

Artwork of the Month May 2021

Parmigianino (1503-40), *Portrait of a Young Man with a Book* (circa 1524)

Anne Hall, a former Chair of the Friends, writes about a painting that is a particular personal favourite and also one of the Gallery's masterpieces, an arresting portrait by the great Mannerist artist Parmigianino



Parmigianino, *Portrait of a Young Man*, oil on canvas, 70 x 52 cm, York Art Gallery, YORAG 739. By permission York Art Gallery

This wonderful portrait of *A Young Man with a Book* by Parmigianino is one of the greatest treasures of our Gallery. Acquired in 1955 as part of the F.D. Lycett Green Collection, it was recently shown on TV's *Fake or Fortune*, where it was held up as a significant work by an artist rarely seen in the UK. I personally was fascinated by this enigmatic painting, more a character study than a mere likeness, when I first saw it.

During our closure it was exhibited in the National Gallery, London, a sign of its high status; in 2004 it had been displayed at the Frick in New York at a special exhibition entitled 'A Beautiful and Gracious Manner: The Art of Parmigianino'. At one time it was thought to be by Correggio (1489-1534); however, its authenticity was established by documents as having been in the collection of the Farnese palace in Rome (the setting of the second act of *Tosca*), where it was hung beside a Memling and an El Greco.

The painting shows an intense young man, not reading, but pointing to a passage on which he is meditating. One's eye is drawn to the light on forehead and nose over the deep-set eyes, and thence, between the white shirt and cuff, to the ringed finger resting on the volume. What is he reading? One could meet him and discuss matters as with any young man of today, but we know nothing of who he actually was. We do, however, know something about the artist.

Francesco Mazzola known as Parmigianino, 'the little one from Parma', was born in that city in 1503 into the Mazzola family of artists. Sadly his father died of plague when he was two, so he was taken in by his uncles, whom Vasari described as 'modestly talented artists', working largely in churches on altarpieces and frescoes. Parmigianino grew up helping them, and, as they recognized his talent, they put him in charge of their studio while he was still a teenager. By the age of eighteen he had completed a large altarpiece (the Bardi Altarpiece, 1521, in the Church of Santa Maria at Bardi in Emilia-Romagna), and had met Correggio (1494-1534), who was working on his great fresco of the Assumption of the Virgin in the dome of Parma Cathedral. This was an important meeting, as it happened at a time of change in artistic style to the phenomenon known as 'Mannerism'.

After the great trio of Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo, what were young artists to do? Leonardo had said 'It is a wretched pupil who does not surpass his master', but how? They could not be mere copyists, in which they would inevitably fail, so they had to find some different form of expression. With Correggio the novelty was to fill the space with action. Bernard Berenson described his work as having too much going on, the [Parma fresco](#) showing 'a confused mass of limbs, draperies and clouds'.

Parmigianino observed all this activity, and went off on his own path towards his special vision of elegance, which in turn became exaggerated. He is sometimes described as the last of the real Renaissance artists of North Italy, but in his pursuit of elegance he became one of the best-known artists of the Mannerist period, roughly 1520-80.

But that was to come. In 1524 he travelled to Rome, seeking patronage from the Medici Pope Clement VII, taking with him religious paintings and a small [Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror](#), showing a smooth faced youth with a long-fingered hand lying across the base of the painting.

Parmigianino was affable and sophisticated, and went down socially very well in Rome; his paintings were praised, and Vasari said he was 'celebrated as a Raphael reborn'. He was successful, but in 1527 came the sack of Rome by the forces of the Emperor Charles V, and Parmigianino fled to Bologna. This was not the first time he had fled, having been hurried away from Parma when young, during a crisis in Italy's endless intercity warfare. Indeed it has been argued that the political and religious uncertainties of the times prompted the exaggerations of the Mannerist style, the best-known example being Parmigianino's [Madonna with the Long Neck](#) (1534, Uffizi), painted when he had returned to Parma. Here he lengthened the proportions of the human body, the swan-like neck supporting a rather small head, while the very long baby sprawls across the Virgin's lap; he must have wanted to shock with this eccentric vision of elegance.

Other paintings of his also show this elongation, leading at times to curious postures, as seen for example in his [Mystic Marriage of St Catherine](#) in the National Gallery. Here in our painting the young man has the long fingers and dramatic lighting of the Mannerist

style, but he is also entirely natural and real, and painted with an urgency that grips the attention - Parmigianino was after all a painter of frescoes, and used to working fast.

Parmigianino was, indeed, multitalented, and was also an engraver and experimenter with etching. An expert draftsman, he was able to popularise his work by making prints and distributing them throughout Italy. He was particularly fascinated by the process of etching, as the ease with which acid could reproduce the spontaneity of the artist's hand appealed to him. Sadly, this was the cause of his loss of work, as, obsessed with his scientific experiments, he delayed his church commissions or even left them unfinished, something that caused him to be imprisoned for a couple of months for breach of contract. His experiments with the various acids as used in etching caused great suspicion; Vasari reported that he had become fascinated with 'magic', and he was accused of attempting alchemy, which was lethal for his reputation.

This was a sad come-down for such an accomplished artist, who had been so very popular, and he died of a fever in 1540, aged 37 years. Happily his works live on, and in York we are privileged to enjoy his fine painting of *A Young Man with a Book*, one of the very few works by this artist available in a public collection in the UK.

Anne Hall

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The best book on the artist in English is by David Ekserdjian, 2006, Yale University Press.