Titian

AND VENETIAN PAINTING, 1450–1590

BRUCE COLE

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Books by Bruce Cole

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PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA:
TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN RENAISSANCE ART

ITALIAN ART, 1250–1550

THE RENAISSANCE ARTIST AT WORK

SIENESE PAINTING FROM ITS ORIGINS
TO THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

SIENESE PAINTING IN THE AGE
OF THE RENAISSANCE

MASACCIO AND THE ART OF
EARLY RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

GIOTTO AND FLORENTINE PAINTING, 1280–1375

AGNOLO GADDI

ART OF THE WESTERN WORLD (COAUTHORED)

GIOTTO: THE SCROVEGNI CHAPEL, PADUA

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF ITALIAN ART, 1250–1550

Titian

AND VENETIAN PAINTING, *1450–1590*

Bruce Cole

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FOR MY CHILDREN–FELLOW ITALOPHILES

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Surprisingly enough, there is no up-to-date introduction in English to Titian's art and its place in the Venetian painting of his time. This is rather remarkable when one considers the pivotal role his work has played in the development of Western art since the Renaissance. His unceasing importance as an artist has been universally acknowledged for more than four hundred years.

This book is written to provide a succinct survey of Titian's works and life. It is intended for the nonspecialist–that interested general reader or student of art history. The following pages provide an overview of Titian's artistic background; an account of the origins, development, and nature of his art; and a summary of the influence or afterlife of his work down to the nineteenth century.

Of course, a concise book like this can concentrate only on the essentials of its very large subject. Thus, it is possible that a reader's favorite painting will not appear in these pages. For this I must apologize; however, I hope that what I have written will encourage those who read my words to further explore the amazing range and depth of Titian's art. If it does, then I will feel that my goal in writing this book has been achieved.

At the end of each chapter is a section of notes. Most of these are intended to point the way toward specialized studies dealing with particular aspects or problems touched upon in

the text that the reader may wish to investigate further. I have, whenever possible, tried to confine the notes and the bibliography to sources in English in order to accommodate the greatest spectrum of readers. Above all, the reader should be referred to Crowe and Cavalcaselle's *Life of Titian,* published more than a century ago, but still, in its Victorian splendor, the magisterial foundation of all studies on the artist.

I have looked at and thought about Titian's art for a long time, yet still I find it, more than the work of any other artist, inexhaustibly fascinating. But no matter how well one knows Titian's paintings, their vast scope and titanic creativity instill a sense of transcendent wonder never wholly explicable. That is the ultimate mystery of this surpassing artist.

Many people have helped me with this book over the years of its gestation. My first debts are to my predecessors in the study of Titian, most especially to Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, those now nearly forgotten pioneers of the history of Italian Renaissance art. Without them, and Harold Wethey, the author of the three-volume catalogue of Titian's work, I would have been unable to write this book. I doubt we shall see their likes again.

I am also grateful to Jody Shiffman, the ever-vigilant and learned scholar/editor who improved what I wrote. Sheri Shaneyfelt gave the book a critical and very useful reading in one of its earlier incarnations. Nancy Thompson helped wrestle the manuscript out of the computer. Several generations of graduate students at Indiana University patiently bore with me in numerous seminars devoted to Titian; of course, I learned as much from them as they did from me. I am beholden to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and its officers, Lisa M. Ackerman, vice-president, and Marilyn Perry, president, for help with the color illustrations in this book and for invaluable assistance over many decades.

As usual, my family and friends lent support of various kinds. My thanks to Doreen, Ryan, and Stephanie Cole, Peter and Julia Bondanella, Mort and Carol Lowengrub, Robert Barnes, and Andrew Ladis. Thies and Marion Knauf provided an unforgettable stay in Spain. My greatest debt is, however, to Cass Canfield, Jr., who has supported and edited my books for nearly a quarter century.

BRUCE COLE

Titian and Venetian Painting, 1450–1590

1

Venice, 1510

The year 1510 constituted a fateful moment in the history of Venetian art. In that year, aged about thirty-four, the painter Giorgione died in Venice. His death, noted by some prescient contemporary observers, came at a time when Venetian art was undergoing a process of fundamental transformation, a process which he himself had helped to initiate. The year 1510 also saw the creation of seminal paintings by several of his talented contemporaries: Giovanni Bellini, Sebastiano del Piombo, and Titian. These paintings were to become the first in a long series of works which would, within less than a century, elevate the Venetians from a school of local importance to a major force in the history of Western art.

In 1510, an informed observer looking at Giorgione's *Tempest* [25], Titian's Santo frescoes [33, 34], or Sebastiano del Piombo's altarpiece in the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo [28] might have realized that these remarkable paintings both embodied and transformed the ancient traditions of Venetian painting upon which they so heavily depended. Their artists visualized the world, its inhabitants, and their beliefs and dreams in a way never before seen in the West.

Giorgione and his equally gifted near-contemporaries, Titian and Sebastiano del Piombo, had all studied with Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516). Bellini and his painter brother Gentile (c. 1435–1507) had, in turn, learned their art in the family workshop headed by their father, Jacopo (c. 1400–1470). As a young man, Giovanni Bellini had painted a series of imaginative pictures based partially on the ancient traditions of Venetian picture-making that began in the Middle Ages and partially on some of the new developments that had lately come into northern Italy from Florence.

By 1510, the year of Giorgione's death, the old Giovanni Bellini himself had developed a personal style of great lyrical beauty, which, while it still embodied many of the venerable characteristics of Venetian art, was to become one of the foundations of Renaissance painting in the city. Bellini's late works, such as the *Madonna and Child* painted in 1510 [16], were to have a major impact not only on his pupils Giorgione and Titian, but on the subsequent development of Venetian Renaissance painting. Yet Bellini himself would be influenced by these two artists around 1510 when Venetian art was experiencing major new developments.

Bellini's influence was also felt by a number of more minor, but still highly talented artists whose conceptions of style and subject depended on his earlier works. For example, in paintings from 1510 by Vittore Carpaccio [23] and Marco Basaiti, one sees these men each responding in their own specific way to the new, broader horizons of the increasingly monumental figural style and expressive landscape favored by Bellini in his late work. Their responses, albeit limited, to the ferment occurring around 1510 graphically demonstrate the artistic dynamism and diversity of the time.

The year 1510 also saw the commissioning of Titian's frescoes for the Confraternity (Scuola) of Saint Anthony of Padua [33, 34]. These revolutionary works, the first which can be dated with certainty to the artist's hand, were a result of what Titian had learned from both Bellini and Giorgione. But more importantly, they embodied many of the elements of an idiom which was to become a cornerstone in the history of European art.

The prospects for Titian's future career improved around 1510 due to two events. The first was Giorgione's removal from

the Venetian scene by death in 1510; the second was the departure from Venice of a potential rival, Sebastiano del Piombo, another remarkable artist trained in the Bellini shop. In 1511 Sebastiano moved to Rome, where he transformed himself into a rather slavish follower of his idol Michelangelo. But before he left, he painted a major altarpiece for the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo [28], probably in 1510. A moving and prophetic work, it reveals Sebastiano's not inconsiderable skill and demonstrates just how talented an artist the Venetian scene lost in that eventful year of 1510.

Sebastiano's change of residence in 1511 was motivated by his desire to work in the city which was to become the only serious rival of Venice for most of the sixteenth century: Rome. Under the brilliant patronage of several popes who wished to renew the luster of the Holy City and of the papacy itself, artists from all over the Italian peninsula found work there, including those two presiding figures of the Renaissance in central Italy, Raphael and Michelangelo. In 1510 each of these artists was engaged on a major Roman project: Michelangelo on the Sistine Ceiling [35] and Raphael on the *School of Athens*. Around 1510 Venetian artists were already well aware of some of the major innovations of these two artists through the reproductive mediums of prints and drawings. Both Raphael and Michelangelo were interested in monumental drama enacted by heroic protagonists within rationally planned, architectonic space. Order, balance, and gravity were essential elements in their artistic visions. To achieve these, they built their pictorial worlds through a rigorous study of subject and setting, clarified and refined through drawing. Careful, precise planning and the slow development of space and form through a myriad of paper studies were used to make a cartoon in which all the studied elements of the picture to be painted were resolved. Such a process was the hallmark not only of Raphael and Michelangelo, but of the entire tradition of central Italian painting, a tradition upon which the Venetians of the sixteenth century often reflected. Soon the influence of the work created by the formidable figures of Raphael and Michelangelo, and some of their lesser contemporaries working in Rome and Florence, was to become part of the vibrant intellectual and formal world of Venetian painting.

Venetian art in 1510 was anchored in the past, but buffeted by strong winds of change, both from within and without. It was a time of intense artistic germination from which would arise the unbroken succession of painters destined to create an extraordinary epoch in the history of art. From the death of Giorgione in 1510 to that of Tintoretto in 1594, Venice was the crucible in which painting–in all its various characteristics of style, subject, and meaning–underwent a fundamental transformation destined to set the stage for every school of European art down to the present day.

The achievements of Venetian Renaissance painters provided an important base for the artists of Baroque Rome. Throughout the seventeenth century, the Venetians inspired not only Caravaggio, the Carracci family, and their contemporaries in Rome, but also constituted major sources of inspiration and motif for artists working outside the Italian peninsula. Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, and Velázquez derived much of their pictorial style and interpretation of subject from extensive study of the Venetian paintings, which were considered throughout the seventeenth century high points in the history of art.

Admiration for the famous Venetians continued unabated during the eighteenth century. In France the painting of mythological scenes and portraits, among other types, by Boucher, Watteau, and Fragonard strongly reflected Venetian influence. As in the previous century, French and other European artists made pilgrimages to Italy to study firsthand the famous Venetian works, many of which they knew partially through reproductive engravings and copies, both painted and drawn.

Venetian form, technique, and color entered the mainstream of nineteenth-century European painting where their example and influence remained undiminished. From Goya's work at the very beginning of the century, to Turner's around its midpoint, to the Impressionists at its end, Venetian painting played a seminal role in the history of Western art.

The city from which the remarkable school of Venetian painting of the sixteenth century arose had, like the school itself, a particular relationship with the rest of the Italian peninsula. By 1510 Venice already enjoyed a long and eventful history.[1] One of the most powerful city-states in the Italian penin-

sula, it could trace its foundation to the time when refugees from the Po Valley, fleeing the successive waves of barbarian invasions, escaped from the mainland to the comparative offshore safety of the islands of mud flats, the location of present-day Venice.

By the sixth century, settlements on the small islands had been established, and by 741 the city had elected its first leader, the doge. The earliest settlers soon began to reclaim land from the lagoon by driving large timbers into the mud of the shallow waters to form foundations for their homes, churches, and commercial buildings. As the city grew in size, land was increasingly reclaimed and the various small islands which make up Venice were linked by the series of canals and bridges for which the city is still so famous. But the amount of land reclaimed always remained small compared to the holdings of the city-states of the mainland. For much of its history, Venice was forced to buy rather than raise its own agricultural products.

So it depended instead on the sea for its existence. To the Venetians the sea was both protectress and provider and, as such, it occupied a sacred place in the thoughts and beliefs of the city. All Venetian life was built and sustained, literally, on an aqueous foundation. The city's particular ties to the sea gave it a romantic uniqueness celebrated worldwide for centuries in both paint and prose.

Founded as part of the Eastern Empire of Rome and recognized as a semi-independent entity, the city soon began to establish the strong commercial links that would eventually make it a formidable power both in the East and the West. Venice's physical and social divergence from the city-states of the rest of the Italian peninsula arose partially from its close spiritual and commercial connections with Constantinople and the Byzantine East. From its earliest history, Venice, led by its patrician oligarchy, looked to the East not only for its commercial livelihood in trade, but also for important elements of its sacred and secular culture.

The independence and power of Venice were symbolized by the Basilica of Saint Mark, the Doges' Chapel (named after the patron saint of the city), and the adjacent Palace of the Doges.[2] From the latter through a labyrinth of governing bodies and

committees, all designed to ensure that power could not be concentrated in the hands of a single individual or family, the city built its considerable Eastern Empire stretching down the Dalmatian coast and into the Aegean Sea.[3] Venice's constitution and government were widely admired throughout the West, especially during the Enlightenment. Despite, or perhaps because of, its ponderous governmental machinery, which kept power out of the hands of a dictator, the city preserved its independence longer than any other major European power, from about the sixth century to the end of the eighteenth century, when it was conquered by Napoleon.

By 1510 Venice's independence, wealth, and prestige had made the city the unique and beautiful place that it remains, largely unaltered, today. Already a distinguished center of painting in 1510, Venice was on the eve of a period of artistic creativity of astounding dimensions destined to last for nearly a century. Much of the impetus for this remarkable development was found in the mind and hand of Giovanni Bellini, the founder of Venetian Renaissance painting.

NOTES

1. On the history of Venice, the most readable and informative introduction is J. Norwich, *A History of Venice,* New York, 1989; see also F. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic,* Baltimore, 1973. A detailed guide to Venice is G. Lorenzetti, *Venice and Its Lagoon,* Rome, 1961. Brilliant impressions of Venice are found in M. McCarthy, *Venice Observed,* London, 1956, and J. Morris, *The World of Venice,* New York, 1960.

2. Information on Venice's Basilica of Saint Mark and the Palace of the Doges is provided by D. Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice,* New York, 1981, and G. Lorenzetti, *Venice and Its Lagoon,* Rome, 1961.

3. For Venice's empire, see J. Morris, *The Venetian Empire,* London, 1980.

2

Precursors:

Giovanni Bellini and the Birth of Venetian Renaissance Painting

In the Renaissance, art was a profession, an enterprise practiced in workshops frequently composed of artists related to one another. Often the business was handed down from father to son.[1] Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516) was the son of a painter, the brother of another painter (Gentile, c. 1435–1507), and the brother-in-law of yet another painter. Giovanni's father, Jacopo Bellini (c. 1400–1470), was himself an important figure in the history of Venetian painting.[2] A pivotal and imaginative artist, he was one of the first Venetians to incorporate substantial elements of mainland art into his work. As a youth, he must have marveled at a large fresco, the *Naval Battle between the Venetians and Otto III* (c. 1410), by the central Italian painter Gentile da Fabriano in the most important room of the Palace of the Doges, the Sala del Maggior Consiglio.[3] Gentile's art, which was deeply infused with the Florentine realism of Masaccio and his contemporaries, came as a profound surprise to Venetian

eyes used to their own more stylized art of the day. That Jacopo Bellini was impressed by Gentile da Fabriano's work seems certain; less secure is the traditional identification of Jacopo Bellini with a Venetian Jacopo who was attested as a pupil of Gentile da Fabriano in Florence in 1423.

In any case, the style of Jacopo Bellini, known from the admittedly small evidence of a handful of authentic panel paintings and several drawing or pattern books, reveals the grafting of motifs and spatial conventions from mainland Italy onto a Venetian style. These outside influences come not only from contemporary central Italian examples, such as the works of Gentile da Fabriano, but also from older northern Italian sources, such as the highly complex painted narratives of Altichiero (c. 1325–1395), who worked in nearby Padua. Like so many Venetian artists who were to follow him, Jacopo Bellini borrowed selectively, with purpose and sophistication.

His most revealing works are the large drawings bound in two volumes now in London and Paris. These drawings, done over several decades (c. 1430–c. 1465), seem to have been used by the artist and members of his shop as models for a myriad of painting types: religious subjects, mythological scenes, and architectural fantasies, among others. There are also drawings of no recognizable subject which seem to be pure flights of imagination (scenes without subject will become an important part of later Venetian painting). Jacopo's drawings also demonstrate his fascination with one-point spatial construction, a hallmark of the Florentine Renaissance. He could have seen this construction in Venice, where the Florentines Paolo Uccello and Andrea del Castagno had left important examples of their art. Even when Jacopo's drawings are indebted to works by other painters, they are very far from simple copies; rather they are creative reinterpretations that transform the shape and spirit of the original into his own idiom. Unlike most Florentine artists, he was unwilling to use one-point perspective as an armature around which space, architecture, and figures were rationally organized. Instead he employed perspective to fashion effects of complexity and fantasy and, by so doing, became the first of a lengthy line of Venetian artists to use pictorial systems originally invented for rational, measurable representa-

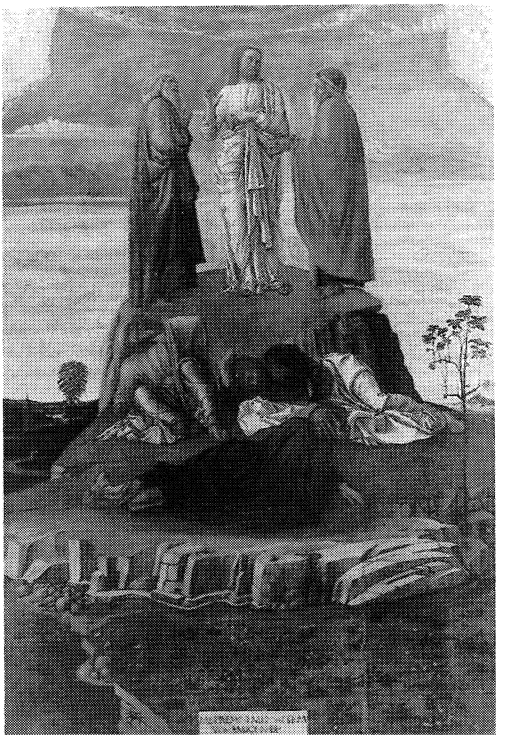
tions to create an environment of unreality. In fact, throughout its long history, Venetian painting constantly eschewed the rationality so favored by central Italian art.

Many of the sacred subjects in Jacopo's sketchbooks are woven into fantastic architectural frameworks daunting in their enormousness and complexity. Sometimes the story is only an excuse for an intricate formal fantasy in which the artist's imagination is given full rein. These flights of inventiveness often center around mythological and classical subjects, revealing the interest in antiquity that he shared with his son-in-law, Andrea Mantegna (c. 1430–1506).

Andrea Mantegna, who married Jacopo's daughter Nicolosa probably in 1454, was born in Padua and studied there with a local master.[4] He worked in Padua, Ferrara, and Mantua, where he became court painter to the Gonzaga family. Strongly influenced by Florentine art, especially by Donatello's major Paduan sculptural projects of the 1440s and perhaps by the Venetian mosaics of the Florentine Andrea del Castagno, Mantegna's art parallels Jacopo's work in several ways. Both artists used one-point perspective for particular emotive and dramatic ends; both often employed a precise, wiry line to describe figures and architecture placed in milieus lacking any sense of real atmosphere; and both were interested in antiquity, although in Mantegna's case this interest occasionally approached obsession. Mantegna's first independent works, which date from the late 1440s, influenced the older Jacopo Bellini both in style and motif.

In turn, the art of Mantegna and Jacopo Bellini inspired Giovanni Bellini, an artist whose importance was eventually to eclipse them both.[5] Born around 1430, he was almost an exact contemporary of Andrea Mantegna. Giovanni was trained in the workshop of his father along with his brother Gentile, who was himself to become a well-known Venetian painter.

One of Giovanni's first major works is an altarpiece depicting the Transfiguration [1], painted around 1450, when the artist was about twenty. Originally arched, the picture is indeed close to the style of Andrea Mantegna, to whom it was attributed until the last century. The restricted, rather somber palette and the figures, whose drapery seems made of metal, are very close to elements



1. Giovanni Bellini, *Transfiguration*, Venice, Museo Correr

Originally arched in form, the painting has been truncated just above the head of Christ. An image of God the Father surrounded by cherubim probably appeared in the now-lost upper section. A fragment of a cherub can still be seen at the very top of the painting.

employed in contemporary works by Mantegna. Yet the meticulously planned and calibrated structure of the painting depends in part on the compositional principles articulated in the drawing books of Jacopo Bellini, which the young Giovanni must have studied with care. The tiered mountain neatly accommodating each of the groups of three figures, the rough circle formed by the sprawled bodies of the apostles, and the archlike configuration of Christ, Moses, and Elijah (which echoed the now-removed original arch of the painting): all fit one another with remarkable sensitivity. Such a composition is the result of much cogitation and meticulous planning, planning which, again, reminds one of many pages in Jacopo Bellini's drawing books.

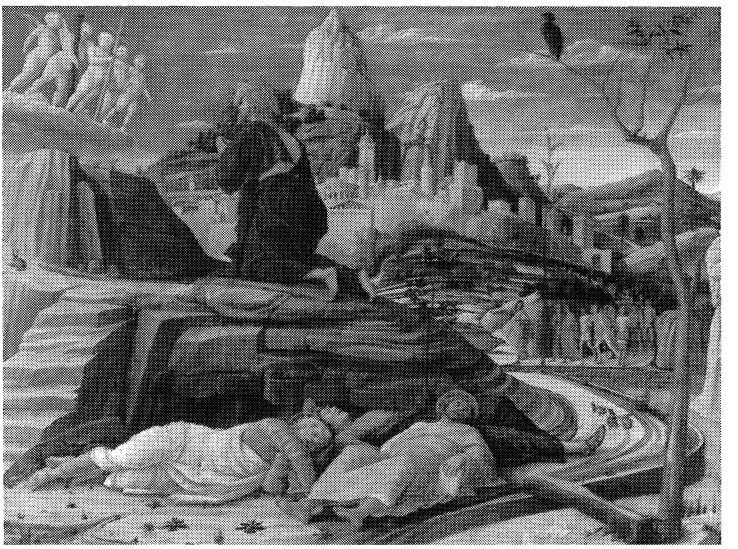
Giovanni Bellini's development into an independent artist can be observed in his famous *Agony in the Garden* [2] of around 1460, painted about a decade after the *Transfiguration*. It is a commonplace in Venetian art history to compare Bellini's *Agony in the Garden* with the painting of the same subject by Mantegna [3]; nonetheless, this comparison remains

2. Giovanni Bellini, *Agony in the Garden*, London, National Gallery

The long cloud formation set in the dawning sky is brilliantly observed and painted. Titian was an avid student of this type of dramatic cloudscape.

instructive. Mantegna's painting is a meticulously drawn, hard-edged composition. Lit by an even, overall illumination, its forms seem to exist in a vacuum bereft of any atmosphere surrounding the objects or existing between them and the observer. All forms are seen with equal clarity and intensity. In many ways, this constitutes the classical fifteenth-century presentation of narrative found throughout the Italian peninsula.

But Bellini's *Agony in the Garden* moves decisively away from the traditional idiom by making a number of modifications that both document the artist's considerable originality and manifest, in an early form, some of the most salient charac-



3. Andrea Mantegna, *Agony in the Garden*, London, National Gallery

Like Bellini's picture of the same subject, Mantegna's *Agony in the Garden* is painted in tempera. However, while Bellini's handling of the material presages the luminous effects he will later achieve in oil, Mantegna's use of tempera remains firmly traditional.