

# Prints and paintings.

## A note on the use of Andrea Mantegna's Entombment print

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### Introduction

The *Entombment* (oil on panel, 43.7 x 48.4 cm, c. 1475–1500, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, fig. 1) was tentatively attributed in the Bonnefantenmuseum catalogue to a 'follower of Andrea Mantegna, Bernardino Parenzano?' a painter born in Parenzo, Istria, and active in Mantua and Padua in the second half of the fifteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The few works on panel by Parenzano or Parenzo that survive, display a rather unusual style with a love of detail and outline and characteristic bare skeletal landscapes in gloomy greys.<sup>2</sup> These works are stylistically quite different from the *Entombment*. Attempts at an alternative attribution so far place this painting no more accurately than North Italy in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This is supported by the technical data. The panel consists of one plank, probably poplar. It is prepared with a single-layer gesso ground covered with a lead white priming layer. The binding medium is presumably walnut oil.<sup>4</sup> The attribution however, will remain a topic for further study.<sup>5</sup>

In this article we will focus on another aspect namely the origins of the scene the artist has depicted. Looking at the painting it immediately becomes clear that the *Entombment* can be divided in two parts: the charming landscape and the dramatic figure group in the foreground. The reasons for this stylistic disparity might become clearer if any evidence of the development of the composition could be found. As the underdrawing, if present, could provide important information for our research, such as various hands at work or the use of transfer methods, infrared reflectography (IRR) was performed. And indeed, IRR of the *Entombment* revealed some remarkable features which assisted in clarifying the stylistic as well as the iconographic disparity in our painting.<sup>6</sup>

### The design

#### The Spolvero

In the infrared reflectogram two styles of drawing can be distinguished. The landscape is sketched freely with simple lines and bold strokes, with all the characteristics of a freehand drawing (fig. 2). In contrast the figure group shows an extensive underdrawing, with every detail carefully delineated (fig. 3). Closer examination revealed that most of the lines consist of fine dots, evidence of the so-called *spolvero* technique used to transfer a design to the painting support (fig. 4). This technique involved piercing the outlines of a cartoon (a drawing on the same scale as the painting, sometimes extremely elaborate) or other guide with a sharp instrument. Some treatises recommended placing the paper or parchment on some kind of support, to prevent the needle from going too far, risking large holes that might tear the paper. For this purpose, Cennino Cennini recommends, in his treatise *Il Libro dell'Arte*, the use of a piece of canvas or cloth or, even better, a poplar or linden board.<sup>7</sup> Then the 'pricked' cartoon was placed on the wall, panel or canvas, and black powder, charcoal or other finely ground black pigment, was dusted through the holes using a pounce bag made of a cloth such as linen whose open weave allowed the powder to pass through. Before the actual pouncing, the verso of the sheet might be lightly sanded to make sure that the paper or parchment rim around each hole would not catch any of the black powder, especially when the pricked cartoon was to be used more than once and on both sides.<sup>8</sup> Leonardo states in one of the very few remarks on the method to be found in contemporary documents: 'and then you *spolverezza* [pounce] and finely *profilla* [outline] your drawing.'<sup>9</sup> And indeed the pouncing would result in dotted lines, which then were traced with black chalk or a fluid medium such as ink. The technique was invented for the transfer of ornament motifs in embroidery and, until the 1430s, was used in the replication of brocade patterns on polychrome sculpture.<sup>10</sup> Cennini mentions the technique as



fig.1 *The Entombment*, oil on panel, 43,7 x 48,4 cm  
Bonnenfantemuseum Maastricht (on loan from Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage).

a way to copy the patterns in gold brocade by using so-called *spolverezzi* — small pieces of parchment or paper with a pricked decorative pattern that could be pounced on either side.<sup>11</sup> Although technically similar, the use of *spolverezzi* in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries for the repetition of decorative motifs is still some way from the application of *spolvero* as an aid in the transfer of figure compositions at the design stage, as seen from the 1430s onwards.<sup>12</sup>

The experiments of fifteenth century painters with perspective, foreshortening and complex compositions required more detailed drawings and more accurate transfer methods as part of the design process. Within the workshop the *spolvero* might be one stage of the process of ‘*invenzione*’, the creation by the artist of a new design. On the other hand, it could be used to copy an existing composition — drawing, print or painting — from another master.<sup>13</sup> Renaissance painters’ workshops often possessed reference material — compositional drawings, decorative patterns, motifs and so on, which could be used again and again in different works. By the end of the fifteenth century, the *spolvero* technique was widely used, especially in mural painting and to a lesser extent in easel painting, for the transfer of an original composition as well as for copying works or motifs by other artists. The possibilities were unlimited, as the *spolvero* could be used repeatedly, partially or reversed. Artists often made secondary cartoons for repeated use; translucent paper could be used to trace the lines, which then could be pricked, saving the original. Or, as recommended by Armenini in his treatise *De veri precetti della pittura* (1586), the original cartoon was pricked while placed on another paper sheet, creating a secondary cartoon used for the actual transfer, which would save the original from over-use and smudging, and preserve it as reference material.<sup>14</sup>

Masters shared the patterns and cartoons with their assistants, and there were exchanges between workshops. After the master’s death, these materials often remained in the workshop, and his successor continued to use them. Prints could augment the range of reference material available, and it is not surprising that inventories of artist’s studios often list large numbers.<sup>15</sup> Leonardo describes the use of the *spolvero* for transferring a drawing made on a glass sheet. The glass was placed between the painter and his subject, which was then portrayed. The drawing on glass could be traced onto transparent paper and then ‘*spolverizzalo sopra buona carta*’ [pounce it on good paper], then paint it.<sup>16</sup>

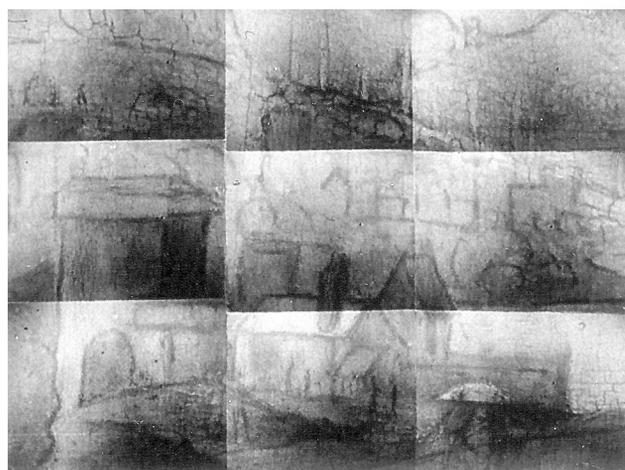
For large cartoons, several paper sheets were glued together, as in Raphael’s cartoon of *The Virgin and Child with John the Baptist* (National Gallery of Art, Washington), which shows the drawn lines pricked for transfer to panel (Musée du Louvre, Paris). Some artists, such as Leonardo and Michelangelo, used specialist paper-makers to prepare large cartoons — to cut and flatten the sheets and paste them together.<sup>17</sup> Fragmentary cartoons of single figures or motifs could also be pricked and transferred, assembling them in a new composition. For smaller scale easel paintings, a single-sheet cartoon might suffice for the whole composition — for example a standard sheet size, a *foglio reale Bolognese*, measured 44.5 x 61.5 cm.<sup>18</sup> Thus the figure group in the *Entombment* could have been transferred as a whole, using just one cartoon/sheet.

The reflectogram of the *Entombment* shows how all the outlines of the cartoon used for the figure group were extensively pricked. Each fold in the drapery, each line in the faces, was pricked with great care. It is quite remarkable that the pouncing marks are so prominent in the infrared reflectogram, as one would have presumed that charcoal dust (most often mentioned in treatises) was used; this would have left less well-defined traces, as the pattern would usually have been rubbed away by the artist’s hand while tracing the lines on the panel in ink or black chalk. Also, to prevent any contamination of the subsequent paint layers, any remaining charcoal dust was removed. The use of feathers was recommended by Cennini: ‘Then take a small bundle of those feathers, and sweep the charcoal from the drawing...’<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, a soft and moist piece of bread would thoroughly clean the sheet of any leftover dust.

In the *Entombment* only some of the dotted lines seem to have been traced with a liquid medium such as black ink or paint applied with a fine brush. Perhaps the *spolvero* was made with a fluid medium brushed or stamped through the holes, which means that the dots would have been fixed on the absorbent gesso ground, making detailed tracing unnecessary.<sup>20</sup> Bambach mentions an example of the use of a fluid medium for pouncing, which resulted in sharply defined dots. She states that although this seems exceptional, ‘it may have been employed by painters more often than we realize.’<sup>21</sup> Alternatively the pouncing could have been done on the priming before the latter was fully dry. The black powder would adhere to the still slightly damp paint, resulting in clearly visible dots.<sup>22</sup>



**fig.3** Infrared reflectogram of the figures.



**fig.2** Infrared reflectogram of the landscape showing the freehand sketch.



**fig.4** Detail of the infrared reflectogram of Mary showing the dotted lines of the spolvero.



fig.5 Andrea Mantegna, *The Entombment*, engraving, 441 x 317 mm, Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow



fig.6 *The Virgin seated on clouds*, by Marcantonio Raimondi, after Raphael, anonymous copy first half sixteenth century Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow  
The outlines are pricked for transfer, front (A), back (B) showing the rubbed pouncing dust and detail (C).

### The origin of the design

The two stylistically different parts of the underdrawing in the *Entombment* indicate quite different sources. The landscape seems a product of the artist's imagination and, as can be presumed from its sketchy character, was probably applied freehand to the painting support without any preliminary design — unlike the figure group, which, as we have discussed above, was based on a detailed cartoon. The iconography of the scene, as well as the style of the figures, revealed that they were in fact derived from the famous *Entombment* print by Andrea Mantegna (fig. 5).<sup>23</sup> Mantegna (1431–1506), one of the most famous Renaissance painters was also one of Italy's earliest printmakers; his prints were extremely influential in fifteenth century Italy.<sup>24</sup>

The *Entombment* print presumably dates from the 1460s and is one of seven plates for which both design and engraving can be securely attributed to Mantegna.<sup>25</sup> Vasari describes in his *Life of Andrea Mantegna* (1550) how the latter left '...the method of engraving in copper imprints of figures, a truly unique convenience; through which the world could see not only the Bacchanal, the Battle of sea gods; the Deposition of the cross, the Entombment of Christ, the Resurrection with [Saint] Longinus and Saint Andrew, works of this Mantegna, but also the methods of other artists.'<sup>26</sup> Mantegna's prints must have reached a wide audience, as a relatively large number survive, as well as numerous fifteenth and sixteenth century copies by other printmakers. Many artists from diverse disciplines used motifs from Mantegna's *Entombment*; some twenty-five examples have been noted — our *Entombment* painting adds to the number. For example, Agostino Fondulo, a Paduan sculptor, used several figures in a terra-cotta *Entombment*; the painter Marco Zoppo repeated the group of three Holy Women in a drawing; and Garofalo, Raphael and Dürer also quoted from Mantegna's prints, introducing his motifs into their own works and re-working them in their characteristic styles.<sup>27</sup> The use of prints as cartoons is not uncommon. Several pricked prints survive, such as *Hercules and Antaneus* by a follower of Andrea Mantegna (Metropolitan Museum, New York)<sup>28</sup>, and *The Virgin seated on clouds*, by Marcantonio Riamondi, after Raphael (Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow) (fig. 6a–b). The measurements of the figure group in the *Entombment* panel and Mantegna's print correspond, as is shown by a tracing of the figure group taken from the painting that exactly fits the engraving. This points to the use of the original print or a substitute cartoon.<sup>29</sup>

At the time, the importance of the *invenzione*, the original creation, was considered differently. Artworks were seldom the work of a single hand but the co-operative products of a workshop. Apprentices were trained in the style of the master to achieve a certain uniformity in the workshop's output. Works of the great masters would be used for education and inspiration. Even Raphael and Titian 'borrowed' from other masters.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Italy, prints — certainly those of Mantegna — were considered independent works of art, to be displayed, valued and imitated.<sup>31</sup>

Copying existing drawings, prints or paintings by other masters was also an important part of apprenticeship. Cennini advises the beginner to copy the best things that could be found: '...make sure you always take the best and most famous...'<sup>32</sup> Leonardo states that drawing after nature is the best training, but that one should start practising by copying drawings by other masters, as long as these are made from nature.<sup>33</sup> A wide range of examples was available, as many famous art works were accessible in churches and other public buildings and there was a growing circulation of prints. As part of their training, young apprentices learned how to use these reference materials, how to make cartoons and how to transfer them to canvas or panel; techniques they often continued in their own studios.<sup>34</sup> Kristeller suggested, in his study of Mantegna, that the seven prints mentioned above were originally meant as study material for apprentices.<sup>35</sup> Although there is no conclusive evidence for this theory, prints, as we have discussed, were used as reference material in the workshop; and it would not be surprising if our *Entombment* began as an exercise by a talented young artist in training.

In the large renaissance workshops, cartoons were very important in allowing rapid production. The master — or his assistants — could replicate his original designs or combine motifs taken from other cartoons. Obviously, artists exploited these models in the most ingenious way, by using a part of a reference, by combining parts and adding some personal touch, or by inserting motifs into a new composition. Several surviving 'reference' prints demonstrate this practice; they are only partially pricked as the artist selected those motifs suitable for the composition he had in mind.<sup>36</sup>

In the *Entombment* only the figure group was taken from Mantegna's composition while a landscape background replaced Christ's tomb and the three crosses on Golgotha. It is not clear why the artist chose to do this, as it removes the figures from their iconographically more significant context. It may have been the demand

of a patron, or a way to create a 'new' composition. Perhaps the pastoral beauty of the landscape provided a powerful contrast to the painful scene of Christ's entombment. We should also note that there was a growing market for copies of works by important masters, and the reproduction of a strong image or as in our case the main part of a composition, taken from a well-known print, might readily have found a buyer.

### Conclusion

Infrared reflectography revealed how the *spolvero* technique was used to copy and transfer a figure group taken from Andrea Mantegna's famous *Entombment* print to panel. The iconographically strong background of the print, however, showing Golgotha and the three crosses,

was replaced by rocks on the left — Christ's grave — and a gentle landscape background, which the reflectogram shows to be a freehand sketch. This explains the stylistic differences between the dramatic foreground scene and the landscape background. It does not necessarily mean that more than one painter was involved as artists often combined freehand sketches with cartoons in one work. Copying existing works by famous masters was also an established exercise for apprentices, and Renaissance workshops usually owned many prints and other models for this purpose.

A combination of technical and art historical research revealed some of the 'tricks of the trade' hidden in this small beautiful painting, possibly the work of a young painter who translated a print into paint, and did so brilliantly.

### Notes

1 C.E. de Jong-Janssen, D.H. van Wegen, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings in the Bonnefantenmuseum*, (Maastricht, 1995), 72.

2 The size of Parenzo's oeuvre is not well-defined. There is only one signed panel by Parenzo depicting a *Way to Calvary*, now in the Galleria Estense in Modena. For more on Parenzo: A. De Nicolo Salmazo, *Bernardino da Parenzo*, (Padova, 1989); H. Chapman, *Padua in the 1450s: Marco Zoppo and his Contemporaries*, [exh. catalogue, British Museum] (London, 1998), no. 24.

3 K. Christiansen (Curator Italian art, Metropolitan Museum, New York) points at Bolognese painting of the late 15th century, especially Francesco di Francia (Bologna, 1450–1517), see *Bonnefanten Museum Catalogue*, 72. G.J. van der Sman suggests 16th century Venetian painting, Bookreview, *Incontri*, 11 (1996), 33. Yet, the colour scheme as well as the background could also point at the Ferrara school (discussion with Peter Black, Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow and Aidan Weston-Lewis, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh).

4 Data are based on research prior to conservation in 1991–2 by Sandra Weerdenburg (Limburg Conservation Institute, SRAL). We thank Arie Wallert

(Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) and Klaas Jan van den Berg (Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage) for further investigation of paint samples (2004). P/S ratio of the binding medium is 2.4 making it very likely that it is walnut oil.

5 The authors are preparing an article on the attribution combining results of the scientific analyses (see note 4) with art historical research.

6 Sandra Weerdenburg is indebted to Anne van Grevenstein, Karin Groen, and Kees Schreuder who supervised the technical research for the conservation treatment (part of her training at the Limburg Conservation Institute, Maastricht, SRAL, 1991). The authors thank Prof. Dr. J.R.J. van Asperen de Boer who performed the principal IRR research (1991) with Sandra Weerdenburg (Nikon F 601-M camera with Nikon Micro-Nikkor macrolens). They also thank Peter van den Brink and Margreet Wolters for digital IRR images using SRAL equipment (Hamamatsu C2400 03d camera with a N2606 vidicon, a Nikon Micro-Nikkor 55 mm objective, with a Kodak Wratten 87A black filter).

7 Cennini Cennini, *Il Libro dell'Arte*, F. Brunello ed., (Vicenza, 1982), Cap. CXXII, 144.

8 C. C. Bambach, *Drawing and Painting in the Italian Renaissance Workshop*, (Cambridge, 1999), 58.

9 C. Pedretti, *The Literary works of Leonardo da Vinci*, compiled and edited from the original manuscripts by Jean Paul Richter: commentary, (Oxford, 1977), 2 vols., 1, 365–366. See Bambach 1999, 78, note 287.

10 Bambach 1999, 223–4.

11 Cennini [Brunello 1982], Cap. CXXI, 143–44. See Bambach 1999, 143–145; interpretation of Cennini's *spolverezzi*. Cennini's description concerns brocade depicted in *sgraffito* a technique in which gilding was covered by a paint layer which was then scratched away, revealing a gold pattern.

12 Bambach 1999, 16; describes how *calco*, a technique in which the verso of a drawing/design was rubbed with charcoal or black chalk powder, the lines then being traced with a stylus, became more popular by the end of the fifteenth century as it was less laborious than *spolvero*. Often the techniques were combined, depending on the design.

13 Bambach 1999, 32.

14 G.B. Armenini, *On the true Precepts of Painting*, ed. E. Olszewski, (Burt Franklin & Co, 1977), 174.

15 D. Bomford ed., *Art in the making. Underdrawing in Renaissance Paintings*, [exh. cat. National Gallery] (London, 2002), 43–46.

16 Leonardo Da Vinci, *Trattato della pittura* (Cod. Urb. Lat. 1270, Biblioteca Vaticana), M. Dotti

Castelli ed., (Colognola ai Colli, 1997), no. 87, 69.

17 See M. Hirst, 'I disegni di Michelangelo per la battaglia di Cascina', in *Tecnica e Stile: esempi di pittura murale nel Rinascimento italiano*, vol. 1, (Milan, 1986), 46; K. Frey, 'Studien zur Michelagnoli Buonarroti und zur seiner Zeit', *Jahrbuch der Koniglich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, XXX (1909), 129.

18 S. Fermor, *The Raphael Tapestry Cartoons*, (London, 1996), 47.

19 Cennini [Brunello 1092], Cap. CXXII, p. 127.

20 Bambach 1999, 80, note 304. Reconstructions in the SRAL studio using a fluid material proved very difficult. Bambach describes how the artist seems to have dragged a loaded brush over the holes.

21 Bambach 1999, 76, and note 275.

22 Bomford 2002, 64. Here this is suggested for a painting by Vincenzo Foppa.

23 The authors are indebted to Dr. J.-M. Massing (Cambridge University) who identified the use of the print while viewing the painting during conservation; and to K. Christiansen for information on the print.

24 *The Illustrated Bartsch*, M.J. Zucker, *Early Italian Masters*, 25, (New York, 1984), 73–85.

25 See Zucker 1984, 79, for the date of the *Entombment* as well as for the description of the seven

prints.

**26** G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*,

ed. 1550, L. Bellosi, A. Rossi eds., (Turin, 1991), 492–96. Zucker 1984, 73–83.

**27** Zucker 1984, 84–5. For Garofalo see A.M. Fioravanti Baraldi,

*Il Garofalo Benvenuto Tisi Pittore*

(c.1476–1559), General Catalogue, (Rimini, 1993), nos. 140–141.

**28** Bambach 1999, 118–122, figs. 112–113.

**29** Measurements of the print are 33.2 x 46.8 cm. (1st state Vienna, Albertina; 4th state London, British Museum), see Zucker 1984, 79–85. We thank Ingrid van Rooy, Bonnefantenmuseum, for making the tracing.

**30** B. Cole, 'Titian and the idea of originality', in *The Craft of Art. Originality and industry in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque workshop*, A. Laddis, C. Wood eds., (Athens, Georgia, 1995), 86–113. See also Bambach 1999, 81–126, on the traditions of copying in the Quattrocento.

**31** D. Landau and P. Parshall, *The Renaissance Print*, (New Haven and London, 1994), 65–90;

on the development and status of printmaking in Italy.

**32** Cennini [Brunello 1982], Cap. XXVII, 27–8.

**33** Da Vinci [Dotti Castelli 1997], 67.

**34** Bambach 1999, 29–32.

**35** P.O. Kristeller, *Andrea Mantegna*, (London 1901), 427–28.

**36** Bambach 1999, 121–122.