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A NEW "MANTEGNA" FOR AMERICA · BY BERNARD BERENSON

THE purchase by Mr. Carl W. Hamilton of Mantegna's Judith (until recently in the Pembroke Collection) is an event which can leave no American lover of Italian art indifferent. Even if we did not know the painter of the masterpiece, we should not fail to recognize that it was one of the most complete and exquisite achievements of Greco-Renaissance design. It would be puerile to deny that its being by Mantegna makes a considerable difference. The name of a supreme artist is a key to treasures of admiration ready to be bestowed upon the work to which it can be attached. Our delight in this picture is multiplied by all that its author means to us already.

I can no longer understand how one came to doubt its being an autograph work by Mantegna.

Two and twenty years ago, when I first questioned this fact, I was hypercritical and in puerile dread of being duped by my instinctive enthusiasms. For my heart went out toward the cameo-like restraint, precision, and completeness of the work. But mental gregariousness pushed me into the camp of the Impressionists, and I became an apostle of their ideals and methods. I thought it was incumbent upon me to admire only stenographic processes of drawing, swagger brushwork, and dump hills of paint. Some day I shall recount the consequences of my misplaced propaganda, how I helped to infect the waters of the Danube with an infection which spread first to those of the Thames, and then to those of the Tiber.

To one who was valuing the art of the past from a crudely impressionistic standpoint, this Judith was necessarily anathema, and I spoke of it in a way of which I am thoroughly ashamed. The only shade of a feeble excuse under which I can attempt to find shelter, is that, unconsciously, I was influenced by the disagreeable aspect

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of the surface, when I saw the panel twenty-two years ago. A squalid varnish addled its color and clogged its line. When I saw it again the other day, after it had been cleaned, my heart leapt up at the purity and splendor of the pigments, and the gliding swiftness of the line.

My harshest words, however, were reserved for the interpretation, which I entirely misunderstood. In the three other versions of the theme due to Mantegna's mind, the heroine, as if gloating over her triumph, does not lose sight of the gory head until she herself has seen it put into the bag. In our version, she turns away with a look of lassitude and despair. I am led to wonder whether in this, his latest study of the subject, Mantegna had not come to see his heroine in some such light as Hebbel did. This dramatist, as we shall remember, lets his Judith realize how much more of a man Holofernes is than any of her own people, for whom she is going to sacrifice him, and allows her to fall in love with him before she slays him.

I am happy to find that eleven years ago at least, when I published my "North Italian Painters," I had already shaken off all doubt about its being an autograph work, and that I admitted it as a matter of course into the canon of Mantegna's works.

I admitted it as a late work. Writing as I am, away from my library and notes, I hesitate to be too precise about the dating. I should scarcely place it later than 1500, and perhaps not earlier than 1495.

This Judith is a complete expression of Mantegna's "Roman, pagan, imperial" genius.



MANTEGNA: JUDITH WITH THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES
COLLECTION OF MR. CARL W. HAMILTON, GREAT NECK, L.I., N.Y.