Mannerism

The term mannerism describes the style of the paintings, bronze sculpture, and even the ornate wooden table in this room. Derived from the Italian *maniera*, meaning simply "style," mannerism is sometimes defined as the "stylish style" for its emphasis on self-conscious artifice over realistic depiction. The sixteenth-century artist and critic Vasari—himself a mannerist—believed that excellence in painting demanded refinement, richness of invention, and virtuoso technique, criteria that emphasized the artist's intellect. More important than his carefully recreated observation of nature was the artist's mental conception and its elaboration. This intellectual bias was, in part, a natural consequence of the artist's new status in society. No longer regarded as craftsmen, painters and sculptors took their place with scholars, poets, and humanists in a climate that fostered an appreciation for elegance, complexity, and even precocity.

Mannerism's artificiality—its bizarre, sometimes acid color, its illogical compression of space, the elongated proportions and exaggerated anatomy of figures in convoluted, serpentine poses—frequently creates a feeling of anxiety. Works appear strange and unsettling, despite their superficial naturalism. Mannerism coincided with a period of upheaval that was torn by the Reformation, plague, and the devastating sack of Rome. After its inception in central Italy around 1520, mannerism spread to other regions of Italy and to northern Europe. In Italy, however, it remained largely a product of artists in Florence and Rome.

The character of mannerism continues to be debated. It is often discussed, and judged, in relation to the High Renaissance that preceded it. Some scholars see mannerism as a reaction to Renaissance classicism, while others regard it as a logical extension of it—a natural outgrowth of Michelangelo's emphatic modeling or Raphael's refinement. Already in 1600, mannerists were criticized for having willfully broken the unity of Renaissance classicism, its integration of form and content, its balance of aesthetic aims and ideas. Today, when classicism no longer has a unique claim on "perfection," mannerism emerges more clearly as a link between the High Renaissance and the emotionally charged and dynamic baroque art that followed.

Andrea del Sarto
Florentine, 1486–1530

Charity, before 1530

In a sense, Andrea del Sarto could be called the godfather of mannerism. Two of his students—Rosso and Pontormo—took the expressive potential of his early work as a point of departure. Andrea's approach, however, remained more classical. While his students looked beneath the appearance of the real world for something more introverted and abstract, Andrea sought a more forceful expression of what he saw in nature. It has been said that color, vibrant and communicative, was his real subject. Produced late in his career, this painting has a quiet warmth and calm sentiment, despite the intensity of its hues.

Charity's face reproduces the features of Andrea's wife Lucrezia. Vasari, who apprenticed in Andrea's workshop (and disliked his wife), noted that "because of seeing her continuously and having drawn her so often, and—what is more—having her impressed on his soul," every woman his master painted looked like Lucrezia.

Oil on panel, 1.195 x .925 m (46 7/8 x 36 3/8 in.).

Rosso Fiorentino
Florentine, 1494–1540

Portrait of a Man, early 1520s

This portrait is less precisely detailed, less "objective," than others in this room, partly as the result of Rosso's technique. To a greater extent than most of his contemporaries in Florence, Rosso left his brushstrokes visible. This man holds none of the attributes that normally help define a sitter's persona; his character is established by his strongly projecting elbow. Light rakes across it and seems to push his gesture to the front of the picture plane. The image crowds the panel. Such concentration and stylization complement the man's expression, which is at once haughty and slightly sad and may reflect an ideal of male deportment.

Rosso—he was called "the red" for his red hair—probably painted this not long before the artist left to work in Fontainebleau. In Italy, Rosso's personal, introverted style did not exert much influence, but in France it was an important starting point for mannerism in the North.

Oil on panel, .887 x .679 m (34 7/8 x 26 3/4 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.59

Jacopino del Conte
Florentine, 1510–1598

Madonna and Child with Saint Elizabeth and Saint John the Baptist, about 1535

Like the somewhat older Rosso and Pontormo, Jacopino was probably a student of Andrea del Sarto. His earliest works essentially paraphrased his teacher's compositions, but here newer influences are evident. A hint of Pontormo's style emerges in the longer, more elegant proportions of the figures and in the hard, polished color. Furthermore, the figures' monumental scale and almost sculptural mass signal Michelangelo's influence.

Images of the Virgin and Child with John the Baptist and his mother Elizabeth were popular in sixteenth-century Florence. Here, many elements of the composition play a symbolic role to extend the scene's meaning. The cloth, just warmed over the brazier, foreshadows Jesus' burial shroud, and the cradle at Mary's feet, his tomb. The unseen future, with Christ's passion and its promise of mankind's salvation, is expressed in these signals and the linked gestures of the figures.

Oil on panel, 1.613 x 1.190 m (63 1/2 x 43 7/8 in.).

Perino del Vaga
Central Italian, 1501–1547

The Nativity, 1534

Perino was born in Florence but trained in Rome, in Raphael's studio. He extended Raphael's feeling for ornament, making fluid patterns an important element of his own style. Perino's decorative ornamentation, in turn, influenced the next generation of mannerists in Rome.

This early work was painted for a family chapel in Genoa, where Perino had settled after the sack of Rome in 1527. Here the Holy Family is surrounded by saints. John the Baptist, Catherine of Alexandria, and James Major were probably name saints of the painting's patrons; Roch and Sebastian were patrons of plague victims. (Plague devastated many Italian towns, including Genoa, following the sack of Rome.) In the background, a man carries a bound lamb into the temple. The painting would have been installed over the altar in a funerary chapel, a backdrop to masses said for the dead.

Oil on panel, transferred to canvas, 2.744 x 2.211 m (108 1/4 x 87 1/8 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.31

Pontormo
Florentine, 1494–1556/1557

Monsignor della Casa, probably 1541/1544

A man must therefore not be content to do things well, but must also aim to do them gracefully.

Giovanni della Casa's description of a gentleman's deportment, which appeared in *Il Galateo,* his 1558 book of manners, might also be applied to mannerist painting. Objective reality is tempered by *grazia* and a self-conscious artifice. Here, Pontormo accentuated della Casa's long, slender figure. The refined gesture of his elegant fingers holding a book well suits a man who was a humanist scholar, poet, and political adviser as well as a high-placed church official. The sitter's own *grazia* is mirrored, even amplified, by the smooth, polished surface of the paint.

Della Casa's expression is at once reserved and inquiring, aloof but not disengaged. Compare the more chilly elegance of Bronzino's portrait in this room. Not surprisingly, it was Bronzino who became principal portraitist for Florence's ruling Medici family: official images had to convey authority and impassive assurance, not humanize their subject with personality.

Oil on panel, 1.02 x .789 m (40 1/8 x 31 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.83

Agnolo Bronzino
Florentine, 1503–1572

The Holy Family, about 1527/1528

Once thought to be the work of Pontormo, most scholars now agree this is an early painting by Bronzino, who apprenticed in Pontormo's workshop. The Virgin's symmetrically oval face resembles Pontormo's madonnas, but other elements point to Bronzino's own emerging style, particularly his use of large areas of color and his isolation of the figures. Although they are linked through gesture and gaze, each seems to be framed within an individual space. The Holy Family almost forms a human still life: the figures are frozen on the surface, their mask-like faces lacking humanity. Little emotion shows below the hard, smooth paint surface.

From a distance, we first see a strong linear pattern emerging from the almost abstract interplay of bright figure shapes and the dark background. Yet up close, the work's precision and particularity dominate. Such tension between abstract composition and intense realism in detail accounts for much of the "strangeness" detected in mannerist paintings.

Oil on canvas, 1.013 x .787 m (39 7/8 x 31 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.387

Agnolo Bronzino

A Young Woman with Her Little Boy, about 1540

Bronzino changed this portrait significantly some five or six years after it was finished by adding the boy. The addition turns the portrait into a dynastic monument; the two unidentified sitters must have been highly connected to Medici circles. Other changes increase the opulence and impressive display of the portrait—and the prestige of the sitters. Some of these can be seen clearly with the naked eye, especially the sleeve enlargements, where the added pigment is darker.

The boy's ghostly paleness—he is painted over the green background—and his compressed position reflect the painting's history as much as they do the artist's decisions. What *is* typically mannerist, however, is the sitters' reserved elegance and, for Bronzino, their cold hardness. The woman appears invulnerable behind her detachment. In the cruel intrigues of the Medici court, this was a useful, perhaps even necessary, protection.

Oil on panel, .955 x .760 m (39 1/8 x 29 7/8 in.).
Widener Collection 1942.9.6

Adriaen de Vries
Florentine, 1556–1626

Empire Triumphant over Avarice, 1610

Adriaen de Vries was born in the Netherlands, but he spent considerable time in Italy. This statuette reveals the influence of Michelangelo and the Florentine sculptor Giambologna, with whom de Vries worked. The figures are powerful, their interaction energetic and dynamic. Even the surface is animated, reflecting light from restlessly modulated planes.

This statuette was made for the Hapsburg emperor Rudolph II in Prague, after de Vries had been appointed a court artist. An allegorical figure of Empire holds the wreath of victory over a vanquished figure of Avarice, a money bag at her feet. The theme of empire triumphant is natural enough, but why the triumph over avarice? In the early 1600s Rudolph was in a weakened political position and hard pressed to pay for his wars against the Turks. He blamed his failures on grudging and insufficient financial support. At least in his private study, where he kept this bronze, he could contemplate an unrealized triumph over stingy "allies."

Bronze, height .773 m (30 3/8 in.).
Widener Collection 1942.9.148

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