

Giorgione and the High Renaissance in Venice

A search for luminous color and intuitive responses to nature—a pursuit, above all, of the sensuous—occupied painters in Venice for centuries. While artists in central Italy concentrated on the more intellectual aspects of form and structure, Venetian painters, beginning with Giovanni Bellini and his students, focused their attention on the surface of things, on color and texture, even on the paint itself.

With the work of Giorgione, one of Bellini's students, the Venetian High Renaissance truly began. Although he died very young, Giorgione's influence was enormous. For the private enjoyment of cultivated patrons he introduced new subjects: mythological scenes and pastorals with elusive meaning. To an unprecedented extent, mood is the primary "subject" of his works. Like Italian poetry of the time, the lyricism of his paintings was designed to delight and refresh. Light and shadow move imperceptibly into one another, and a soft atmosphere unifies landscape and figures, giving both a kind of mystery. For Giorgione more than any artist before him, the landscape became an end in itself. It was no longer a mere backdrop to the action of the figures but an equal actor in creating his *poesia*.

Giorgione is credited with several technical innovations as well. Although Bellini had mastered the new medium of oil pigments, some of his practices remained those of a tempera painter. He planned carefully, defining every element of his compositions in advance. By contrast, Giorgione worked directly and without detailed preparatory drawings. Many of his paintings show evidence of rethinking; radiographs reveal figures that were changed, added, or removed. Giorgione also increasingly favored canvas over wood panel as a painting support, a switch that brought about its own set of technical changes. Instead of painting from light to dark on a light ground, Giorgione used a darker ground and painted progressively from darker to lighter tones. Light seems to emerge from the darkness. The woven canvas encouraged a looser pattern of brushwork, one that breaks up the surface with light-reflecting textures, some thick, others of transparent thinness.



Giovanni Bellini
Venetian, about 1430/1435–1516
The Infant Bacchus, probably 1505/1510

Bacchus is typically portrayed as a young man wreathed with vines, his body slouched with the intoxicating effect of drink. This young child, who wears an ivy wreath and holds a wine pitcher, must also represent the god of wine. As a god of agriculture, Bacchus was sometimes depicted as aging along with the seasons, in much the same way that the new year comes in as a baby and goes out as an old man. In winter, when crops were just starting to grow, Bacchus took the guise of a young boy—as pretty, Roman poets said, as a curly-haired girl.

Bellini used this same figure in the *Feast of the Gods*, which hangs in a nearby room. In that painting, made for Alfonso d'Este of Ferrara, the youth of Bacchus might suggest the duke's winter wedding to Lucrezia Borgia. Not until Bellini was close to eighty years old could he be persuaded, even by strong-willed patrons such as the Este family, to paint mythological scenes. He preferred instead the religious subjects and portraits that had occupied his long career. Remaining open to innovation, however, Bellini's style, and ultimately his subject matter, responded to influences from younger artists, including his own pupils.

Oil on panel transferred to panel, .501 x .390 m (19 3/4 x 15 3/8 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.5



Giorgione
Venetian, 1477/1478–1510
The Holy Family, probably about 1500

Knowledge of Giorgione's life and career is in inverse proportion to his artistic importance. He remains one of the least documented and most influential of all Renaissance painters. A single signed painting exists. Beyond that, scholars must attempt to identify his works on the basis of style and on sixteenth-century household inventories, which provide only brief indications of subject matter. Many of Giorgione's paintings were made for private patrons, so records that typically document large civic and religious commissions are not available. Difficulty also arises in distinguishing the early work of Giorgione from that of his contemporaries Sebastiano del Piombo and Titian, who were also pupils of Bellini and whose early styles were likewise heavily influenced by their teacher.

This painting must be one of those early works. Essentially Gothic in its symbolism, it contrasts Joseph, who represents the incomplete and imperfect era of the Old Law, with Jesus and Mary, who usher in the new era of Grace. While Joseph sits on an unfinished wall, mother and child rest on a humble rock that emphasizes Christ's humility and humanity. The figures, especially the aged, bearded Joseph, closely resemble those painted by Bellini.

Oil on panel transferred to hardboard, .373 x .456 m (14 5/8 x 17 7/8 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.8



Giorgione
The Adoration of the Shepherds, 1505/1510

Most scholars accept this panel as a work by Giorgione, but dissenters prefer to see it as an early painting by Titian. Only slightly younger than Giorgione, Titian also trained with Giovanni Bellini and responded to Giorgione's own innovations.

As with *The Holy Family*, the style of the figures offers no clear distinguishing characteristic. They resemble those painted by Bellini and by his students. In recent years, however, X-ray examination has bolstered arguments in favor of Giorgione's authorship. Extensive changes made to the sides and background opened up the space and drew attention into the distance. Giorgione, who was unusual in his time for not creating preparatory drawings, often worked out designs directly on the panel or canvas, making just this kind of revision as work progressed. In addition, these particular changes point to an increased interest in the landscape. For Giorgione, landscape became an overriding concern. He increasingly strove to integrate figures into the setting, suffusing both with a poetic mood that encompasses and unifies the whole scene.

Oil on panel, .908 x 1.105 m (35 3/4 x 43 1/2 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.289



Giorgione and Titian

Venetian, 1477/1478–1510; Venetian, about 1490–1576

Portrait of a Venetian Gentleman, about 1510

Like other paintings associated with Giorgione, this striking portrait presents difficulties of attribution. Both Titian and Sebastiano completed paintings by Giorgione that remained unfinished when he died prematurely in his early thirties. (It was said that Giorgione, fond of poetry, music, and beauty in all forms, contracted the plague from his mistress.) A second hand seems to have been at work in this painting, too. The portrait's format, with its subject glancing sidelong at the viewer from behind a parapet, was developed by Giorgione, and the soft, shadowy gradations of tone also recall his style. Its overall aggressive mood, however, points to another painter, one who both used bolder strokes and possessed a more active, worldly outlook—perhaps Titian or Cariani. (Works by these painters can be compared in nearby galleries.)

The unidentified sitter's expression of calculating, almost cruel, appraisal is amplified by the gesture of his closed fist. The inscription on the parapet does not help to identify either the sitter or the artist, although Titian sometimes "carved" his initials in a similar manner on painted parapets. These letters, *VVO*, have been interpreted as a form of the Latin *vivo* (in life). This would suggest that the portrait was painted from life and that it confers a measure of immortality on both subject and painter. It may be more likely, however, that it abbreviates a humanist motto, perhaps *virtus vincit omnia* (virtue conquers all).

Oil on canvas, .762 x .635 m (30 x 25 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.258



Lorenzo Lotto

Venetian, about 1480–1556/1557

Allegory of Virtue and Vice, 1505

This small panel originally functioned as the cover of a portrait. Covers not only protected the painting underneath but also allowed the artist to expand on particular facets of the patron's personality or concerns. This allegorical scene covered a portrait, now in Naples, of Bernardo de' Rossi, bishop of Treviso. (Lotto's *A Maiden's Dream*, also in this room, was probably a portrait cover as well.)

Rossi had only recently survived an assassination attempt when Lorenzo Lotto painted this. The cover presents a view of the bishop's virtue and perseverance—and the ultimate reward for those who choose a difficult path over more immediate and worldly gratifications. The panel is clearly divided into two halves by the central tree. On the right side, a drunken satyr peers into a wine pitcher, the intoxicating liquid already spilled around him. His surroundings are lush and green, but in the distance a storm rises and a ship sinks below the waves. On the other side, which includes Rossi's coat of arms leaning against a tree, an industrious child busies himself with tools. Here, the land is parched and rocky, but in the distance the same child, now with an angel's wings, climbs a hill into a brilliant radiance. Even the tree sprouts new life, but on the left side only. This might refer to Job 14:7: "For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again." Bishop Rossi, like Job beset by troubles, would also flourish through steadfast virtue.

Oil on panel, .565 x .422 m (22 1/4 x 16 5/8 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.156



Sebastiano del Piombo

Venetian, 1485–1547

Portrait of a Young Woman as a Wise Virgin, about 1510

The story of the wise and foolish virgins is told in the biblical book of Matthew. Preparing for marriage, five wise virgins carefully provided oil for their lamps and awaited the bridegroom. Five foolish virgins, on the other hand, missed the bridegroom when they left their homes in search of more oil. The parable was often interpreted in terms of the Last Judgment and the need to be constantly prepared for the Second Coming.

Otherwise unusual for early sixteenth-century Italy, this subject would have had obvious significance for brides, and this painting is possibly an idealized portrait intended as a wedding gift. A faint inscription on the painting has often been interpreted as a reference to Vittoria Colonna, a poet best known for her friendship with Michelangelo. Perhaps the painting was done to commemorate her wedding in 1509. Several seventeenth-century editions of her works used engravings based on this painting as a frontispiece.

Vittoria, however, lived in Rome, and Sebastiano worked in Venice until 1511. Furthermore, paintings like this one were more popular in Venice than in Rome. Venetian works depicting beautiful young women with locks of hair tumbling to creamy shoulders and revealing necklines may have been idealized portraits or fanciful creations painted for a gentleman's private enjoyment. The models for these *bellezze* may well have been the fabled courtesans of Venice.

Oil on panel, .534 x .462 m (21 x 18 1/8 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.9



Dosso Dossi

Ferrarese, active 1512–1542

Aeneas and Achates on the Libyan Coast, about 1520

In a set of paintings made for Duke Alfonso d'Este of Ferrara, Dosso illustrated Virgil's *Aeneid*. The scenes were installed friezelike on the walls of Alfonso's private study, the *camerino d'alabastro*, where Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* (in Gallery 17) also hung.

This painting is from that set and is usually thought to illustrate the moment when the luckless Trojans rebuild their wrecked ships after storms, unleashed at the bidding of the goddess Juno, drove them to the coast of Africa. Walking along the beach with Carthage in the distance, Aeneas tells his friend Achates, "Sorrow is implicit in the affairs of men. . . ." (The painting, however, has been cut down and perhaps no longer includes the figure of Aeneas. The two conversants at the right seem too old for the young Aeneas and Achates.) Dosso imparted a sense of immediacy to the ancient literary subject by clothing the Trojans in the latest Italian fashions and by giving them ships of the kind that were then exploring the New World.

Little is known about Dosso's early career. Possibly he was a native of Ferrara, where he became court painter to the powerful Este family. Although his painting style shows influences from Venice and Rome, his work is strongly original, with feathery landscapes and scenes of everyday life tinged with whimsy. Quick brushwork, intense colors, and strong patterns of light give them unusual vitality.

Oil on canvas, .587 x .876 m (23 1/8 x 34 1/2 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.250