

THE "GIORGIONE CODE": PAINTING IN VIENNA DECIPHERED

Vienna, October 13, 2006 - Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the "Giorgione Code": his enigmatic "Three Philosophers", painted in 1506, is among the most celebrated paintings of the Venetian Renaissance - but which philosophers does it depict, and why? Exactly five centuries later the Viennese philologist, Karin Zeleny, has finally deciphered the picture: **Pythagoras** and his two teachers, **Thales** and **Pherecydes**, symbolize the development of philosophy, but also the dialogue with Islam and Judaism, as well as - what heresy - the pagan religion of Classical Antiquity. Check it out from October 18 in the exhibition "Bellini, Giorgione, Titian and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting" at the Kunsthistorisches Museum.

The identity of the three philosophers and the meaning of the painting was long one of history's best kept secrets. One pious suggestion was the Three Magi - too simple for this Renaissance master. Their clothes are unusual: one of the three sages is identified by his attire as a Greek or a Christian. The second one has donned a turban - is he a Muslim? The third one is dressed in yellow garments and thus easily recognizable as a Jew. Until now, scholars remained divided: some believed Giorgione was referring to a dialogue with Islam and Judaism - already a hot topic five centuries ago and therefore encoded. Others suggested that the painter depicted three individual philosophers. But which ones?

„Both views are correct; one can identify the three philosophers, but they also have a symbolic meaning“, says Karin Zeleny, editor in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, who began specializing in Latin literature from the Renaissance while at university. “However, we cannot draw on our modern knowledge of Ancient philosophers, but must try to think like a Renaissance scholar, and read what he read“. In 1499, only a few years before “The Three Philosophers” was painted, the humanist Polydorus Vergilius published his standard work on classical innovators in Venice, the city where Giorgione lived and worked. This book identified Thales, Pherecydes and Pythagoras as the founding fathers of Western philosophy: the three were said to have been the first to introduce the Ancient Greeks to the accumulated knowledge of the Ancient Egyptians and Chaldeans - especially astrology and astronomy.

Thales in Jewish Attire

So they are Thales, Pherecydes and Pythagoras. Can we find any support for this assumption in the painting? What about their clothes? From a historical point of view, the evidence is strong: in the Renaissance, Thales was believed to be a scholar of Phoenician descent, that is to say practically Jewish. This idea originated in Late Antiquity, popularized by Diogenes Laertius in his “Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers“. Eusebius, one of the Fathers of the Church, spins this yarn in his “Praeparatio Evangelica“, which aims to move Greek philosophy closer to the Levant and thus to the Bible, and which served as one of the Renaissance’s most important sources of Ancient philosophy.

Thus Giorgione depicts the „Phoenician“ in Jewish attire. In his hand is a diagram on which one can read the word “eclisi” (eclipse). Thales was the first astronomer to study eclipses and he even predicted one. This is presumably depicted in the sketch below, because, according to Pliny, the moon must be larger than the earth (the small sphere) to be able to block out the sun. The numbers 5.4.3 on the upper left are the simplest basis for the Pythagorean theorem, which, according to Diogenes Laertius, was also attributed to Thales. The old sage in yellow can therefore, from a contemporary point of view, be identified as Thales.

Pherecydes was a native of the Aegean island of Syros, which is why he is often surnamed „syrios“. Eusebios mistook this to mean he was “Syrian“, so the Renaissance considered Pherecydes a native of Syria. And just as Giorgione shows the “Phoenician” Thales in Jewish attire, he depicts the “Syrian” Pherecydes as a Muslim. Such anachronistic details were quite common in Venetian painting. For example, in the “Cycle of Saint Mark the Evangelist” which is set in Ancient Alexandria the locals are dressed like 15th century

Egyptian Mameluks. The same is true of literature: Dante calls Virgil's parents "Lombards", and Hannibal's men from Carthage "Arabs".

Pythagoras and the Sun Deity

That leaves only Pythagoras. Legend assigns him white robes; this fits perfectly with Giorgione's painting. His body forms a right triangle - if measured, its sides even conform to the Pythagorean theorem. This identification is supported by Raphael's fresco in the Vatican in which he depicts the "School of Athens". It includes a fascinating, very similar three-figure group. One of the few universally accepted identifications of a philosopher in this fresco is that of Pythagoras; behind him is a seated old man attired in yellow; a third man wearing a turban glances over his shoulder. These attributes are so obviously similar to those in Giorgione's painting that it seems plausible to identify the figures as the same philosophers.

But where is this scene taking place? In classical antiquity, Pythagoras was believed to be a son of the sun deity, Apollo. On a hill near Miletus, where Thales lived, lay the important sanctuary of Apollo at Didyma with its famous oracle: a rock with a spring. According to Macrobius, a scholar from Late Antiquity, Apollo's epithet "didymaeus" (from "didymoi", twins) was derived from the two kinds of light that he sends to earth: via the sun, and via his twin-sister, Artemis, the goddess of the moon, who derives her light from the sun.

This fits in with the dual sources of light in this painting: the shadows clearly show that the light comes not from the rising sun in the background but from the direction of the rock. Blatantly absurd - unless the sun god is speaking through the oracle in this rock to the world, or more exactly to his son, Pythagoras, who is giving him his full and undivided attention. It seems Giorgione has located the scene at Didyma in order to celebrate the intellectual achievements and contributions of the classical pagan religion, as well as those of Islam and Judaism - a message wisely encoded and thus intelligible only to scholars.

So when Marcantonio Michiel writes in 1525 that the seated man admires the rays of the sun, although the rock is shrouded in darkness and the sun is rising somewhere else, the learned humanist obviously knows the identity of the three philosophers and knows that Pythagoras is here communicating with his divine father. Perhaps this dialogue is also about the dual aspect of light: about the real light of the sun and the ideal divine light of the spirit.

Chronology and the most important quotes

around 550 B.O: Pythagoras of Samos (c. 570 - after 510 B.O) studies with Pherecydes of Syros and Thales of Miletus

1499: „But all agree that the first to introduce the Ancient Greeks to philosophy and to contemplate heavenly and divine things - namely the Syrian Pherecydes, Pythagoras, and Thales - were pupils of the Ancient Egyptians and the Chaldeans.”

Polydorus Vergilius (1470-1555), *De rerum inventoribus libri tres*, Venice 1499.

This statement is a verbatim translation of Flavius Josephus (ca. 37-100), *Contra Apionem* 1, 6, and Eusebius (ca. 275-339), *Praeparatio evangelica* 10, 7.

c. 1506: Giorgione paints the “Three Philosophers”

1525: “In the house of M. Taddeo Contarini. The canvas in oil of Three Philosophers in a Landscape, two standing and another seated, who contemplates the rays of the sun, with a rock that is miraculously rendered.”

Marcantonio Michiel (1484-1552), *Notizie d'opere di disegno*, manuscript, Venice

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