

1 Introduction

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On 29 November 1516 the Venetian nobleman Marin Sanudo wrote in his diary: “We learned this morning of the death of Giovanni Bellini, the best of painters, at the age of His fame is known throughout the world, and old as he was, he continued to paint excellently”.¹ At the time of his death Bellini had dominated Venetian painting for more than half a century; and although Sanudo’s words naturally reflect a patriotic pride in the life and work of a fellow citizen, they are no empty hyperbole. Rather, they represent an early recognition of a now universally acknowledged fact: that Bellini was one of the greatest artists not only of Quattrocento Venice, but of the entire Italian Renaissance. For Roberto Longhi, who in 1946 described him as “one of the great poets of Italy”,² Bellini’s achievement even transcended the medium of painting.

This high critical esteem did not survive unchallenged in the four centuries between Sanudo and Longhi. It was still shared in 1532 by Lodovico Ariosto, who in the expanded edition of his *Orlando Furioso* included the name of Bellini, alongside those of Mantegna, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Giorgione, and Titian, as one of the greatest artists of the modern age.³ But for mid-Cinquecento writers such as Giorgio Vasari (1568), Bellini’s “arid, crude and laboured style” was eclipsed by the “modern manner” of his successors Giorgione and Titian;⁴ and this verdict was generally shared by academic historians and theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even so, Roger De Piles includes Bellini as one of only two fifteenth-century painters in his “Balance des Peintres” of 1708;⁵ and exceptionally for an artist of generation, Bellini’s work was considered worthy for inclusion in the great princely collections of the seventeenth century such as that of the Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in Brussels. Bellini’s historical importance as the founding father of Venetian Renaissance painting was also recognised by seventeenth-century Venetian critics such as Carlo Ridolfi and Marco

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Boschini,⁶ as well as by Luigi Lanzi in his *Storia Pittorica della Italia* of 1789. It was not, however, until the mid-nineteenth century, when Bellini found an ardent champion in John Ruskin, that his true stature was again properly recognised. In his Slade Lecture on "Colour", delivered at the University of Oxford in 1870, Ruskin characteristically declared: "I have ventured to call the aera of painting represented by John Bellini, the time 'of the Masters.' Truly they deserved the name, who did nothing but what was lovely, and taught only what was right." Similarly, in his lecture on "The relation between Michael Angelo and Tintoret", delivered a year later, Ruskin went as far as to pronounce Bellini's Frari triptych (Fig. 49) and San Zaccaria altarpiece (Plate XIII) the two best pictures in the world.⁷

Once Ruskin had restored Bellini to the ranks of the very greatest of Renaissance masters, it was left to the art historians of the twentieth century to provide a sustained analysis of the artist's work, tracing his chronology, identifying his sources of inspiration, and attempting to differentiate between his autograph works and those by imitators or followers. The short but critically penetrating book by Roger Fry of 1899⁸ was followed by some fifteen monographs, mainly by Italian scholars, during the course of the century. Another major landmark in the growing public appreciation of Bellini's stature was the great, and never to be repeated, exhibition of his works held in the Doge's Palace in Venice in 1949.⁹

Bellini was a many-sided artistic genius, and every generation since Ruskin has found something new to admire in his work. But for viewers at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as for Longhi in 1946, one of the most striking aspects of Bellini's genius remains his ability to respond creatively to a succession of quite diverse stimuli, while adhering to a sense of aesthetic order and to an inner spiritual vision that were entirely his own. To the names adduced by Longhi as stimuli – Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, Antonello da Messina, and Giorgione – other scholars have added those of Jacopo Bellini, Jan van Eyck and his Flemish followers, Donatello, Pietro Lombardo, and Leonardo. Furthermore, it is now universally recognised that by moving during the course of the 1470s from the traditional Italian technique of egg tempera to an oil medium inspired by Flemish painting, Bellini initiated a technical revolution that was to have profound consequences for the whole history of European art.

One of the themes that Bellini pursued most singlemindedly throughout his long career was that of the Virgin and Child; and one only has to compare an early work such as the Davis *Madonna* of c. 1462 (Plate II) with a late work such as the *Madonna of the Meadow* (Plate XII) to appreciate the extent of

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this stylistic and technical development over a period of four decades. In the Davis *Madonna*, which is executed in quick-drying tempera, the forms are circumscribed by sharp, metallic contours that reveal a close study by the young painter of the Paduan works of Mantegna and Donatello. Equally sculptural are the hard surfaces and deeply excavated folds of the Virgin's cloak. Similarly, the landscape background is carefully constructed in the manner of Jacopo Bellini, and again Mantegna, with neatly tilled fields on the right conforming to a perspective grid, and the curving road on the left devised to lead the eye towards the horizon. By contrast, in the *Madonna of the Meadow*, which is (essentially) an oil painting,¹⁰ the forms are endowed with a much greater softness, with more gradual tonal transitions, and there is a new warmth, depth, and intensity of colour. The background landscape, which now occupies a relatively greater area of the picture field, is arranged in a more planar fashion, with effects of distance achieved by means of colour gradation rather than of linear construction.

Yet for all their differences, the two works retain a close spiritual affinity and an essential consistency of approach to the devotional theme. Both are composed with a geometrical clarity of design, with the head of the Virgin placed in each case on the central vertical axis of the panel, and forming the apex of a firmly based triangle. Both represent the Virgin praying over the nude body of the sleeping Child; and although this was a favourite theme among Venetian painters, generally no other artist endowed it with such profound religious expressiveness as did Bellini. On one level, the Virgin is portrayed as a loving mother, tenderly solicitous towards her child as he lies asleep. But on a deeper level, she is unequivocally the Mother of God, foreseeing the future sacrifice of the Cross, and pondering its meaning. In both works, too, as so often in Bellini, the landscape serves as a poetic commentary on the religious message of the foreground, enhancing the poignancy of the theme by its tranquil and delicate beauty.

The *Madonna of the Meadow* may also serve to illustrate a paradox that lies at the heart of the art of Bellini, at least from his middle career onwards. In an obvious sense, the style and composition are more "modern" than those of the Davis *Madonna*: thus, the new softness of the modelling has analogies with the work of Leonardo as well as of Giorgione, while the smaller size of the figures in relation to the frame lends an effect of greater spaciousness. Yet in another sense, the later work is the more archaic of the two, with deeper roots in Venetian pictorial tradition. With its emphatically sculptural forms and austere colour scheme, the Davis *Madonna* marks a sharp stylistic break with the relatively planar and richly decorative

Madonna type of Jacopo Bellini and Antonio Vivarini, and before them, of the innumerable Gothic and Byzantine images to be seen in Venice. When painting his picture, Bellini self-consciously espoused the most modern artistic style then to be found in northeastern Italy and rejected that of his local predecessors. In the *Madonna of the Meadow* he sought rather to reaffirm certain aspects of his Venetian heritage. There is something unmistakably neo-Byzantine in the deep saturation of the colours of the Virgin's draperies; or in the unnaturalistically rigid forms of the folds; or in the way in which the colours are distributed in broad, decoratively repeating planes across the whole picture surface. All this may also be interpreted as part of Bellini's deep religious sense, and his evident desire to invest his image with an effect of timelessness and sanctity appropriate to its devotional function.

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The known facts of Bellini's biography may be quickly sketched.¹¹ He belonged to an illustrious family of painters: his father, Jacopo Bellini, played a pioneering role in introducing the new Renaissance style of painting to northern Italy; his elder brother, Gentile, although lacking the genius of Giovanni, nevertheless shared with him a commanding position in Venetian painting of the later fifteenth century; and the brothers' sister, Nicolosia, was married to Andrea Mantegna. Their cousin, Leonardo Bellini, was eminent as a manuscript illuminator.

The first documented reference to Giovanni dates from April 1459, when he is recorded living in his own house in the parish of San Lio in Venice.¹² In the following year, Jacopo signed his altarpiece for the Gattamelata chapel in the Santo, Padua, in the names of himself and his two painter-sons.¹³ During the earlier 1460s Giovanni apparently continued to lend assistance to his father, contributing to such major projects as the set of four triptychs for the church of the Carità (now Venice, Accademia),¹⁴ and a narrative cycle representing scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin for the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.¹⁵

Although Bellini's earliest surviving work to carry a certain date is the *Madonna degli Alberetti* (Fig. 93) of as late as 1487, it is clear that he was already regarded as the city's leading painter of altarpieces and smaller devotional pictures by the beginning of the 1470s. Official recognition of his preeminent position in all branches of Venetian painting came in 1479, when he was appointed to work on the cycle of history paintings in the Doge's Palace (destroyed by fire in 1577).¹⁶ Partly, no doubt, in response to the burden of work imposed by this appointment, Bellini came to employ numerous

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assistants; and by about 1500 he stood at the head of what was probably the largest painter's workshop in Italy. Despite the artistic revolution created by Giorgione in the first decade of the sixteenth century, Bellini continued to dominate artistic life in Venice right up to the time of his death in 1516.

Bellini's long and successful career was outwardly uneventful, and apart from a probable visit to the Marches in the early 1470s¹⁷ to undertake a major commission, the *Coronation of the Virgin* for San Francesco, Pesaro (Plate V), he may never have travelled outside the Veneto. Virtually all his most important works were painted for the churches, confraternities, and council chambers of Venice; and it is likely that the majority of his smaller devotional works and portraits were similarly painted for Venetian rather than local customers. In this sense, commissions of the size and importance of the Pesaro *Coronation*, or the *Baptism* for Santa Corona in Vicenza (in situ), may be seen as exceptional in his career. But as his international fame grew, so must have the number of requests from foreign patrons, including from the north Italian courts. One of the best-documented episodes of his career concerns the protracted attempts by Isabella d'Este, Marchesa of Mantua, to persuade him to provide a secular allegory for her humanist *studiolo* (1496–1505).¹⁸ Although in the end Isabella managed to get Bellini to paint only a small-scale devotional picture, he did later produce his secular masterpiece, the *Feast of the Gods* (Plate XVI), for her brother Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara.

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Bellini signed the *Feast of the Gods* in 1514, two years before his death in November 1516. It is unfortunate that Sanudo's obituary notice left blank the painter's age, since there is no other precise evidence regarding the date of his birth, and the question is obviously crucial for a proper understanding of his earlier career. Following the testimony of Vasari, who claimed that Bellini died at the age of ninety,¹⁹ a number of influential twentieth-century critics placed his birthdate at c. 1425, and they consequently dated the beginning of his career to the later 1440s. Vasari also claimed that Giovanni was older than his brother Gentile; and since Jacopo's wife, Anna Rinversi, is known to have been pregnant for the first time in 1429, and since she makes no mention of Giovanni in her last will of 1471, it has further sometimes been supposed that he was not her son and was illegitimate. However, as is now generally accepted, there is stronger contemporary evidence to indicate that Gentile was the elder brother, thus putting both assertions by Vasari in doubt, and rendering the hypothesis of illegitimacy superfluous – at least as regards the question of Giovanni's birth date.²⁰ Another common

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assumption made in the past, that Gentile was the child born of Anna in 1429, has also been shaken by the confirmation of the existence of a third brother, Niccolò;²¹ and in any case, there was at least one sister. In recent decades, scholars were beginning to come to a certain consensus that Gentile was born c. 1431 and Giovanni c. 1433;²² yet, as pointed out by Mauro Lucco,²³ there is no external reason why Giovanni should not have been born c. 1435–6, or even a year or two later, in which case his career as a painter would not have begun until the late 1450s. This would, in fact, accord better with the aforementioned notices of 1459/60, and with the fact that Giovanni still occasionally collaborated with his father's workshop in the early 1460s.

As shown by Lucco, and also by Keith Christiansen in the present volume (pp. 56–8), the conclusion that Giovanni's independent career as a painter began c. 1458/9, presumably initially with small-scale devotional works, is also consistent with the visual evidence, and it helps solve a number of longstanding problems in the study of his early chronology. An important advance in this area was made in 1985 with the emergence on the art market of a panel by Jacopo Bellini representing *Sts Anthony Abbot and Bernardino* (now Washington, D.C. National Gallery of Art), and the realisation that this, together with three predella panels now dispersed between Venice, Padua, and Ferrara, very probably constitute fragments of the Gattamelata altarpiece of 1460.²⁴ All four panels are clearly essentially the work of Jacopo; but it is reasonable to hypothesise that Gentile collaborated on the two full-length saints, and that the young Giovanni similarly had a hand in the execution of the predella. The Ferrara panel in particular, representing the *Adoration of the Magi*, shows very close stylistic parallels with the *St Jerome in the Desert* in the Barber Institute, Birmingham (Plate I), which is generally admitted to be one of Giovanni's earliest independent works, because of its closeness to the art of Jacopo. If the *St Jerome* is dated to c. 1460 instead of to a decade earlier, as it previously had been, the next phase of Giovanni's development, which is dominated by his interest in the work of his brother-in-law Mantegna (and also of Donatello) in Padua, may be compressed into the 1460s. This "Mantegnesque" phase includes such works as the Davis *Madonna* (Plate II), the London *Agony in the Garden* (Fig. 12) and the Brera *Pietà* (Plate III); and it also includes his first large-scale altarpiece, the *St Vincent Ferrer* polyptych for SS Giovanni e Paolo (Fig. 48). Although bold and ambitious, and already attributed to Bellini by Francesco Sansovino (1581), this work lacks the refinement and perfection of the *Agony* and the *Pietà*; and since there existed circumstantial evidence to indicate that it was

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commissioned soon after 1464, earlier critics such as Giles Robertson (1968) found it difficult to reconcile with their version of the early chronology, and hence to accept it as an autograph work.²⁵ Such misgivings may be overcome, however, once one accepts that this is not a mature work by an artist in his early thirties, but a highly original effort by one still in his twenties.

Despite the continuing dearth of securely dated works in the 1470s and earlier 1480s, Bellini's stylistic evolution becomes easier to trace from c. 1470 onwards, thanks to the efforts of twentieth-century art historians. A particularly coherent and sensitive account is provided by Robertson's book of 1968, which represents the first full-length monograph on Bellini in English, although inevitably a number of Robertson's datings have been convincingly refined and modified by subsequent studies, including Lucco's essay of 1990 in *La Pittura nel Veneto: il Quattrocento*, and Anchise Tempestini's monographs of 1992 and 1999 (the latter of which has been translated into English).²⁶ In an art-historiographical climate in which the traditional discipline of tracing chronology by stylistic analysis has become increasingly unfashionable, it has been reassuring to learn that the recently discovered date of 1478/9 on a masterpiece of Bellini's middle career, the *Transfiguration* now in Naples (Plate VII),²⁷ corresponds almost exactly to the date assigned to it by Lucco and Tempestini, as well as by previous scholars. On the other hand, problems of dating naturally remain. Another recent discovery, for example, indicates that there are good external reasons for supposing that the *Portrait of a Boy* in Birmingham (Barber Institute) cannot date from before 1474;²⁸ and indeed, it was dated c. 1475 by Tempestini. Yet in style the portrait is very close to the *Pietà with four Angels* in Rimini (Fig. 56); and according to the testimony of Vasari, accepted by Lucco, this picture was painted for Sigismondo Malatesta, who died in 1468.²⁹ The question of which of these two approximate dates is correct is obviously crucially important for the proper understanding of this stage of Bellini's career, in which he almost certainly painted his next major public work after the *St Vincent Ferrer* polyptych, the *St Catherine of Siena* altarpiece (now lost, but recorded in an engraving) for the neighbouring altar in SS Giovanni e Paolo (Plate IV).

But the art of Bellini presents many interesting questions for thought and study other than those of dating and attribution. In the wake of Millard Meiss's monographic study (1964) of the Frick *St Francis in the Desert* (Plate VIII), increasing attention has been paid in recent decades to the iconography and meaning of Bellini's pictures.³⁰ Robertson's monograph addressed questions of iconography in selected problematic cases, such as the *St Francis*, or the *Sacred Allegory* in the Uffizi (Fig. 54), or the *Feast of the*

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Gods. But the chronological framework of his book did not permit him to explore broader issues of the meaning, especially as conditioned by function and context; and perhaps for this very reason the author of the other principal monograph on Bellini in English in recent years, Rona Goffen,³¹ adopted a typological rather than a chronological structure. Thus, she devotes successive chapters to Bellini's Madonnas, to his half-length Passion pictures, to his altarpieces, to his portraits, and to his mythologies; and in this way, she is able to take due account of the unspoken conventions that regulated these genres, and of the social, political, religious, and intellectual purposes that they were designed to meet.

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By its very nature, the present collection of essays by twelve different scholars, who are not always necessarily in agreement with one another on problematic issues, is similarly organised by theme rather than by chronology. A guiding principle behind the choice of themes has been to complement the standard monographs by Robertson, Goffen, and Tempestini by concentrating on aspects of Bellini that these authors, because of their different priorities and methodologies, tended to treat mainly in passing. At the same time, the opportunity has naturally also been taken to reconsider some of their conclusions in the light of more recent research, and to stimulate new lines of fruitful investigation.

The collection begins with J. M. Fletcher's essay on Bellini's social world. Its purpose is to flesh out the regrettably scanty surviving information about Bellini the man, his family and friends, and his position in the social and professional life of later fifteenth-century Venice. A surprising, perhaps even shocking, fact about Bellini's private life recently discovered by the author is that this pillar of the Venetian artistic establishment, the painter associated above all with pious Madonnas, was a practising homosexual as an aged widower, and perhaps also for many years previously.³² This discovery serves to highlight how little we can ever know about the personality of any fifteenth-century artist, and to warn against making too glib an equation between his art and his biography. Yet there clearly do remain numerous aspects of Bellini's everyday experience that are reflected, directly or indirectly, in his art; and by providing this unprecedentedly detailed picture of the people he knew and the world he inhabited, Fletcher offers numerous suggestions that may be relevant for the deeper understanding of his paintings.

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The three essays that follow treat traditional but continuingly important issues of Bellini's artistic relationships. A major task of all the existing monographs on the painter has been to define the relationship of his early style to that of his somewhat older, and considerably more precocious brother-in-law, Mantegna; but revised ideas about Bellini's birth date and early chronology, as well as new research on Mantegna's own early career undertaken at the time of the major exhibition of his work in 1992,³³ have prompted the reassessment provided here by Keith Christiansen. The art of Bellini's father Jacopo has likewise been the object of renewed study in recent years,³⁴ and Christiansen touches on the implications of this, too, for our understanding of the young Giovanni. Although Bellini's active engagement with the work of Mantegna was all but over by c. 1470, his continuing awareness of its significance, if only as a way of defining his own rather different priorities, emerges clearly from his responses to the advances of Isabella d'Este three decades later.

According to the conventional, schematic subdivision of Bellini's career, the early period dominated by the example of Mantegna was succeeded in the 1470s and 1480s by a middle period dominated by that of Antonello, who is documented as having visited Venice in 1475–6. But as was first fully appreciated by Meiss and Robertson in the 1960s, Bellini's dialogue with Antonello coincided with, and indeed was preceded by, a deep response to similar qualities of style and technique in Flemish painting, in the tradition of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden. The difficulty of accurately assessing this response has always been the inadequacy of our knowledge of precisely which Flemish pictures Bellini could have seen. But as shown by Mauro Lucco in his present essay on the subject, a growing art-historical interest since the 1960s in the artistic relations between Renaissance Venice and northern Europe³⁵ has led to a number of important advances in this area; and these have enabled the writer to put the question of Bellini's debt to Flemish painting on a new and firmer basis.

Unlike his central Italian contemporaries Verrocchio, Botticelli, Perugino, and Ghirlandaio, Bellini did not conveniently die or pass into obscurity with the dawn of the sixteenth century and the rise of a new, revolutionary generation of artists. Not only did he outlive Giorgione, but as has been mentioned, he remained the dominant figure in Venetian painting until his death in 1516, despite the best efforts of the ambitious young Titian to dislodge him. Bellini's development of a late style that could at least hold its own with that of his younger contemporaries in terms of its modernity raises a number of

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questions that are addressed in the essay by Carolyn Wilson. Did he achieve an approximation to the style that we call High Renaissance by creatively responding to the work of Leonardo and Giorgione – as he had done earlier to Mantegna and to Flemish painting? Or should the similarities be viewed rather in terms of the debt owed by the younger generation to Bellini? And how should we interpret the new concern with antique form and content found in his late work?

But Bellini's artistic interests extended beyond his own medium of painting, and the next two essays, by Debra Pincus and Deborah Howard, explore his approach to the sister arts of sculpture and architecture. These topics – between which there is naturally a large amount of overlap, since the leading Venetian stonemasons of the period, Pietro Lombardo and Antonio Rizzo, practised both as sculptors and architects – have never previously before been systematically studied, although various scholars have touched on aspects of both of them. Pincus surveys the changing emphasis of Bellini's concern with sculpture, from the plastic and expressive qualities of Donatello's bronze statues in the Santo in Padua, to the ornamental repertory of Pietro Lombardo's architectural decoration, and to antique gems and reliefs. Howard similarly traces the evolution of Bellini's architectural interests over several decades, naturally concentrating on his succession of great altarpieces, most of which both contain painted architecture and retain their original architectonic frames.

A central argument of Howard's essay is that Bellini's interest in the formal and spatial aspects of architecture was matched by an equal or even greater interest in its expressive and symbolic values. Analogous arguments are presented by Augusto Gentili and Paul Hills in their essays on two elements of Bellini's art that have always been regarded as central to his pictorial genius: landscape and colour. One of the qualities of devotional panels imported from Flanders that made them so attractive to Italian patrons and artists was their customary inclusion of radiant landscape backgrounds, in which distant vistas were combined with an abundance of natural details of astonishing verisimilitude. Bellini's dependence on Flemish precedents to express his own delight in the beauty of God's creation is obvious in such masterpieces as the Frick *St Francis* (Plate VIII) and the *Madonna of the Meadow* (Plate XII). But there remains the question of interpretation already raised by Meiss in his monograph on the *St Francis*.³⁶ Since some of this plenitude of natural and man-made detail – the plants, the animals, the birds, the rivers, the distant cities – is unquestionably invested with a symbolic significance, are we to conclude that it all is? Did Bellini