BELLINI · GIORGIONE · TITIAN

and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting

National Gallery of Art, Washington • June 18–September 17, 2006

The early sixteenth century was a time of great innovation and experimentation in Venetian painting. Led by Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione, and Titian, artists in Venice radically reinterpreted traditional subjects and introduced new ones, such as the pastoral landscape, the provocative woman, and the dramatic portrait. The manner of depicting these new themes was equally revolutionary. Paintings became larger in scale, compositions more dynamic, and brushwork more expressive and fluid. Artists embraced oil painting as the medium par excellence for rendering textures, capturing effects of light and atmosphere, and creating the luminous colors that are perhaps Venice's most dazzling legacy to the history of art.

The word "Renaissance" in the exhibition title refers, in the traditional sense, to the rebirth of antiquity—the revival of interest in classical art, literature, and philosophy. But here it also signifies that Venetian painting was transformed—reborn—in the opening decades of the sixteenth century. The exhibition focuses on the period from 1500 to 1530, which represents, visually and intellectually, the most exciting phase of the Renaissance in Venice, when three great masters, the old Bellini, Giorgione, and the young Titian, were all working side by side. Their innovations and those of gifted contemporaries, such as Sebastiano del Piombo, Palma Vecchio, and Lorenzo Lotto, would influence European art for centuries.

HISTORICAL CLIMATE

This burst of creativity occurred in a period of crisis. As the century opened, the Most Serene Republic of Venice (La Serenissima) was at war with the Ottoman Turks and lost important Aegean trading outposts to them. Plague repeatedly

1

ARTISTS' MATERIALS

Venetian painters' materials were transformed in the early sixteenth century, when canvas replaced wood panel as the preferred support and the oil medium, introduced in Venice in the 1470s, largely displaced tempera. Using egg yolk to bind pigments, tempera dries to a semi-matte state, whereas oil paint retains its translucency and produces colors of greater richness and depth. Venetian painters also used pigments previously employed in manuscript illumination—orpiment and realgar—to produce the glowing orange and yellow tones seen, for example, in Joseph's robe in Giorgione's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (FIG. 2). To add even more brilliance and luminosity to their paintings, artists sometimes mixed their pigments with pulverized glass.

struck the city, and one virulent outbreak in 1510 probably cut short the life of Giorgione, then in his early thirties. More disastrous was the war that pitted Venice against the League of Cambrai, an alliance formed by the papacy, its Italian allies, and the Holy Roman Emperor to halt Venetian expansion on the mainland. Venice's humiliating defeat in a crucial battle of 1509 nearly extinguished the republic. Recovery was slow, but the war effectively ended when Venetian troops marched victorious into Verona in 1517. That the arts flourished amidst this chaos was largely due to the wealth the city had accumulated in the previous century, its prosperous trade with northern Europe, and its stable republican government.

SACRED IMAGES AND STORIES

Despite the Renaissance interest in secular themes of classical inspiration, images of saints and scenes from the life of Christ continued to dominate Venetian painting, as they had for centuries. Venetian artists approached these traditional subjects in novel ways. Most devotional pictures of saints had previously been vertical in format to focus the viewer's attention on the holy figures that largely filled the frame. Bellini adopted instead a horizontal format, as in his *Virgin with the Blessing Child* (FIG. 1), permitting a panoramic view of the landscape behind the Madonna and Child. Bellini, whose artistic career had begun in the 1460s, was the point of departure for the younger generation of Venetian artists. The high demand for his altarpieces and small half-length Madonnas required him to maintain a large workshop of assistants, which Giorgio Vasari described in his *Lives of the Artists* (1568) as the training ground for Giorgione, Sebastiano del Piombo, and Titian.

Bellini's followers continued his innovations and introduced their own. The keen interest in nature seen in his works is carried further in Giorgione's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (FIG. 2). By placing the figures to one side, Giorgione

2

made room for an unprecedented, expansive view of nature, whose beauty and serenity harmonize with the emotional tenor of the figures surrounding the infant Christ. Titian also experimented with asymmetrical compositions, lending them a new dynamism, as in his *Virgin and Child with Saints Catherine and Dominic* (FIG. 3). Unlike Bellini's hieratic, blessing child, Titian's holy infant twists away from his mother to gaze at Catherine, while Dominic and the unidentified donor of the painting ardently press forward in their spiritual longing for nearness to Christ. Such pictures of saints from different eras (Catherine

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was martyred in the fourth century and Dominic died in 1221) joined in contemplation of the Virgin and Child are known as *sacre conversazioni* (holy conversations) and had long been a staple of Italian painting. In Venice, Titian's reinterpretation of the theme, with figures in fervent poses interacting with one another, was entirely new.

PICTURES OF WOMEN

Relatively few portraits of actual women survive from Renaissance Venice. More common are poetic images of provocative young women such as Giorgione's *Laura* (**FIG. 4**). This bare-breasted figure framed by laurel branches inspired a series of similar beauties, culminating in Titian's *Flora* (**COVER**). Their sensuality, free-flowing hair, and semi-undress must have surprised viewers accustomed to seeing women portrayed, if at all, as respectable matrons. Titian's letters indicate that his models were sometimes women of easy virtue, who were not difficult to find in Venice, then famous throughout Europe for its many beautiful and charming courtesans.

The origins of the eroticized half-length portrait are intertwined with amorous descriptions of beloved women found in both classical and contemporary love poetry being published in Venice at this time. Without the constraints of naturalistic portraiture, artists freely invented imaginary beauties. Some have attributes associating them with ancient heroines or goddesses, while others are pure embodiments of the poetic ideal of the perfect woman.

5

ALLEGORIES AND MYTHOLOGIES

The rediscovery of classical texts in the Renaissance opened up a vast range of new subjects for artists to explore. By 1500, Venice was a major center of the printing industry, and the publication of writings from antiquity led patrons to commission works of art derived from ancient philosophy, history, and literature. The section of Plato's *Republic* that discusses the education of philosophers possibly inspired Giorgione's enigmatic *Three Philosophers* (**FIG. 5**), in which the

TECHNICAL PHOTOGRAPHS

In 1568 the artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari wrote in his *Lives of the Artists* that the Venetians did not make preliminary drawings for their paintings. The recent use of infrared reflectography to study Venetian paintings has forced a revision of this view. Infrared reflectograms, which allow us to peer beneath the paint surface, reveal that Venetian painters often drew directly on the canvas instead of making numerous studies on paper. The infrared images show that Giorgione and Titian used fluid brushstrokes to indicate the placement and shape of the figures and their settings (**FIG. A**). Such drawings provided only a guideline; x-rays of paintings, called x-radiographs, expose underlying paint layers which demonstrate that the creative process continued in the course of painting. Artists experimented with different poses and compositions, adding and eliminating details, such as the exotic headdress in Giorgione's *Three Philosophers* (**FIG. B**), which was painted out in the final composition.

A

B

figures may represent the three ages of man. The youngest, seated philosopher contemplates the dark, cavernous cliff face; the mature philosopher regards our world; and the oldest, perhaps blind philosopher seems to look inward. In an earlier phase of the painting, visible with x-rays, the old philosopher wore an exotic headdress whose shape suggests rays of sunlight. Although variously interpreted, the *Three Philosophers* may derive from the Platonic allegory of the mind's ascent from the shadowy darkness of ignorance, symbolized by a cave, into the bright light of knowledge, symbolized by the sun. The subject would have appealed to the owner of the work, Taddeo Contarini, who read ancient philosophy and was one of the most erudite patrons in Renaissance Venice.

The revival of classical bucolic poetry, of the sort known from Virgil's *Eclogues*, gave rise to a quintessentially Venetian type of painting: the idyllic, pastoral landscape. Titian's *Pastoral Concert* (**FIG. 6**) epitomizes this genre, with its gently rolling hills bathed in sunlight. Inspired by a pastoral poem from antiquity or the Renaissance, the painting is evidently an allegory on the creation of poetry. The women seem invisible to the poetic, musical young men and are perhaps their muses. The contrast between the rustic, barefoot shepherd and the fashionable, urban lute player points to the dialectic between city and country, cultured and rustic, art and nature, that lies at the heart of the pastoral idiom.

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Mythological gods and goddesses, beautiful nymphs, and naughty satyrs populate the pastoral landscapes painted by Bellini and Titian for a room in Duke Alfonso d'Este's palace in Ferrara. Bellini completed his *Feast of the Gods* (**FIG. 7**) for this room in 1514, and several years after his death in 1516, the duke commissioned Titian to paint the *Bacchanal of the Andrians* (**FIG. 8**). Inspired by an ancient description of a lost painting, Titian portrayed the happily drunken denizens of the island of Andros, where a river of wine flows perpetually. Later, Titian reworked the *Feast of the Gods*, painting the hillside at left, among other changes, to make Bellini's composition harmonize with his own. The contrast between the reclining nymphs at the far right of both works suggests that Titian was also trying to outdo Bellini, his former master, in the depiction of female beauty. Such artistic rivalry probably contributed to the rapid development of Venetian painting in this period.

PORTRAITS OF MEN

Giorgione and his circle evolved a revolutionary type of dramatic male portrait, in which patrician young men are shown acting the part of a lover, poet, musician, or gallant soldier. Previously, Venetian portraits had emphasized the sitter's social and economic station in life. The Giorgionesque portrait reveals instead the sitter's private self, often touched with melancholy and a sense of yearning. The softly shaded style and the dreamy demeanor of the young man depicted in Palma Vecchio's *Portrait of a Poet* (**FIG. 9**) typify this approach.

Venetian painters' interest in conveying an individual's state of mind was likely inspired by Leonardo da Vinci, who visited Venice in 1500 and may have

11

brought with him drawings demonstrating his new language of pose, gesture, and expression. Leonardo's influence may be detected in Sebastiano del Piombo's *Man in Armor* (FIG. 10), in which the soldier's menacing glance and jutting shoulder forcefully convey his potentially aggressive mental state. Sebastiano's virtuoso handling of oil paint to depict metallic sheen demonstrates that he was also familiar with the work of Jan van Eyck and his followers. Flemish paintings were prized by collectors in Venice, where they were widely available as a result of the city's trade with northern Europe.

Of all the Venetian portraitists, none had more lasting influence than Titian, who experimented with the Giorgionesque type of poetic portraiture but invested its mood of reverie with greater realism. The youth depicted in his *Man with a Glove* (FIG. 11) seems simultaneously real and ideal. Though his identity is unknown, he possibly belonged to the court of Federico Gonzaga in Mantua, whose most illustrious member, the author and diplomat Baldassare Castiglione, visited Titian's studio in Venice in 1523. In his book *Il Cortegiano*, Castiglione described the perfect courtier as one who possessed nobility and grace, impressed others with his talent, and, above all, avoided affectation so as to appear natural. According to Castiglione, dress should "always tend more toward the grave and sober rather than the foppish. Hence, I think that black is more pleasing in clothing than any other color." In its restraint, naturalism, and understated elegance, the *Man with a Glove* epitomized the new courtly ideal of dress and deportment. As such, it set a standard for portraiture that would be emulated by European artists for centuries.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FIG. 1 Giovanni Bellini, *Virgin with the Blessing Child*, 1510, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan (cat. 1)

FIG. 2 Giorgione, *Adoration of the Shepherds ("Allendale Nativity")*, c. 1500, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection (cat. 17)

FIG. 3 Titian, *Virgin and Child with Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Dominic and a Donor*, c. 1513–1514, Fondazione Magnani-Rocca, Parma (cat. 10)

FIG. 4 Giorgione, *Portrait of a Woman ("Laura")*, 1506, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna (cat. 38)

FIG. 5 Giorgione, *Three Philosophers*, c. 1506, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna (cat. 30)

FIG. 6 Titian, *Pastoral Concert ("Concert Champêtre")*, c. 1510, Musée du Louvre, Departement des Peintures, Paris (cat. 31)

FIG. 7 Giovanni Bellini and Titian, *Feast of the Gods*, 1514 and 1529, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection (cat. 32)

FIG. 8 Titian, *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, 1522–1524, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid (cat. 33)

FIG. 9 Palma Vecchio, *Portrait of a Poet*, c. 1520, The National Gallery, London (cat. 52)

FIG. 10 Sebastiano del Piombo, *Man in Armor*, c. 1511/1512, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund (cat. 51)

FIG. 11 Titian, *Man with a Glove*, c. 1523/1524, Musée du Louvre, Departement des Peintures, Paris (cat. 56)

FIG. A Infrared reflectogram of the Virgin's face in Titian's *Virgin and Child ("Gypsy Madonna")*, c. 1511, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna (cat. 2)

FIG. B X-radiograph of the head of the elderly man in Giorgione's *Three Philosophers*

COVER Titian, *Flora*, c. 1520, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (cat. 42)

PROGRAMS

CONCERTS IN HONOR OF THE EXHIBITION

Sundays, 6:30 pm, West Building,
West Garden Court
Presented in connection with the
Washington Early Music Festival

June 18
National Gallery Vocal Arts Ensemble
Rosa Lamoreaux, artistic director
Music of Renaissance Venice for chamber choir and instruments

June 25
Drew Minter, countertenor, and
Tempesta di Mare
Virtuoso music of the late Italian Renaissance and early baroque periods

LECTURES WITH LIVE MUSIC

Thursdays, June 29 and August 3, 12:00 noon
West Building, Lecture Hall

Music and Art in Renaissance Venice
Russell Sale, lecturer
Stephen Ackert, harpsichordist

SUNDAY LECTURES

East Building Auditorium, 2:00 pm

June 18
The Renaissance of Venetian Painting: An Introduction to the Exhibition
David Alan Brown, curator of Italian painting, National Gallery of Art
A book signing will follow.

June 25
The Renaissance Studiolo: Reading, Collecting, and the Invention of Mythological Painting
Stephen Campbell, professor, history of art, The Johns Hopkins University
A book signing will follow.

September 10
Double Lecture Program
Deborah Howard, head of the Department of the History of Art, University of Cambridge; and Juergen Schulz, Andrea V. Rosenthal Professor of History of Art and Architecture, Emeritus, Brown University

PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM

September 16, 10:30 am–4:30 pm
September 17, 1:00–4:30 pm
East Building Auditorium

Reconsidering Venetian Renaissance Painting
Illustrated lectures by noted scholars of Venetian Renaissance painting and panel discussion with the organizers of the exhibition

SUMMER LECTURE SERIES

Sundays, July 9–August 27, 2:00 pm
East Building Auditorium

Five Hundred Years of Art in Venice: Achievement, Allure, and Influence

July 9, *Giovanni Bellini's "Feast of the Gods" in Context,* Russell Sale

July 16, *Getting Your Feet Wet: An Introduction to Venice,* Eric Denker

July 23, *Gentile Bellini at the Court of Mehmed II,* Philip Leonard

July 30, *Visions and Realities, Nineteenth-Century British Artists and the Lure of Venice,* Diane Arkin

August 6, *The Lure of the Sun: Nineteenth-Century German Painters in Italy,* Christopher With

August 13, *Monet and the Impressionists in Venice,* Eric Denker

August 20, *Venice in Film: Art, Love, and Death in La Serenissima,* David Gariff

August 27, *The Venice Biennale: The Grandest of Spectacles,* Sally Shelburne

GUIDED TOURS

Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting, Russell Sale and David Gariff, June 26, 27, 30 and July 12, 14, 18, 20, 24, 12:00 noon; August 16, 23, 25, 29, 1:00 pm

Grand-Tour View Paintings from Rome, Venice, and Saxony, Philip Leonard, June 9, 11, 14, 16, 1:00 pm

Venetian Views: The Art of Canaletto, Bellotto, Guardi, David Gariff, June 21, 25, 27, 29, 1:00 pm

No reservations are required. Call 202.842.6247 to arrange special tours for adult groups (20 or more).

FILM PROGRAMS

Festival of Classic Italian Cinema
This summer series is a rare opportunity to view 35 mm prints of several great Italian films, including works by Fellini, Rossellini, and Visconti. See *www.nga.gov* for further details.

AUDIO GUIDE

Narrated by National Gallery director Earl A. Powell III, with David Alan Brown, curator of Italian painting, National Gallery of Art; Deborah Howard, head of the Department of the History of Art, University of Cambridge; and Peter Humfrey, professor at the School of Art History, University of St Andrews.

Cost: $5:00, at the entrance to the exhibition. To reserve for groups, call 202.842.6592.

ON THE WEB

http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/renaissanceinfo.htm

CATALOGUE

Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting, edited by David Alan Brown and Sylvia Ferino-Pagden. Produced by the National Gallery of Art and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, and published in association with Yale University Press. 352 pages. Softcover $45; hardcover $65.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Hours: Monday–Saturday, 10:00 am–5:00 pm; Sunday, 11:00 am–6:00 pm. Gallery Web site: *www.nga.gov*. For information about accessibility, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services, inquire at the Art Information Desks, consult the Web site, or call 202.842.6690 (TDD line 202.842.6176).

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

It is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Brochure prepared by Susan M. Arensberg, Department of Exhibition Programs, and produced by the Publishing Office.