



## Correggio (Antonio Allegri) (1494?-1534)

by Richard G. Mann

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One of the most innovative Italian painters of the sixteenth century, Antonio Allegri is usually called Correggio, after the small town in the Emilian region of Italy where he was born. One of the first artists to abandon the classical restraints of the High Renaissance, Correggio devised a highly original manner with many features that directly anticipate the Baroque style of the seventeenth century--including free and fluent handling of paint, illusionistic effects, and physical and emotional interaction with the spectator.

Correggio infused all of his figures--male and female alike--with an intense voluptuousness that transcends any limitations of gender. His depiction of exquisite androgynous youths has made him a favorite among gay male viewers in the modern era. The artist also challenged dominant conventions by celebrating the fusion of pain and ecstasy in altarpieces, such as *The Martyrdom of Four Saints* (about 1520, Galleria Nazionale, Parma).

### Correggio as Queer Icon

The queer appreciation of Correggio can be traced back to at least 1874 when the pioneering homosexual writer John Addington Symonds celebrated the "soft voluptuousness" of Correggio's figures in his book, *Sketches and Studies in Italy and Greece*. Given the sexual repression of the Victorian period, it is not surprising that Symonds avoided naming Correggio as a homosexual. However, his lavish commentary leaves little doubt about his understanding of the homoerotic implications of the Italian artist's pictures.

For instance, Symonds characterized the figures of seraphs and saints in the dome of Parma Cathedral as "among the most splendid instances of the adolescent loveliness conceived by Correggio" and further asserted that "in their boyhood and their prime of youth, they acquire a fullness of sensuous vitality and a radiance that are peculiar to Correggio." Among other prominent homosexuals in late nineteenth-century Britain, Oscar Wilde shared Symonds's admiration for Correggio's art, and he sought out his paintings during his trip to Italy in 1875.

The homoerotic qualities of Correggio's paintings have continued to be appreciated by gay viewers in recent decades. Thus, Charles W. Leslie, co-founder of the Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation, recently remarked that "When one looks at Correggio's *Christ Crowning the Virgin*, it is almost impossible to believe that the artist was not gay."

Frequently included in lists of famous gay historical figures, Correggio is among the fifty-two individuals whose name is recorded on *Into the Light*, the mural covering the dome in the Gay and Lesbian Center of the San Francisco Public Library. Furthermore, the overall conception of this trompe l'oeil painting by Mark



A portrait of Correggio (top) and three of his paintings (top to bottom): *The Adoration of the Magi* (ca 1517), *The Martyrdom of Four Saints* (ca 1520), and *Ecce Homo* (ca 1525-1530).

Evans and Charley Brown (1995-96) was ultimately inspired by Correggio's revolutionary fresco of the *Assumption* in Parma Cathedral.

### **The Heterosexualization of Correggio in Scholarly Writing**

Despite the intuitive recognition by gay viewers of the queer dimensions of Correggio's work, virtually all modern scholars--including glbtq historians--have maintained that the artist was exclusively heterosexual. For instance, in his influential account of representations of Ganymede, Saslow emphatically maintains that the homoerotic aspects of Correggio's paintings could have nothing to do with his own personality because he was married and fathered children. Such assertions overlook the fluid conception of sexual identity that prevailed in Renaissance Europe despite the harsh condemnation of sodomy. (Such assertions are also curiously naive, especially coming from gay scholars. After all, many of the most famous homosexuals of the modern era, including Wilde and Symonds, were also married and the fathers of children.)

To account for the homoerotic aspects of Correggio's work, scholars have resorted to a variety of unconvincing explanations. Some have dismissed the homoeroticism of his paintings as an unintended byproduct of such technical innovations as his delicate coloring and soft, atmospheric effects. Of course, this theory implies that the artist was a "gifted idiot," unaware of the impact of his creations.

More commonly, it is claimed that Correggio incorporated homoerotic elements into his work in order to appeal to the sophisticated tastes of aristocratic patrons. However, it is difficult to believe that all of the artist's clients (many of whom are unknown today) would have encouraged homoerotic imagery.

Saslow specifically associates the homoerotic qualities of Correggio's paintings with the influence of writers in the circle of Federigo II Gonzaga, Marchess of Mantua, for whom Correggio created some of his most famous mythological pieces. However, Correggio infused his paintings with homoerotic qualities long before he did any work for the Mantuan court. Furthermore, as Saslow admits, same-sex love was described primarily in derogatory and satirical terms in the poems and theatrical pieces at the Mantuan court.

The queer dimensions of Correggio's work have largely been overlooked by scholars who regard the sensuality of his images as a distinctive response to the needs of the emerging Catholic Counter Reformation. While these historians demonstrate the relevance of sexual desire to worship, they do not explain why Correggio would have infused his religious paintings with such strong homoerotic feeling.

Sixteenth-century critics seem to have had less difficulty acknowledging Correggio's deliberate transgression of gender boundaries than many modern scholars have had. Commentators of the period consistently used terms, generally reserved for women, to describe both the artist's work and personality. For instance, Vasari characterized Correggio's handling of forms as *morbido*--a word for soft that had strong implications of "womanly"--and asserted that this aspect of his painting reflected his gentle and withdrawn nature. The accuracy of Vasari's assessment of his character seems to be confirmed by the self portrait, included in *Madonna and Child with Saint Francis* (about 1515, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden).

Because there is so little evidence available about Correggio's personal life, it is not possible to establish his sexuality beyond doubt. However, the efforts of modern historians to distance him from the homoeroticism of his work are unconvincing. The exuberant and pervasive sensuality of his paintings suggests that Correggio fully appreciated the erotic attractions of both men and women.

### **Correggio's Origins and Early Career**

Many aspects of Correggio's early life are obscure, including the exact date of his birth, his artistic education, and the chronology of his paintings before 1519. He may have received his initial training in Correggio from his uncle, Lorenzo Allegri (d. 1527). However, the young Antonio seems to have been influenced more decisively by the achievements of such prominent artists as Leonardo da Vinci, Andrea

Mantegna, and Raphael. Although there is no documentation concerning Correggio's movements before 1519, it is generally thought that he must have taken extended trips during the 1510s to northern Italy and to Rome, where he could have studied major works by these artists.

A variety of stylistic influences are evident in *Christ Taking Leave of his Mother* (before 1514), one of Correggio's earliest certain preserved works. Basing the composition on a print by Albrecht Dürer, Correggio employed many distinctive features of the work of Mantegna, including simplified, volumetric shapes; vivid colors; and classical architectural features. However, Correggio moderated the firm contours, typical of Mantegna, through the subtle handling of chiaroscuro (dark/light effects), inspired by works of Leonardo da Vinci. A highly original aspect of the picture is the naturalistic landscape, which is infused with a tragic mood, complementing the theme.

The effects of chiaroscuro are still more pronounced in *Saints Peter, Martha, Mary Magdalene, and Leonard* (about 1515, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), in which Correggio also utilized Leonardesque *sfumato* (an Italian term referring to the "smoky" or hazy effects, used to soften contours) to soften the forms and to enhance the tender mood.

Correggio more fully defined his distinctive manner in the *Adoration of the Magi* (about 1517, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan). His appropriations from other artists are less apparent in this picture than in earlier works because he has synthesized them into a coherent whole. He creates a mood of intense religious feeling through the eloquent and vivid facial expressions, gestures, and poses. Shimmering effects of light enhance the appeal of the picture.

### **A Major Commission from Gioanna Piacenza**

In 1519, Gioanna Piacenza (d. 1524), Abbess of the Benedictine convent of San Paolo in Parma, entrusted Correggio with his first large-scale undertaking: the decoration of the salon of the convent. For this project, he devised an innovative and ambitious program. He painted the vault of the salon to resemble the trellises of a lush garden arbor, filled with playful putti. Taking into account the probable viewpoints of spectators, Correggio made the painted vault illusionistically convincing through the use of foreshortening and other devices.

In addition, on the upper part of the walls, he painted twelve lunettes with nude figures (primarily female), which represent mythological and allegorical themes. The ensemble is completed by the large, exuberant image of Diana on her Chariot, painted on the chimney piece. The full meaning of the program is still debated by scholars, but it certainly alludes to the power of women. This theme was of great importance to Abbess Gioanna, who repeatedly asserted her right to govern the convent without recourse to bishops or other male authorities.

The shimmering effects of light, fluid handling of paint, and glowing colors contribute to the sensual impact of the images. Most scholars insist that the erotic treatment of the figures simply accords with Renaissance conventions and has no relevance to the purposes of the program. However, it is possible that this aspect of the decoration would have had particular appeal for Abbess Gioanna and the other residents of the convent, who were rumored to practice "unnatural vices." Perhaps Abbess Gioanna selected Correggio for this project because of the same-sex eroticism already apparent in his pictures.

### **Religious Paintings of the 1520s**

The success of the San Paolo undertaking helped to secure Correggio's reputation, and he decided to establish his artistic practice in Parma, the most important cultural and economic center of Emilia. Documents indicate that Correggio was married (at an unknown date) and had fathered children (including at least one son and an uncertain number of daughters) before he moved his studio to Parma. However, both his wife and children remained in his native Correggio.

Correggio was very productive throughout the 1520s, the most successful decade of his career. For private clients, he created exquisitely beautiful, small-scale devotional pictures with both joyful and tragic themes, and he also fulfilled several major commissions from prestigious religious institutions.

The *Madonna of the Basket*, a small oil painting on wood (measuring only 33.7 x 25.1 cm., about 1524, National Gallery, London), well exemplifies the sweetness and intimacy of his depictions of the Holy Family. The Madonna and Child are placed extremely near to the picture plane, while a strong diagonal helps to lead the viewer into the background, where Joseph labors. The graceful, movements of the "wet" drapery folds on the pliant, curved bodies of the Virgin and Child enliven the picture and help to evoke the intensity of their mutual love. Further enhancing the sensual appeal of the picture is the shimmering light that infuses the delicate colors.

Employing many of the techniques evident in the *Madonna of the Basket*, Correggio seeks to arouse pity for the sufferings of Christ in *Ecce Homo (Presentation to the People)*, sometime between 1525-1530, National Gallery, London). The beautiful, androgynous figure of Jesus is pushed right up to the edge of the picture, so viewers become part of the crowd condemning him. Foreshadowing the sentimental depictions of the Passion by Guido Reni in the next century, Correggio's Christ responds to his persecution with a mood of gentle resignation. With an expression evoking both ecstasy and pain, the Virgin swoons in the left foreground.

From X-rays of the picture, it is apparent that during the course of execution, Correggio pushed Christ's bright pink cloak further back in order to reveal more of his radiant, porcelain-like body. Throughout the picture, Correggio applied the thick oil paint in a lush, fluent manner, which enhances the sensual allure of the beautiful, virtually nude figure.

Between 1520 and 1525, Correggio frescoed the dome, apse, choir vault, and nave frieze of the large, recently constructed church of San Giovanni Evangelista. In the dome, the *Vision of Saint John on Patmos* presents a sweeping panorama of the descent of Christ from the heavens. Through foreshortening and other devices, Correggio creates a remarkably effective illusion without recourse to a static perspective scheme. A mood of great spiritual excitement is created by the lively movements of the figures and by the light, bursting out from the center of the dome.

Saint John the Evangelist, seated at the base of the dome, gazes up at the figure of Christ, ringed by the beautiful nude figures of Apostles and angels on clouds. As numerous scholars have suggested, the poses of the Apostles and angels seem to have been derived from figures by Michelangelo on the Sistine Ceiling. However, the soft, shimmering flesh and playful--and even flirtatious--expressions distinguish Correggio's images from the solemn and aloof creations of Michelangelo.

In 1522, Correggio also won the commission to decorate the dome, apse, and choir vault of Parma Cathedral. Because the ongoing work at San Giovanni and other commitments delayed this undertaking, Correggio did not complete the dome until 1530. Although the dome is octagonal, Correggio created a soaring, seamless image of the Assumption of the Virgin into the heavens.

The illusionistic effects of San Giovanni Evangelista are remarkably intensified. Around the outer edges of the dome, Correggio painted a ledge, which seems a logical extension of the space of the cathedral; along this ledge, the Apostles stand in dramatic poses that convey the intensity of their responses to the events transpiring above them. The heavens are filled with a swirling mass of beautiful and radiant nude angels who carry the Virgin up into the heavens. The fluctuating light, infusing the heavenly scene, greatly contributes to the excitement of the fresco.

Although this bold project revolutionized the character of European dome decoration, the canons of Parma Cathedral were displeased with it, and they terminated Correggio's contract in 1530. The reasons for their

reaction have not been documented, but, according to an anecdote of the period, one of the canons described the dome as "a stew of frogs' legs." Most scholars suppose that conservative ecclesiastics would have regarded the virtual absorption of the Virgin into the congregation of nude angels as disrespectful. The intense homoerotic appeal of the angels may have further disconcerted church officials.

### **Mythological Paintings**

The explicit eroticism of Correggio's mythological paintings is unequalled in European art of his era. With the exception of the frescos in the Camara di San Paolo, all of Correggio's mythological paintings date from the 1520s. However, drawings reveal that he had been interested in mythological themes from the earliest stages of his career.

The arrangement of the figures in *Venus, Cupid, and a Satyr* (1524-25, Louvre, Paris) recalls Michelangelo's depiction of the *Temptation and Fall of Adam and Eve* in the Sistine Chapel. However, Correggio has emphasized the sensuality of the subject through his sinuous line, atmospheric color, and voluptuous modeling.

Commissioned by Federigo II Gonzaga, the series of four pictures celebrating the loves of Jupiter (Ganymede, Io, Danaë, and Leda) constitutes Correggio's best known and most dazzling ensemble of mythological subjects. The *Rape of Ganymede* (about 1525-30, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) was the first large-scale Renaissance oil painting of the subject. Correggio shows Jupiter, in the guise of an eagle, lifting the shepherd boy high above the lush blue-green landscape, while a dog jumps excitedly up toward his young master.

With his face encircled by soft curls, Ganymede gazes out seductively at the viewer, even as he embraces the eagle. The dark feathers of the eagle help to set off the glowing pink flesh tones of the youth, who is shown at a three-quarter angle with much of his backside visible. Wind blows the pink draperies away from Ganymede's smooth, radiant buttocks, so that these are fully exposed to the viewer. Jupiter's understandable attraction to the beautiful youth is revealed by the way that the eagle tenderly licks at the boy's wrist.

The early acknowledgment of Correggio's *Ganymede* as a quintessential representation of homoerotic desire is indicated by the numerous references to the painting in the proceedings, conducted by the Spanish Inquisition against the wealthy connoisseur Antonio Pérez (1534-1611) on charges of sodomy. During the lengthy trial (which lasted from 1579 until 1590, when Pérez escaped to France), his ownership of Correggio's *Ganymede* was repeatedly cited as proof of his inclination to commit homosexual acts.

### **Correggio's Final Years**

Little is known with certainty about the final years of Correggio's life. Apparently discouraged by the cancellation of his contract by the Cathedral, he closed his studio in Parma and moved back to his native town in 1530.

Subsequently, Correggio received no major public commissions, and it is generally assumed that his artistic output must have declined in quantity, if not in quality. However, the precise extent of his production during this period cannot be determined because many of his works are undocumented and, therefore, cannot be securely dated.

According to Vasari, the heat of the sun and unhealthy water provoked a sudden attack of pleurisy and a "raging fever," which killed Correggio. Whether or not this story is true, it seems likely that poor health contributed to the young artist's premature death on March 5, 1534.

### **Posthumous Reputation**

Correggio's transgressions of sexual and gender norms may help to explain why his art was largely overlooked during the most conservative phase of the Catholic Counter Reformation (lasting from about 1540 until 1590). However, his paintings were rediscovered around 1600 by Caravaggio and other pioneers of the Baroque, who borrowed many aspects of his highly expressive style.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Correggio was considered one of the most important European painters of all time. This high valuation of his work continued until the Victorian era, when his paintings came to be widely disdained as frivolous and immoral, although technically skilled. Nevertheless, during the late nineteenth century, Symonds and other prominent figures of the emerging gay subculture celebrated the splendors of his work.

Since the early twentieth century, Correggio has been largely ignored by the general public, although gay viewers have remained enthusiastic about his pictures. With his sensual and innovative manner of painting, Correggio deserves recognition both as a major Renaissance artist and as a queer icon.

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