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about 3,000 words

The Adoration of the Magi

A beautiful thing never gives so much pain as does failing to hear and see it.
Michaelangelo

Luigi Andreati threw himself on the floor, cowering, as the Austrian cannon shells hit the roof of his home, the ancient Andreati Palace on Mantua's Via Cairoli. On impact, portions of the palace's roof fell in, covering the public rooms with a layer of plaster, wood debris, and broken tile. Andreati was not injured but, as he got back on his feet, he surveyed with tearing eyes the magnitude of the disaster. It would take a lot of money to repair the damage, and he did not have it.

Shortly after the bombardment ceased, summer rains began. Water began pouring into the foyer, the reception room, and the ballroom, and soon the elaborate wooden floors were buried under a layer of stinking sludge. Andreati sought refuge in his private quarters, which like the chapel had escaped intact from the shelling; he was shivering with cold and fear, for he was certain that the Austrians would soon march into Mantua to retake the city from Napoleon's troops and he could lose his life in the door to door fighting that was about to break out.

His life was spared by the French commander's negotiating surrender terms so that by the end of July the French had marched out of Mantua. The ruined city, weakened by war, hunger and plague, was again occupied by the Austrians.

Escaping with his life was little consolation to Andreati. He was ruined and his palace was in shambles: a particularly grievous casualty was extensive water damage to a large Bernardo Bellotto oil depicting Venice's Grand Canal, which had been the main decoration of the southeast wall of the reception hall.

Luigi was the last surviving member of the Andreati family. He was a bachelor nearing fifty years of age and had no sentimental attachment to the palace or its furnishings. He was not particularly aggrieved by the damage to that painting, which he found uninteresting except for its ornate gilded frame, but knew it was a very marketable piece. If he sold it to one of the galleries in Paris or London, he could raise enough funds to finance repairs to his home.

But the damaged painting was unsaleable, so Luigi needed to find someone right away who could restore the Bellotto painting. In war-torn Italy in 1799, however, it was difficult to find competent restorers, and at any rate he could not afford to travel anywhere to find an artist that could bring the work back to its original condition. So, he visited Giacomo Gatti, a local painter, and asked for his help in restoring the Bellotto. Gatti demurred, for he was just a landscape painter and knew very little of art restoration. Andreati insisted, pointing out that Gatti could not ruin what was already a ruined work, and offered to pay him ten Florentine scudi for his efforts. Gatti was as hard pressed as everyone in Mantua those days and accepted the commission.

The first thing Gatti did was study the condition of the Bellotto. Two things were obvious: first, the beautiful gilded frame had escaped damage; second, water had found its way into the picture and had already caused mold to form in several places and produced significant discoloration in others. Turning the picture around, he noticed that the frame's backing was

soaking wet and threatening to seep moisture into the back of the canvas and further affect the work. He decided that replacing the frame's backing was the most urgent task that needed to be accomplished. However, because of the war he could not get backing of the quality used by the original framer decades earlier, so he decided to substitute a local material. Shortly afterwards, while Gatti was starting to go over the mold-damaged areas, the new backing began to shrink and squeezed the front, including the painting, causing it to crack all over. The Bellotto was now damaged beyond repair.

"What a catastrophe!" exclaimed Andreati when confronted with the ruined painting. "Is there anything you can do to remedy what you have done?" Gatti was contrite; after offering a thousand apologies, he mentioned that the cracks on the picture had revealed that there might be another picture underneath, which had been covered by Bellotto so he could reuse the expensive frame for his Grand Canal scene.

Andreati was not a brave man: "I'm ruined! I may not even be able to pay you!"

Gatti blanched at the thought of not receiving his fee and replied very slowly: "*Caro* Signor Andreati, not such words, *prego*. There is one thing we can still do. Let me see if there is in fact something under this picture. If there is another picture, and it has not been ruined by the water intrusion and the shrinkage of the backing, it may be pleasing. If not, we will take everything out and at least sell the frame."

"Another canvas underneath this one? Is that even possible?"

"Very unlikely, but not impossible. Artists of the past were known to reuse valuable frames like this one. Sometimes, instead of removing an existing picture, they would use it as additional backing and superimpose a new blank canvas on top of it. They got the idea from

medieval monks who wrote devotional works on parchment or vellum, which very expensive. To inscribe the new writings, they removed existing text using milk and wrote over it.”

“Can you uncover the hidden canvas without ruining it?”

“Well, I can very carefully apply solvents, a little bit at a time, to loosen and ultimately remove the canvas containing Bellotto’s painting and see what we find. I dare not rip the canvas out lest it damage the painting underneath. However, I do not know what damage the backing may have done, or if the Bellotto has bled through onto what lies below.”

Andreati remained skeptical but consented. “Fine, go ahead. At this point we have nothing left to lose.” He sighed. “Do it, but be very, very careful.”

Gatti did just that. Using distilled water and a variety of solvents, he was able to remove first the varnish and then the paint of the Bellotto cityscape. As the Bellotto canvas became blank, he was able to very gingerly lift it in a series of steps. He first focused on a small section on the lower right corner of the work and, after a week of trial and error, was able to peel off an area roughly the size of a pocket Bible. And yes, there was definitely a different canvas with a painting under the one that showed the turbid waters of the Grand Canal. “What is it?” asked Andreati eagerly. “I don’t know” replied Gatti. “All I see is a dark patch that could be the ground. We probably need to remove the Bellotto canvas in its entirety before we can make sense of what the other one shows and determine its condition.”

“All right, go ahead” urged Andreati. “Be as quick as you can, but still be very careful.” The moment he said it he realized he was not making sense, but he was getting anxious – they were in mid-October already and his meager funds were being depleted quickly.

The palace was almost the only asset left in Andreati’s possession; the other property he still held was a vineyard south of town, where the family had for centuries grown the Viadanese

grape that was the main component to the Lambrusco Mantovano, a delightful red wine that was much sought after for consumption with cold cuts, pizza, and pasta dishes. The vineyard was Andreati's sole source of income.

The Viadanese grape harvest was concluded and the grapes had been crushed by the time Gatti removed two hand-widths of the Bellotto canvas. He had switched to work on the lower left corner, and what he had uncovered appeared to be the hind quarters of a white palfrey and the rump and back legs of a large dog. The colors were vivid and the figures seemed ready to leap out of the frame. Better yet, by some miracle the hidden painting seemed to be undamaged.

"Oh, that looks good," admired Gatti. "Whoever painted this knew what he was doing. Notice the delicate shape of the horse's legs and the detail on the dog's coat."

"Please, please," implored Andreati. "Can you finish uncovering this work? I get a good feeling about it."

"I do too" replied Gatti. "But we must take extra care to do this right and not damage the painting. I will go as slow as it takes," he vowed.

Andreati's impatience almost got the better of him, but with an effort he restrained himself from any further demands.

This was the time of the year when he had to take a trip to the *azienda vinicola*, the winery where his harvested and crushed grapes would be blended with other grapes in the process of making the Lambrusco Mantovano. The ostensible purpose of his trip was to collect from the winery owner the agreed upon price for his grapes. However, Andreati was hoping to negotiate an increase from what had been agreed in the spring. 1799 had been a fine weather year except for the summer downpours during the siege of the city, and the Viadanese grape crop

from his estate had been abundant and of apparently high quality, so Andreati was hoping to get a better deal.

The winery owner, Fausto Pezzetti, immediately disabused Andreati of any notion that he would get a higher price for his product. Yes, the grapes looked and tasted great but the year had been terrible for business with the French and Austrian armies trotting up and down the countryside and shaking down landowners for all they could get. Pezzetti finished his tale of woe dramatically: "I may not even be in business next year."

Andreati and Pezzetti knew each other well, having done business together for many years. Thus, they engaged in a friendly but protracted negotiation that lasted a couple of days, during which Andreati was seething with ill contained impatience fearing the worst for having left Gatti alone with his picture. At the end, Pezzetti relented and offered a somewhat higher price than he had given earlier on, and he and Andreati shook hands and parted company.

Thus, it was an afternoon in the second week in December that Andreati rode back into Mantua. Upon arrival at his palace, he rushed immediately to the reception room where an absorbed Gatti was cleaning and slightly retouching the newly revealed picture.

And what a picture it was! Andreati gasped as in one glance he took in the colorful array of human and animal figures that crowded the canvas. It was obvious that the picture represented the Adoration of the Magi, the arrival of the Three Wise Men at the manger where Baby Jesus lay on Mary's bosom. But saying that did not quite do justice to the spectacle on display in the newly revealed oil.

The left half of the picture was taken up by several gaudily attired noblemen, their horses, esquires, and onlookers. At the center, the three kings from the Orient were offering their gifts; one of them, knee on the ground, was presenting a covered cup to Jesus, who sat placidly on

Mary's lap as she showed the infant to the visitors. To the right, peasants on bent knees or holding lambs completed the tableau. The background was a serene landscape; every one of the figures had an individualized countenance and expression. Mary, in particular, was breathtaking in her ethereal loveliness; the composition was such that the eye of the beholder was immediately drawn to her and the infant she held. Indeed, those figures in the picture that were not looking away seemed transfixed by the scene that was presented before their eyes.

"It's beautiful" whispered Andreati in awe.

"And it's miraculously intact. I saw a picture like this one at a church in Perugia" said Gatti, wonderstruck. "It was by Raffaello Sanzio, one of the greatest artists of his time. But it was part of an altarpiece, and was rather small, although exquisitely detailed. This may be a later version by Raffaello, or a copy by one of his disciples, or a work by some other painter seeking to profit from the genius of Raffaello."

"Could it possibly be an original by the maestro himself?" wondered Andreati.

"No way to know. A painting like this should be in a church or in the vault of some moneylender in Firenze. It defies imagination how it could have ended in the hands of some ignoramus who would replace it with a banal scene like the Bellotto."

"Do you think I would be able to sell it for a good sum?"

"No doubt that you would be able to sell it in Milano or Venezia, and probably would fetch a decent price. But everyone would discount it as being the work of a disciple of Raffaello or some unknown third party, so you would never get as much as the Bellotto would have commanded."

"What are we talking about here? What is your best guess as to what this picture would bring?"

“Alas, I’m no expert on the sale of art, but judging from the prices that my landscapes are getting, you would probably be able to get at most a couple of hundred scudi for it.”

Two hundred scudi. Financing the repairs to the dilapidated Andreati Palace would run to four hundred scudi or more. Two hundred was not enough.

Andreati had another idea: “Is it possible that we could find still another picture under this one?”

Gatti gave him a dirty look. “I would hesitate to damage this magnificent work, even if it’s only a copy, on the remote chance that something better might lie underneath. See, it seems almost as if this picture wanted to be found and was protected from damage by the hand of God. I’m sorry, I will carry out your wishes if you ask me to tamper with it, but I will do it with a heavy heart.”

Andreati stood silently in front of this probable imitation of a masterpiece by Raffaello. All of a sudden, he felt how he was getting on in years, and shuddered at the prospect of poverty in his old age. Selling this picture would alleviate his predicament. He experienced the dilemma that many a gambler faces at the table: walk away with meager winnings, or put it all back on the table, casting caution to the wind and hoping for the best.

Except that here the gambler’s impulsive behavior would mean getting rid of the marvelous work of art in front of him. Did he even have the right to sacrifice an object of great beauty just to help getting out of financial trouble? And what if the painting was indeed by Raffaello? Would that not be a crime?

He brushed those concerns aside as his pressing financial needs became again paramount. What did he care about one painting or another? It was only something to hang on a wall as evidence of your wealth. He was not wealthy and there was nobody he needed to impress.

Then, as his tired eyes were drawn to the Virgin Mary in the painting, Andreati realized that for the first time in his life he was in the presence of real beauty. He loved that painting and did not want to part with it. Life was ebbing away and he had little to show for his years on this world. If he kept the painting, he could give himself every day the satisfaction of owning a great work of art (whether original or not) and pretending that he owned a real Raffaello, something potentates all over Europe would wish they could say. More importantly, he would enjoy what nobody else could: admiring the beautiful Madonna who was there for his eyes only, like the adoring figures in the picture would be forever doing.

Besides, it was almost Christmas. What better present to give himself this holiday season? It had been a cruel year, but this belated gift made up for many months of suffering.

He decided to visit Pezzetti again and find out if the merchant would be interested in buying his vineyard. He hoped he could get a decent price for it.

Pezzetti agreed to buy the vineyard, but could not offer much. Andreati was thus faced with a dilemma: sell the vineyards for a song and spend the rest of his life in dire poverty, watching his palace fall into ruin; or sell the painting and live off the proceeds. It was a difficult choice to make, but the magnetic attraction of the picture prevailed.

In the summer of 1801, torrential rains drenched Northern Italy. During a vicious storm in August, the roof over the living quarters of the Andreati Palace collapsed, as did much of the rest of the once sumptuous structure.

Scavengers seeking to recover anything of value in the ruins discovered the emaciated corpse of Luigi Andreati under the rubble that once had been his bedroom. He apparently had been dead for quite some time, but the body was almost intact, with no trace of corruption. The entire room had collapsed around him, but on the only wall still standing hung a magnificent

Renaissance picture that seemed to shine with a light of its own and showed no damage from the elements.

“É un miracolo!” marveled the rescuers.

The picture was reverently taken down and sent to Milano for assessment. It was determined to be a copy of a Raffaello miniature by some unknown artist, and thus have only scant market value. Nonetheless, it was placed on the wall behind the altar in a church in Mantua, where it is to this date the object of veneration by the faithful, in a manner not unlike the adoration it received from the late Signor Andreati.

T H E E N D