

Lucian of Samosata, Strabo, Eustathios Makrembolites: Literary Sources for two Iconographical Circles in Mantua

Rodolfo Signorini

Abstract

Andrea Mantegna began to paint the private chamber of the Marquis Ludovico II Gonzaga, in the castle of San Giorgio in Mantua, known as *Camera Picta*, on 16th June 1465 and completed around the end of May 1474. Two scenes from the life of the Gonzagas, both traceable to 1st January 1462, are represented. On the wall of the fireplace the scene *La Corte* (the Court) narrates the arrival in Mantua of a letter from Bianca Maria Visconti. The Marquis and his family members, Emperor Frederick III of Habsburg and the King of Denmark Christian I are depicted on the wall of *L'Incontro* (The Meeting). The vault is adorned with portraits of eight Caesars depicted in laurels, tied with ribbons and supported by putti. In the centre of the vault the famous *oculus* is inspired by Luciano di Samosata's *Περὶ τοῦ οἴκου*. The peacock represents visual beauty, with which the orator who intends to speak in such a richly decorated chamber cannot compete, since the audience would be attracted to the paintings and would not listen to him. The *Sala dello Zodiaco* of Palazzo d'Arco in Mantua, painted after 1509, describes the activities of the months. The literary source which inspired the painter (Giovanni Maria Falconetto?) has been identified as being the 12th-century Byzantine novel by Eustathios Makrembolites, *Hysmine and Hysminias*. The depictions of the months coexist with representations of ancient monuments and myths. On the frieze above scenes taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are represented.

1. The *Camera Picta*, a Paradigm of Humanistic Culture

[...] since Your Lordship has had such a beautiful chamber made, which is on everyone's tongue, and the universal opinion of all those who have seen it is that it is the most beautiful chamber in the world [...].

These were the words used by Zaccaria Saggi da Pisa, Mantuan ambassador to the court of Milan, in his letter of 26th November 1475 to the Marquis Ludovico II

Gonzaga.¹ A *unicum* of beauty had been created in Mantua. But if we consider that there was no palace at that time that did not have painted chambers, particularly in the courts of kings, popes and cardinals, that the whole religious and secular, aristocratic and bourgeois world competed to celebrate ecclesiastical, noble or economic power through the magnificence of its chambers, and that for this reason works were commissioned from the most renowned artists of the time, expressions such as those used by the Gonzaga ambassador may appear not to be dictated solely by courtly devotion, but by genuine admiration for a creation of an innovation, totally out of the ordinary.

On the walls of Gonzaga's private chamber, from 16th June 1465 until around the middle of 1474,² Andrea Mantegna had painted the family of the second Marquis of Mantua, the cardinal dignity of his second son Francesco, the political role of the Prince of Mantua, faithful feudal vassal of Emperor Frederick III of Hapsburg, faithful subject of the Holy Roman Church, loyal lieutenant-general of the Duke of Milan, Francesco Sforza, reverent brother-in-law of the King of Denmark, Christian I of Oldenburg, relative of the Marquises of Brandenburg and the Dukes of Bavaria. But all this is only a part – the most obvious part, as it were – of the masterpiece. What makes the chamber in the castle of Mantua so unique is its exclusive cultural innovation.

I have illustrated the historical content of the paintings on various occasions, so a brief summary will suffice here:

The *Camera Picta* appears as a pavilion, closed on the eastern and southern sides (where the Prince's bed was positioned) by arabesqued cordovans, and open on the other two sides, where the drapes have been drawn aside like theatre curtains and gathered around faux pilasters. In this way, like a revelation, two scenes from the life of the Gonzagas, both traceable to 1st January 1462, are presented to the viewer.³ For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to the first as *La Corte* (the Court) and the second as *L'Incontro* (The Meeting).

La Corte represents the arrival in Mantua of a letter from Bianca Maria Visconti to Gonzaga, bearing the news of Sforza's seriously failing health and the request for Gonzaga to travel to Milan immediately to administer the fate of the duchy at that dramatic moment (fig. 1);⁴ *L'Incontro* depicts the moment when the marquis, who had left that same day for Milan, greets his second son, Francesco, in Bozzolo (fig. 2). Francesco had been a prince of the church since 18th December 1461 and was returning from Milan to Mantua in the company of his brother, Federico. Both episodes are portrayed against the background of Rome, the city that is already awaiting the young cardinal. From right to left, the landscape depicts Rome, Tivoli, Palestrina, Tuscolo, places in the Lazio region, described by the geographer Strabo, which in the summer of 1461 witnessed

1. R. Signiorini, *Opus hoc tenue: La 'archetipata' Camera Dipinta detta 'degli Sposi' di Andrea Mantegna*, Mantua 2007, 149.

2. Signiorini, *op. cit.* (note 1), 156-166.

3. Signiorini, *op. cit.* (note 1), 174.

4. Signiorini, *op. cit.* (note 1), 178-186.

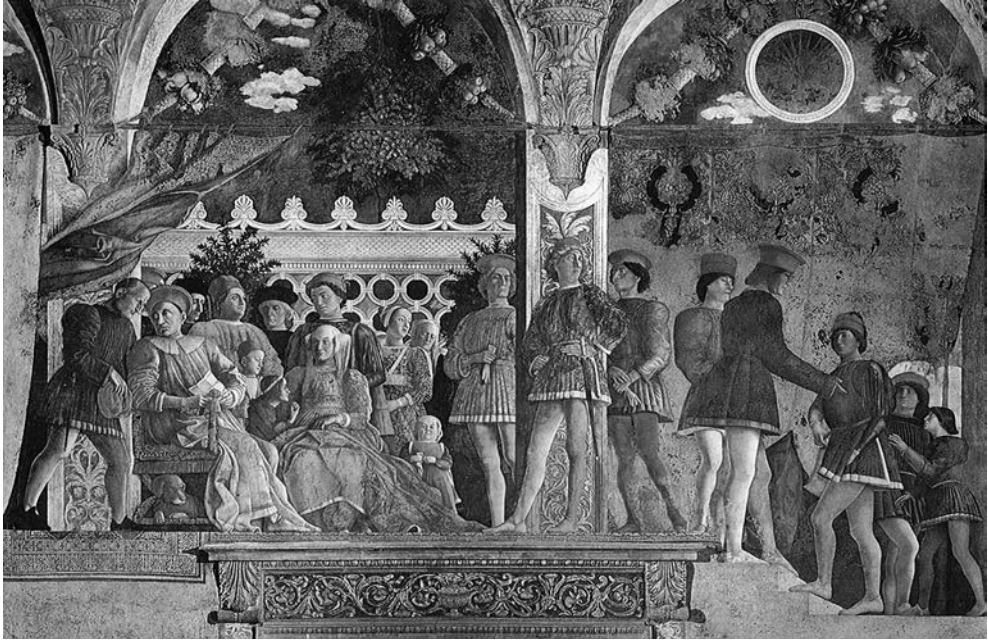


Fig. 1. Andrea Mantegna, *The Court*, 1465-1474, *Camera Picta*, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua [photo: Palazzo Ducale].

the conflict between Pius II and the Roman barons, led by Giacomo Savelli, Lord of Palombara Sabina, who finally surrendered to army.⁵ In this way the marquis intended to honour Pius II, who, celebrating the Diet to launch a new crusade against the Turks from 27th May 1459 to 19th January 1460, had made the city on the River Mincio a second Rome, on which all the eyes of the West and the East were turned.

This is the content of the two *stories* (to quote Alberti), above which, in the lunettes, eight Gonzaga imprese are featured: *la Tortora* (the Turtle Dove), *il Sole* (the Sun), *la Cervetta* (the small Deer), *la Torre* (the Tower), the AMΩMOc, *il Cane Alano* (the Great Dane), *Le Ali con l'anello* (the Wings with the Ring), and *l'Idra* (the Hydra).⁶ In the sails of the vault above there are episodes from the myths of Orpheus (*Orpheus seduces men, animals and nature with song; Orpheus in the Underworld; the Death of Orpheus*) and of Arion (*Arion betrayed by the sailors sings the nomos orthios which calls the dolphin; Arion saved by the dolphin; Periander punishes the faithless sailors*) and of Hercules (*Hercules kills Nessus; Hercules slays the Nemean lion; Hercules and the Hydra; Hercules and Antaeus; Hercules and Cerberus*).⁷

5. R. Signiorini, *La più bella camera del mondo: La Camera Dipinta di Andrea Mantegna detta 'degli Sposi' / The Most Beautiful room in the World: The Painted Room by Andrea Mantegna*, Mantua 2002, 33.

6. Signiorini, *op. cit.* (note 1), 266-295.

7. Signiorini, *op. cit.* (note 1), 296-307.



Fig. 2. Andrea Mantegna, *The Meeting* (Attendants with dogs and horses and at the center Spiritelli bearing dedicatory inscription), 1465-1474, fresco, west wall, *Camera Picta*, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua [photo: Palazzo Ducale].

The vault is adorned with portraits of eight Caesars (*Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba and Otho*), depicted in laurels, tied with ribbons and supported by putti.

In the centre of the vault, an amazing invention, a masterpiece with a spectacular perspective effect, an *oculus* opens onto a blue sky with drifting white clouds. The balustrade crowning the circle of the sky is decorated with *putti*, two groups of figures and a peacock (fig. 3).

It is here that the sublime artistic achievement manifests itself as a perfect node of humanistic culture. It is here that the literary source that inspired the artist is revealed: the *Περὶ τοῦ οἴκου* by Lucian of Samosata (2nd century AD), which consists of a description of a splendid painted room (in his case depicting mythological subjects).⁸

8. R. Signorini, 'La fonte di ispirazione; Luciano di Samosata', in: *Andrea Mantegna: Gli sposi eterni nella Camera Dipinta: Testi di Vittorio Sgarbi, Giovanni Reale, Rodolfo Signorini, Schede delle opere a cura di Gianfranco Ferlisi*, Milan 2011, 41-111, esp. 94-111. Signorini, *op. cit.* (note 1), 314-337.



Fig. 3. Andrea Mantegna, *Oculus*, 1465-1474, *Camera Picta*, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua [photo: Palazzo Ducale].

Before even starting to describe the room, Lucian states that such beauty would tempt an orator to deliver a speech there, in order to be part of such magnificence:⁹

And when one sees a very large, very beautiful room, radiant with light, resplendent with gold, and decorated with paintings, does not one feel like delivering a speech there, if such is one's profession, so as to be praised, lauded, applauded, and to become as much a part of that beauty as possible? [...] A most pleasant thing, in my opinion, it is the most beautiful of rooms open to accommodating such a speech; and being full of praise and applause, it sweetly echoes like the echo of caverns, prolonging the voice, pausing over the last words [...]. To my mind, I think that with the magnificence of the room the mind of the orator is exalted, inciting him to speak, as though inspired by the spectacle itself: since as soon as the soul receives beauty through the eyes, it immediately composes itself and speaks accordingly [...].

The beauty of this room, however, is not made for the eyes of barbarians, nor Persian coarseness, because barbarians only admire wealth and gold, not true beauty,

9. Luciano di Samosata, 'Di una Sala', in: *Luciano di Samosata: I Dialoghi e gli Epigrammi*, L. Settembrini (trad.), D. Baccini (ed.), Rome 1962, 801-809.

which is made of elegant simplicity. Lucian's painted room does not want 'only poor spectators, but discerning ones, who do not only have judgement in their eyes, but also wisdom in their speech'.

In particular, Lucian's room faces east, as did the ancient temples, it is totally flooded by the rays of the rising sun and is of perfect proportions: its length corresponds to the width and both correspond to its height:

The ceiling is also splendid in its graceful simplicity, its modest elegance, its gilding of judicious symmetry without obnoxious exaggeration, like a chaste and beautiful woman whose beauty is enhanced by [...] a ribbon gathering up her scattered locks [...] but the courtesans, especially the ugliest ones, dress all in purple, decorating their necks all in gold; they try to attract attention through ostentation, and to make up for their lack of beauty by adding external ornaments; because they believe [...] that the face itself will appear more lovable if surrounded by so much shining gold [...]. Now who would not delight in seeing so many and exquisite sights? And who would not long, even with an effort, to speak in the midst of them, aware that it is a great shame to allow oneself become overwhelmed by the view.

So the horse gallops 'more jauntily' when it feels soft ground under its hooves. And the peacock,

approaching a meadow at the beginning of spring, when the flowers are abloom – and are not only more graceful but almost, as it were, more florid, and with purer colours – flaps its wings and spreads them in the sun, lifting its tail and spreading it like a fan, to display its own flowers and the spring of its wings, as though the meadow were challenging it.¹⁰

And yet, Lucian continues,

while I was speaking, a voice inside kept gnawing at me, trying to interrupt my words; and then, when I had finished, the voice said that I had not told the truth; and it marveled at how I could claim that a beautiful gilded room adorned with paintings was suitable for eloquent speeches, when precisely the opposite was true.¹¹

An orator who wishes to display his talents in a painted chamber like this is, in fact, distracted by the surrounding sights and inevitably ends up giving a poor performance. Worse still for his listeners, who gradually stop following what he is saying, attracted as they all are by the beauty of what they are seeing, so that 'from listeners they become spectators':¹²

So what he said above about the peacock, I think confirms my own maxim, because the peacock is admired for its looks and not for its voice. For if one takes a nightingale

10. Luciano di Samosata, *ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. Signorini, *op. cit.* (note 5), 23-25.

or a swan and lets it sing, and while they are singing presents a peacock that does not sing, I know that the attention of the spectators will turn to the peacock, rather than to the warbling of the other birds: to such an extent does the pleasure of such a sight diminish all others.

Now raise your eyes to look at the *Camera Picta*.

The first group of figures leaning over the balustrade consists of three women, the first is combing her long blonde hair with a double-rowed comb; the second has almost finished styling her hair, and the third is perfectly groomed, with a simple ribbon gathering her 'scattered locks'. All three are looking into the chamber.

The second group consists of an elaborately coiffed woman, with a veil on her head, whose hair is held in place by a precious net adorned with pearls and gold. This woman is being ogled by a black figure wearing an ornate turban on his head.

The first three female figures are actually the same woman, depicted during three separate moments of her toilette, and the personification of the charming simplicity of the blonde beauty on the ceiling, while the other, looking ahead as though absorbed and not seeking any interaction with the observer below, is the courtesan, at whom the Oriental gentleman, fine in wealth only, is smiling in admiration.

So the peacock is not a purely decorative element, given the space it occupies in Lucian's dialogue, where it symbolises visual attractiveness, which is the principle and aim of painting.

The question now arises as to who might have suggested Lucian's writings to Marquis Ludovico II Gonzaga, the erudite patron of the *Camera* whose library contained a codex of Lucian's work (now conserved in Germany, in the famous Wolfenbüttel library), and to Mantegna. I personally think it was Leon Battista Alberti, who was in Mantua at the time of the planning of these paintings – the subject of which dates back to two events on 1st January 1462 – and who is considered the greatest Lucianist of the 15th century.¹³ This theory is, therefore, also justified from a historical perspective. And the figure wearing the black cap in the centre of *La Corte*, who looks like a thinker, could actually be Alberti himself, as already posited by Eugene Johnson. Alberti, concluding the third book of *De pictura*, asked the artists who had followed his doctrine to portray him in their works. It was the only remuneration he requested, to exist in eternity.¹⁴

In Carlo Ridolfi's work, *Le maraviglie dell'arte. Ovvero le vite degli'illustri pittori veneti, e dello Stato* (Venezia, Giovanni Battista Sgava, 1648, p. 70), he recounts that in the Castle of Mantua there is a 'Bridal Chamber' ('una camera detta degli Sposi'). From then on, this title (due perhaps to the fact that Margherita Gorni and Alessandro Donesmondi had spent their wedding night there on Sunday 26th April 1573)

13. Signorini, *op. cit.* (note 5), 26-28.

14. E.J. Johnson, 'A Portrait of Leon Battista Alberti in the Camera degli Sposi?', *Arte Lombarda* 42-43 (1975), 67-69.

became more and more popular, to the extent that it replaced the original name, *Camera Picta*.

This chamber – a unique realisation of Lucian’s fantasy – embodies an indissoluble merging of the classical culture and genius of an artist who was Greek by vocation, an emulator of the ancient painters, happily at ease in the court of Mantua, which was still benefiting from the teachings of Vittorino da Feltre (d. 1446), ‘supreme mathematician and father of all humanity’, recites the medal on which Pisanello committed to eternity the features of that ‘excellent tutor’, father of Mantuan Humanism.

Mantegna dedicated the *Camera* to his patrons, Marquis Ludovico II Gonzaga and his wife Barbara of Hohenzollern or Brandenburg, calling it OPVS HOC TENVE: a title perhaps suggested by a man of learning, since the word TENVE would have called to the mind of any humanist the sixth verse of Virgil’s *Georgics*, Book IV: *in tenui labor; at tenuis non gloria* (Slight is the subject, but the praise not small): he has no fear of praise for his patrons or for himself, the artist.¹⁵

2. *Sala dello Zodiaco* or *Sala del Falconetto*

At the top of the grand staircase of the palazzina in the garden of Palazzo d’Arco, on the right hand side there is a door with two age-old shutters that leads into a hall with a well-preserved floor; a worn ceiling made of boards, beams and planks, a large antique marble fireplace, painted walls and four windows with only old shutters on the outside.

The spectacular *Sala dello Zodiaco*, also known as the *Sala del Falconetto* after the painter and architect Giovanni Maria Falconetto (Verona 1468-Padua 1535) (fig. 4),¹⁶ is the artistic jewel in the crown of the Museum, a prime example of the astrological culture that, in Mantua, was also expressed in the *Zodiaco* of Bartolomeo Manfredi’s astronomical-astrological clock, in the *Zodiaco* of the castle, in the *Sala dei Venti* of the Palazzo del Te, in the *Zodiaco* of the Palazzo Ducale, in the *Ciclo dei Figli dei Pianeti* (Children of the Planets cycle) in Palazzo Freddi.

Yet nothing is known for certain concerning the *Zodiaco* in the Palazzo d’Arco.¹⁷ Neither the name of the artist nor the client, nor the time the works were carried out nor the use assigned to the room – which was reached by means of a thirty-step brick staircase – have been documented with any certainty. Nevertheless, the various studies that have been carried out to date have shed some light on the period in which the work was carried out, as well as on its author, and on the meaning of the paintings.

15. Signorini, *op. cit.* (note 5), 139. Signorini, *op. cit.*, (note 8), 91.

16. T. Buddenseig, G. Schweikhart, ‘Falconetto als Zeichner’, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 33 (1970), 21-40. R. Signorini, *La Dimora dei conti d’Arco in Mantova*, Mantua 2000. G. Schweikhart, ‘Falconetto, Giovanni Maria’, in: *Grove Art Online*. Retrieved 20 Feb.2023, from <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884460540010000001078>.

17. R. Signorini, *Lo Zodiaco di Palazzo d’Arco in Mantova*, Mantua 1989.