
**BELLINI, GIORGIONE, TITIAN
and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting**

An exhibition organized by the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
And the National Gallery of Art, Washington
October 18, 2006 till January 7, 2007
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Picture Gallery

During the first thirty years of the 16th century Venetian painting experienced a remarkable upswing characterized by constant innovations and extraordinary achievements.

During these three decades the pioneer of early Renaissance painting, Giovanni Bellini, completed his final works. The highly innovative Giorgione, who died young, executed his whole oeuvre. And the greatest Venetian painter of the century, Titian, reached his prime and set out on an international career that was to take him far beyond the confines of the city. Besides these three great masters Venice was home to numerous other, hardly less important painters, members of both the older and the younger generation. Cima da Conegliano, Marco Basiati and Vincenzo Cattera belonged to the older generation or continued to paint in the traditional manner. Lorenzo Lotto - born in Venice but more interested in Northern painting than his contemporaries - painted his highly idiosyncratic works, comprising both hyper-realistic and lyrical-poetic elements.

In 1511 Sebastiano del Piombo, Titian's rival, went to Rome. Palma il Vecchio moved to Venice from Bergamo and his paintings are among the most successful of the second decade of the 16th century, together with Titian's. Younger artists such as Paris Bordone and Bonifazio Veronese continued these achievements in their works. Their creativity was stimulated by the short sojourns in Venice of a number of distinguished visitors - Leonardo da Vinci in 1500, Albrecht Durer from 1505 till 1506, Fra Bartolommeo in 1508, and Michelangelo in 1529.

These three decades witnessed an intense fermentation that was to have a profound influence on the development of European painting - after all, the Venetian artists whose works are included in this exhibition all knew each other intimately - as teachers and pupils, as friends and rivals, perhaps even as enemies. They worked in close proximity, competed for the best inventions, borrowed certain elements from each other's works, changing and altering some of them while ignoring others. Their fruitful interaction may be compared to the similar, almost exactly contemporaneous situation in Florence and Rome between Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and their contemporaries. Thus the term "High Renaissance" - though somewhat out of fashion at present - may also be applied to this phase of Venetian painting.

During this period traditional subjects, especially religious ones, were rephrased. Formerly static-symmetrical compositions featuring half-length or full-length figures of the Virgin and Child with or without saints become asymmetrical, the figures begin to interact with each other and with the viewer which makes them appear much more alive. If placed in a formal church or some other interior setting, a landscape vista is included in the background; later the scene itself is sited in a landscape setting. The same happens to scenes from the life of Christ or the saints: they begin to interact, they are brought to life, and - if you like - they are secularised. Landscape is one of the new subject matters, not only as a setting for religious stories but as an element permeating and uniting almost all subjects. Classical authors had celebrated the pastoral landscape and their works inspired contemporary poets writing in Italian, such as, for example, Jacopo Sannazaro from Naples. The bucolic landscape was also a favourite setting for classical myths and allegories. Titian's "Concert Champêtre" (Pastoral Concert), his "Worship of Venus", Bellini's "Feast of the Gods", Giorgione's "Three Philosophers" and, famously, his Christian allegory "Il Tramonto" (Sunset Landscape) are all placed in a landscape setting. Never before were such precious allegorical myths - now cherished by museums among their most highly valued treasures - united in a single exhibition.

However, many of the subjects remain elusive. A good number of them are based on classical literature. The "Feast of the Gods" was inspired by Ovid's "Fasti"; when commissioning the "Worship of Venus", Alfonso d'Este asked for a copy of a classical painting known only from a description by the Greek author, Philostratus. Giorgione's "Three Philosophers" was probably based on a programme devised by a contemporary scholar of classical texts. The same may be true for "Concert Champêtre".

Landscape was also used as the ideal backdrop for another new subject matter, the female nude. Numerous depictions of Venus were inspired by the landscape in the celebrated "Venus" now in Dresden - this exhibition includes an example by Palma Vecchio, though here the landscape remains unfinished. But another painting by him contains no less than thirteen female nudes in a charming landscape.

Woman as the subject of erotic dreams is now transposed into the female half-length portrait, creating a new subject matter or genre, the so-called "bella donna veneziana". These erotic half-length figures, the first of which was presumably Giorgione's "Laura", are probably primarily the expression of male desires and thus a poetic elevation of reality. Male portraits include similarly idealising modes of depiction that are clearly removed from reality and its constraints; they encompass various poses or moods, from the lovelorn to the poet to the warrior to the cortegiano, the elegant courtier.

Venetian painting was not only innovative in its treatment of different subject matters but also in its development of a completely new technique of painting and the way a picture was increasingly composed on the canvas itself, dispensing with preliminary drawings. Combined with a progressively subtle handling of the new medium of oil painting, it enabled artists to capture sensual atmospheric phenomena created by Venice's unique light, as well as things like skin or velvet, so realistically that one is almost fooled into believing one can touch them. Venice was the centre of world trade and thus able to supply her artists with the very best materials from all over the world, among them extremely rare pigments.

This magnificent exhibition, a seductive feast of visual sensuality permeating all subject matters, will captivate all visitors.

Dr. Sylvia Ferino-Pagden
Curator of the Exhibition

Publications

Catalogues in German (Skira Press) and in English (Yale University Press) are published in conjunction with the exhibition, each is priced at € 38,-

In addition, an issue of „Vernissage“ (in German) will be published, priced at € 6,50

All publications are available in the shops of the KHM, or online at www.khm.at

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To book a guided tour (also available in English)

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Opening Hours

Tue– Sun 10am – 6pm, Thur until 9pm

Entrance Fees

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The ticket includes entrance to both the special exhibition and the permanent collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Until further notice.

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The exhibition is organized by the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna and the National Gallery of Art, Washington and supported by BRACCO, an international leader in diagnostic imaging.

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