

# Mannerism

Mirror of Twentieth-Century European Intellectual History

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## Abstract

The twentieth century saw various opposing interpretations of Mannerism. The followers of modern art first sought to rehabilitate this art, which had been disdained for so long, by seeing it as a “proto-avant-garde” freed from the classical model. However, in a conservative and nationalist spirit, art historians made it a symbol of artistic decadence. After 1945, when Europe was in full reconstruction, Mannerism was seen as a truly European art that had enabled different nations to “speak” a same “language”...

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## Article

“Mannerist” art was long kept in a state of historic limbo. From Dolce to Lanzi as well as with Agucchi and Bellori, the vast majority of experts during the early modern period disdained the works of Pontormo, Rosso, Bronzino, or Salviati, whose work they saw as questioning the classical “perfection” achieved by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and especially Raphael. Nothing, or practically nothing, that had been produced in Italy between Raphael's death in 1520, and the moment when Annibale Carracci found the “path” of nature and classical models in 1590, found favour in their eyes. Contrary to what one might believe, this point of view was not abandoned during the nineteenth century, when history was elevated to the rank of a “science.” It was actually still largely shared by most European art historians: Burckhardt, Courajod or Wölfflin did not have words strong enough to describe the “wanderings errancies” of Mannerist art. It took until the early twentieth century for the works of Pontormo, Beccafumi, Rosso, and El Greco to be considered in a positive light.

This change in perception of Mannerist artists was especially owing to the deconstruction of the classical canon undertaken by Picasso, Matisse, and Kandinsky. First, Max Dvořák (1924) recognized in El Greco a proto-expressionist artist, a “clairvoyant” whose spiritual and non-rational painting responded to the materialist crisis troubling Renaissance society. El Greco was, for the Viennese art historian, a brother in arms of the avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century, and his art announced some of the most radical formal inventions of early modern art (dissolution of the figure, free expression of colour). At the same time, Walter Friedlaender also referred to the transformations of the art of his time, and saw in the art of Beccafumi, Parmigianino, Pontormo, and Rosso an essentially anticlassical movement. For him Mannerist art was marked by the absence of perspective, the abandonment of the natural model, and more generally by the rejection of all principles of classical art (symmetry, harmony, moderation, order, etc.).

Although this rehabilitation had a certain resonance during the 1920s and 1930s, it nevertheless did not immediately impose itself, far from it. During the first half of the twentieth century, most art historians continued to spread the notion of a decadent and even degenerative Mannerist art. In France for example, Mannerist art was seen as being “convoluted” (Michel), “sterile” (Babelon),

“bland” (Durrieu), “with neither soul nor mind” (Schneider), and “complacently indeterminate” (Réau). Moreover, in many respects it even appeared to be dangerous. In fact, for many interwar historians of French art (Vitry, Babelon, Réau, Michel), this art, which was introduced into the court of Francis I by the Italians Rosso, Primaticcio, and Niccolò dell'Abbate, was deeply “foreign,” and in their opinion corrupted the “profound nature” of French art, which consisted of balance, moderation, and realism.

This vision of Mannerist art, however, was not the prerogative of only of French criticism. In Germany, beginning in the 1930s followers of an official art history (Wilhelm Pinder) established a parallel between the “anticlassical” and “expressionist” aesthetic of Florentine Mannerism and the Berlin, Munich and Vienna avant-garde, which was consequently associated with what would be called a “degenerate art” (*entartete Kunst*). Most art historians that had worked on Mannerism incidentally fled Nazi Germany to take refuge in England (Antal, Hauser) or the United States (Friedlaender, Panofsky).

In the aftermath of World War Two, the field of ruins that was Europe favoured an entirely different reading of Mannerist art. Not only did the inventiveness, singularity, and virtuosity of these works appear as so many values to be looked to in reconstructing Europe, but the transnational aspect of this artistic *lingua franca* of the sixteenth century (Zeri) also seemed to represent a remedy for the xenophobic, racist, and nationalist discourse on which the art history of the first half of the twentieth century had thrived. That Mannerist art was able to triumph in Italy, Spain, England, Bohemia, France, and Flanders seemed to prove that, through history, that it was possible to share the same artistic culture. This, at any rate, was what the 1955 exhibition organized in Amsterdam, under the auspices of the Council of Europe, affirmed in its title: *The Triumph of European Mannerism: From Michelangelo to El Greco*. It was also what Gustav René Hocke asserted when he proposed the idea of a Mannerist foundation for European art in his work *Die Welt als Labyrinth* (1957). The term “Mannerism,” which was in vogue, could designate both the art of the sixteenth century, as well as an ahistorical style (Hoffmann, 1955).

The relatively undifferentiated use of the term prompted a certain number of art historians to examine it critically. In 1961, on the occasion of the Congress of the International Committee of the History of Arts (CIHA) held in New York, two Anglo-American art historians, John Shearman and Craig Hugh Smyth, both argued for a recontextualization of the notion by confronting Mannerist works with the the artistic discourses that flourished during the sixteenth century. Shearman published a book based on this exploration, *Mannerism* (1967), in which the term “Mannerism” is essentially used to characterize the virtuosic, graceful, refined, and elegant art of Parmigianino, Vasari or Giambologna, an art *di maniera* that stood out through its “stylish style”. Hugh Smyth offered a detailed analysis of the artistic processes of Mannerist artists, which prompted him to divide the Mannerist period into a number of phases. This joint effort toward contextualization had the effect of dissociating historical study from any critical consideration—history no longer serving, to all appearances, as a substrate for the historical debates of the present. Yet as Henri Zerner has observed, this “objective” viewpoint of history consisted, to put it shortly, of interpreting Mannerism through the prism of Vasari's writing, and also had the effect of transforming Mannerism into an art *for art*. Yet as Antonio Pinelli, André Chastel, Daniel Arasse, and Patricia Falguières noted beginning in the decades between 1970 and 1990, Mannerist art was not disconnected from the political, cultural, and religious realities of its time, but was rather an art dedicated to amazement and *glorification*, hence its eminently rhetorical character. In order to fully understand Mannerism, it is therefore important to accept its different interpretations, without for all that neutralizing them.

This “dialectic” approach, which is still broadly present today, is no less indebted to the thought of its time, as was for example the “Expressionist” approach of Dvořák. By calling for a stronger link

between awareness of the present and the reconstruction of the conditions of emergence, late twentieth-century art historians are engaged in a fully “post-modern” (Lyotard) deconstruction of meta-narratives.

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