

David Alan Brown and Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, eds. *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting*.

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In the early modern period, art was deeply embedded in the social ritual of everyday life: at first, primarily the religious sphere, and then, eventually, the secular one as well. Altarpieces and private devotional works were created to incite piety, mythological stories decorating the palace trumpeted the patrician's erudition, and portraits celebrated their upscale sitters' alleged *virtù* and beauty. It is thus especially unfortunate that Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists* in 1550 and 1568, should have chosen to ignore the social embeddedness of art and, influenced by classical authors, focused instead on the individual creators, writing as if Renaissance art was an end in itself. Given Vasari's immense influence, art historians have, until recently, focused too often on producing catalogues raisonnés and monographic exhibitions, rather than exploring the functions served by the works in their original locations.

Such a context makes the beautiful exhibition *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting* by David Alan Brown of the National Gallery of Art in Washington and Sylvia Ferino-Pagden of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna a step in the right direction. Featuring paintings not only by those mentioned in the title, but also, among others, Sebastiano del Piombo, Lorenzo Lotto, Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo, and Paris Bordone, the exhibition is organized by theme, not by artist. The period chosen, one of extraordinarily rapid artistic innovation, runs between 1500, when most of these artists came to maturity, and 1530, when many had died or left Venice. During these years, production increased significantly, new formats became popular, the potential of the new oil medium and canvas support were explored, new colorants introduced, and new secular subjects invented, including the specifically Venetian themes of pastoral landscape and female eroticism.

The exhibition's themes consist of the sacred icon of the Virgin and Child, alone and with Saints, and pictures for private devotion, including several altarpieces; Christian *istorie*, or religious narrative; secular *poesie*, the allegorical and mythological stories with which princes and patricians decorated their personal spaces; erotic images of provocative, lightly clad women of dubious virtue; and, finally, a magnificent selection of male portraits.

Generous loans enabled the display of some extremely famous paintings. In

the first room, Lotto's wonderfully animated *Virgin and Child with Saints Ignatius of Antioch and Onophrius* (1508, Galleria Borghese) faced Bellini's beautiful but static *Virgin with Blessing Child* (1510, Brera) — the Quattrocento type from which it derived and which it updated in the new manner. After viewing the astonishing pairing of Giorgione's *Three Philosophers* in Vienna with Titian's *Concert Champêtre* in the Louvre, one moved into a room in which Titian's *Bacchanal of the Andrians* in the Prado and Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* in Washington were exhibited side by side. While these works have been displayed together before, the installation in Washington was the first to take into consideration the *spalliera*, or wainscot, over which the paintings were originally hung in Alfonso I d'Este's alabaster chamber in Ferrara. The works' location some five feet above the ground reveals why Titian felt the need to unify the two compositions by extensively repainting Bellini's landscape, and how this reworking helped to minimize the difference in figure-scale between the two canvases.

The category of half-length *belle donne* included the pairing for the first time of Giorgione's *Laura* (Vienna) with Titian's *Flora* (Uffizi). In the midst of these sensual, breast-revealing adolescents, the presence of Giorgione's so-called *La Vecchia* — ugly, aged, low-class — seemed particularly anomalous. Given the low esteem in which women in general were held in this patriarchal culture, and that portraits of withered old crones were unknown in this culture of ideal forms, the work can only be read as an allegorical portrait-cover signifying the transience of time, rather than as an independent likeness.

The horizontal format that, beginning with Bellini, was adopted by many artists encouraged the prominent place given by this culture to the visualization of the land-based natural world. While the fictive idyllic landscapes envisioned in so many backgrounds were undoubtedly rooted in bucolic poetry, whether by such ancients as Virgil or such moderns as Sannazaro, the yearning for contact with land is palpable in this city balancing on stilts in the middle of a lagoon. Paint was used to point up the effects of light not on the sea, but on the fields, forests, streams, and hills that embodied Venice's *terraferma* empire. Given that this empire was lost in those very years, one wonders whether the wholesale artistic embrace in these paintings of the imaginary delights of land can be altogether without political resonance.

Venetian painting is, and was, celebrated for its artists' skill in *colore* as distinct from Central Italian talent in *disegno* (composition or drawing). An excellent catalogue essay by Barbara Berrie and Louisa Matthew outlines the circumstances that underlay this phenomenon: the Venetian industry of color that provided artists with a wider variety of pigments than that available elsewhere in the peninsula. Specialists known as *vendecolori* (color sellers), a profession unique to Venice, played a crucial role in stimulating color experiments by introducing many new pigments, such as the yellow orpiment and reddish-orange realgar that became the signature hues of Venetian painting.

The beautifully designed catalogue, including many essays and good color plates, makes an excellent introduction to the glories of Venetian painting for the general public.

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