

In Search of a Definition

Three books on Mannerism

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There are some advantages in reviewing these three books together, but because of their different intentions it is not easy to make direct confrontations. Würtenberger aims to encompass all the visual arts and all European countries, and his is a substantial volume.¹ Briganti's² and Smyth's³ books both deal only with Italian painting of this period, but their format, style and intended audience are as different as can be.

Würtenberger's book has no beginning and no end: it gives the appearance of a number of notes on various *cinquecento* events roughly grouped together without much thought for continuity or consistency. The reader is never given an explanation of his use of the difficult term 'Mannerist', and, if we take the view that the whole book is a definition, then this definition is subject to the same flaws as the book. But it seems that almost anything that occurred in the *cinquecento* is apt to find its way under one of the author's file-headings, with no apparent selective process; extravagant claims are made, phenomena are described as 'new' with monotonous inaccuracy and we find the exceptional constantly raised to the characteristic. So often some happening is described as Mannerist when it simply occupies a position in the *cinquecento* mid-way between and logically related to earlier and later parts of the same pattern: for example, artists live in grand houses, create their own mortuary chapels and so on—but this began with Mantegna and continued with

Rubens. Often the 'novelty' claimed for some observed fact is subject to an error which is more than chronological. The author states that the 'new type of architect', the Mannerist one, is typically not an architect by origin; but what is to be made of this if one reflects on the careers of Brunelleschi, Alberti, Bramante, Sansovino, Raphael, Bernini, or, indeed, Wren? Moreover he tends to make distinctions by making false statements about other periods: El Greco, here styled as a Mannerist, conceives figures already draped, but

Leonardo, Raphael or Parmigianino first prepared drawings of the nude figures as a framework for the composition and only added the drapes when actually painting the picture.

This is nonsense. The carelessness of thought is well illustrated by the observation, *apropos* of the social status of Mannerist art, that it was not bought by farmers (p. 34)—an observation that would have meaning only if it could be shown that non-Mannerist art of the *cinquecento*, for example Titian's, was bought by farmers; but as Dolce remarked, 'So ben io che di aver ritratto o altra pittura di sua mano si possono vantar pochissimi plebei'. One must also protest against the elevation of his heroes at the expense of the non-Mannerists (such as Titian), for example in the remark (p. 6) that the latter were 'innately calmer, more traditionally-minded'.

Mannerism as described by Würtenberger is so anthropomorphic that it is capable of volition and, apparently, evasive action; we are told of 'the comprehensive mission to which Mannerism laid claim', or that 'Mannerism was in a very critical situation, historically speaking'. One of the first things we must understand about Mannerism is that it is an 'ism' that never existed

in this sense. The author tends to deal with texts in the same way and without any sense of chronology. Thus Lomazzo's *Trattato* is described as a 'comprehensive treatise on Mannerism' (a word Lomazzo had never heard, but in any case the *Trattato* is not *about* a movement of any kind). The complex rationalizations of the end of the century on the *idea* and so on by Zuccaro as well as by Lomazzo are projected back over the whole century as if they guided the brush of Parmigianino and his contemporaries.

The inconsistencies will puzzle and finally irritate the general reader. Antonio da San Gallo is called one of 'those architects who . . . kept apart from the Mannerist mentality', yet his design for St. Peter's, Rome, is used four pages later to illustrate a typical Mannerist façade. Palladio is cited as a non-Mannerist, but his Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza, is pressed into service as an example of a Mannerist vista. On page 9 'Titian and Veronese . . . cannot be counted as Mannerists', but on page 139 Veronese's illusionism is scooped into the net, and even Titian was a Mannerist when he painted pictures for himself (p. 167).

The subjectiveness of Würtenberger's analyses may be gauged from one example in which he draws similarities between the Escorial and Brueghel's *Death of the Virgin*. The improbability of his claims can be seen in the statement:

The Mannerist architect concentrated on the ground plan, i.e., he began it with a mental conception freed from the structure of the building. Owing to this procedure strangely inconsistent and tormented forms were produced when the edifice was actually built.

His inaccuracy is well illustrated in his carelessness over names ('Nanni Ungliero' for Unghero), and in his

¹ Franzsepp Würtenberger, *Mannerism*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1963 (first edition *Der Mannerismus*, Verlag Anton Schroll, Vienna, 1962), £6 10s.

² Giuliano Briganti, *Italian Mannerism*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1962 (first edition, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1961), £4 10s.

³ Craig Hugh Smyth, *Mannerism and Maniera*, published for Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, by J. J. Augustin, Locust Valley, New York, 1963, \$4.80.

observations that 'Michelangelo took up the theme of Leda in a drawing' (he made a painting), that Parmigianino's figures in the Steccata carry baskets on their heads (they are actually vases), that the Brills invented the small landscape inset into decorative schemes (this had been done already by Perino in Castel Sant'Angelo, by Niccolò dell'Abbate in Palazzo Poggi and by Barocci in the Casino of Pius IV), that Rubens's works were displayed about 1600 in Mantua, Antwerp, Rome, London and Paris and in Germany and Spain, and that the designation 'Mannerists' was used for the followers of Michelangelo by the Carracci brothers. It is, to say the least, surprising to read that Brueghel's figures have little connexion with their surroundings, or that 'the Mannerists aimed at intensifying the relation between picture and spectator'.

The author's errors are multiplied by the translator. Thus we get 'Jacopo Barozzi, known as Barola' (Vignola, correctly, in the German edition) and 'Parma il Giovane'. Nonsensical passages abound, the result, presumably, of thoughtless use of the dictionary: torsos, especially female ones, cannot be 'emasculated figures' and irregular keystones are not 'bowdlerizations of individual shapes'. The ineptitude of rendering is often quite funny: 'The Roman Senate took a long time before it came round to Mannerist state halls'; and, while the author says of Bronzino's *Ugolino Martelli*: 'auf dem Tische liegt das neunte Buch der Ilias aufgeschlagen; im hintergrund steht die Statue des David von Donatello', the translator gives the sitter's name as 'Ugolino Martinelli', and says that 'on the table stands the statue of David by Donatello'.

The books by Briganti and Smyth, on the contrary, make a serious contribution to the subject. Briganti's is a fluent, indeed eloquent, expression of an attitude to the problem which is gaining ground among contemporary Italian scholars, though it is not in itself very novel: that is that Mannerism is a stylistic phenomenon reflecting a spiritual malaise induced by the catastrophic history of *cinquecento* Italy. Thus his terms of reference include ideas which by now are familiar, such as 'exacerbated stylism', 'exasperated formalism' and 'crisis'. Briganti first defines his field in this way, and then provides a readable and generally authoritative survey of Italian painting which seems to him to belong to it. Whether the reader agrees with the definition or not, the survey can cer-

tainly be recommended for its own sake.

The warm welcome which should be accorded to Briganti's *Italian Mannerism* does not preclude objections to some disagreeable features about it. He, too, is subject to at least one unnerving inconsistency, and that a crucial one in the present historiographical context. He calls Mannerists 'fundamentally anti-classicists', but a page later finds the 'anti-classical definition' a 'facile criterion'. He clearly means to be provocative, yet can only provoke a distrust as to the depth of his own reasoning. In frankly polemical vein he criticizes German scholars for 'interpreting Mannerism through a reversed historical perspective' under the influence of Expressionism. He then detects the influence of Surrealism, 'a tendency to see it as an anti-classical and anti-Renaissance movement, thus linking it to the "Eternal Gothic spirit"'. The terms of this argument barely conceal that chauvinistic complacency from which German criticism has always had difficulty in abstaining. Expressed like this, the objection, just as it may be, seems to disqualify itself. Now that Mannerism is becoming fashionable there is possibly more than a little pique caused by the fact that German scholars made most of the early running. It is noticeable that throughout the book Italian literature is digested much less critically than German; and more especially, as is done in so much contemporary Italian art history, any judgement of the *Professorone* is taken to be history itself, rather like Soviet adjustments of the history of the war. Briganti also contributes his share of errors and careless expressions: for example, the Cappella Capponi is not in S. Trinita; 1523 is the date of Rosso's arrival in Rome, not that of his departure; the Parmigianino in the National Gallery, London, was painted for San Salvatore in Rome, not for Città di Castello; Salviati's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Fig 1) is in the Uffizi, not the Palazzo Pitti, Florence, and belongs to the '40s rather than the '30s; and at the end there is a startling misunderstanding of Barocci—both of what he stands for and of the formation of his style. When we read that Ficino 'draws a parallel between Neoplatonic ideas and Mannerist forms', are we expected to believe it?

Smyth's little book contains the really original ideas and is the one that will worry us, in the best sense, the most. It is a thought-provoking book. The first thought, possibly an unworthy one, is that the book is justified solely by

its footnotes, for it is a reprint of a paper delivered to the New York Congress in 1961, which had already been published in the *Acts* of the Congress (but without the footnotes). The reader would be well advised to follow the author's hint and read the text independently of the notes, for there is often little connexion between one and the other: both are absorbing, but are mutually disruptive.

Smyth is disturbed, undoubtedly with good reason, by current notions of Mannerism and he means to communicate his disquiet to us; he also intends to clarify the problem and suggest a new basis for a solution. He doubts, finally, whether it is possible to start the whole discussion afresh, assuming that we will go on using the term in the wrong way but with the realization that it is wrong. There are some of us, however, who are less disposed to compromise and we will prefer his earlier return to first principles. Methodologically his introduction is admirable: he traces 'Mannerism' back to a word *maniera* used in criticism of the *cinquecento*, he tries to find out what it means and he suggests, on that basis, how we can define the qualities of a Mannerist work of art. He then switches direction and deduces from stylistic analysis a set of common denominators of the appropriate paintings; he calls these the 'hallmarks of *maniera*' and from them builds up a definition which, if one could agree with it, would be workable. This, I believe, is 'formalistic' criticism of the kind to which Briganti so much objects, while Briganti's approach is of exactly the arbitrary kind which Smyth seeks to avoid. Smyth documents his suggestions most elaborately, and the documentation in the notes is splendid and is now obligatory reading for specialists. The reader will find, I believe, only one impediment—a periodic obscurity of expression. There are sentences which make no sense at all ('In extremes the compositional units are the body's members—limbs, heads, torsos') and others in which the author's idea is so subtle that it has eluded him altogether ('In the interstices between volumes there are apt to be holes without positive value in the surface'); there are also passages of comical infelicity ('Lazarus was a ground-breaking figure', or 'it was around 1530 that the gathering of the *maniera* was stepped up'). In addition there are ill-considered quotations of texts, to which I shall return. It is clear, however, that all this arises from a scholar lacking in time rather than in conscientiousness.



1. *Adoration of the Shepherds* by Cecchino Salviati (1510–63). Oil on canvas, 85 × 108 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence

We may start our general review of the problem which these authors raise by noticing that each (not unnaturally) selects his illustrations to prove his general contention; thus it is instructive to read Smyth while referring to Briganti's plates, and vice versa, and then to refer both of these texts to Würtenberger's plates. There is the immediate conviction that something is wrong somewhere. In one sense Smyth and Briganti, unlike Würtenberger, immediately limit the validity of their arguments, which refer only to Italian painting, and cannot be extended to sculpture, architecture, or the minor arts (try Briganti's argument on the *cofanetto farnese* or on a Gerhardt, for example). It is arguable that the application of the term Mannerism to architecture is difficult, but it is not, I believe, impossible; on the other hand

it is surely an extreme view, even if it has one distinguished exponent, that there is no Mannerist sculpture. I think we cannot accept a special meaning of the term for Italian painting alone.

Briganti's case is the more vulnerable on other grounds. The deduction of a cause-and-effect relationship from the juxtaposition of developments in style and historical circumstances is, to use one of his own critical terms, facile. The scholar who takes this course ties himself to an inflexible chronological framework. Thus Briganti undermines his own position when he finds one of the earliest statements of Mannerism in Michelangelo's *Doni tondo*, for, if his argument works, the same result should be found in another work produced in the same historical context, such as Raphael's *Belle Jardinière*; and again, if we follow Briganti in this, an awk-

ward disparity exists between the early works of Beccafumi and those of Andrea del Sarto. There is really a chasm, which must be more carefully bridged, between an artist's style on the one hand and, for example, the frustration of papal ambition, the economic crises of individual states, the Reformation, or the loss of any number of battles on the other. The argument must also be reversible, that is to say that, if the general theory is propounded that such events *do* condition style, it must work at other times when the environmental conditions are similar. No doubt it can be argued that we are dealing with the reactions of individuals, but, if once this factor is admitted, it is time to ask whether there is any strength at all left in the argument, the strength of which depends upon rigidity, not flexibility (it

would be fair to add that Briganti has a conscience about determinism, but he keeps it firmly under control).

Even if these objections can be disposed of, there is a yet more serious flaw in the argument. It is necessary to be sure that an artist, while experiencing the 'desperate strain to which the human spirit was put by the various events and disasters' outlined by Briganti, would necessarily transpose all this into the work of art. Let us recall an animated discussion which took place at the New York Congress, during which it was stated that in times of strain a human being either went to pieces or pulled himself together. If the psychologists could settle this doubt in Briganti's favour it would then be necessary to discover whether, in the greater proportion of artists, the emotional state so induced was, in fact, closely reflected in their work. I have the impression it is not often so and there seems to be no clear pattern (I cannot see why there should be). In some cases, of course (the late work of Pontormo, for example), there does seem to be a meaningful connexion between a verifiable disturbance of mind and the resultant work; but in so many others the artists seem to keep their creative life effectively insulated from their personal joys, tragedies and crises. In any event, Pontormo's illness is not very useful as a yardstick unless it is seriously suggested that it was due to contemporary events. An approach to the problem of Mannerism similar to Briganti's was produced at the Congress in a most lucid paper by Frederick Hartt, and the case could not have been better argued. Some reading of this kind should be prescribed for all students since it seems to work like an inoculation, building up methodological antibodies.

Briganti's account of Mannerism is open to another kind of disagreement. In his plates he manages to assemble a remarkable collection of works which contain seemingly distraught figures; and if apparent tension is the qualification for a Mannerist work, then it is odd that one can illustrate it from works of art which no one in his right mind would call Mannerist: works by Donatello, Dürer, Andrea del Sarto, Lotto, Liberale da Verona, Bramantino, Butinone, or even Correggio. The supposedly hallucinatory expressions of the figures in what is called Early Mannerism (or some of it) are not likely to be conscious descriptions of rare traumas, for that stage in the history of physiognomic science had scarcely been reached. They belong rather to an in-

complete stage in the development of this problem, and the strangeness is the result of partially successful experiments in rivalling Leonardo, or in imitating such works as the *Laocöon* and the like. Some artists, such as Correggio, mastered the problem, some, like Foschi, never had the wits to do so, while others eventually discovered a fascination in the strangeness itself. There are also important cases where it can be shown that the tense expression of a figure is the direct result of the *influence* of Dürer and Donatello.

Moreover, it seems to me that in the attempt to justify his argument Briganti greatly exaggerates. There is a purple passage (pp. 11-2) in which he assembles examples of odd behaviour in Mannerist artists (as if it were restricted to them!) and dredges up matter as irrelevant as it is unsavoury: 'Cellini's autobiography with its endless boastings and extravagances' is not measurably different in these respects from Mussolini's; 'there was Lappoli . . . who fled half-naked from Rome to escape the mishandlings of the lansquenets'. This misleading sensationalism is carried over to his observations on paintings, such as the 'morbid deviations and expression of repressed but obsessive hedonism' which he detects in the Sistine Ceiling.

Smyth's case rests with equal weight upon his interpretation of the word *maniera* and upon the validity of his 'hallmarks'. Regretfully, neither is found to be convincing. The textual argument rests primarily upon a passage in Dolce's *Dialogo* (1557), from which it appears that a current term of abuse among painters was '*maniera*', that is, the bad practice whereby forms and faces are stereotyped ('*maniera, cioè cattiva pratica, ove si veggono forme e volti quasi sempre simili*'). Briganti, by the way, disagrees: 'For Vasari, Raffaello Borghini and other *cinquecento* writers, *maniera* in fact only meant the characteristic and indefinable feature of an artist's expression'. So does Würtenberger: 'in the first instance the Italian word *maniera* means nothing more than personal style'; but they can safely be left to digest Smyth's footnotes 26-37 or, *ad vocem*, the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*. It does seem certain that *maniera* was an absolute quality found in *cinquecento* works of art; the problem is to deduce from the context of a number of examples what it meant. The sense in which the word is used by Dolce, in the passage quoted by Smyth, is exactly matched in Vasari's criticism of Perugino's uniformity. Un-

fortunately this negative usage makes no sense of many more interesting passages in Vasari and other writers of the period where the word *maniera* is used to describe an entirely positive quality, apparently closely related to grace and accomplishment. Smyth also seems to be unaware that the word was used in this way of works of art in the *quattrocento*, or that Castiglione and Raphael implied the presence of this quality in antique architecture.

In general it seems that Smyth's quotations of, and references to, texts must be studied somewhat critically. Rather frequently the context of a chosen passage belies the significance he would like to attach to it. For example, footnote 11 provides three texts to buttress the assertion that the *cinquecento* was aware of a falling-off of quality. The first, from Pino (1548), is totally irrelevant, for when Pino says that art is not '*premiata come anticamente era*', he means literally *vis-à-vis* the age of Pliny and not the High Renaissance. In the second case also, this time from Dolce, the text will not support the argument, for Aretino is made to say simply that he fears that the level of Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian cannot be sustained, and it must be awkward for Smyth that Aretino selects Battista Franco, of all people, upon whom to fix his hopes. The third citation, from Armenini (1587), is perfectly justifiable, though the date is rather too late for the text to be helpful. Again, it is a mistake to equate Malvasia's 'washed-out' colour in the work of Mannerist artists with Vasari's '*dolcezza ne' colori unita*'. Vasari's phrase comes from his wonderful definition (probably the first) of colour harmony and is simply the language of a new era of taste, as valid for Venetian (and *seicento*) as for Mannerist painting. In the same passage Vasari specifically condemns the 'washed-out' effect, and no Mannerist painter of any distinction can be abused in this way.

To return to *maniera*: if we could agree with Smyth that the derogatory and rather rare usage of the term as 'routine procedure' was the prime source of the concept of Mannerism, one could then go on to examine his corresponding 'hallmarks'. The logic of the argument at this point is unshakable: if *maniera* means reduction to formula, the symbols that make up the formula should be enumerable. But few of these, it seems to me, would survive a critical test. His analysis of lighting in Mannerist paintings ('flat-lighting') is as misguided as are his

remarks about colour; the only example he quotes in the first instance (pp. 10-1) is Bronzino's *Borghese Baptist*, which has a raking light that certainly does not flatten the forms. None of the reproductions he uses shows a lighting system which was not in use in the High Renaissance. We read that the 'ground is habitually tilted upward, placing the rear figures higher', but this is not an accurate observation, either on the particular examples quoted or when applied to a general distinction between Mannerist and High Renaissance painting. Some of the characteristics of Mannerism which he cites summon up no particular kind of painting: 'Only a little less insistent is the inclination to juxtapose figures side by side, or tangent to each other'; or, 'Legs and arms are habitually bent'. Others work well within the limits of the examples chosen for illustration ('... the tendency to flatten figures parallel to the picture plane'). Then, finally, there are those which do have a validity which is apparent throughout the kind of work that Smyth selects, such as the love of twisting and foreshortened figures and of the bizarre and the elegant, the premium placed upon abundance of invention, the copiousness of *motifs*, the conquest of difficulty; but these, it must be said, are the ones that correspond least well to *maniera* in the sense of monotony.

The third section of Smyth's book contains a most interesting proposition: he quotes a mainly new category of sources (antique reliefs) to illustrate certain features of Mannerist style. The point is well chosen, well argued and entirely credible. The only possible criticism is that he overdoes it. While enthusiastically pursuing a discovery, he cannot see it in perspective and his remarks should be adjusted so as to give equal importance to antique sculpture in the round. It is, however, very satisfactory that the links between Mannerism and the past are being appreciated once more; and this even applies to the immediate past, since neither Smyth nor Briganti adheres any more to the idea of a dichotomy between Mannerism and High Renaissance.

To summarize this review is difficult. It is apparent from these three books (and from others, recently published) that historians are in disagreement over the definition of the term Mannerism. It may even be argued that we can get along very well without it, but at least it is clear that there is rethinking to be done before we pursue the subject further. The first necessity is not for

the definition itself, but for agreement on the method by which it is to be attained. This, it seems to me, is why Smyth's is the most important of these books. One may challenge his conclusions, but they are separable from his methodological process: he seeks a definition that is not arbitrary, but that is arguable.

The matter of plates must also be mentioned. Smyth's book is directed to specialists, but this is not a justification for such a poor standard of reproduction. The plates in Briganti's book are all in colour, and unusually vulgar they are, too; they represent, in most cases, objects of ravishing beauty, but here one cannot believe that they were intended to give pleasure (I have never seen a plate more undesirable than that of Pontormo's *Deposition*), and they generally share the sensationalism of the text (which they would illustrate less well if they were more realistic). It is a pleasure to be able to say that the illustrations chosen by Würtenberger are as excellent in quality as they are lavish in quantity; few of those in colour are intolerable and some are very good indeed. Moreover, of the illustrations in the three books, these plates alone cover the whole European phenomenon in all the arts and, whether by accident or not, most of what he selects is reasonably described as Mannerist, the choice being unbalanced only by the author's addiction to freaks.

If the reader likes Mannerist works of art and wants a decent collection of reproductions, Würtenberger's book is a good investment. Even the specialist may read it with profit for its collection of sometimes rare and often piquant information. If the reader wants to buy an enjoyable, stimulating and reasonably reliable account of Italian *cinquecento* painting, often held to be Mannerist, he should choose Briganti's book. If, however, he wants to be worried about the whole historical problem, then he will find no competition for Smyth's book.

FURTHER REVIEWS

Two Books on Country Houses

THE COUNTRY LIFE PICTURE BOOK OF COUNTRY HOUSES, selected by John Cornforth, with an introduction by Christopher Hussey, 1963, 18s.

ENGLISH COUNTRY HOUSES OPEN TO THE PUBLIC by Christopher Hussey and John Cornforth, 1964, 42s.

both published by *Country Life Ltd.*
Long ago, when the majority of stately

homes were still homes and not show-places, Mr. Christopher Hussey was penning his readable and accurate descriptions of the familiar and unfamiliar among them. It is no overstatement to say that, as a result of his painstaking labours, his name has become little less well-known than that of the National Trust, the body which has ensured that so many of these magnificent places remain more than mere names on the map. Mr. John Cornforth, with whom Mr. Hussey's name is associated in these two volumes, is a worthy disciple.

Both books, which contain pictures of both exteriors and interiors, are remarkably good value for money. Readers will find that the choice of subjects has not been confined to the over-publicized houses, and that the cheaper-priced contains no fewer than eight large colour-plates. While comment is limited in the one instance to brief captions, each of the mansions in the larger volume is the subject of a concise history as well as a wider pictorial treatment. Potential visitors will gain from this treatment a good idea of what lies in store for them but without having the element of surprise marred in any way.

Both books will take their place along with the lighter forms of travel literature for shortening long winter evenings. Not only will they serve for planning summer tours and visits, but memories of past enjoyments can be revived with them. As long as interest in such houses remains alive, and its present vitality is proved by the increasing numbers of visitors, then we have less need to despair at urban 'shoe-boxes' and other monstrosities which they will assuredly outlast.

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