

# Bellini, Giorgione, and the Venetian Renaissance

A search for luminous color and intuitive responses to nature occupied Venetian painters 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 on the sensual appeal of color and texture, even of the paint itself. Bellini was among the first to master the techniques of recently introduced oil paints, which capture and reflect light in ways the flat colors of tempera could not. In his work, for the first time, is the glowing color that would continue to characterize Venetian painting for centuries to come.

Among Bellini's many students was Giorgione. Although he died very young, Giorgione's influence was enormous. He introduced a new type of subject to painting: mythological scenes and pastorals with elusive meaning, created for the private enjoyment of cultivated patrons. To an unprecedented extent, mood is their primary "subject." Like the verses of contemporary poetry, their lyricism was designed to delight and refresh, a purpose well served by what was called Giorgione's "tender modeling." Light and shadow move imperceptibly into one another, without strong divisions. A soft atmosphere unifies landscape and figures, giving both a kind of mystery. And for Giorgione, more than any artist before him, the landscape was more than a mere backdrop for figures — it was an equal actor in creating *poesia*.

Giorgione is credited with several technical innovations as well. Although Bellini had mastered the new medium of oil paints, some of his practices remained those of a tempera painter. He planned carefully, defining every element of his compositions in advance. Giorgione worked directly and without detailed preparatory drawings. Many of his paintings show evidence of rethinking: figures that have been changed, added, or removed. Giorgione also increasingly favored canvas over panel, a switch that brought about its own set of technical changes. 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**  
Italian, c. 1430/1435 – 1516

*Saint Jerome Reading*, 1505

Saint Jerome is often depicted on small devotional panels like this one. Because he had translated the Bible into Latin, the saint was a favorite of Renaissance humanists and was often shown reading in a study. Other depictions showed him in the wilderness, living as a hermit and beating his breast in penance. Here the two types are combined.

In fact, the elderly saint and his lion companion, shifted to the lower right, occupy only a small area of the painting. The landscape commands center stage, filled with a distant view and abundant life, all washed with a radiant light. Many of the plants and animals have various symbolic meanings — the rabbits, for example, could serve as reminders of lust or Christian meekness. Rather than intending that we "read" them as symbols, perhaps Bellini means us to see them simply as part of a vast and rich nature.

Perhaps, paradoxically, it was because Venice was so intensely urban — it was a largely artificial environment constructed on pilings and scant marshy ground — that its artists developed into such evocative landscape painters. Their approach, in contrast to contemporaries elsewhere, was more intuitive than scientific: they responded to, rather than recorded, nature.

Oil on panel, 47 x 37.5 cm (18 ½ x 14 ¾ in.)  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.217



**Cima da Conegliano**  
Italian, c. 1459 – 1517 or 1518

*Saint Helena*, c. 1495

Mother of the emperor Constantine, Saint Helena journeyed to the Holy Land, where she found the True Cross, the cross of the crucifixion, which she holds here. Scenes of saints in landscape settings like this were something of a specialty of the artist.

Cima had moved to Venice by the mid-1480s but always remained in close contact with his hometown of Conegliano on the mainland. The town's *castello* and other landmarks appear in the background of this small devotional panel. Almost all of Cima's paintings include idyllic landscapes that recall the mountainous region of his home.

Cima formed his artistic style early in life and never deviated from it. Even though his clear colors and meticulous detail became a bit old-fashioned, his work remained popular with Venetian patrons, especially the more conservative ones. In the 1490s, when Bellini became occupied with decorations for the doge's palace, Cima became the leading painter of altarpieces in Venice. He is sometimes referred to as a "rustic" Bellini for his direct and ingenuous figures, which he posed with greater casualness than Bellini, relaxing the imposing symmetry of Bellini's compositions. The informality and greater sense of movement exhibited by Cima's figures influenced Titian and other Venetian artists of the next generation.

Oil on panel, 40.2 x 32.2 cm (15 13/16 x 12 11/16 in.)  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.12



**Vittore Carpaccio**  
Italian, c. 1465 – 1525/1526

*The Flight into Egypt*, c. 1515

Mary and Joseph's flight with Jesus to escape Herod's slaughter of the Hebrew babies is recounted in the gospel of Matthew. The subject is often found on predellas, the small scenes at the base of altarpieces, but this painting is too large to be a predella panel. Nor is it likely to have been the central section of an altarpiece — those were usually meditative, devotional images rather than narrative ones like this. Perhaps it was made for a religious confraternity. Such *scuole* were among the most important patrons of Venetian painters. They commissioned Carpaccio's best-known works — large bustling scenes that are full of anecdotal detail and provide valuable information about life in Renaissance Venice. Here, the distant village and covered boat gliding past offer a hint of Carpaccio's delight in storytelling.

While Bellini began to use layered oil glazes to soften the edges of his forms, the younger Carpaccio continued to favor a harder (and increasingly old-fashioned) line. In this case, though, it enhances his narrative purpose: hard contours accentuate the gait of the ass and the long stride of Joseph, and they help frame the Virgin and Child in a way that almost enthrones them on their humble mount. In contrast, the luminous undersides of the clouds reveal the influence of Bellini's treatment of light.

Oil on panel, 72 x 111 cm (28 ¾ x 43 11/16 in.)  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.28



### Giorgione

Italian, 1477/1478 – 1510

*The Holy Family*, probably c. 1500

Knowledge of Giorgione's life and career is in inverse proportion to his 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 that records, which typically document large civic and religious commissions, are not available. Difficulty also arises in distinguishing the early work of Giorgione from that of near contemporaries like 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. The figures, especially the aged, bearded Joseph, closely resemble those of Bellini. Joseph sits on an unfinished wall, while mother and child are seated on a humble rock that emphasizes Christ's humility and humanity. The symbolism of the unfinished wall also refers to the incomplete and imperfect era before Christ's birth. The precision of detail, particularly of the plants and rocks in the foreground, suggests the influence of paintings from northern Europe, which could be seen in Venice in large numbers and were also known through prints.

Oil on panel transferred to hardboard, 37.3 x 45.6 cm (14 11/16 x 17 15/16 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.8



### Giorgione

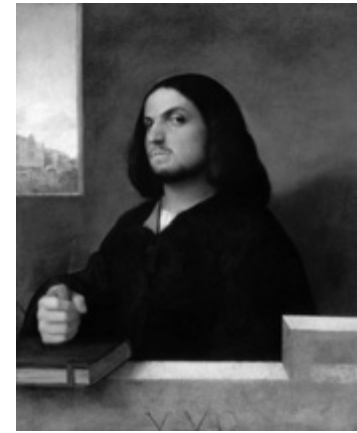
Italian, 1477/1478 – 1510

*The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1505/1510

The Virgin has a calm, quiet beauty, and Joseph's domed head is washed in light, his gray hair picked out with delicate highlights. Barely visible behind them, the ox and ass stand in a dark cave, as humble men gaze down on the infant. The Adoration of the Shepherds was a common theme for public altars, but Giorgione has transformed it — making it more intimate and emotionally resonant.

Landscape became Giorgione's overriding concern as a painter and a primary means of creating mood. X-ray examination of this panel has revealed extensive changes to the sides and background that opened up the space and drew attention into the distance. (Giorgione was unusual in his time for not making preparatory drawings, often working out designs directly on the panel or canvas.) Compare *The Holy Family*, painted earlier, where the landscape is contained within a window. In *The Adoration*, by contrast, setting and figures are integrated and suffused with a poetic ambiance that unifies the entire composition. Landscape — and light — shape our experience, emphasizing the painting's meditative, rather than narrative, dimension. Some elements of the picture may have been suggested by poems that celebrated the beauties of nature and rustic life: distant shepherds; the light at the horizon, glowing a soft yellow; a tiny fire sparking under an archway; and clear water flowing in a glassy stream.

Oil on panel, 90.8 x 110.5 cm (35 3/4 x 43 1/2 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.258



### Giorgione and Titian

Italian, 1477/1478 – 1510; Italian, c. 1490–1576

*Portrait of a Venetian Gentleman*, c. 1510

The expression of calculating, almost cruel, appraisal — amplified by his closed fist — gives this man an aggressive air, but we do not know his identity. The inscription on the parapet does not help. 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 on both subject and painter a measure of immortality. It may more likely, however, be an abbreviation of a humanist motto, perhaps *virtus vincit omnia* (virtue conquers all).

Like other paintings associated with Giorgione, this one presents difficulties of attribution. Both Titian and Sebastiano are known to have completed works that remained unfinished when Giorgione died prematurely in his early thirties. (It was said that Giorgione contracted the plague from his mistress.) A second hand seems to be at work in this painting. The portrait's format, with 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. However, its aggressive mood points to a painter with a bolder brush and more active, worldly outlook, like Titian.

Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm (30 x 25 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.258



### Lorenzo Lotto

Italian, c. 1480 – 1556/1557

*Allegory of Virtue and Vice*, 1505

This small panel originally functioned as a cover for a portrait. Covers not only protected the painting underneath, but allowed the artist to expand symbolically on particular facets of the patron's personality and concerns. This allegorical scene covered a portrait, now in Naples, of Bernardo de' Rossi, bishop of Treviso.

Rossi had only recently survived an assassination attempt when Lotto painted him. This scene presents a view of the bishop's virtue and perseverance — and the ultimate award available to those who choose a difficult path over more immediate and worldly gratifications. The panel is clearly divided in 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 farther in the distance a storm rises and a ship sinks below the waves. On the other side, where we find 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 toward a brilliant radiance. Even the tree sprouts with new life, but on the left side only. It may refer to Job 14:7: "For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again." The bishop, like Job beset by troubles, would also flourish through steadfast virtue.

The clarity of Lotto's landscape has little to do with the soft dreaminess recently introduced by Giorgione. It shows instead the continuing influence of the kind of precision found in northern art, especially that of the German Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), who traveled to Venice and whose works were widely known through printed engravings.

Oil on panel, 56.5 x 42.2 cm (22 1/4 x 16 5/8 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.156