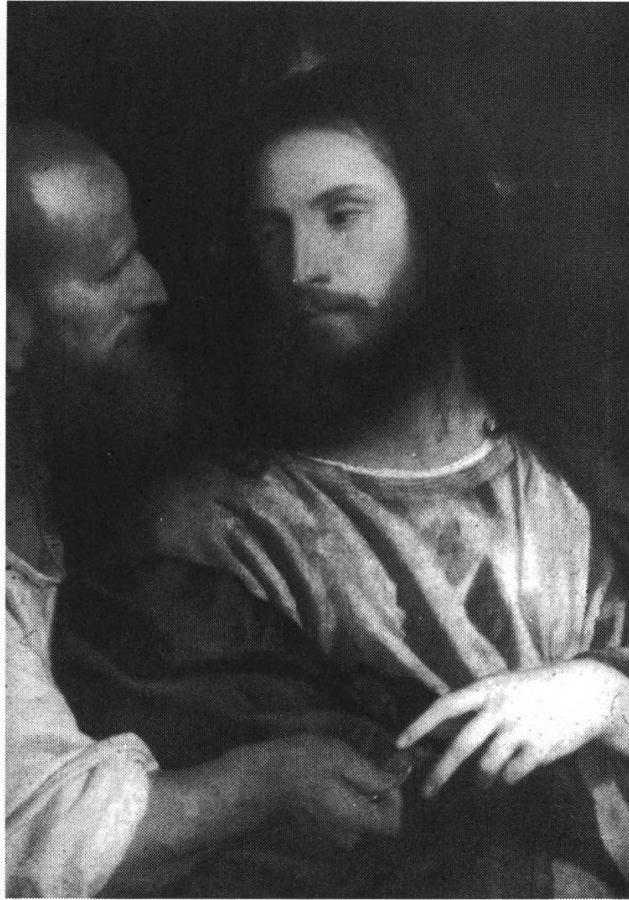


Figure 5. Titian, *Tribute money*, ca 1516 (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie)

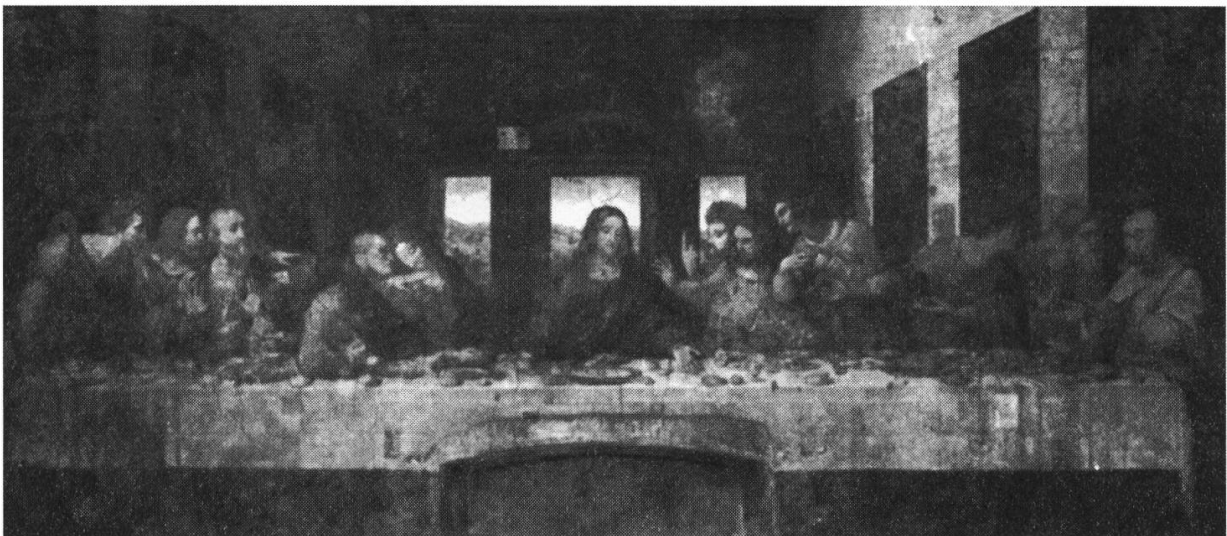


Figure 6. Leonardo, *Last Supper*, detail, 1495-1497 (Milano, Santa Maria delle Grazie)

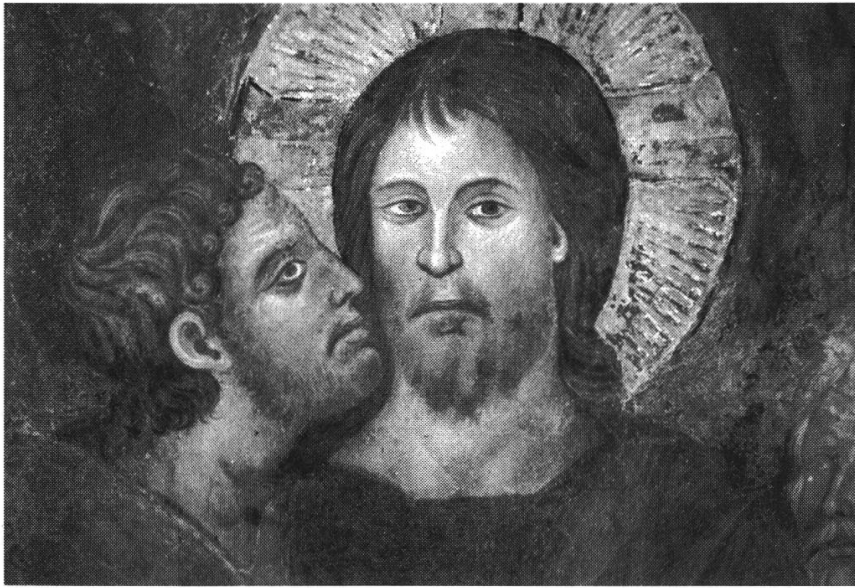


Figure 7. Maestro della cattura, *Christ's Arrest*, detail, end of the XIIIth cent. (Assisi, St. Francis)



Figure 8. Giotto, *Christ's Arrest*, 1305-1306 (Padua, Scrovegni's Chapel)



Figure 9. A. Mantegna, *St. Sebastian*, 1480 (Paris, Louvre)



Figure 10. H. Bosch, *The Pharisees leading Christ to the Crucifixion*, 1515-1516 (Gand, Musée des Beaux-Arts)

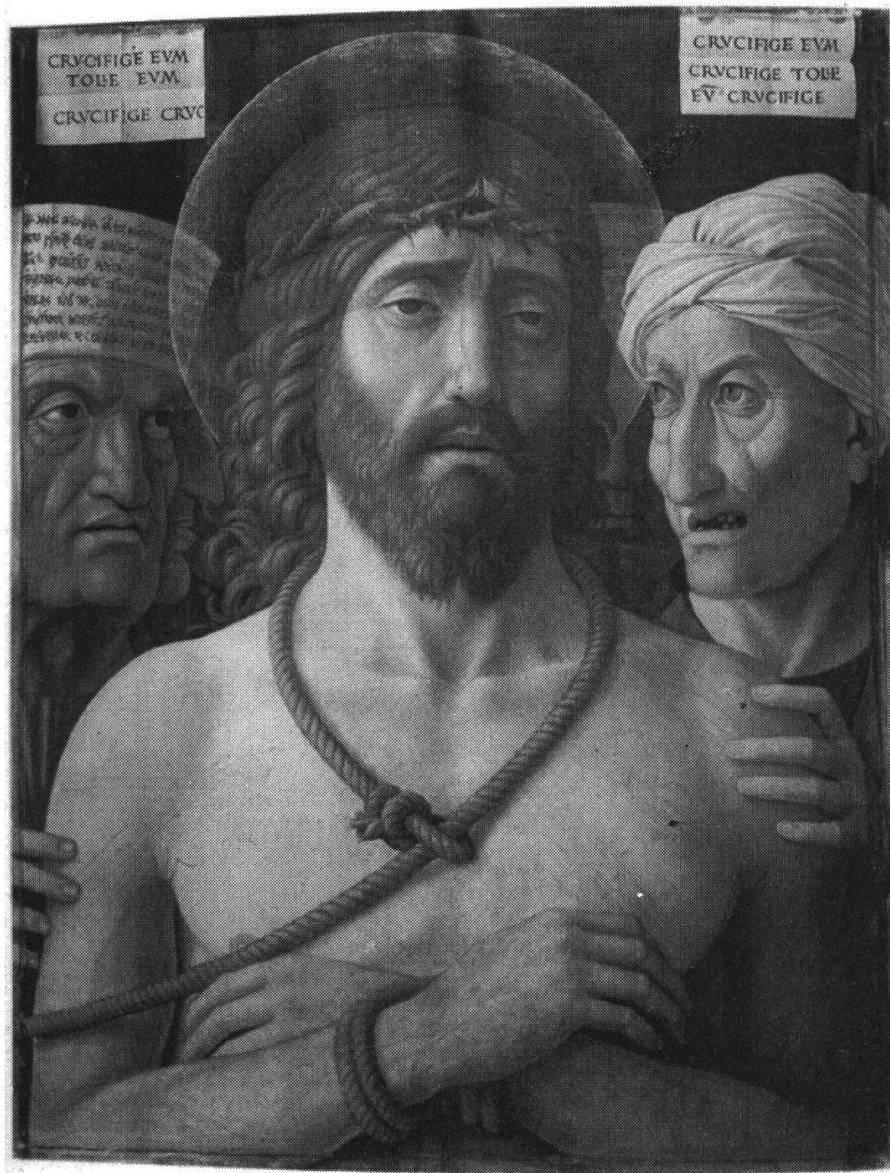


Figure 11. A. Mantegna, *Ecce Homo*, ca 1500 (Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André)