ART REVIEW

He Was More Than a Mannerist

Two Jacopo Pontormo masterpieces at the Morgan Library & Museum provide an opportunity to reassess his work.

Pontormo's 'Visitation' (c. 1528-29) **PHOTO:** CARMIGNANO, PIEVE DI SAN MICHELE ARCANGELO

By Cammy Brothers
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Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557), one of the most accomplished and intriguing painters Florence ever produced, has been maligned by history on at least two fronts. First, by the great artist biographer Giorgio Vasari, who recognized Pontormo's gifts but depicted him as a solitary eccentric who imitated the manner of the German painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer to a fault. And second, by art historians quick to label him as a "Mannerist," a term that has often carried negative associations, broadly used to mean excessive artifice and often associated with a period of decline. The term isn't wrong for Pontormo, but it's a dead end, explaining away Pontormo's distinctiveness while sidelining him at the same time.

Pontormo: Miraculous Encounters

The Morgan Library & Museum
Through Jan. 6, 2019

It's not hard to understand how Pontormo got his reputation. He threw out many of the hallmark artistic achievements of the Renaissance—perspectival space; realistic portraiture; the naturalistic depiction of the human body—like so much useless baggage. In their stead, he employed high-intensity color and emotional

expression. He would have given the German Expressionists a run for their money.

Now comes an opportunity for reassessment in the form of a small exhibition featuring several stunning, rarely seen works, currently on view at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York before it travels to the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. "Pontormo: Miraculous Encounters," curated by Bruce Edelstein, coordinator for graduate programs and advanced research at New York University in Florence, and Davide Gasparotto, senior curator of paintings at the Getty, centers on a magnificent altarpiece, the "Visitation" (c. 1528-29), normally housed in the church of San Michele Arcangelo in Carmignano, Tuscany, recently restored, and on view for the first time outside of Italy. It also features "Portrait of a Young Man in a Red Cap (Carlo Neroni?)" (c. 1530), never before shown in the U.S. The three venues of the show, which first opened at the Palatine Gallery in Florence, include slightly different works; the most significant and unfortunate omission at the Morgan is the Getty's stunning portrait known as the as the "Portrait of a Halberdier (Francesco Guardi?)" (c. 1529-30), which at the Palatine paired beautifully with the "Young Man in a Red Cap." The Morgan installation features just two paintings and three drawings, hung together in one room, but each work packs a punch.

The "Visitation" represents an encounter between the Virgin Mary and her aged cousin, St. Elizabeth, accompanied by female attendants. On one level, the meeting is portrayed as if it could be any familiar encounter between women: They greet each other warmly, touching, locking gazes. On another, it registers an encounter of great theological significance: Here are the mothers of Christ and of St. John the Baptist, both pregnant through miraculous intervention.

As one looks at the painting, its ambiguities multiply. Does it show four distinct women, or are these two women shown at two angles?: The clothes are different but the faces appear almost identical. The facial features of the Virgin and St. Elizabeth are themselves similar, with Elizabeth represented as an older version of the Virgin. Are all four women inspired by one model? These are visual games Pontormo plays, drawing you in and keeping your attention locked into a composition that is simple, even stark. In place of the elaborate perspective and architecture of many paintings of this period, Pontormo gives his figures a vaguely defined and sharply receding urban setting. Their scale comes through dramatically in the contrast with the two tiny figures perched on the bench of a palace. The work's focus on the foreground figures gives it a contemporary feel.

Pontormo's 'Portrait of a Young Man in a Red Cap (Carlo Neroni?)' (c. 1530) **PHOTO:** COLLECTION OF MR. AND MRS. J. TOMILSON HILL

The subject of "Young Man in a Red Cap," lent from a private collection, is speculated to be Carlo Neroni, a young Florentine nobleman. The young man draws you in with his oblique glance and the mysterious note he holds. His puffed up sleeves and tightly drawn waist were the

latest in military fashion, designed to protect the wearer from attacks. The clothing indicates that the painting, like the "Portrait of a Halberdier," was probably made in the context of the Siege of Florence of 1529-30, when foreign armies allied with the Medici to overthrow the Republican government.

Not mentioned in either the exhibition or the catalog is the darker skin tone of the sitter, especially relative to the pale pink of Pontormo's other figures. To my eye, it evokes discussions that have surrounded Pontormo's portraits in Chicago and Philadelphia of Alessandro de' Medici, the ill-fated Duke of Florence whose mother is thought by some to have been an African house servant, and suggests that Alessandro may not have been the only member of the Florentine nobility of mixed heritage.

Any traveler to Italy knows that one of its charms is its churches, chock-full of museum-quality art. But there are also downsides to these holy sites: insufficient lighting, no climate control, no security. Now some churches have begun to transform themselves into quasi-museums, charging admission and constructing separate entrances for tourists. This is not an option for smaller towns, and the church of Carmignano's urgent need for repairs is the occasion of the exhibition, launched together with a crowdfunding campaign. It is an ambitious gambit, which if successful could a provide model for other struggling churches. Meanwhile, it provides an opportunity to see the "Visitation" up close, recently cleaned, and in excellent lighting. For my money, it's the most beautiful painting in New York right now.

—Ms. Brothers is the author of "Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture" (Yale).