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# RA

Royal Academy of Arts  
Exhibition in Focus

## In the Age of Giorgione

# An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

*Written by Mari Griffith*

For the Learning Department  
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## In the Age of Giorgione

*The Sackler Wing of Galleries*

12 March – 5 June 2016

FRONT COVER  
Cat. 5, Giorgione, *Portrait of a Man* ('*Terris Portrait*'), 1506 (detail)

BACK COVER  
Cat. 29, Giovanni Bellini, *Virgin and Child with Saint Peter and Saint Mark and a Donor* ('*Cornbury Park Altarpiece*'), 1505 (detail)

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Academy  
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**'Giorgione is regarded as a unique figure in the history of art: almost no other Western painter has left so few secure works and enjoyed such fame.'**

Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, 2004

## Introduction

This exhibition, *In the Age of Giorgione*, examines a decade of extraordinary artistic innovation in Venice. The early years of the sixteenth century witnessed tremendous developments in Venetian art as a new generation of artists – among them Giorgio da Castelfranco, known as Giorgione (1478–1510) and Titian (c. 1488–1576) – built on the achievements of their older contemporary Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516), who in 1500 was the undisputed master painter in Venice. Bellini had been preeminent in the city for around twenty years and, together with his brother Gentile, headed a large family studio which had been established by their father Jacopo. His work was much in demand, and he employed numerous apprentices. In fact, many of the artists featured in this exhibition at the Royal Academy knew each other, whether as pupils, teachers, friends or rivals. Over the first ten years of the sixteenth century, the period that this exhibition examines in detail, a new generation of artists, most notably Giorgione and Titian, took their art in unprecedented directions, breathing new life into the genres of portraiture and devotional works.

Studying Venetian art of the first decade of the sixteenth century is fraught with difficulty, as facts are few. The careers of some of the artists who were emerging from Bellini's shadow, in particular the life and work of Giorgione, are poorly documented, which has left art historians to deal with probabilities rather than certainties. One reason for this lack of information is that most of Giorgione's works were private rather than public commissions, which were commonly recorded in less detail. As a result, his life and *œuvre* have to be pieced together from scant historical evidence: just a handful of references during his lifetime and an account of his life written long after his death by Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, published in 1550 and 1568. Scholars therefore have to turn to his paintings, and attempt to identify his works on stylistic grounds.

## Venice, 1500–1510

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Venice was one of the most vibrant and cosmopolitan cities in Europe, and home to some of the greatest artists of the Italian Renaissance. Built on a small cluster of islands in a lagoon just a few miles from the Italian mainland, it had long been a dominant maritime power, with territories and trade routes that extended east across the Mediterranean and north towards the Alps. As the hub of a vast trading empire, Venice was accustomed to receiving goods, visitors and new ideas from far afield. The city's prosperous history was reflected in its grand architecture, as shown in a map produced by Jacopo de' Barbari in around 1500 (**fig. 1**). It features many of the buildings that are still standing in Venice today, such as the Doge's Palace and the vast industrial area of the Arsenale, where the city's many boats were built.

**Fig. 1** (overleaf)  
Jacopo de' Barbari  
*View of Venice* (detail),  
1498–1500  
Woodcut printed from six  
blocks on six sheets of  
joined paper, 139 × 282 cm

© The Trustees of the British Museum

Designed by Isambard Thomas, London Printed by Tradewinds Ltd





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Despite its architectural magnificence, at the end of the fifteenth century Venice's political fortunes were in decline as the city suffered defeats in naval battles, and lost territories. At home, plague struck the city three times during the first decade of the sixteenth century, bringing death to its tightly packed neighbourhoods. Giorgione was among those who perished. Despite these difficult circumstances, an artistic renewal took place, supported by a range of favourable factors. The city had long-established wealth based on its trading activities and strong artistic tradition. It had international connections and a cosmopolitan population that brought different influences and innovations into the city. It also had a stable government: like Florence, Venice was a republic, ruled by elected members of its nobility. Whereas, other Italian city-states of the period were ruled by powerful family dynasties, such as the Sforza in Milan. And last but not least, the city had a learned élite who were interested in new ideas and eager to commission art.

## Portraits

Portraiture in Venice underwent significant changes during the first decade of the sixteenth century. The artist of choice was Giovanni Bellini, then in his seventies and still at the height of his powers. Indeed, when the German artist Albrecht Dürer visited the city in 1505–07, he noted that Bellini was 'very old and still the best of all the painters.' At the same time, Dürer's painstaking realism and close observation of his sitters made a lasting impression on Venetian art of the time.

**Cat. 3** Among other things, Bellini developed a portrait type for wealthy Venetian sitters. The format of *Portrait of a Man (Pietro Bembo?)* demonstrates many of the key characteristics of his portraits: the sitter is presented in three-quarter profile, with just his head and shoulders visible, and is set behind a parapet, which bears a label emblazoned with the painter's signature in elegant cursive script. His fair hair and skin stand out against the inky blackness of his jacket and cap. This is the only surviving portrait by Bellini with a landscape background, which recalls the rolling hills and distant mountains of Venice's mainland territories. We can also make out a fortified tower and city in the distance. His averted gaze gives him a reserved, contemplative air. His identity is unknown but the black robe and hat (*biretta*) tell us that he is a *cittadino*, a citizen of the social group beneath the nobility in Venice. It has been suggested that he could be the notable writer and scholar Pietro Bembo, an important figure in Venice's cultural world at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Born in Venice, Bembo spent time at the courts of Ferrara and Urbino, later becoming Papal Secretary and Cardinal in Rome, and had a strong influence on Venice's thinkers.

An important factor in the development of Bellini's portraiture was his choice of medium, a decision that was influenced by the direction taken by Netherlandish artists. In his later career, he abandoned egg tempera, which was the more

**'I marvelled greatly to see the placement of this [sumptuous] city and to see so many church towers and monasteries, and such large buildings, and all in the water; and the people have no other form of locomotion except by these barges, of which I believe thirty thousand might be found.'**

Philippe de Commynes,  
French Ambassador to  
Venice, 1494

### Cat. 3

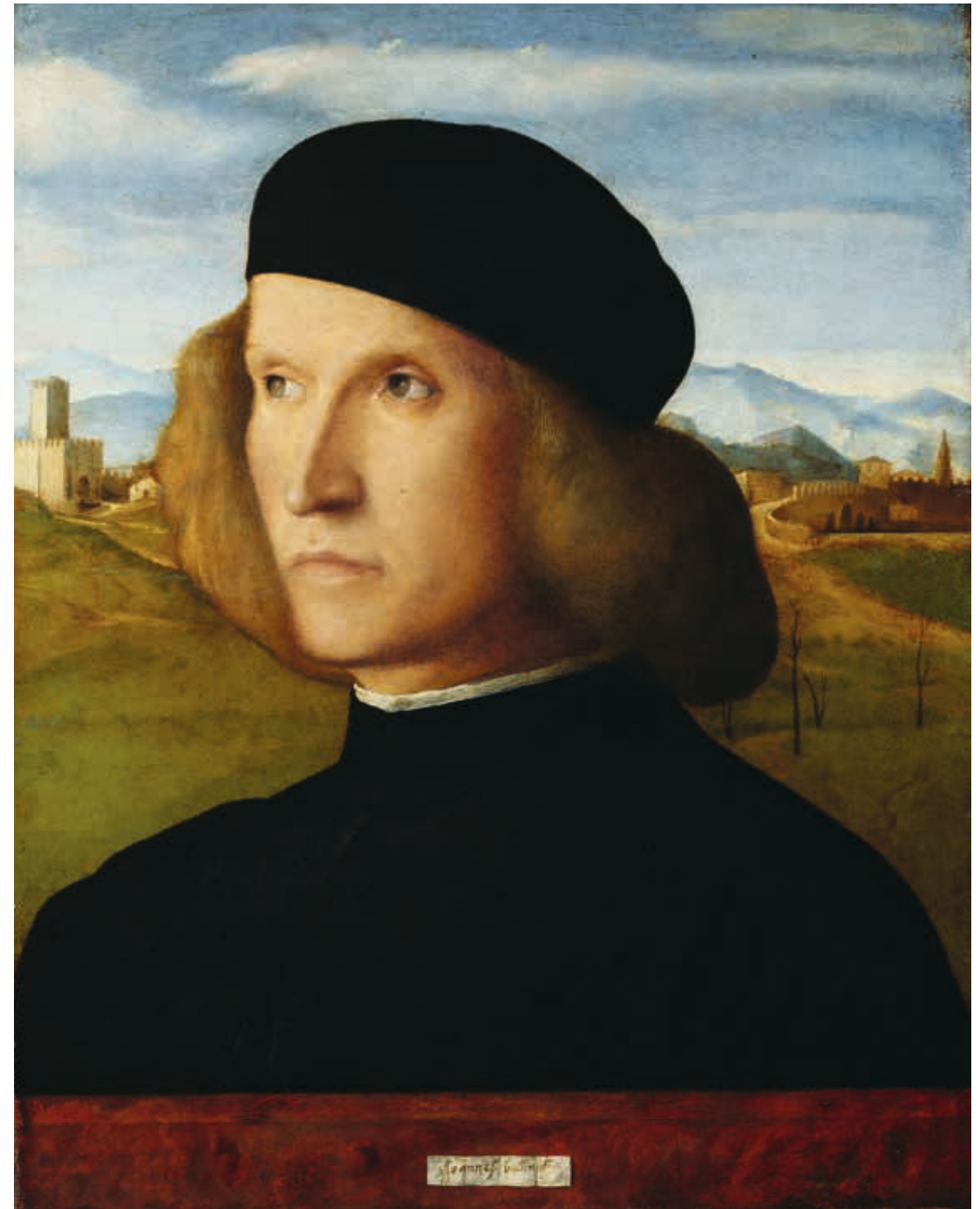
Giovanni Bellini  
*Portrait of a Man (Pietro Bembo?)*, c. 1505  
Oil on panel, 43.8 × 35.2 cm

Generously lent by Her Majesty The  
Queen from the Royal Collection, RCIN  
405761  
Photo © Royal Collection Trust / © Her  
Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016

**'Painting contains a divine force which not only makes absent men present... but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive.'**

Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura*, c. 1435

common medium in Italy in the fifteenth century, in favour of oils, which were more widely used in northern Europe. Egg tempera, a paint made by mixing colour pigments with egg yolk, dries quickly, requiring artists to work in a fast, methodical way. Oils, on the other hand, dry more slowly, allowing artists to spend longer on details and to create more subtle transitions between areas of light and dark. Bellini also followed the Netherlandish technique of applying oils in transparent glazes, which enabled him to capture the subtle nuances of character as well as



the effects of light. His later works demonstrate the rich colours and atmosphere that came to characterise Venetian painting.

**What are the advantages of portraying a sitter in three-quarter profile rather than from a full frontal point of view?**

**What elements in this portrait could help us establish the identity of the sitter?**

**Cat. 5** Giorgione's *Portrait of a Man*, painted at around the same time as Bellini's, shows how the younger artist transformed the tradition of Venetian portraiture during the first decade of the sixteenth century, using a freer treatment of oils and moving away from the symmetries and conventions of the previous period. The precise, descriptive manner of Bellini's portrait has been replaced by a more allusive and naturalistic approach. Giorgione's looser, broader application of

**Cat. 5**  
Giorgione  
*Portrait of a Man* ('*Terris Portrait*'), 1506  
Oil on panel, 30.2 × 25.7 cm

The San Diego Museum of Art, Gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam 1941.100  
Photo © The San Diego Museum of Art, [www.sdmart.org](http://www.sdmart.org)



**'He began to give more softness and greater relief to his paintings, with beautiful *maniera*; he still was in the habit of looking for subjects that were alive and natural, and of representing them as he knew best, with colours, alternating raw and tender colours as the live subject showed him, without drawing.'**

Giorgio Vasari on Giorgione, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*

paint enabled him to convey subtle psychological nuances, atmospheric effects and textures, such as his sitter's greying hair. Also, whereas Bellini's sitter averts his gaze, Giorgione's makes direct eye contact, engaging us with his deep yet ambiguous expression. Giorgione shows the man close-up in the composition. The resulting effect is one of a strong, immediate presence, capturing something of the interior life of the subject.

Giorgione's innovative technique was probably inspired by another visitor to Venice, Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), who passed through the city in 1499. Leonardo would have brought drawings with him, if not paintings, introducing Venetian artists to his *sfumato* technique. The word *sfumato* derives from *fumo*, 'smoke' in Italian, and refers to the blurred or soft outlines characteristic of Leonardo's paintings. This same effect of subtle shifts between light and shade is also found in Giorgione's work, and was described by the sixteenth-century art historian Giorgio Vasari as the *maniera moderna*, or modern manner.

Vasari is one of the main sources of information about Giorgione's life, which to this day remains shrouded in mystery. We know that Giorgione died in Venice in 1510 during an outbreak of the plague when he was just thirty-three years old. He was therefore born around 1478, in Castelfranco on the Venetian mainland. Among the few historical documents that mention him, one records a prestigious commission in 1507 for him to paint a large work for the Ducal Palace, which confirms that by then he was highly regarded in the city. Yet information about Giorgione was already scant when Vasari visited Venice in 1541, just 34 years after Giorgione's death, to gather material for his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, since published as *The Lives of the Artists*.

The uncertainty surrounding Giorgione's life also extends to his work. Only a few contemporary documents mention paintings by him. The most important is a list written by the nobleman and scholar Marcantonio Michiel (1484–1552), who described works of art in the public and private collections of Venice. Of the eleven paintings he mentioned as being by Giorgione, only three can now be identified with certainty. The lack of evidence surrounding Giorgione's work has caused the consensus of what exactly he painted to fluctuate wildly over the centuries: from about 40 works in the sixteenth century to several hundred in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and back to around 40 today. Part of the problem is that early works by Giorgione and Titian are often stylistically indistinguishable; in fact, works by Titian have been described as 'Giorgionesque'. Added to which, because Giorgione's paintings have been so coveted by collectors, some unfounded or tenuous attributions have been made. All we can say for sure is that Giorgione was extremely influential among his contemporaries.

**How has Giorgione created a sense of intimacy and immediacy in this portrait?**

**When little is known about an artist's career, where can art historians look to discover more about their life and work?**



**Cat. 2** The portraits attributed to Giorgione have an evocative mood and a suggestion of a narrative, both of which were new to portraiture at this time. This *Portrait of a Young Man and His Servant* shows a handsome young man sitting in a highly expressive fashion; with his head resting on his hand, he is in the traditional pose of melancholy. The emotion conveyed by his posture is mirrored in his wistful facial expression, which suggests the yearning of unrequited love. One side of his face is illuminated by light pouring in from a nearby window; the other half is in shadow. Elegantly attired, he holds a Seville orange, which due to its sharp taste was often associated with the bittersweet nature of love. The atmosphere of the composition is enhanced by the presence of the secondary figure, possibly a servant, who looks directly out at us with a knowing expression, thus highlighting the young man's absorption. The story is not spelt out but merely suggested.

In their lyricism, Giorgione's works were perhaps intended to rival poetry. During the Renaissance in Italy, there was lively debate known as the *paragone*, or 'comparison' of the relative merits of the different arts, whether it was painting and sculpture or painting and poetry. With his evocative images, Giorgione persuasively argued the case for the painter as poet.

As in poetry, Giorgione's paintings often address the theme of love. According to Vasari, Giorgione was himself known for his amorous nature, but this theme also reflected a broader curiosity about romance-related subjects in the cultural milieu of the time. Several contemporary writers wrote about love, among them the notable Venetian scholar and poet Pietro Bembo, the possible sitter in Bellini's portrait (cat. 3). In 1501, Bembo published a new edition of Petrarch's love sonnets, and also wrote a famous dialogue on love, called *Gli Asolani*, set in the courtly hill town of Asolo on the Venetian mainland. *Gli Asolani* was published in 1505 by the Venetian printer Aldus Manutius, the most important representative of the thriving printing industry in Venice. This new technology allowed for the wide dissemination of ideas into the city's intellectual and artistic life, inspiring the minds of artists and patrons alike. The patrons who commissioned Giorgione's works represented a new class of well-educated and culturally sophisticated Venetians. Giorgione devised his innovative subjects for the private enjoyment of these cultivated men, who would have been well versed in both classical and contemporary literature.

**How would you describe the relationship of the two men in *Portrait of a Young Man and His Servant*?**

**What factors might have supported advances in the art of painting in Venice at this time?**

## Cat. 2

Attributed to Giorgione  
*Portrait of a Young Man  
and His Servant*  
Oil on canvas, 80 × 67.5 cm

Museo Nazionale del Palazzo di  
Venezia, Rome, inv. PV.902  
Photo © 2016, Photo Scala, Florence  
- courtesy of the Ministero Beni and  
Att. Culturali

**'Giorgione had seen  
some things by the hand  
of Leonardo with a  
beautiful gradation of  
colours, and with  
extraordinary relief,  
effected, as has been  
related, by means of  
dark shadows; and this  
manner pleased him so  
much that he was forever  
studying it as long as he  
lived, and in oil-painting  
he imitated it greatly.'**

Giorgio Vasari on Giorgione,  
*Lives of the Most Excellent  
Painters, Sculptors, and  
Architects*





## Landscape

The second section of this exhibition is dedicated to landscape. Whereas in the fifteenth century and before, landscapes could be glimpsed in the background of portraits and religious paintings, in the early years of the sixteenth century they started to take centre stage. In paintings by Giorgione, Titian and others, figures appear *within* nature rather than set against it.

**Cat. 26.** Domenico Campagnola (1500–1564), son of the printmaker Giulio Campagnola (c. 1482–after 1515), was best known for his drawings of bucolic landscapes, such as that in the example of *Two Kneeling Youths in a Landscape*, from the British Museum in London. This tranquil vision of nature belongs to the pastoral landscape tradition, in which nature is presented as a place of retreat and repose, untouched by civilisation. Independent works in their own right, these drawings were highly sought after by Venetian collectors and connoisseurs. As in Giorgione's paintings, the undulating landscape is reminiscent of the Veneto (a north-eastern Italian region), but does not seem to depict a specific landscape.



### Cat. 26

**Domenico Campagnola**  
*Two Kneeling Youths in a Landscape*, c. 1515–20  
Pen and brown ink on paper,  
18.2 × 27.3 cm

Lent by the Trustees of the British Museum, London, Department of Prints and Drawings, inv. 1895,0915.836  
Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum

### Fig. 2 (Cat. 25)

**Attributed to Titian**  
*Two Arcadian Musicians in a Landscape*  
Black and brown ink over  
black chalk on paper,  
22.4 × 22.6 cm

Lent by the Trustees of the British Museum, London, Department of Prints and Drawings, inv. 1895,0915.817  
Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum



Like other cultural centres in Italy, Venice saw a revival of classical culture at this time. But unlike in Rome or Florence, where artists focused on archaeological evidence of the ancient world, in Venice, where there was less of it to be seen due to the city's urban, watery environment, the focus was on ancient literature. The city's printers published numerous classical texts, among them

pastoral texts such as Theocritus's *Idylls*, written in Greek, and Virgil's *Eclogues*, in Latin. Most influential, however, was the contemporary work *Arcadia*, by the Neapolitan writer Jacopo Sannazaro (1458–1530), published in Venice around 1502. Written in the vernacular, it was accessible to people without a classical education, including artists, and was frequently reissued during the sixteenth century. The pastoral world evoked in these poems was given visual expression by Titian and Giorgione, as well as Campagnola. Domenico Campagnola was himself educated in humanist thought, and knew both Latin and Greek.

A similar drawing by Titian can also be seen in this section, *Two Arcadian Musicians in a Landscape* (fig. 2). Tiziano Vecellio, known as Titian, was probably around ten years younger than Giorgione, and like him, was born on the mainland of Italy, but in the mountain town of Pieve di Cadore. During 1508–1509, Titian and Giorgione worked side-by-side on the fresco decoration of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, headquarters of the German merchants on the Grand Canal in Venice, where according to Vasari there was some rivalry between them. Giorgione's premature death in 1510 left Titian to lead the way in Venetian painting.

**What elements in these drawings of figures in a landscape convey nature as a place of peace and repose?**

**What can we learn about an artist from looking at a drawing rather than a painting?**



**Cat. 19** As well as finding inspiration in poetry, Giorgione also imbued his landscapes with a poetic quality of their own. Departing from the more detached, analytical approach of Albrecht Dürer, he managed to heighten his depictions of nature with a resonant and palpable mood. He achieved this through his close observation of light and a subtle portrayal of atmospheric effects. In *Il Tramonto* (The Sunset), now in the National Gallery in London, he captures the ephemeral glow of dusk, the distant sky still pink, and the darker foreground conveying the fading light of day.

This evocative landscape recalls Giorgione's most famous depiction of atmospheric effects, *La Tempesta* (The Tempest), a highly enigmatic painting whose exact meaning, despite much academic discussion, is not known (**fig. 3**). In the foreground, a naked woman sits on the ground breastfeeding a baby, watched on the left by a man who stands in front of two truncated columns. Their identity is uncertain. In the background, a bolt of lightning flashes through the dark sky, casting its ominous white light onto the town below – a split-second, momentary effect. The open-endedness of the subject is typical of Giorgione's mysterious works, which have proved notoriously difficult to interpret. Like his biography and body of work, his iconography is also hard to decipher because the subjects he depicted were, at the time, unprecedented. Reams have been written about *La Tempesta*, with different academics interpreting it variously as a mythological scene, religious subject, historical allegory and even a painting without a subject, but Giorgione's intentions remain uncertain.

The subject of *Il Tramonto* is equally mysterious, and complicated by changes that have been made to the painting by conservators since Giorgione's day. During the twentieth century, the figures of Saint George slaying the dragon on the right and the old hermit hidden in the shadows at the very far right (perhaps Saint Anthony Abbot) were both added by restorers to conceal damage. However, the two figures in the foreground – apparently



**Fig. 3**  
Giorgione  
*La Tempesta* (The Tempest),  
c. 1504–08  
Oil on canvas, 82 × 73 cm

Galleria dell' Accademia, Venice, Italy  
Cameraphoto Arte Venezia /  
Bridgeman Images

**Cat. 19**  
Giorgione  
*Il Tramonto*, c. 1502–05  
Oil on canvas, 73.3 × 91.4  
cm

The National Gallery, London, bought  
1961, inv. NG 6307  
Photo © The National Gallery, London

travellers who have stopped to rest – are original. The older man inspects the leg of his younger companion, who may have had difficulty walking.

Like his subjects, Giorgione's technique was also innovative. He forfeited preparatory drawings in favour of taking a more spontaneous approach, working out his compositions directly on the canvas. The under drawings reveal that they were done with a wider, bolder brush, and the compositions altered as he worked on them.

Colour continued to be a key factor of Venetian painting in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Thanks to Venice's far-reaching trade routes, many of the pigments used by artists were imported from distant lands. Two pigments – the orange-coloured orpiment and red-coloured realgar, both made from arsenic sulphide minerals formed in volcanic hydrothermal veins – were imported from Asia Minor, and became a hallmark of the new manner of Venetian painting.

**In *Il Tramonto*, does Giorgione succeed in capturing a particular moment of the day? How has he done that?**

**What might be the story behind the two figures in the foreground of this composition?**







**Cat. 29**  
**Giovanni Bellini**  
*Virgin and Child with Saint Peter and Saint Mark and a Donor* ('Cornbury Park Altarpiece'), 1505  
 Oil on panel, 91.4 x 81.3 cm  
 Lent by Birmingham Museums Trust on behalf of Birmingham City Council  
 Photo © Birmingham Museums Trust

**'The method he used is judicious, beautiful, and astonishing, for it makes pictures appear alive and painted with great art, but it conceals the labour that has gone into them.'**  
 Giorgio Vasari on Titian, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*

## Devotional Works

Despite the rise of new, secular subject matters in Venetian painting of the early sixteenth century, the content of most works remained religious; such as, for example, depictions of the Virgin and Child accompanied by saints. Giovanni Bellini's painting *Virgin and Child with Saint Peter and Saint Mark and a Donor* (cat. 29) is known as a *sacra conversazione*, that is, a sacred or holy conversation. Both the Virgin and Child and accompanying saints are all set within a unified space, which is a departure from earlier polyptych altarpieces in which the Virgin and the saints appeared on separate (although usually hinged together) panels, as if they were occupying different worlds. From the early sixteenth century, the practice of commissioning religious polyptychs was displaced by a preference for having a single-panel altarpiece known as a *pala*, in which the different figures are unified by a naturalistic treatment of space and light.

This altarpiece by Bellini is dated to 1505, as inscribed on the label or *cartellino* visible on the lower step of the platform, which is the same year that Bellini painted *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Peter, Catherine of Alexandria, Lucy and Jerome*, his famous and highly influential large-scale altarpiece, for the Church of San Zaccaria in Venice. Here, the Virgin is seated on a finely carved marble throne, which separates the architectural space of the marble-floored foreground from the distant blue mountains of the natural world behind it. She is flanked on the left by Saint Peter, and on the right by Saint Mark, the patron saint of Venice. They are there to act as intermediaries between the Virgin and Child and the donor who is kneeling on the right, his hands joined in prayer. The inclusion of the donor is unusual for Venetian altarpieces of the time. Though he has not been identified, his costume does not correspond to traditional Venetian dress, which suggests the painting may have been made for someone on the Venetian mainland. Indeed, the painting is first recorded in a collection in Verona, Italy, albeit much later, in 1648.

Just as Giorgione and Titian responded to Bellini, it appears that by 1505 Bellini himself had in turn adopted some of their stylistic traits. The heads and portrayal of the faces here closely resemble those painted by the young Titian. Looking closely, we find differences in the painting technique in separate parts of the painting. The faces of the Virgin and Child, for example, are far less distinct than those of the saints and donor, which are more clearly defined. This has led some scholars to believe that several hands were involved in creating this work, which would not have been unusual in a studio as large as Bellini's.

**How does Bellini distinguish between the sacred space occupied by the Virgin, Christ child and saints, and the worldly space occupied by the donor?**

**How has Bellini given his figures a sense of solidity and form?**



**Cat. 31** Towards the end of the first decade of the sixteenth century, Titian began making his mark with large-scale religious paintings. His *Jacopo Pesaro Being Presented by Pope Alexander VI to Saint Peter*, which presents a sacred figure alongside a kneeling donor, provides a glimpse of the history of Venice as it was commissioned to commemorate a specific event, and reminds us of the interconnection of religion and politics during this period.

Saint Peter, on the left, can be identified by the keys placed at his feet. (According to the Bible, Jesus granted Peter these keys when he called him the foundation stone of the Christian church.) Raising his right hand in a gesture of blessing, Peter looks down at the kneeling man in the black robe, who would have commissioned this picture. He is Jacopo Pesaro (1464–1547), the Bishop of Paphos in Cyprus (which had become a Venetian territory in 1489). The third figure in the painting, identified by his papal tiara, is the Pope himself, Alexander

**Cat. 31**  
**Titian**  
*Jacopo Pesaro Being Presented by Pope Alexander VI to Saint Peter*  
 c. 1508–11  
 Oil on canvas,  
 147,5 × 189 cm

Koninklijk Museum voor Schone  
 Kunsten, Antwerp, inv. 357  
 Photo © Royal Museum of Fine Arts,  
 Antwerp / www.lukasweb.be - Art in  
 Flanders vzw. Photography: Hugo  
 Maertens



VI, a member of the Borgia family. A coat of arms associated with the Borgias appears on the red standard held by Jacopo Pesaro. The connection between these two men is that Jacopo Pesaro, as well as being Bishop of Cyprus, was also a commander of the papal fleet, who in 1502 led twenty galleys in a crusade against the Turks. The warships in the background are a reminder of this naval mission in which the papal fleet gained victory over the Turks near the Ionian island of Santa Maura. This was a period when Venice's Mediterranean territories were frequently challenged by Ottoman forces, making this triumph a worthy cause for celebration. It was probably the occasion for commissioning this painting. However, the success was short lived as the island was returned to Ottoman hands the following year.

The theme of triumph is highlighted in the bas-relief that adorns the steps leading to Saint Peter's throne. The female figure on the right of it is Venus Victrix, the goddess of love in her guise as patroness of victory. She provides another connection with the theme of this painting because Paphos, where Pesaro was Bishop, was said in antiquity to have belonged to the goddess of love.

**Looking at the composition, how does Titian give prominence to Saint Peter?**

**What can we learn about the three figures depicted just by looking at their costumes and the objects associated with them?**

**Cat. 34** Titian's *Christ and the Adulteress* presents a biblical episode as if it were a sixteenth-century scene, with Christ the only figure in historic dress. Paintings like this, giving religious stories a contemporary relevance, were probably produced for secular settings, such as private houses, rather than for a church.

The Bible story depicted in *Christ and the Adulteress* is told in the Gospel according to John, which describes Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes discussing the punishment of a woman caught in the act of adultery. Jesus is asked whether the woman should be stoned for her actions, according to the Law of Moses. He bends down and writes with his finger on the ground before saying, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.' As the crowd gradually disperses without a single stone being thrown, Christ tells the woman, 'Neither do I condemn you.' The message is that we should suspend judgement and temper punishment with mercy. The painting may have been intended for a public space, perhaps somewhere justice was dispensed.

Titian conveys the drama and agitation of the scene through his dynamic composition and active poses. The impetuous-looking man in red pulls the weary woman towards Christ, his hand resting on his thigh as if impatiently awaiting an answer. As Christ delivers his compassionate judgement, he reaches out to hold the man's arm, as if imploring him to understand why he ought to set the woman free from his grasp. It is an action-packed composition, and with the figures large



**Cat. 34**

Titian

*Christ and the Adulteress,*

c. 1511

Oil on canvas,

139.2 × 181.7 cm

Glasgow Life (Glasgow Museums) on  
behalf of Glasgow City Council.  
Archibald McLellan Collection,  
purchased 1856, inv. 181  
Photo © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums  
Collection





in relation to the scale of the canvas, they seem to be closer to us, which gives us a greater sense of involvement in the drama. The painting originally included another standing male figure further to the right but this part of the canvas was cut off at a later stage.

Although this painting is now unanimously accepted as being by Titian, it was long attributed to Giorgione. The painting styles of the young Titian and Giorgione were very similar. According to Vasari, it was difficult to distinguish between the work of the two artists even in his day, and the uncertainty continues. With so few of their works documented, experts and connoisseurs must make attributions on stylistic grounds.

**How might Titian's contemporaries have reacted if Christ, like the other characters in the story, was also dressed in sixteenth-century dress?**

**How does the artist conjure a sense of drama and agitation in this painting?**

## Allegorical Portraits

The last section of the exhibition is devoted to allegorical portraits, that is portraits of individuals depicted in mythological or religious guises.

**Cat. 45** *Judith* by Giovanni Cariani (1490–1547) is a particularly striking example. The story of Judith is told in the Bible, in the Old Testament Apocrypha. She was a heroine of the Israelites, a beautiful widow who aroused the passion of Holofernes, the general of the Assyrian army who laid siege to her home town of Bethulia. Wanting to save her people from attack, Judith accepted Holofernes's invitation to visit his tent at night, and when he fell asleep under the effects of wine, she brutally cut off his head and stowed it in a bag. In Cariani's painting, the head of Holofernes can be seen in the lower right of the composition, and above it, Judith's maid, who had been waiting nervously for her mistress outside the tent. The painting includes several elements of the religious narrative: the knife in Judith's hand, her bared breast and of course, the severed head. The impact of the scene is heightened by its dramatic lighting: Judith's brightly lit figure stands out prominently against the dark background.

This painting is attributed to Giovanni Busi, known as Cariani, who is thought to have possibly come from near Bergamo in Lombardy, Italy, but lived and worked in Venice. There, he was exposed to many of the city's leading artists, including Giorgione and his new style. The elderly maid to the right, for example, bears some resemblance to Giorgione's *La Vecchia*.

**What is the effect of seeing Judith close up, rather than seeing her entire figure?**

**Why do you think a woman of this period might choose to be depicted in the guise of a biblical or mythological character? What might have influenced her choice of character?**

**'Tiziano, then, having seen the method and manner of Giorgione, abandoned the manner of [Giovanni] Bellini, although he had been accustomed to it for a long time, and attached himself to that of Giorgione; coming in a short time to imitate his works so well, that his pictures at times were mistaken for works by Giorgione.'**

Giorgio Vasari on Titian, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*

### Cat. 45

Giovanni Cariani  
*Judith*, c. 1510–15  
Oil on panel, 69 × 56.5 cm

Francesca and Massimo Valsecchi  
Photo © Alex Fox at Roy Fox Fine Art

**'An admirable female portrait by Cariani showing Judith with an old hag by her side, the hag carrying the head of Holofernes. Energetic, almost brutal in the deed [...].'**

Bernard Berenson, 1904







**Cat. 39**  
**Giorgione**  
*La Vecchia*, c. 1508–10  
 Tempera and oil on canvas,  
 68 x 59 cm

Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, inv. 272  
 Photo © Archivio fotografico del Polo  
 Museale del Veneto. Photography:  
 Quartana, su concessione del Ministero  
 dei beni e delle attività culturali e del  
 turismo

**'I see Giorgione poised  
 overhead in the  
 marvellous firmament  
 [...] I seek him in the  
 mystery of the flaming  
 cloud that envelops him.  
 He seems more like a  
 myth than a man. No  
 poet on earth has a  
 destiny to compare with  
 his.'**

Gabriele D'Annunzio on  
 Giorgione, 1895

**Cat. 39** While ideal female beauty was a prominent theme in Venetian painting, Giorgione subverted the usual idealisation in *La Vecchia*, an astounding and highly unusual portrayal of old age. It is not immediately clear whether this is a portrait of a specific person or if the artist intended it as a generic depiction of old age. In a later inventory (1569), the painting is documented as a portrait of the artist's mother. But despite the portrait format (with stone parapet) and expressive, characterful face, the painting has at the same time a strong moral intent, suggesting that it was intended as more than a straightforward portrait and instead as an allegory of temporal transience.

Giorgione painted the woman with penetrating and unflinching realism. She looks directly out at the viewer, her eyes weary beneath her drooping eyelids, and her skin wrinkled. Her open mouth reveals her few remaining teeth, and a few thin strands of grey hair escape from beneath her cap. It is a carefully observed portrayal of old age and the passing of time, which carries a message communicated by the piece of paper, or *cartellino*, the woman holds in her hand. It reads *COL TEMPO* (WITH TIME), a chilling reminder of the ephemeral nature of youth and beauty. The painting reminds us that no one is immune from the effects of time.

This was a familiar message during the Renaissance, and Giorgione himself explored this same theme in another work. His *Three Ages of Man*, c. 1500, depicts a youthful boy flanked by a grown man and an older gentleman. The older man is looking over his shoulder at us, thereby establishing a direct connection with viewers. The painting is generally interpreted as an allegory of the three stages of life: boyhood, adulthood and old age. Like the old woman in *La Vecchia*, whose gaze gives that painting a startling immediacy, the three men depicted in this painting communicate its message with brutal honesty.

**What message do you think Giorgione wanted to convey with this painting?**

**How did Giorgione highlight his sitter's age? What is the visual effect of the dark background?**

## Conclusion

Giorgione himself was destined never to experience the ravages of old age, as he died tragically young, in his early thirties and artistic prime. With his death, Venice lost one of its leading artistic lights. However, his influence has been and continues to be far reaching. The enduring appeal of his work is partly due to its allusive, atmospheric quality, which continues to communicate directly across the centuries. Also, the mystery that surrounds Giorgione, the man and artist, furthers his mystique and legacy. For art historians, the enigmatic nature of his subjects and the uncertainty surrounding the works attributed to him provide endless fascination and opportunity for research.



During the first decade of the sixteenth century, Giorgione revolutionised painting in Venice, building on the achievements of his older contemporary Giovanni Bellini. Along with the young Titian, he established new subjects and approaches that inspired a new generation of artists in the city. Although he died young, his legacy lasted well beyond his lifetime, as Venetian artists followed his example. It was Titian who led the way, taking Giorgione's innovations in new directions over the course of the sixteenth century.

## Bibliography

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### Cat. 2

Attributed to Giorgione  
*Portrait of a Young Man  
and His Servant* (detail)

