8.5: Italy in the 15th century- Early Renaissance (II)

Central Italy

Sculpture and architecture

Donatello, *St. Mark*

by DR. DAVID BOFFA
Video \(\PageIndex{1}\): Donatello, St. Mark, 1411-13, marble, 93" (236 cm) (Orsanmichele, Florence). Speakers: Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris
A humorous anecdote

The sixteenth-century artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari gives us a humorous anecdote about Donatello’s Saint Mark. Supposedly, when the patrons first saw the statue standing on the ground they were displeased with it, but Donatello convinced them to let him install it in its niche, where he would finish working on it. The patrons agreed, the statue was installed, and Donatello covered it up for fourteen days—pretending to work on it but in reality not touching it.
When it was finally uncovered, everyone viewed the statue with wonder. The only difference was the installation of the work in its proper context. The artist had included distortions to account for the sculpture being seen from below (in its original location its base would be just above the height of an average person—see image at the bottom of this page). Some of these distortions include a torso and neck that are slightly longer than expected, which would be visually corrected when viewed from below (and the neck is hidden by a flowing beard).

Although Vasari’s story is apocryphal, the visual evidence does suggest that Donatello—in this work and others—was keenly interested in viewer perception. This sensitivity to audience and the ability to manipulate his viewers through his works in stone and bronze are part of what makes him such a distinctive figure—and part of why his *Saint Mark* still has the ability to astound us with its power and expressiveness.

This over-life-size marble, carved from a single, shallow block of stone, portrays the evangelist Saint Mark standing on a pillow, holding a book in his left hand, staring intently into the distance. Rendering a convincingly soft pillow in marble is a testament to the sculptor’s mastery of the material (and perhaps a reference to the patrons, which we’ll get to later).

Apart from this gaze, his face is defined by a long, intricately carved beard whose wavy curves reach down to the base of his neck. The rich folds of the toga he wears convey the expressiveness of fabric—bunching up at his waist, for instance, and falling dramatically around his legs—while also responding to and suggesting the body underneath. Note, for example, how his left knee—slightly forward—pulls at the garment, and how even when the fabric is piled up, as it is on his hip, it manages to convey the body’s physicality. Consider the extraordinary skill in turning hard stone into something that looks like soft, malleable fabric.

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century...)
Contrapposto

Saint Mark’s stance is classic *contrapposto*—an Italian word loosely translated as “contrasted” or “opposed” and that refers to a naturalistic way of portraying the human form that originated in ancient Greece. Saint Mark supports his weight primarily on his right leg, a point emphasized by the strong vertical lines of the toga over that leg—lines that seem to mimic the fluting on Greek and Roman columns. The saint’s hips are at a slight angle and his left leg, bent at the knee as though about to step forward, is far more relaxed. His upper body is the opposite: the left arm is engaged in holding his book—a reference to his status as one of the authors of the Gospels—while his right arm hangs loosely at his side. The slight curve to the body, and the use of both active and relaxed elements, gives the figure an easy, natural gracefulness that reflects how a human would actually stand, and makes it appear as though the saint is caught in the act of stepping out of his niche.

All of these formal elements—the scale, the expressive carving, the interest in the body, the contrapposto—are aspects we have come to associate as new developments in the art of the Early Italian Renaissance.

The commission and setting

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century/Figure%203%20-%20Reproduction%20of%20Donatello%27s%20St.%20Mark%20(1411-13%2C%20the%20original%20is%20now%20in%20the%20museum%20inside)%20in%20its%20original%20location%20in%20a%20niche%20at%20Orsanmichele%2C%20Florence%2C%201349%20loggia%20(1380-1404%20upper%20stories)%20(photo%3A%20Shirley%20de%20Jong%2C%20CC%20BY-NC%202.0))
Donatello’s commission for Saint Mark was part of a broader campaign to adorn the exterior of Orsanmichele in Florence, Italy. Orsanmichele is and was a building with both civic and religious importance for Florentine citizens. Though constructed in part as a grain warehouse and used as such for decades, Orsanmichele was also a significant site of pilgrimage and religious devotion, due to the presence of a miracle-working image of the Virgin and Child. Plans to decorate the exterior of the building date back to 1339, when the Silk Guild (the Arte della Seta, then known as the Arte di Por Santa Maria) proposed that they and the other major guilds of Florence adorn the external piers of the building with tabernacles (or niches) and life-sized (or bigger) sculptures of saints. The project was slow to get off the ground—only a few works were completed before it came to a stop—but it was revived in the early fifteenth century. At this point, the city government legislated that the guilds had to decorate their tabernacles within ten years or give up their rights to do so.
Orsanmichele was so important to the city that a guild’s ability to commission an artwork for it was considered an honor—if an expensive one. Although the legislation wasn’t strictly enforced, it did inspire a flurry of activity and commissions around Orsanmichele—of which Donatello’s *Saint Mark* was one example, commissioned by the Linen Weavers’ Guild (the *Arte dei Linaiuoli*). Other noteworthy sculptures from this period include Lorenzo Ghiberti’s *Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1414 and Saint Matthew, c. 1420, *Nanni di Banco’s Four Crowned Saints*, c. 1415, and Donatello’s *Saint George*, c. 1415.

The Orsanmichele projects provided an opportunity for the guilds to compete with each other, each one commissioning a more luxurious or impressive sculpture. Competition of all sorts—between patrons, artists, even art forms themselves—is a consistent theme of the Renaissance, and in the opening years of the fifteenth century this was on display as guilds vied for public attention and praise via their Orsanmichele commissions. For example, the Cloth
Merchants’ Guild (the Arte di Calimala) commissioned Ghiberti’s *Saint John the Baptist* in bronze rather than marble—a far more costly decision intended to show off the guild’s wealth and outdo its rivals.

Unfortunately, all of the original statues on Orsanmichele—fourteen works—have been placed in either the building’s museum or the Bargello museum. The sculptures in the niches are copies. The result is that we can now view Donatello’s *Saint Mark* at ground level—exactly as he did not intend it to be viewed!

**The artist**

Donatello—whose full name was Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi—was born around 1386 in Florence to a middle-class family. He probably trained as a goldsmith as a young man, and eventually spent some time with two of the most important artists of the fifteenth century: Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti. He went with the former to Rome in the opening years of the century, and he spent time in Ghiberti’s workshop from about 1404 to 1407.

By the time of the *Saint Mark* commission, Donatello had already completed or was at work on several other notable public sculptures, including his marble *David* (1408-9), *Saint John the Baptist* (1408-15), and *Saint George* (c. 1410-15, also for Orsanmichele). These early works—especially *Saint John*—already exhibit some of the hallmarks of Donatello’s style, including a realism informed by Classical (ancient Greek and Roman) art and a certain psychological intensity. In subsequent decades he would execute original monuments that later generations have come to view as landmarks in Renaissance art: these include the bronze relief of the *Feast of Herod* for the baptismal font in Siena’s baptistery (c. 1425); the *Equestrian Monument of Gattamelata* in Padua (c. 1450, the earliest surviving Renaissance equestrian monument); and the *Judith and Holofernes* (c. 1460), now in Florence’s Palazzo Vecchio. These works had an impact not only on his peers but on later sculptors, as well—including on Michelangelo, who can be considered the High Renaissance artistic heir to Donatello. Thanks to a career that spanned over sixty years of activity (Donatello lived until 1466) and that resulted in radical works for major cultural and artistic centers—including Florence, Siena, Padua, and Rome—Donatello became an artist whose fame and impact equaled if not surpassed that of his teachers.

**Additional resources:**

Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists* (1550) on Donatello

[Donatello on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](http://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)

**Donatello, *Saint George***

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](http://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](http://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)
Video \PageIndex{2}): Donatello, *Saint George*, c. 1416–17, marble (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, commissioned by the armorers and sword makers guild for the exterior of Orsanmichele)

**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**

![Image 1](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)

![Image 2](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)

Media, iframe, embed and object tags are not supported inside of a PDF.
Figure 6: More Smarthistory images...

Donatello, *Feast of Herod*

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
Video \(\PageIndex{3}\): Donatello, *Feast of Herod*, panel on the baptismal font of Siena Cathedral, Siena, Italy, Gilded bronze, 1423-27

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Donatello, *Madonna of the Clouds*

by **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER** and **DR. BETH HARRIS**
Video \(\PageIndex{4}\): Donatello, *Madonna of the Clouds*, c. 1425–35, marble, 33.1 x 32 cm / 13 1/16 x 12 5/8 inches  
(Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Donatello, *David*

by **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER** and **DR. BETH HARRIS**
Video \(\PageIndex{5}\): Donatello, *David*, bronze, late 1420s to the 1460s, likely the 1440s (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence)

The following is a conversation about Donatello’s *David* between Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker:
SZ: Seeing Donatello’s David in the Bargello in Florence makes me realize just how different it is from the later, more famous version of David by Michelangelo. It feels so much more intimate and so much less public.

BH: Well, it is MUCH smaller! After all, this one is only about five feet tall—that’s a few inches shorter than me. And Michelangelo’s David is more than three times this size!

SZ: Because of the small size, and perhaps also because of the warm tones of the bronze, this sculpture seems so immediate and beautiful and vulnerable.

BH: Yes, and of course, Michelangelo’s marble sculpture WAS a public sculpture—it was meant to go in a niche high up in one of the buttresses of the Cathedral of Florence, commissioned by the Office of Works for the Cathedral. We don’t know who commissioned Donatello’s David, but we do know that it was seen in the courtyard of the Medici Palace in Florence, a much more private and intimate setting.

SZ: This intimacy is not simply a result of the nudity, but also of the emotional experience Donatello renders through the face and even the stance of the body—and it’s so unexpected in the telling of the story of David and Goliath! I would expect rather a triumphal victorious figure, maybe holding the sword and the enemy’s severed head aloft… Instead, here is a thoughtful, quiet, contemplative face.

BH: I don’t know, he doesn’t look so contemplative to me—instead he seems proud of his victory over the giant Goliath—which is strange since the story is very much about how David defeats Goliath because he has God’s help—he doesn’t do it on his own!
SZ: Really? Look at his calm, downcast eyes... the lids are half closed. That is not the usual expression of victory. Note that the facial muscles are totally relaxed, the mouth is lightly closed though there is the slightest hint of a smile—and yes, that is subtle pride, but to me this is the face of interior thought not exterior boasting. It's as if he is coming to terms with the events that have taken place, including God's intervention, here Donatello foreshadows the wisdom that will define his later reign as king.

Figure \(\PageIndex{10}\): Goliath’s head (detail), Donatello, *David*, c. 1440, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence)

BH: Fair enough, perhaps it's primarily his pose that speaks of pride to me. The relaxed contrapposto and the placement of his left hand nonchalantly on his hip feels to me like confidence and pride. His right hand holds the sword that he used to cut off Goliath's head, which we see below, resting on a victory wreath. The gruesome head seems to conflict with the sensuality and beauty of the young David.

SZ: Agreed. There is a certain swagger in that stance and the horrific contrast to the head of Goliath is wild and unnerving. But the contrapposto is also Donatello's swagger, the sculptor's rendering of David offers the most complete expression of this natural stance since antiquity. We know he was studying ancient Roman art with his friends, Masaccio and Brunelleschi and it's worth noting that he reclaims more than just the classical knowledge of contrapposto, he has also reclaimed the large-scale bronze casting of the ancient world. It must have been such an extraordinary revelation for a culture that until this moment, had not seen human-scaled bronze figures.

BH: It IS amazing how Donatello, after a thousand years, reclaims the ancient Greek and Roman interest in the nude human body. Of course, artists in the middle ages, a period when the focus was on God and the soul, rarely represented the nude. Donatello does so here with amazing confidence, you're right. In fact, this is the first free-standing nude figure since classical antiquity, and when you consider that, this achievement is even more remarkable! But let's face it, there's an undeniable sensuality here that almost makes us forget that we're looking at an old testament subject.
SZ: Right, Donatello’s figure of David is almost too sensuous for the subject being represented. In some sense this isn’t really a Biblical representation at all; Donatello seems to have used the excuse of the boy who eschews armor in order to represent not the Judaic tradition but instead the ancient Greek and Roman regard for the beauty of the human body and he uses the classical technique of lost wax to cast the form. Then, just like the Greeks and Romans, he worked the bronze to smooth the seams and the surface and to cut in details such as in the hair.

BH: I think it’s important to stress that this figure is free-standing. Sculpted figures have finally been detached from architecture and are once again independent in the way they were in ancient Greece and Rome. And because he’s free-standing, he is more human, more real. He seems able to move in the world, and of course the contrapposto does that too. It’s easy to imagine this figure in the Medici palace garden, surrounded by the ancient Greek and Roman sculpture that they were also collecting. I wish I could go back in time to Florence in the 1400s, to this remarkable moment, to witness the rebirth of Humanism.

SZ: I’d love to meet the artists and thinkers of the era but am not at all sure that I would find their world hospitable. Disease, want, cruelty, and a permanent hierarchy among social strata defined the period—not to mention the terrible position women found themselves in. You can go, I’ll stay here in the 21st century thank you!

BH: Like David, Florence was the underdog that withstood repeated attacks from Milan and yet, like young David, thanks to God’s favor, Florence was victorious (or at least that’s how the Florentines interpreted these events!). And as a result, many Florentine artists will tackle this subject.
David and Goliath

The subject of this sculpture is David and Goliath, from the Old Testament. According to the story, Israel (the descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) is threatened by Goliath, a “giant of a man, measuring over nine feet tall. He wore a bronze helmet and a coat of mail that weighed 125 pounds.” Goliath threatened the Israelites and demanded that they send someone brave enough to fight him. But the entire Israelite army is frightened of him. David, a young shepherd boy, asserts that he is going to fight the giant, but his father says, “There is no way you can go against this Philistine. You are only a boy, and he has been in the army since he was a boy!” But David insists that he can face Goliath and claims he has killed many wild animals who have tried to attack his flock, “The LORD who saved me from the claws of the lion and the bear will save me from this Philistine!” They try to put armor on David for the fight, but he takes it off. David faces Goliath and says to him, “You come to me with sword, spear, and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD Almighty—the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.” David kills Goliath with one stone thrown from his sling into Goliath’s forehead. Then he beheads Goliath.

The people of Florence identified themselves with David—they believed that (like him) they defeated their enemy (the Duke of Milan) with the help of God.

Additional resources:

David by Donatello, Palazzo Medici

Monumental Sculpture from Renaissance Florence: Ghiberti, Nanni di Banco, and Verrocchio at Orsanmichele, National
Gallery of Art

Donatello’s *David*, Dr. Allen Farber

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Figure 13: More Smarthistory images...
Donatello, *Equestrian Monument of Gattamelata*

by **Dr. Beth Harris** and **Dr. Steven Zucker**

Video \(\PageIndex{6}\): Donatello, *Equestrian Monument of Gattamelata (Erasmo da Narni)*, 1445-53, bronze, 12’ 2” high, Piazza del Santo, Padua

Smathistory images for teaching and learning:
Donatello, *Mary Magdalene*

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
VideoPageIndex(7): Donatello, Mary Magdalene, c. 1455, wood, 188 cm (Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Florence)

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Leon Battista Alberti

Leon Battista Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai

by CHRISTINE ZAPPELLA
Video \(\text{PageIndex}(8)\): Leon Battista Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, c. 1446-51, Florence (Italy)
By 1450, the skyline of Florence was dominated by Brunelleschi’s dome. Although Brunelleschi had created a new model for church architecture based on the Renaissance’s pervasive philosophy, Humanism, no equivalent existed for private dwellings.

In 1446, Leon Battista Alberti, whose texts *On Painting* and *On Architecture* established the guidelines for the creation of paintings and buildings that would be followed for centuries, designed a façade that was truly divorced from the medieval style, and could finally be considered quintessentially Renaissance: the Palazzo Rucellai. Alberti constructed the façade of the Palazzo over a period of five years, from 1446-1451; the home was just one of many important commissions that Alberti completed for the Rucellais—a wealthy merchant family.
Three tiers

Like traditional Florentine palazzi, the façade is divided into three tiers. But Alberti divided these with the horizontal entablatures that run across the facade (an entablature is the horizontal space above columns or plasters). The first tier grounds the building, giving it a sense of strength. This is achieved by the use of cross-hatched, or rusticated stone that runs across the very bottom of the building, as well as large stone blocks, square windows, and portals of post and lintel construction in place of arches.

The overall horizontality of this façade is called “trabeated” architecture, which Alberti thought was most fitting for the homes of nobility. Each tier also decreases in height from the bottom to top. On each tier, Alberti used pilasters, or flattened engaged columns, to visually support the entablature. On the first tier, they are of the Tuscan order. On the second and third tiers, Alberti used smaller stones to give the feeling of lightness, which is enhanced by the rounded arches of the windows, a typically Roman feature. Both of these tiers also have pilasters, although on the second tier they are of the Ionic order, and on the third they are Corinthian. The building is also wrapped by benches that served, as they do now, to provide rest for weary visitors to Florence.

The Palazzo Rucellai actually had four floors: the first was where the family conducted their business; the second floor, or piano nobile, was where they received guests; the third floor contained the family’s private apartments; and a hidden fourth floor, which had few windows and is invisible from the street, was where the servants lived.
The loggia

In addition to the façade, Alberti may have also designed an adjacent loggia (a covered colonnaded space) where festivities were held. The loggia may have been specifically built for an extravagant 1461 wedding that joined the Rucellai and Medici families. It repeats the motif of the pilasters and arches found on the top two tiers of the palazzo. The loggia joins the building at an irregularly placed, not central, courtyard, which was probably based on Brunelleschi’s Ospedale degli Innocenti.
The influence of ancient Rome

Figure 19: Arnolfo di Cambio (initial design), Palazzo Vecchio, 13th and 14th centuries, Florence (Italy)

In many ways, this building is very similar to the Colosseum, which Alberti saw in Rome during his travels in the 1430s. The great Roman amphitheater is also divided into tiers. More importantly, it uses architectural features for decorative purposes rather than structural support; like the engaged columns on the Colosseum, the pilasters on the façade of the Rucellai do nothing to actually hold the building up. Also, on both of these buildings, the order of the columns changes, going from least to most decorative as they ascend from the lowest to highest tier.

The Palazzo Rucellai has many features in common with the Palazzo Medici (below), which was constructed a few years before, not far from Alberti’s building. The Palazzo Medici is also divided into three horizontal planes that decrease in heaviness from bottom to top.

But there are subtle differences that betray the intents of the patrons. The bottom tier of the Palazzo Medici, built for Cosimo il Vecchio de' Medici by Michelozzo, resembles the stone of the Palazzo Vecchio (left), the seat of political power of Florence, with which Cosimo intentionally wanted to associate himself. It also employs the same type of windows.
Because Michelozzo used this medieval building as a model, whereas Alberti looked to ancient Rome, the Palazzo Medici is not truly Humanist in its conception and lacks the geometric proportion, grace, and order of the Palazzo Rucellai. The top tier of the Palazzo Medici is almost entirely plain, whereas Alberti continued to use architectural features for ornamentation throughout his design.

The main difference between the Palazzo Rucellai and other palazzi was Alberti’s reliance on ancient Rome. This may have reflected Giovanni Rucellai’s pretensions for his family. Rome was the seat of the papacy, and though Rucellai was not a cleric, he claimed to have descended from a Templar. The Palazzo Rucellai went on to influence the design for the homes of many clerics, such as the famous Palazzo Piccolomini that was built for Pope Pius II in Pienza by Bernardo Rossellino.

Text by Christine Zappella

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Alberti, Façade of Santa Maria Novella, Florence

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS

Video: Alberti, Façade of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1470.
Speakers: Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris

Additional resources:

Architecture in Renaissance Italy on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Leon Battista Alberti, Sant’Andrea in Mantua

by DR. HEATHER HORTON

Mantua’s relic

In the fifteenth century, pilgrims flocked to the Basilica of Sant’Andrea to venerate the most famous relic in the city of Mantua: drops of Christ’s blood collected at the Crucifixion, or so the faithful believed. In fact, the church Sant’Andrea was erected to accommodate the huge crowds that arrived on holy days and who, in turn, helped fund its construction. Today, art historians admire Sant’Andrea’s Early Renaissance design for elegantly bringing the grandeur of ancient architecture into a Christian context.

Who built that?

Sant’Andrea is built of bricks, though they are mostly concealed by painted stucco. The patron, Ludovico Gonzaga, estimated that at least two million bricks were needed. The bricks were baked in onsite kilns, making the church far less expensive and faster to erect than a building made with stone, which had to be quarried, transported, and finished.
Gonzaga was the Marquis of Mantua—and in addition to employing Alberti, he appointed Andrea Mantega as court artist. His portrait is featured in the frescos Mantegna painted in the Camera degli Sposi (also known as the Camera Picta), in the Marquis’ palace.

The sections of the building constructed in the Fifteenth Century, including the Western façade and the nave up to the transept, are usually attributed to the humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti, even though he died in Rome a few months before construction began in June 1472. Alberti was an expert on all things ancient and he wrote the first Renaissance architectural treatise.

Alberti probably made a model to explain his design and he definitely sent Gonzaga a drawing (now lost), and a short description of his plan in a letter dated 1470. Despite this, it is uncertain how much of the building follows Alberti’s design, how much comes from the Florentine architect Luca Fancelli who directed construction, and how much should be credited to Gonzaga, who closely supervised the project.

**Ancient models**

Questions of Sant'Andrea’s attribution are important because it is such an ingenious, unified combination of three ancient Roman forms: temple front, triumphal arch, and basilica.
On the façade, four giant pilasters with Corinthian capitals support an entablature and pediment.

Together these elements recall the front of ancient temples, such as the Pantheon in Rome. There is also a grand arch in the center of the façade that is supported, at least visually, by two shorter fluted pilasters. Taken together, the lower façade, with its tall central arch and flanking side doors evoke ancient triumphal arches such as the Arch of Constantine.

**Ancient rituals**

The center arch extends deep into the facade itself, creating a recessed barrel vault that frames the main entrance to the church. The arch and its coffered barrel vault form a perfect setting for processions of the holy relic and the celebration of Christ’s triumph over death. Such spectacles would recall ancient processions where victorious warriors paraded through Rome’s triumphal arches.

When pilgrims pass under the arch and into the nave (the long interior hall), after their eyes adjusted to the purposefully...
dim, mystical light, they would look up and see a second, much more massive barrel vault, the largest constructed since ancient Rome.

![Barrel vault with painted coffers, Basilica of Sant'Andrea, 1472-90, Mantua (Italy)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century...)

Figure \(\PageIndex{27}\): Alberti, barrel vault with painted coffers, Basilica of Sant’Andrea, 1472-90, Mantua (Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC: BY-NC-SA 3.0)

Then, on both sides of the nave they would find three chapels with lower barrel vaults. Surprisingly, there are no side aisles or rows of columns, as at the old St. Peter’s in Rome or other early churches like Santa Sabina.

![Nave looking west, Alberti, Basilica of Sant'Andrea, 1472-90, Mantua](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century...)

Figure \(\PageIndex{28}\): Nave looking west, Alberti, Basilica of Sant’Andrea, 1472-90, Mantua

Sant’Andrea’s huge central space and buttressing side chapels strongly resemble the layout of the ancient Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine in the Roman forum (below). The basilica plan is perfectly suited to large churches since it could accommodate massive crowds. But unlike earlier basilica-plan churches, Sant’Andrea’s plan seems to return more strictly to the ancient forms.
It's even possible that Sant'Andrea's unusual plan and all'antica ("after the antique") façade impacted the new St. Peter's and the Church of the Gesù in Rome.

Additional resources:

Architecture in Renaissance Italy on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History

Northern Italy: Venice, Ferrara, and the Marches

Venetian painting is characterized by deep, rich colors and a strong interest in the effects of light.

1400 - 1500

Beginner's guide: Venice in the 15th century

Venice is a cluster of islands, connected by bridges and canals.

1400 - 1500

Venice was a very wealthy city, with a strong merchant class that helped shape its culture. Ships from the East brought luxurious, exotic pigments, while traders from Northern Europe imported the new technique of oil painting. Since oil dries slowly, the colors could be blended together to achieve subtle gradations.

Venetian art, an introduction

by DR. HEATHER HORTON
Venice – another world

Petrarch, the fourteenth-century Tuscan poet, called Venice a “mundus alter” or “another world,” and the city of canals really is different from other Renaissance centers like Florence or Rome.

Venice is a cluster of islands, connected by bridges and canals, and until the mid nineteenth century the only way to reach the city was by boat. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Venice suffered numerous outbreaks of the plague and engaged in major wars, such as the War of the League of Cambrai. But it also boasted a stable republican government led by a Doge (meaning “Duke” in the local dialect), wealth from trade, and a unique location as a gateway between Europe and Byzantium.

The Venetian Style

Painting in Early and High Renaissance Venice is largely grouped around the Bellini family: Jacopo, the father, Giovanni and Gentile, his sons, and Andrea Mantegna, a brother-in-law. Giorgione may have trained in the Bellini workshop and Titian was apprenticed there as a boy.
The Bellinis and their peers developed a particularly Venetian style of painting characterized by deep, rich colors, an emphasis on patterns and surfaces, and a strong interest in the effects of light.

While Venetian painters knew about linear perspective and used the technique in their paintings, depth is just as often suggested by gradually shifting colors and the play of light and shadow. Maybe Venetian painters were inspired by the glittering gold mosaics and atmospheric light in the grand Cathedral of San Marco, founded in the 11th century? Or maybe they looked to the watery cityscape and the shifting reflections on the surfaces of the canals?

Oil paint

The Venetian trade networks helped to shape local painting practices. Ships from the East brought luxurious, exotic pigments, while traders from Northern Europe imported the new technique of oil painting. Giovanni Bellini combined the two by the 1460’s-70’s. In the next few decades, oil paint largely supplanted tempera, a quick-drying paint bound by egg yolk that produced a flat, opaque surface. (Botticelli’s Birth of Venus is one example of tempera paint, which you can learn more about here).

Figure 10: Giorgione, The Adoration of the Shepherds, 1505/1510, oil on panel, 35 3/4 x 43 1/2" / 90.8 x 110.5 cm (National Gallery of Art)
To achieve deep tones, Venetian painters would prepare a panel with a smooth white ground and then slowly build up layer-upon-layer of oil paint. Since oil dries slowly, the colors could be blended together to achieve subtle gradations. (See this effect in the rosy flush of the Venus of Urbino’s cheeks by Titian or in the blue-orange clouds in Giorgione’s Adoration of the Shepherds—above). Plus, when oil paint dries it stays somewhat translucent. As a result, all of those thin layers reflect light and the surface shines. Painting conservators have even found that Bellini, Giorgione, and Titian added ground-up glass to their pigments to better reflect light.

Venetian painting in the 16th century

Over the next century Venetian painters pursued innovative compositional approaches, like asymmetry, and they introduced new subjects, such as landscapes and female nudes. The increasing use of pliable canvas over solid wood panels encouraged looser brushstrokes. Painters also experimented more with the textural differences produced by thick versus thin application of paint.

In the Late Renaissance Titian’s mastery was rivaled by Tintoretto and Veronese. Each attempted to out-paint the other with increasingly dynamic and sensual subjects for local churches and international patrons. (Phillip II of Spain was particularly enamored with Titian’s mythological nudes.) The trio transformed saintly stories into relatable human drama (Veronese’s The Dream of St. Helena), captured the wit and wealth of portrait subjects (Titian’s Portrait of a Man), and
interpreted nature through mythological tales (Tintoretto’s *The Origin of the Milky Way*).

**Additional resources:**

- Sacra Conversatione from The National Gallery
- Titian on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Timeline of Art History
- Madonna of the Pesaro Family from the University of Mary Washington

**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**

Figure \(\PageIndex{35}\): More Smarthistory images...
Oil paint in Venice

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS

Video \(\PageIndex{10}\): A review of fresco and tempera and the development of the use of oil paint by artists in Venice.

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Ca’ d'Oro

by DR. ELLEN HURST
Venice, an outlier

When we think of the Italian Renaissance, we think of cities like Florence, Siena, and Milan where artists took an interest in reviving the traditions of classical antiquity. Venice, in contrast, remained something of an outlier. Whereas Florence, Siena, and Milan recalled their Greco-Roman past, Venice looked to its Byzantine history (as part of the eastern Roman Empire), which extended from the classical period up through the more recent medieval era.

Other Italian cities were also embroiled with political unrest even well into the High Renaissance (beginning in the late fifteenth century); rivaling families vied for power, warring for control, and killing or imprisoning their enemies. Venice’s more stable political climate and defensible island setting made it different from the other major cities in fifteenth-century Italy.

Figure \(\PageIndex{38}\): Ca’ d’Oro, 1422-1440, Venice

Venice’s unique position also made for a unique architecture. By the fifteenth century, it was a very wealthy city, with a strong merchant class that helped shape its culture. The city’s wealthiest families had the means and desire to build impressive palaces for themselves in the tradition of prominent civic architecture such as the fourteenth-century Palazzo Ducale on St. Mark’s Square. These powerful patrons constructed buildings as a way to express their wealth and importance and the Ca’ d’Oro (above) is a perfect example.

Figure \(\PageIndex{39}\): Palazzo Ducale (Doge’s Palace), Venice, 1424
House of gold

Bartolomeo and Giovanni Bon are credited with the decoration for the Ca’ d’Oro, built for Marin Contarini, of the prominent Contarini family. The building borrows its style from the Palazzo Ducale (the palace of the elected ruler of Venice), albeit on a smaller scale, but what it loses in size it makes up for in ornamentation. The building was known as the Ca’ d’Oro—“House of Gold”—because its façade originally shimmered with gold leaf, which has since faded away. You can’t get much more opulent than a golden house! Even with the gold leaf no longer in place, it is still possible to get a good sense of the richness of this gem of a building.

Figure \(\PageIndex{40}\): Ca’ d’Oro façade diagram
Figure \(\PageIndex{41}\): Michelozzo, Palazzo Medici, Florence, 1445-60
Like the Palazzo Ducale, the Ca’ d’Oro is much more open than many of the palaces built in other parts of Italy at this time. Unlike the Palazzo Medici in Florence, for example, the Ca’ d’Oro is not fortress-like structure built with massive rusticated stones.

Also like the Palazzo Ducale, it is divided into three distinct stories: a lower loggia (covered corridor) of pointed arches open to the water, a middle balcony with a balustrade (railing) and quatrefoils (four-lobed cutout), and a top balcony with another balustrade and fine stone openwork.

The result is a delicate, ornate building that seems almost like a work of sculpture. Each level of the façade is increasingly ornate and intricate towards the top. The increased ornamentation on each story creates a vertical emphasis; however, that verticality is matched by the equally strong horizontal emphasis provided by the two balustrades on the upper balconies and the large cornice at the roofline.

We also see a precise harmony to the division of space. The lower loggia has a wide arch at its center, which is symmetrically flanked by narrower arches. In the balcony above, two arches fit in the space directly above the wide central arch of the lower loggia.

The arrangement of columns and arches in the upper two balconies perfectly corresponds with one another: column over column, arch over arch. The façade’s harmonious arrangement suggests the architects in Venice had similar interests to those of the classicizing architects working in Florence.
Uniquely Venetian

Yet, we cannot describe the Ca’ d’Oro simply in terms of Renaissance palace architecture. It is a distinctly Venetian building in its incorporation of Byzantine, Islamic, and Gothic elements. This blending together of architectural styles in a uniquely Venetian style had already occurred in the Palazzo Ducale, but this is perhaps an even better example of that phenomenon.

Patterned colored stones, in the tradition of Byzantine architecture, fill the flat wall space of the façade. As in the Palazzo Ducale, the ornamental details on the arcade and balconies combine Islamic and Gothic elements. In the Ca’ d’Oro, though, the ornamentation pops because of its intense detail, set within the patterned stone walls. All of the different forms of ornament are combined within the same area of the façade.
The five Gothic quatrefoils of the second story balcony stand atop slender columns. They stand out as distinct sculptural elements carved on all sides. In the upper balcony, pointed arches borrow from Islamic architecture in their distinct horseshoe shape and from Gothic architecture in their elongated, pointed form. Tracery connects every other column, creating an elegant interwoven effect. Within that interweaving, smaller pointed arches connect neighboring columns to one another, and these arches are multi-lobed, also in the tradition of Islamic architecture. Above each column there is a delicate cutout that mimics the quatrefoils in the level below. The open carving of the upper balconies in fact resembles the ornate screens common in Islamic architecture. This is repeated in the ornamentation of the windows to either side of the balcony on the second story.

In spite of its complexity and its many sources of inspiration, the building is unified and neither over-the-top nor visually chaotic. The Ca’ d’Oro’s varied elements come together in spectacularly unique fashion. The building embodies a distinct architecture all its own in early Renaissance Venice, one not merely imitative of Byzantium, the Gothic North, or Islam. Venetian architects brought these different elements together in new and surprising ways, making a building such as the Ca’ d’Oro tremendously important.

Additional resources:

The Ca’ d’Oro Gallery website

This building at the Venetian Ministry of Cultural Heritage
Palazzo Ducale

by DR. ELLEN HURST

Figure \(\PageIndex{46}\): View of St Mark's campanile (left) and Palazzo Ducale (right) from the lagoon, Venice

Venice in the 14th century

Today, we think of Italy as a unified country. But in the fourteenth century, the major urban centers of Italy were largely unstable. Wars were common. Rivaling families sought to oust their opponents—often by violent means—and seize power for themselves. This is why so much civic architecture of the Renaissance period is imposing and fortress-like. Buildings like Florence’s Palazzo Vecchio (below)—with its thick, tall walls and defensive crenellations (gaps at the top of the wall for shooting)—were the standard for civic buildings in Italy well into the fifteenth century.
Things were different in Venice. The city was politically more stable than other Italian centers, and it was also naturally protected from invasion by its favorable setting in a lagoon on the Adriatic Sea. As a result, Venice’s architecture did not need to be as defensive as the architecture of neighboring regions. This allowed for greater experimentation in architectural form evident in the Palazzo Ducale, constructed beginning in 1340, for the elected ruler of Venice.

A new palace for the doge

Fourteenth-century Venice was an oligarchy, meaning that it was ruled by a select group of elite Venetian merchants. The main elected ruler was called the "doge," and his residence was—much like the White House in the United States—a private residence and also a place for official business. Although there was already a residence for Doge Gradenigo in the 1340s, the system of government changed afterwards so that more people were involved in governmental activities. This required more space than was available in the existing palace, the great council (a political body consisting of the nobility) voted to extend the palace. Workers began construction in 1340 and continued into the early part of the fifteenth century.
The Palazzo Ducale sits in a prominent location. It is adjacent to the Basilica of St. Mark (Venice’s cathedral church), on St. Mark’s Square. The Ducale also overlooks the lagoon, which was a major point of entry into the city. Its prominent location made it (and continues to make it) an important symbol of Venetian architecture. It offered visitors one of their first impressions of the city.

**Delightfully open**

The building appears delightfully open and ornamental precisely because it is able to forego many elements of defensive architecture. The façade includes three levels: a ground-level loggia (covered corridor) defined by an arcade of pointed arches. The second level contains an open balcony which features a prominent balustrade (railing) that divides the first and second stories.
Like the lower loggia, the balcony features pointed arches, though here with the addition of delicate quatrefoils (four-lobed cutouts) just above them. A stone wall completely encloses the third and uppermost level of the façade and is punctuated by a row of large, pointed windows.

In many respects—especially in its horizontal emphasis and three-story façade—the exterior of the Palazzo Ducale exhibits features that emerged in the Renaissance architecture of Florence during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. One could argue that this building anticipates those trends. Undoubtedly, in the Palazzo Ducale, we see a degree of the harmony and rhythm that we associate with later Italian Renaissance architecture.

Figure \(\PageIndex{51}\): Third level Byzantine patterned stone and second level balcony quatrefoils atop columns, Palazzo Ducale, 1340 and after, Venice

Crossroads of Byzantium, Islam, and Gothic Europe

However, the Palazzo Ducale is actually more representative of the unique position of Venice in the fourteenth century. Venice occupied a geographical location that was inherently defensible, and the city was uniquely situated in terms of its proximity to other cultures. Venice once belonged to the Byzantine Empire (the eastern part of the Roman Empire), but by the fourteenth century, it was an independent republic. Yet, it still had strong cultural and artistic links to Byzantium, partially because Venice was a robust center of trade with the East. The city absorbed many of the traditions of Islamic art and culture by virtue of contact with Islamic traders, artisans, and goods. Similarly, Venice’s location at the northern edge of the Italian peninsula meant that it was closer to the Gothic centers of northern Europe than Italian cities farther to the south, such as Florence. It took longer to shake the Gothic habit, so to speak.
We see the architectural heritage of each of these distinct cultures in the Palazzo Ducale. The upper story of the façade features a diamond pattern of colored stone, a technique that was a hallmark of late Byzantine architecture. The openwork (lattice-like carving) and arcades of the bottom two levels combine Islamic and Gothic influences. Pointed arches and quatrefoils were typical features on Gothic buildings, but the pointed arches bow out beneath their peaks, in the manner of Islamic horseshoe arches. We also see tripartite lobes within the arches of the balcony that resemble a similar trend in Islamic architecture. As a result of its unique cultural and geographic position, fourteenth-century Venetian architecture—as exemplified by the Palazzo Ducale—is a beautiful hybrid of Byzantine, Islamic, and Gothic cultures, which are all bound together within a blossoming Venetian Renaissance architectural tradition.

Additional resources:

The Palazzo Ducale Museum

A video about the Palazzo Ducale

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

More Smarthistory images…
Devotional confraternities (scuole) in Renaissance Venice

by DR. LORENZA SMITH

Figure \(\PageIndex{54}\): Scuola grande di S. Marco e chiesa SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Venice, photo: Mark Edward Smith, by permission © Mark Edward Smith

Venetian Society and the scuole

The Republic of Venice lasted for almost one thousand years (from the eighth to the eighteenth century). Its exceptional stability was due not only to its geographical position (in the middle of a protective lagoon) and its effective political system, but also to its social structure and the stabilizing presence of the scuole.

The scuole were confraternities, or brotherhoods, founded as devotional (religious) institutions, that were set up with the purpose of providing mutual assistance. They provided an important guarantee against poverty and played a crucial role in protecting individuals and families in need. The scuole were supported by a tax levied on each member and on the bequests of wealthy brothers. These donations and earnings were then used to help all the members and their families. The scuole also depended on the state, which exercised a protective and supervisory role. Each scuola had a patron saint and a statute with its own symbols and emblems.

In the fifteenth century, more than two hundred such scuole existed, among which six were scuole grandi (large scuole). By then the initial religious role had shifted to a more civic purpose. The scuole grandi included individuals who had diverse occupations and could afford spectacular meeting-houses, while the scuole piccole (small scuole), could be purely corporate. Even foreigners, in order to overcome the lack of protection by the State, and to strengthen their national or religious identity, founded several scuole piccole. These were all dissolved (but one) with the Napoleonic invasion in 1797—the year that marked the end of the Venetian Republic.
Social structure

In Venice there were three distinct social classes:

**Patricians**
The patricians were drawn from the nobility and were the ruling class. They represented about 5 percent of the population and were the only ones eligible to hold positions at a high political level.

**Citizens**
The next 5 percent were known as citizens. Citizens were divided into two categories: those who were Venetian by birth and those who became citizens after a lengthy process of naturalization (similar to green card status in the United States). Professionals, employees of the bureaucracy and merchants usually qualified as citizens. Though Citizens did not hold political power, they could exert some influence through the *scuole*, where the most distinguished members held significant positions.

**Working class**
The working class included artisans, small traders, other workers, and seamen. These people were not necessarily poor, just as the patricians were not necessarily rich. The working class also had their own *scuole*.

**The Teleri**
The *scuole* served an important role in the patronage of Venetian art. Along with altarpieces, they commissioned large narrative painting cycles (*teleri*). The subject matter of the *teleri* (*telero* — singular) was always religious but they also carried secular and civic connotations. The charm of these large paintings lies in the fact that they tell stories that unfold step by step. Because the imagination of the artists and their narrative skill was combined with their patron’s instructions—and there are even instances when members of a *scuola* required they were included in the paintings, *teleri* provide a fascinating visual journey that allows us to appreciate and understand Renaissance Venice. What follows are a few outstanding examples with brief descriptions.
Gentile Bellini, *Procession in St Mark's Square*, 1496

The Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista (a large *scuola* dedicated to St. John the Evangelist) commissioned paintings that narrate the miracles made by the relic of the True Cross that was in its possession. This sacred fragment was carried through the streets of the city each year on April 25 for the feast of St. Mark (patron saint of the city). In Venice, processions had great civic and religious meaning; creating continuity season after season, virtually unchanged over time.

This painting, by the great Venetian artist Gentile Bellini, depicts a miracle. In the midst of the procession, in the foreground, is a man in prayer. He is a merchant from Brescia who, having arrived in Venice for business, received the terrible news that his beloved son was in critical condition from a blow to his head. The next day, the man, aware of the powers of the True Cross, went to attend the ceremony, and when the famous relic passed in front of him, he knelt before it as a sign of devotion. When he returned home, he found his child miraculously healed.

The protagonists of the procession are in the foreground: the *scuola*’s brothers (members) are dressed in white; the procurators (the office of procurator of St Mark’s was the second most prestigious appointment in the Venetian government after that of Doge) and senators of the Republic wear red gowns. The patricians and the citizens wear black. The members of the *scuola* carry a canopy to protect the reliquary that holds the sacred relic as it is carried through St. Mark’s Square (the religious and political heart of the city).

St. Mark's Square is reproduced in Bellini’s painting with a wide-angle view in striking detail, providing a remarkable...
visual document of the square at the end of the fifteenth century. To open up the scene, the artist moved the bell tower to the right. St. Mark’s Basilica, sparkling with its Byzantine gold (gold also lights up the reliquary in the foreground), functions as a backdrop. The square is populated by a cosmopolitan mix of people elegantly dressed in the fashion of the time: some young people in multicolored stockings, a group of Jews, a number of Turks wearing turbans, as well as merchants and children. On the left, women look out from the windows and colorful carpets are displayed from balconies as a sign of celebration.

Figure \(\PageIndex{58}\): Vittore Carpaccio, *The Healing of the Madman*, 1496, tempera on canvas, 365 x 389 cm (Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice)

**Vittore Carpaccio, The Healing of the Madman, 1496**

Carpaccio portrayed another miracle of the True Cross for the *Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista*. The artist presents the passage of the miracle from the procession on the bridge (whose members are in white) to the main event that takes place in the Patriarch of Grado’s palace on the upper left. The Patriarch is seen raising the relic before a possessed man who fixes a glassy-eyed stare on it, and who will be miraculously cured. The miracle is in progress, a dramatic moment made even more authentic by the fact that the scene takes place in a marginal position within the composition. The white tunics of the procession members surround the scene, while all around life unfolds quietly, and it seems that few are aware of what is happening. Here Venice itself is not just the background but a dominant theme of the painting.

One can see the Rialto Bridge (the financial heart of the city) as it was then, constructed in wood, with a row of shops on each side, while below the Grand Canal (the main waterway of the city) is animated by gondolas and their gondoliers. In the distance, among the colorful palaces and the characteristic chimneys, daily life is in full swing. A woman beats a carpet, another hangs the laundry, a mason fixes a roof. In the lower section several men in turbans confirm the diversity of those who visited the Rialto market.
Gentile Bellini, St Mark Preaching in Alexandria, Egypt, 1504-07

The Scuola Grande di San Marco commissioned Gentile Bellini to paint St. Mark Preaching in Alexandria, Egypt, but the artist died before the painting was completed, so it was finished by his brother Giovanni Bellini (who, like Gentile, had never been to Alexandria). For the costumes and architectural details, Gentile drew inspiration from his stay in Constantinople and from travelers’ accounts. The layout of the painting is reminiscent of Procession in St. Mark’s Square, where the figures in the foreground are represented in profile.

The saint, who will become the patron saint of Venice, preaches from a small podium placed between the scuola brothers and the Arabs, while in the background stands a great temple whose façade, divided into three parts, brings to mind the meeting house of the Scuola Grande di San Marco, the Basilica of San Mark and the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Nearby is an obelisk engraved with hieroglyphics and several minarets. In the square, alongside the inhabitants, a number of exotic animals stroll by, including camels and giraffes.
At the end of the fifteenth century, Vittore Carpaccio was commissioned by the Scuola Piccola di Sant’Orsola (a small scuola dedicated to Saint Ursula) to paint a cycle of nine paintings on the Life of Saint Ursula, taken from the popular medieval book, the *Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Varagine. With his vivid imagination he had no difficulty creating a northern scene (Brittany and Germany) set in the fourth century, often with elements drawn from an imaginary city reminiscent of fifteenth-century Venice. In the story, the ambassadors approached the father of Ursula in Brittany asking for the hand of his daughter on behalf of the English prince Ereo. After consulting her father, the girl accepted, on the condition that Ereo be baptized at the end of a long pilgrimage to Rome. After the baptism, on the way back to Cologne, the married couple ran into the king of the Huns who fell in love with Ursula. She rejected the proposals of the bloodthirsty ruler, preferring death instead.

The story begins with the *Arrival of the English Ambassadors*, where we see a large room represented with no front walls, while in the background we see buildings in the Venetian style and details of city life. Carpaccio skillfully employs perspective while maintaining the frieze-like structure typical of Venetian narrative paintings. The telero includes two consecutive moments. The first episode displays the ambassadors approaching the king; this scene unfolds behind a railing left accessible by an open gate. The following episode takes place in Ursula’s bedroom where she receives the message from her father. The room is simple but includes a devotional painting testifying to the pious character of the young girl.
Vittore Carpaccio, *Saint George and the Dragon*, 1502

Carpaccio was also summoned by the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni (Dalmatians) to depict the cycles of Saint George and Saint Jerome, still in-situ today. The cycle of Saint George is also taken from the *Golden Legend*. In the narrative, Selene, a city in Libya, was oppressed by a terrible dragon that fed off the meat of boys and girls and terrorized the town with threats of death and destruction. When it was the king’s daughter’s turn to be devoured, Saint George, on his steed, intervened swiftly, injured the dragon and then led it into the town before killing it in front of everyone. Thanks to the surprising liberation from the dragon, the knight persuaded the king and his people to be baptized.

In the combat scene with the dragon, the background is delineated to the left by a city, represented by several minarets, an obelisk, an equestrian statue, exotic palm trees and a castle typical of the Veneto (the region in northern Italy that was ruled by the city of Venice). On the other side we see the African princess, with a fair complexion and elegantly dressed in European-style clothing, looking on calmly, with her hands folded. In the foreground, the scene runs along the diagonal of the lance of Saint George who struggles valiantly with the dragon on a ground strewn with the remains of tortured bodies.

**Conclusion**

The complex narratives depicted in these paintings represent important religious events and miracles—yet directly or indirectly, they are simultaneously preoccupied with the complexity, diversity, and beauty of Renaissance Venice. They also point us to the critical role played by the scuole in both the life and art in the Most Serene Republic of Venice.

**Additional resources**


Gallerie dell’Accademia


Scuola Grande di San Marco

Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni

Aldo Manuzio (Aldus Manutius): inventor of the modern book

by DR. LORENZA SMITH

Figure \(\PageIndex{63}\): Map of Venice, 1486, from Bernhard of Breidenbach, *Sanctae peregrinationes*, printed in Mainz by Erhard Reuwich (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Venice as a center of print culture

For centuries, Venice served as one of Europe’s main cultural and commercial centers and as the most important intermediary between Europe and the East. The city’s political stability and wealth, combined with its extensive international relationships and rich cultural and artistic life, proved to be fertile ground for the establishment of the printing press.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, when printed books gradually began to substitute for handwritten manuscripts, Venice was the European capital of the printing press. The invention of movable type in Germany in the mid-1400s ushered in a sea change, placing Venice on a par with modern-day Silicon Valley. Both of these creative environments resulted from a powerful combination of invention, technology and economic power. According to the scholar Vittore Branca, at the end of fifteenth century, an estimated 150 typographers operated in Venice, far more than the 50 or so that were active in Paris at that time. In the last five years of the century, Branca estimates that one-third of the volumes printed in the world originated from Venice.
Unsurprisingly, this flourishing industry generated wealth, cultural interest, and the diffusion of a new trend known as “bibliomania”—defined as a passionate enthusiasm for collecting and owning books. Readers and collectors from all over the world sought out the books of Venetian printers, who skillfully adapted production to demand. These printers created an inventory that was extraordinary in its variety, thanks also to the freedom of press granted by the government. It was in Venice that the first printed edition of the Koran was published, along with the first printed Talmud.

Books, booksellers, and bookstores

Anyone strolling through the bustling streets of Venice in the late 15th century would encounter bookstores whose windows displayed beautiful book frontispieces while catalogues of the books available either hung from the jamb of the door, or were available inside, on the counter. It was common practice for the bookseller to offer the loose pages of a book in a package which the buyer would subsequently arrange to have bound in accordance with his or her taste and financial means.

Bookstores soon became places where scholars, intellectuals, collectors, and book lovers gathered to discuss new editions, exchange information, and converse with the bookseller who often was also the publisher and the printer. The invention of movable type spawned an industry that led to the creation of a new professional figure, the printer-publisher,
and a new business, the publishing house. The publishing house developed its own structure, investors, and also required legal advisors, due to the emergence of copyright issues.

![Portrait of Aldo Manuzio](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)

**Figure \(\PageIndex{65}\): Portrait of Aldo Manuzio, n.d., print, 105 x 81 mm ([Deutsches Buch- und Schriftmuseum, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek Leipzig](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…))

**Aldo Manuzio**

“Venice is a place that is more similar to the rest of the world than to a city,” Aldo Manuzio wrote in a preface to one of his books. He arrived in Venice in 1490, driven by his profession as a Greek and Latin tutor. Manuzio was a humanist from a small town in central Italy, and it was probably his interest in books that brought him closer to the world of the printing press.

Manuzio was one of the first publishers in a modern sense. In a short time, he transformed the concept of the book in Europe thanks to his typographical innovations and to his unique editorial vision. He did this by founding and overseeing the Aldine Press, with the help of technicians, scholars, investors, as well as with political support. Aldine Press books were marked by a famous emblem depicting an anchor and dolphin and were known throughout the world for their accuracy, beauty, the superior quality of the materials employed, and their cutting-edge design.
Manuzio’s original intention was to spread Greek language and philosophy to a wider public. He subsequently produced books in Latin and Italian, publishing famous editions of Dante and Petrarch, as well as work by some of his contemporaries, such as Erasmus. Over two decades Manuzio published 130 editions, 30 of which were first editions of Greek writers and philosophers.

Aldine editions stood out: from the first pages, Manuzio impressed the reader through the use of prefaces discussing his editorial work, his intentions and projects. In the preface, he would occasionally invite the reader to find and to report any errors in the text, thus actively engaging the reading public.
The inventor of the modern book

Many of the elements that Manuzio introduced, or eliminated, in the conception of his editions are innovations that have become embedded in today’s books. Notably, he gave a new look to the printed page: the pages of Manuzio’s books featured harmonic proportions between the size of the fonts, the printed section, and the white border, according to precise mathematical principles—reflecting a major theme in Renaissance culture.

Manuzio also introduced page numbers and made reading more fluid by clarifying the disorganized punctuation that prevailed at the time. He added a period at the end of the sentence and was among the first to adopt the use of the comma, apostrophe, accent, and semicolon in the ways they continue to be used today. In order to recreate the familiar effect of handwriting, he also invented what is now known in English as the “italic font,” named after it’s Italian provenance.
Figure 68: *Epistole di santa Caterina da Siena*, published by Aldo Manuzio, 1500 (Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna). This is the first example of italic type (printed within the book on the left), which was developed for Manuzio by the typographer Francesco Griffo.

One of Manuzio’s most striking inventions was the printing of small-format books, the ancestors of our modern pocket-sized publications. Small religious volumes were already in circulation, but Manuzio’s revolutionary idea was to publish both classics and modern works in the small format.
It can be argued that through this innovation Manuzio also invented a new audience. With pocket-sized books, reading became an intimate moment, an activity that could be enjoyed while traveling, lying in bed, or sitting on a garden bench. For the first time, the book became a manageable, easy to carry, and relatively inexpensive object, therefore it became accessible to a larger audience comprised not only of scholars, but also of aristocrats and members of the upper middle class. The small books immediately became very fashionable and conferred a certain status, as we can see in many portraits of the time.

Sweeping away barbarism with books

The Aldine editions had a significant impact in Europe, imparting new momentum to the book market and creating a larger audience, that in turn stimulated culture and led to the spread of ideas. Erasmus praised Manuzio's objective to "build a library that would have no boundary but the world itself." Indeed, the power of a book is that it enables its readers to live many lives and to deepen their understanding of the entire world without ever needing to leave their
homes. By reviving the classics and publishing modern works with rigor and beauty, Aldo Manuzio wished—in what has proven to be a timeless quote—that “it could be possible to defeat weapons with ideas and to sweep away barbarism with books.”

Additional resources:

Digital catalog for the Aldo Manuzio exhibition at the Gallerie dell’Accademia di Venezia

Guido Beltramini, Aldo Manuzio: il Rinascimento di Venezia (Marsilio, 2016)

Lodovica Braida, Stampa e cultura in Europa (Laterza, 2003)

Mario Brunetti, L’Accademia Aldina, in Rivista di Venezia, VIII, 1921

Carlo Dionisotti, Aldo Manuzio umanista e editore (Edizioni il Polifilo, 1995)

Gian Arturo Ferrari, Libro (Bollati Boringheri, 2014)


Paul Grendler, Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989)

Mario Infelise, Aldo Manuzio: La costruzione del mito (Marsilio, 2016)

Mario Infelise, Manuzio, Aldo, il Vecchio, Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani – Volume 69, Istituto dell’Enciclopedia italiana Treccani, 2007

Jill Kraye, The Afterlife of Aldus: Posthumous Fame, Collectors and the Book Trade (Warburg Institute, 2018)

Martin Lowry, The World of Aldus Manutius: Business and Scholarship in Renaissance Venice (Cornell University Press, 1979)


Giovanni Mardersteig, Aldo Manuzio e i caratteri di Francesco Griffo da Bologna, in Studi di bibliografia e storia in onore di Tammaro De Marinis (1964)

**Saving Venice**

by [LISA ACKERMAN](https://human.libretexts.org/) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/)
Video \(\PageIndex{11}\): A conversation about the issues facing Venice and efforts to save the historic city, with Lisa Ackerman, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, World Monuments Fund and Steven Zucker

**Additional resources:**

- [Venice (from the World Monuments Fund)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)
- Marcello Rossi, "Will a Huge New Flood Barrier Save Venice?" *Wired Magazine, April 5, 2018*
- [As Tourists Crowd Out Locals, Venice Faces 'Endangered' List (from NPR)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Carlo Crivelli

Carlo Crivelli, *The Annunciation with Saint Emidius*

by DR. SALLY HICKSON
Video \( \PageIndex{12} \): Carlo Crivelli, *The Annunciation with Saint Emidius*, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)
Aside from Cosimo Tura, Carlo Crivelli was the most delightfully odd late Gothic painter in Italy. Born in Venice, he absorbed the influences of the Vivarini, the Bellini, and Andrea Mantegna to create an elegant, profuse, effusive, and extreme style, dominated by strong outlines and clear, crisp colors—perhaps incorporating just a whiff of early Netherlandish manuscript style. By 1458 he had left Venice to work in the Marches (the fertile plains south of the Appenines) in and around the port city of Ancona on the Adriatic. As a seaside painter, he could be credited with inventing a second Adriatic style that stands in stark contrast to the soft, suffused colors and gentle contours of Giovanni Bellini.
The subject matter

This Annunciation is signed and dated 1486, so it was an early commission in his adopted territory. The narrative is deceptively simple; the angel Gabriel interrupts the Virgin, engaged in reading and prayer, to announce that she will become the mother of the son of God. The actual event, the incarnation, occurs through words rather than actions, and to be recognizable as a dramatic encounter there are a variety of poses that the Virgin assumes to signify her reaction, from humble acceptance to visible consternation. Crivelli’s version rather peculiarly places Gabriel outside the Virgin’s home, accompanied, in another unusual variation on the theme, by St. Emidius.

Figure (PageIndex{74})): Gabriel and St. Emidius (detail), Carlo Crivelli, The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

Emidius is the patron saint of the town of Ascoli Piceno, and Crivelli painted this altarpiece for the city’s church of the Santissima Annunciazione (the Holy Annunciation). A proud citizen, Emidius seems to have hurried to catch up to Gabriel to proudly show off his detailed model of the town, which he holds rather gingerly, as though the paint hasn’t quite dried.

The fact that Gabriel and the Virgin do not share the same space is unusual, but doesn’t seem to disrupt the delivery of the message. We see the descent of the Holy Spirit has penetrated the frieze of the building, through a conveniently placed arched aperture, into the room where Mary kneels receptively. The inclusion of Emidius brings the miracle of the incarnation home, and this corner of the city is depicted in the kind of deep perspective of contiguous spaces that one sees later in Dutch Baroque domestic scenes, such as Pieter de Hooch’s At the Linen Closet.

Figure (PageIndex{75})): Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

The variety of figures in the background on the left of the painting lend an atmosphere of spontaneity and the hubbub of
everyday life; at the top of the staircase a little girl peeks around a column, a group of clerics are engaged in conversation and, in the upper mid-ground, two figures stand on the footbridge above the arch, one reading a just-delivered message (echoing the Annunciation).

The inscription along the base of the painting reads "Libertas Ecclesiastica" (church liberty), and refers to Ascoli’s right to self-government, free from the interference of the Pope, a right granted to the town by Sixtus IV in 1482. The news reached Ascoli on 25 March, the Feast of the Annunciation, which is probably the message the official in black is reading.
To the right of the two figures on the bridge, the bases of a crate and a potted plant extend out over the wall just far enough to suggest they could, with a little nudge, topple onto the head of a figure below who, oblivious, shades his eyes to better see the penetrating irradiation of the Holy Spirit entering the wall. He is the witness inside the painting, we are the witnesses outside the painting.
The spatial composition of the overall painting is actually quite traditional, hearkening back to the Annunciation fresco of Piero della Francesca at the church of San Francesco in Arezzo; in both the surface of the painting is essentially vertically bisected by the architecture, while the right half is squared by the horizontal division between the lower room and upper balconies of the Virgin’s dwelling. What is spectacularly different here is Crivelli’s architectural articulation, which consists of an entire dictionary of all’antica elements, made more dramatic by the profusion of materials from which the buildings are made.

The white columns carry gilded capitals, the entablature is elaborated by a red marble frieze, both are illusionistically “carved” with running reliefs of floral, vegetal, and acanthus decoration, springing from beautiful vases, and the frieze is further punctuated with putto heads, lending a sense of animation to the scene. Adding to the ornamentation are egg-and-dart and curious floral dentils, varied marbles, a carved imperial profile relief encircled by a wreath, and crenellations along the farthest wall.

Figure 8.05: Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

Luxurious costumes

All the major characters wear luxurious costumes, painted to resemble gold and silver embroidered brocades. Gabriel wears a large gold medallion, on a heavy chain, studded with cabochon jewels. Emidius wears a bishop’s mitre similarly jeweled, with a large jeweled clasp on his golden cope. The Virgin wears a jeweled head-band and a dress modestly trimmed with pearls along the top of the bodice. Gabriel’s feathered epaulettes echo his glorious wings, which deserve an essay of their own. The elegant delicacy of Crivelli’s linear style can be seen best in the elongated, pale hands of the Virgin, floating at the ends of her arms, lightly folded across her breast in supplication.

A splendid interior

Rather than occupying a sparsely furnished monastic cell, the Virgin is depicted in a splendidly arrayed interior that echoes the magnificence of the palace exterior. Red and green pillows and blankets embroidered with gold thread cover her bed, with its sweep of red silk curtain, similarly embroidered in gold.
The objects on the shelf above the bed are made of a variety of materials, from the gold candle holder to the barely fluted glass carafe which holds clear water, a sign of Mary’s purity. The grain of the wood in the prie-dieu runs vertically, in contrast to the horizontal grain of the base of the bed, which helps to create the shallow recession in which the Virgin kneels on a splendid carpet.

A sense of cosmopolitanism

At the level of the balcony, Crivelli draws our eye to another carpet, this one displayed draped over the balustrade, and yet another is draped above the arch in the background. Carpets such as these were a major Italian import from the eastern Mediterranean, and used here they lend a cosmopolitan air to the city. The presence of a splendidly feathered peacock, another exotic import, reminds us that carpets from the eastern Mediterranean were coveted luxury items brought in through trade, and they lend an air of cosmopolitanism to the overall scene.
A pickle and an apple?

Of course, the objects that attract the most attention in this painting are the cucumber and apple, placed right in the center foreground of the painting, above the inscription. The cucumber, in fact, seems to project out of the painting and teeter into our space, breaking the fictive wall and blurring the line between a space of miracles and our everyday world. The apple can be taken to symbolize original sin, the source of our fall, the forbidden bite setting into motion the whole reason for the Annunciation. In all fairness, the National Gallery calls the cucumber a gourd (which does sound more Biblical), since cucumbers are part of the gourd family, and leaves it at that, there being neither a Holy Cucumber nor a Holy Gourd. Alas, here we enter the realm of speculation. One school of thought, absent any evidence, is that apples symbolize female sin and cucumbers symbolize male sin. I’ll leave it to you to work out why. Could it be a marrow? Marrows do appear in the Bible, as in Psalm 63:5: “My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips.” That seems rather appropriate. The controversy rages on.

Additional resources:

This painting at The National Gallery

Stephen John Campbell, C. Jean Campbell, Francesco De Carolis, Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice (Paul Holberton Publishing, 2015)


Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Figure \(\PageIndex{84}\): More Smarthistory images...
Gentile Bellini, *Portrait of Sultan Mehmed II*

by **DR. ELIZABETH RODINI**

![Portrait of Sultan Mehmed II](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)

Figure \(\PageIndex{85}\): Gentile Bellini, *Portrait of Sultan Mehmed II*, 1480, oil on canvas, 69.9 x 52.1 cm, The National Gallery London. Layard Bequest, 1916. Currently on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

**The afterlife of a painting**

In a portrait attributed to the Italian artist Gentile Bellini, we see Sultan Mehmed II surrounded by a classicizing arcade, with a luxurious embroidered tapestry draped over the ledge in front of him. Gentile, already an accomplished portraitist from Venice, painted the sultan’s likeness when he spent 15 months in Constantinople at the court of the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II around 1480 on behalf of the Venetian Republic.

Today this famous portrait belongs to the National Gallery of Art, London. It has had many “afterlives,” that is, many ways it has been re-interpreted and understood since it was produced nearly 550 years ago.
Figure (PagIndex(86)): Circle of Gentile Bellini (?), *Portrait of Sultan Mehmet II with a Young Man*, c. 1500?, oil on panel, 33.4 x 45.4 cm (purchased at Christie’s London by the Municipality of Istanbul in June 2020)

For example, in June of 2020, the Municipality of Istanbul spent over a million dollars at auction for a double portrait featuring the face of Sultan Mehmed II and a young man. The painting is mysterious: it is uncertain who painted it, when, or where, and the identity of the second figure is unknown. The image of the sultan, however, is based on Bellini's well-known London picture, and the reputation of the mystery painting—as well as Istanbul’s risky purchase—depends on its fame. This is just the most recent, and ongoing, of the London portrait’s “afterlives,” which are the subject of this essay. Before exploring them, however, we must begin with the original painting and its production.

**A Venetian travels to paint Sultan Mehmed II**

When the London portrait was created, Mehmed was sultan of the Ottoman empire, and ruled from Constantinople (now Istanbul), the city that had been the capital of the Byzantine empire until Mehmed conquered it in 1453. (The Ottomans were Muslim, the Byzantines were Orthodox Christians, and European rulers were faithful to the Church in Rome, or to what we now call Catholicism—and these divergent creeds were no small matter.) Even today, Mehmed is known in Turkish as “Fatih,” or “conqueror.” In addition to being a warrior and politician, he was a great patron, bringing artists and architects together to write, paint, and build. When he petitioned the Venetians to send him artists skilled in portraiture,
they sent Gentile Bellini, who seems to have had rare access to the private spaces of Mehmed’s palace. The London portrait is believed to have been produced there, and was probably transported to Italy soon after Mehmed’s death in 1481—by whom is unclear.

The painting resembles many other European portraits of the day, and is dramatically different from contemporary Ottoman portraiture. A single figure, bust-length and life-sized, poses in elaborate dress that reveals his rank and wealth. He is not quite in profile but turned ever so slightly forward, a visual strategy that, along with the carved stone arcade, gives a sense of depth and creates the illusion that the sultan actually sits before us. That illusion is disrupted by the flat, black background and six crowns that seem to float behind him, symbols either of his territorial rule or his place in the chronology of Ottoman sultans. Gentile signed the architectural plinth with his name and date, as a kind of painterly proof of his status as an eyewitness to the sultan (who was often hidden from view) and of the truthfulness of this image.

Why would Mehmed commission such a picture? The answer likely lies in his general curiosity as a patron. We know he studied classical languages, was fascinated by maps, and followed the latest advancements in military architecture. He collected coins and medals, and was aware of their power to glorify a ruler through the circulation of his image. In addition, Mehmed’s interest in portraiture suggests he was up-to-date on some of the most revolutionary things that were happening in Italian painting—in particular, new attempts to depict the world as if it were seen through a window, to paraphrase the contemporary art theorist Leon Battista Alberti. Commissioning a skilled Venetian artist to paint a life-sized, illusionistic portrait might have been a test of just what, exactly, this new form of image making could do.

Figure \(\PageIndex{88}\): Gentile Bellini, *Mehmet II*, c.1480 (later casting), bronze, 9.38 cm (Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.)
Two points need to be clarified before we move on. First, the London portrait is sometimes considered the first “realistic” representation of a Turk to arrive in Europe (most images of the time were demonizing stereotypes, like “The Great Turk” engraving in Berlin). Yet it is misguided to assume Mehmed was focused on advancing European knowledge of foreigners. If, as is possible, he intended to circulate his image through copies of Gentile’s portrait, his goals were fame and power, not ethnographic instruction. Second, the equally misguided notion that Islam forbids naturalistic imagery also needs correcting: such imagery had a long tradition, especially in illuminated manuscripts, and was often acceptable outside religious contexts. Moreover, for sultans, rules and norms did not apply.

**Mehmed’s portrait in Italy**

How and when Gentile’s portrait of Mehmed arrived in Italy is another of its mysteries. In all probability, it landed in Venice shortly after the sultan’s death in 1481, and this is what the Ottomans thought—they even sent a delegate there to recover lost portraits of the sultans one hundred years after Gentile’s trip east (they failed, returning with modern works instead, including the one by an artist in the circle of Veronese). But the painting now in London did not come to light until hundreds of years later, in 1865, when it was purchased from an impoverished nobleman by the British explorer, collector, and eventual ambassador to Constantinople, Austen Henry Layard. Layard’s own circumstances offer an excellent introduction to the reception of Gentile’s painting in the modern era.
Like Gentile, Layard traveled to the Ottoman court in a diplomatic position, meeting privately at the palace with the reigning sultan, Abdülhamid II. As a young man, Layard had excavated, published, and sent back to London a trove of Assyrian artifacts from Nineveh (in modern Iraq), and had authored several illustrated volumes about his experiences. In these roles, Layard was an archetypal “Orientalist,” someone whose status, power, and actions depended on a colonial imbalance between Europe and the Near East. On occasion, Layard even played at “Oriental,” donning headscarves and swords. As a collector, he was particularly proud of his portrait of Mehmed, which he immediately recognized as the famous lost work by Gentile Bellini. But what did he see when he looked at it, hanging in his Venetian palace among assorted fragments of Assyrian architecture? Might he have seen his own experiences as ambassador reflected back at him? One journalist of the period suggested as much, but we can only speculate—recognizing at the very least how different Layard’s interactions with the picture were from that of Mehmed.
By 1915, Gentile’s portrait had been at the center of two other conversations that again reframe its meaning. The first has to do with definitions of national patrimony, a topic that is very much in the news today. Layard had willed his collection, which hung in Venice, to the National Gallery in London. But on the death of his widow, Enid, in 1912, the Gallery found itself up against several recent Italian laws that aimed to keep the greatest “Italian paintings” in Italy. Gentile’s portrait of Mehmed was among them: it “was regarded [by the Italians] somewhat as the Athenians regarded the Elgin Marbles,” wrote the British ambassador to Italy, making reference to the Greek sculptures that are still at the center of patrimony controversies. That the portrait was painted in Constantinople for an Ottoman patron by a traveling Venetian, that it was an inherently global object, was not mentioned. But these claims offer another way of thinking about Gentile’s picture—and presented a significant obstacle to its transport to London as well. (How the painting got out of Italy and into England in 1916 lay in the legal fine print.)

The second, equally philosophical controversy involved its status as a portrait. Layard left his collection to the National Gallery, but, in a clumsy turn of phrase, his will opened the door for his nephew to claim rights to all of his portraits. Both sides took legal action, bringing in experts to decide just what, exactly, constitutes a portrait. The surviving dossier reads like art theory crossed with intellectual property law and the observations of a private eye. Debate centered on questions of intent, interpretation, and continuity (“once a portrait, always a portrait”); on whether there is a distinction between historical portraits and family portraits; and on how Layard organized, wrote about, and displayed his collection. Gentile’s image of Mehmed was the star witness, the one painting the antagonists consistently tussled over.

Again the National Gallery won, and hung the portrait prominently in its entrance hall. Over the next century, however, its fortunes swung dramatically, along with shifting understandings of conservation and authenticity (problematic, since only an estimated 10% of the paint is original to Gentile—over time, the canvas was damaged and was on several occasions repainted), as well as evolving attitudes within museums about how and why certain paintings are valued over others. After being one of the museum’s prize acquisitions, Gentile’s picture spent decades in the lower level galleries for “problem works.” In 2009, it was moved across London to the Victoria and Albert Museum where, along with carpets, ceramics, and metalwork, it is now part of a gallery dedicated to art and trade in the early modern Mediterranean. These shifting appraisals say more about the frames of interpretation than they do about the painting itself that, aside from the abrasions of time, has not changed.

The portrait today

In 1999, Gentile’s portrait of Mehmed traveled to Istanbul to star in a one-painting show that drew huge audiences and attention. “We have seen this picture so many times, in so many schoolbooks and on so many walls over so many years that it’s really imprinted on our brains,” one Turkish viewer told an American reporter. For many, aware of Mehmed’s broad patronage and support of a Venetian painter, the image signified a tight bond to Europe. Notably, it was also in 1999 that Turkey made its first petition for membership in the European Union.
In the two decades since, however, relations between Turkey and the West have soured, and Ottoman imagery, including that of Mehmed II, has been coopted in Turkey by more conservative political forces to stand for a separatist, nationalistic identity. In this "neo-Ottoman" framework, Gentile’s picture takes on new meaning, with emphasis on the sultan as "Fatih," conqueror—thus it is this face that welcomes visitors to Istanbul’s new Panorama 1453 Conquest Museum, which celebrates the Ottoman taking of the city from the Byzantines centuries ago. The same face also appears on magnets, notebooks, tote bags, and countless internet memes, in a thoroughly contemporary stew of humor, nationalism, and entrepreneurship.

Is this painting exceptional in the many permutations of meaning we give to it? Probably not. Gentile Bellini’s portrait of Sultan Mehmed II is more likely an object lesson in how many lives a single artwork can take on, and of the value to be found in deep looking and extended research.

Additional resources:

This essay is based on Elizabeth Rodini, *Gentile Bellini’s Portrait of Sultan Mehmed II: Lives and Afterlives of an Iconic Image* (I.B. Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2020). An extensive bibliography and notes can be found there (and see the publisher’s site).

*This painting is in the collection of the National Gallery, London but presently on long-term loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

Read more about the *expanded renaissance world*

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**Giovanni Bellini**

**Giovanni Bellini, St. Francis in the Desert (or St. Francis in Ecstasy)**

*by* [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org)
Video \(\PageIndex{13}\): Giovanni Bellini, *Saint Francis in the Desert (or Saint Francis in Ecstasy)*, oil on panel, c. 1480 (Frick Collection, New York City)

*Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:*
Giovanni Bellini, *San Giobbe Altarpiece*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Giovanni Bellini, *San Giobbe Altarpiece*, c. 1485, oil on panel, 471 cm × 258 cm / 185″ × 102″ (Accademia, Venice)

**Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece**

*by DR. SALLY HICKSON*
Video \(\PageIndex{15}\): Giovanni Bellini, *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16’ 5-1/2” x 7’ 9” inches (San Zaccaria, Venice)

Figure \(\PageIndex{94}\): Giovanni Bellini, *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice)
San Zaccaria, in Venice

We are fortunate that Bellini’s famous altarpiece can be seen in the church it was made for, San Zaccaria, in Venice. San Zaccaria (Saint Zachary) is not a common name for a church — it is among a handful of Venetian churches named after Old Testament saints (more typically saints come from the New Testament and early Christian history). So how did Old Testament figures become saints?

According to Byzantine tradition, Christ spent three days in the underworld, breaking open the gates of hell to release the souls of the pre-Christian righteous who would otherwise not be able to share in the eternal life made possible by his crucifixion. Adam and Eve were the first to emerge, followed by other Old Testament people like Moses, Job and Zachary, all three of whom have churches named after them in Venice. This “harrowing of hell,” as it is known, was largely rejected in evolving Christian doctrine because of a lack of Biblical evidence, which explains why we don’t often encounter St. Moses or St. Zachary in paintings. Perhaps that disagreement about the doctrinal soundness of the harrowing of hell (also called Anastasis in the Byzantine tradition) explains why there is no depiction of St Zachary in the altarpiece by Bellini named for his church.
The fact that such an altarpiece was commissioned from Bellini, who was the official civic painter of Venice, is a testament to the importance of the group of nuns who occupied the church monastery, many of them the daughters of prominent patrician families.

**A sacred conversation — a new kind of altarpiece**

The subject of the altarpiece is a sacred conversation (sacra conversazione), a type of painting that developed first in Florence and then in Venice. The sacred conversation describes a subject of the enthroned Virgin, holding the infant Christ, surrounded by standing saints of differing eras, accompanied by angels. All of the figures are united in a single space.

![Figure 96: Perhaps the earliest true sacra conversazione — Domenico Veneziano, Saint Lucy Altarpiece (Madonna and Child enthroned with St. Francis, John the Baptist, St. Zenobius and St. Lucy), c. 1445, tempera on wood, 209 x 213 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence). Other early paintings that reduce the framing elements include Piero della Francesca’s Brera Altarpiece (1472-74) and Fra Filippo Lippi’s Barbadori Altarpiece (1438).](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)

Earlier altarpieces tended to be polyptychs or triptychs (altarpieces made up of several different panels), each of them containing one or more saints, arranged around a separate central panel often depicting the enthroned Virgin and Child. The sacra conversazione removes those barriers to create a single assembly of figures who share a literal (as well as a psychological) space.
In the *San Zaccaria Altarpiece* by Bellini, the individuals depicted are all aware of one another, and the viewer outside the painting shares this common space as well as this idea of inclusion and belonging. The Virgin, the saints, and the viewer are all from different times, but the artist has created a common space in which they can all assemble. The physical unity helps to promote a kind of silent communication, which is the essence of the sacred (and silent) conversation. The angels signify that, although this space looks real, it is of a different, transcendent order. They sometimes play instruments and appear to be singing; the music is a symbol of harmony.
The Virgin and Child (and an angel)

We recognize the Virgin and Child at the center of the composition. The Virgin does not wear a crown and is depicted as a simple young mother. Christ stands on her lap, in that strangely teetering but confident way that babies can stand when they're completely protected by their mother’s body and steadied by her hand. In this case, the Virgin’s right hand lightly supports Christ from the front. He appears to have just lifted his left foot from her left hand, which is cupped below his toes. Babies really do this when they briefly find themselves in a standing position – they randomly lift their feet. The infant holds his right hand up in a blessing gesture directed to the worshipper at the altar; and while both he and the Virgin look down and gaze to the left—toward anyone who might be kneeling in prayer before the altarpiece. An angel sits on the steps of the throne, below the Virgin and Child, playing what looks like a very large violin-like instrument (of course, she’s a very little angel).

Identifying the Saints

There are paired figures to the left and right of the Virgin, each pair consisting of a female and a male saint. To Mary’s left, we see St. Catherine of Alexandria and, in front of her, St Peter. On the right we see St. Lucy and, in his red cardinal’s robe, St. Jerome. The women are depicted in profile, each turned toward the Virgin, like parentheses enclosing the Virgin and Child. The male saints, who stand at the front of the picture plane and are closest to the viewer, are both facing forward. How do we identify these saints? And what are they doing here?

The two female saints are virgin martyrs, that is, they were put to death for choosing faith over forced sex; that’s why they each hold a palm frond, a symbol of martyrdom. Each is shown with their instrument of torture; St. Catherine rests her hand on a broken wheel (it’s broken because God’s protection proved stronger than the wheel) and St. Lucy holds what looks like a kind of weedy flower, but is actually her two eyes, hanging on visceral stems, which she gouged out so she would no longer tempt unwanted sexual advances. St. Lucy was martyred in Syracuse in the 4th century but her remains were sent to Constantinople in the 8th century and looted by the Venetians in the Fourth Crusade of 1204, after which they were installed, and still remain, in the church of San Geremia. She is probably included here because she was adopted as a Venetian saint. St. Catherine has no direct relationship with Venice, but she inspired a hugely popular cult following throughout the Middle Ages as an exemplar for female Christian virtue. She was undoubtedly intended to serve as an example to the nuns of San Zaccaria, who were, by all accounts, notoriously debauched.

Figure 10: Saint Lucy and Jerome (detail), Giovanni Bellini, *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice)
We also see St. Jerome dressed anachronistically as a cardinal of the church. St Jerome was considered one of the four Doctors of the Church, so he exemplified ecclesiastical authority. He was important for translating the Bible from Hebrew into Latin, making it more accessible to educated lay readers, and Bellini, who painted Jerome often, depicts him reading a book. Across from Jerome stands Peter, who was the rock of Christ’s church (Peter derives from “petrus” which means rock) and the first Pope, and holds the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. He stands for spiritual authority, and the controlling oversight of the church over religious communities.

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)

**The Architecture and the light**

The sacra conversazione takes place in a perfectly depicted little chapel that, because of the accuracy of the linear perspective (reinforced by the receding squares of the painted floor), the scale of the painting (which allows the figures to be the right size in terms of where they’re standing in relation to a viewer) and the integration of the real architecture of the frame with painted trompe l’oeil architecture in the painting, looks like it opens out from the architectural space of the church.

The painting is framed by a marble triumphal arch supported on pilasters decorated with running, floral scroll work. Inside the painting, we see two identical lateral arches, and another identical rear arch… There is virtually no break between the real architecture of the frame and the completely illusionistic, vaulted chapel in the painting — one exists on a continuum with the other. As Alberti prescribed in his book Della Pittura (On Painting), it feels as though we’re looking through a window. Any separation between the church and the world inside the painting disappears.
There's another reason for this. As you enter the church, the painting is on the left wall of the church. Today, the interior of San Zaccaria is crowded with large-scale (mostly Baroque) paintings, hung in double registers along the walls. Bellini's altarpiece stands out immediately because of its architectural frame, but also because it responds precisely to the natural light that enters the church from a window in the façade. Knowing the precise location of the altar, Bellini calculated the composition of the painting in accordance with this light. When the sun shines, and the light hits the painting, all the shadows cast by the painted figures and the architecture in Bellini's fictional world fall in accordance to the real light in the church. This seamlessness of light and shadow increases the "reality" of the painting; we see the figures as solid, three-dimensional beings who are sharing our space.

Disegno and colore

Of course, a modern viewer can increase the light by dropping a couple of euros into the coin box to turn on lamps that flood the painting with artificial illumination. And that's fun, because it makes the colors pulsate with light and Bellini, as a painter, was fundamentally a colorist. There was a great debate in the Renaissance, and beyond, between the fundamental importance of disegno (drawing) and colore (color) in painting. The idea is that the Florentines thought disegno (composition, but also contour and clarity in drawing) was the most important thing, while the Venetians said that painting is nothing without colore; by which they meant not just the choice of colors, but the tonalities, contrasts,
harmonies, and application of paint.

Look at how Bellini uses color in the figures. Peter wears blue and yellow, which are the characteristic colors of his robes; Jerome wears a glorious red. The two figures together are an essay in primary colors, but softened by Bellini’s application, which incorporates a lot of Leonardo’s gentle transitions in the areas of shadow. This is the glory of oil paint, which can be coaxed into the subtlest transitions in a single shade.

The female figures — the Virgin, St. Catherine and St. Lucy — wear primaries as well, but there’s also green which blends green and yellow and therefore adds a new harmony. The music-making angel alerts us to these harmonies, wearing green and the gentlest of pinks. If you look carefully, the same tones are found in the architecture, the mosaic, the landscape — Bellini writes music in paint.

Figure (PageIndex(104)): Angel (detail), Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice)

The mosaic

Once you hear the music, you study the details. The rear arch frames the throne of the Virgin, sitting at the center of the space (not against the rear wall). The wall itself curves to form an apse-like space, crowned with a glittering half vault, painted to look like mosaic.

By the sixteenth century (even well before), mosaic work would have seemed anachronistic anywhere except Venice, which retained the Byzantine taste and expertise for mosaic. Frescoes are a near impossibility in Venice because the whole city sits in water that creeps up the masonry and seeps into the plaster, turning frescoes into sodden, salt-bloomed, indecipherable messes. Mosaics, set into proper mortar, are more durable. Plus, Venice was the European center for glassmaking, and produced quantities of gold glass that characterize Byzantine-style mosaic work.

The simulated glasswork in Bellini’s paintings is always astonishing, he was a master of the pictorial representation of gold-glass. The surface shimmers and shines, capturing and reflecting dancing shards of light. Below the mosaic, there is an elegant, curved entablature, echoed by a black marble band , which sets off the relief of the carving.
The egg

A lantern, suspended from a large, perfect, oval ostrich egg, is located above the Virgin’s throne. We’ve seen this egg before, in the *Montefeltro Altarpiece* (c. 1474) of Piero della Francesca, made for the Duke of Urbino. The egg seems strange to modern eyes but is both symbolic and historically accurate. Ostrich eggs were often suspended in Coptic churches in Egypt (as well as in mosques) — apparently, something about the odor repelled spiders, which would be the practical aspect (in case you’re wondering, humans can’t detect the smell). More importantly, however, ostrich eggs also have Christological significance because they are hatched by the heat of the sun. The analogy is to the miraculous conception and birth of Christ. Pearls carry the same symbolism because they are spontaneously born from oyster
shells. Miracles in nature are used as analogies for the miracle of Christ.

The throne

Finally, the Virgin's throne is a simple, stepped, rectangular structure of white and yellow marbles, punctuated by globed, gold finials on the arms, and topped by the carved head of a king. This is Solomon, renowned for his wisdom and mercy, reinforcing the importance of learning both in theory and in practice. Behind him there is an elegant, woven Persian-motif carpet, suspended from an iron crosstie, a reference to the Virgin's cloth of honor. Miraculously, the little illusionistic chapel is not completely enclosed. The lateral arches are open to provide an outdoor view. The two slivers of landscape include a glimpse of blue sky and slim, elegant trees springing up from a green lawn. The landscape admits painted "natural" light into the chapel, which helps to illuminate the figures. It also transports us out of Venice and into the world of the painting, making the illusion complete.

Figure \(\PageIndex{107}\): Giovanni Bellini, *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice)

About Bellini

Bellini was 74 years old when he completed the *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*. Having grown up in his father's workshop, he was a painter from the moment he was born. Almost all his work was made for Venice, and most of his paintings are devotional works depicting the Madonna and Child in various iconographical permutations rooted in Byzantine tradition. In its monumentality, classically inspired architecture, and treatment of color and light, this altarpiece is his most perfect synthesis of that tradition with the new values of Renaissance art.

**Note:** Centuries later, the *San Zaccaria Altarpiece* was considered such a masterpiece that in 1787, when Napoleon ransacked the city, he had his troops steal it, cutting it from its frame. This explains the missing area at the top of the painting, just below the frame of the crowning arch. During its time in France, the painting was subjected to a radical new form of conservation intervention; the supporting panel was stripped down so that the paint surface could be removed and then it was glued to a canvas support (it has since been transferred back to panel — long story). At the time, it was thought that paintings should be on canvas, and presumably the change of support also made the works lighter and easier to hang and frame in Napoleon's new museum. The return of the painting to its rightful place in Venice brought it back to life, allowing it to be experienced as Bellini intended.
Additional resources:

A short biography of the artist from The National Gallery, London

Renaissance Paragone: Disegno and Colore (Oxford Art Online)

Disegno e colore (Italian Renaissance Learning Resources)

Venetian Color and Florentine Design on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Giovanni Bellini and Titian, *The Feast of the Gods*

by **DR. SUSAN NALEZYT**

Lotis and Priapas (detail), Giovanni Bellini and Titian,

The Feast of the Gods, 1514/29, oil on canvas, 170.2 x 188 cm (National Gallery of Art)

A Divine Party

Finished just two years before Giovanni Bellini’s death, *The Feast of the Gods* was an unlikely subject for this Venetian master (he typically painted Christian themes and portraits). But Bellini continued to challenge himself by creating a raucous scene of 17 classical gods and goddesses eating and drinking in a lush forest clearing, painted in brilliantly rich, blended colors typical of the Venetian school of painting. Nymphs and satyrs serve wine to these classical deities. Some figures tipsily raise glasses to their lips, while others suffer the effects of having imbibed too much, staring with unfixed gazes or even passing out altogether. And the one responsible for this uninhibited celebration kneels in the left-hand foreground—the ancient Roman god of wine—Bacchus, who draws yet more of his gift from a barrel.
Figure \(\PageIndex{110}\): Giovanni Bellini and Titian, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514/29, oil on canvas, 170.2 x 188 cm (National Gallery of Art)

Figure \(\PageIndex{111}\): Copy after Titian, *Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara*, oil on canvas, 127 x 98.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)
Changes to *The Feast* by Dosso Dossi and Titian

Bellini sent this large work from Venice to Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, who intended it to hang in his camerino, his little room, as he called it, a private study modeled after an ancient painting gallery. After the canvas’s arrival in Ferrara in 1514 though, something must have gone wrong. Canvases are typically rolled for shipping and later varnished, but the painting’s surface might have been damaged in the varnishing process. Alfonso asked a local painter, Dosso Dossi (who also contributed paintings to his camerino), to repaint the left-hand background with a hill and amend the tree foliage at upper right.

Bellini had originally composed a shallow stage for his figures, behind which was a continuous line of tree trunks illuminated by warm sunlight (the only passage of which survives at the far right). But the painting today is the result of yet another change. Since Bellini died in 1516, Alfonso commissioned one of his students, the ambitious young Titian, to provide three works for his camerino, and it is Titian who painted out Dosso’s landscape with a striking mountainous backdrop, leaving only Dosso’s foliage and the pheasant in the right-hand tree.

The Feast’s subject

A consensus on the painting’s subject has yet to be reached because a number of the figures’ identities have been hotly debated. Some scholars argue a theme of marriage for the Feast’s subject. The bird, a kingfisher, in the foreground could point to the winter solstice for Alfonso’s December wedding, though it took place a decade prior to the commission. Bellini painted Bacchus unusually as a child, a guise that comes from the ancient writer Macrobius, whose book, *The Saturnalia*, discusses feast days, wherein Bacchus appears at four stages of life at the solstices and equinoxes of the calendar year. Bellini’s child Bacchus appears with his gluttonous teacher, Silenus, who leans on his attribute (identifying symbol), his loyal donkey.

Behind them could be the god of beginnings, Janus (sometimes identified as Sylvanus), because his hand touches his attribute, the heads of 2 snakes on the winged staff of Mercury’s attribute, the caduceus. Also in the background playing his flute is a nude Pan (or Faunus?). Jupiter with his eagle (the eagle is also an Este family symbol), appear in the center, and to the right, may be the queen of the underworld, Proserpina (or Amphitrite?). She holds a quince, a symbol of marriage to the god of the underworld, Pluto (or Neptune?), who amorously squeezes her upper thigh, while his pitchfork rests on the ground nearby. Next to him is the goddess of the harvest, Ceres (or Cybele?), wearing her wheat crown, and next to her, the god of poetry, Apollo, who with his laurel crown holds his lyre, painted as a sixteenth-century instrument, a *lira da braccio*.

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Figure (PageIndex(112)): Annotated detail, Giovanni Bellini and Titian, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514/29, oil on canvas, 170.2 x 188 cm (National Gallery of Art)
Bellini consulted a text by the ancient writer Ovid titled the Fasti (Book of Days) that discusses Roman holidays in 6 books, one for each month—January through June. Bellini’s deities could, therefore, represent calendar months.

January could be represented by Janus. February is Pan. March is the child Bacchus for the spring equinox. April is Ovid’s story of the birth of spring, and the characters in the story are lined up in the foreground. Pluto had abducted Ceres’ daughter, Proserpina and Jupiter decreed that she would return to the world of the living for only half the year. As the goddess of agriculture, Ceres annually mourned her daughter’s absence, ushering in winter, halting plant growth when Proserpina resided in the underworld. Following Bellini’s sequence and Ovid’s text, then, the month of May could be for Maia, Mercury’s mother, who appears in gold. June is the fertility god Priapus at right, with his bulging phallus and scythe hanging in the tree above. Bellini here represents a story Ovid tells twice—with different victims: a nymph, Lotis (in January) or the goddess of the hearth, Vesta (in June). In both versions, Silenus’ donkey brays, awakening the sleeping lady, and foils Priapus’ erotic plot to take advantage of her.

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century\…)

**Other works in the duke’s camerino**

Characters from ancient stories seem to leap from the pages of classical books onto Alfonso’s camerino walls. He enlisted a well-read advisor to help devise later paintings’ subjects, and he tried to commission the best artists. Alfonso once climbed the Sistine Chapel scaffolding to ask Michelangelo for a painting, and he negotiated with Raphael, but both declined.
He found Titian to be more accommodating. In 1519, Titian contributed his *The Worship of Venus* (above), and in 1523, his *Bacchus and Ariadne* (above). In 1525, Titian painted his *Bacchanal of the Andrians* (below), a scene described in an ancient text about the island of Andros, where a stream sacred to Bacchus flowed with wine. Titian inserted details deliberately invoking comparison to his teacher’s *Feast*. Both feature a reclining female figure at right and an overturned wine glass in the foreground. Both have barebacked male figures carrying vessels exiting at left, and nearby, plump, inebriated fellows imbibing yet more wine. And later in 1529, Titian would repaint Bellini’s background to stylistically unite it with others of his hanging in Alfonso’s camerino, a Renaissance space dedicated to the rebirth of classical art.

Figure \(\PageIndex{114}\): Titian, *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1520-23, oil on canvas, 176.5 x 191 cm (The National Gallery)

Figure \(\PageIndex{115}\): Titian, *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, 1523, oil on canvas, 175 x 193 cm (Museo del Prado)
Additional Resources:

Titian and Bellini, Feast of the Gods at the National Gallery of Art (high resolution available for download here)

Titian and Bellini, Feast of the Gods from Webexhibits

Titian, Bacchanal of the Andrians at the Prado

Titian, The Worship of Venus at the Prado

Titian, Bacchus and Ariadne at The National Gallery

Dosso Dossi, Aeneas and Aches on the Libyan Coast at the National Gallery of Art (also painted for the camerino)

Sixteenth Century Painting in Venice and the Veneto on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Andrea Mantegna

Mantegna, St. James Led to his Execution

by STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{16}\): Mantegna, *St. James Led to his Execution* and the Ovetari Chapel cycle frescoes, 1447–58, Church of the Eremitani (Padua, Italy) reconstructed with photographs, original fragments, and inpainting after American bombs hit the church on March 11, 1944, an ARCHES video
A conversation with Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker in the Ovetari Chapel

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Andrea Mantegna, *San Zeno Altarpiece*

by **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER** and **DR. BETH HARRIS**

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

Video: Andrea Mantegna, *San Zeno Altarpiece*, 1456-59, oil on panel, 212 x 460 cm / 83 x 180", commissioned by the Benedictine Abbot, Gregorio Correr (Basilica of San Zeno, Verona)
Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian*

by **DR. BETH HARRIS** and **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER**

Figure \(\PageIndex{117}\): More Smarthistory images...
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Andrea Mantegna, *Dormition (or Death) of the Virgin* 

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \PageIndex{19}): Andrea Mantegna, *Dormition (or Death) of the Virgin*, c. 1462, tempera on panel, 21.26 × 16.54" / 54 × 42 cm (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

**Andrea Mantegna, Camera Picta (Camera degli Sposi)**

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…) and [DR. DAVID DROGIN](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.05%3A_Italy_in_the_15th_century…)
Video \(\PageIndex{20}\): Andrea Mantegna, Camera Picta (Camera degli Sposi), frescos in the ducal palace in Mantua, 1465-74

Andrea Mantegna, *Dead Christ*

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
Video \( \PageIndex{21} \): Andrea Mantegna, *Dead Christ*, tempera on canvas, c. 1480 – 1500 (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

Guido Mazzoni

Guido Mazzoni, *Lamentation* in Ferrara

by DR. HEATHER GRAHAM

Figure \( \PageIndex{119} \): Guido Mazzoni, *Lamentation*, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) Italy (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)
Modeling Magnificent Woe

In the early 1480s, Duke Ercole d’Este, ruler of the North Italian city-state of Ferrara, hired the artist Guido Mazzoni to create a life-size, terracotta sculpture group of seven biblical figures gathered around the dead body of Jesus Christ. The characters are those associated in religious texts with the final phase of Christ’s human life: the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen, Mary Cleofas, Mary Salome, John the Evangelist, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea. Painted in naturalistic polychrome and modeled with great physical realism, these figures demonstrate deep emotional reactions to the death of Christ whose corpse, modeled with equal naturalism, lies at their feet.

Figure \(\PageIndex{120}\): Guido Mazzoni, the dead Christ, detail of the *Lamentation*, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

Among the biblical mourners are two figures local audiences would have immediately recognized: Duke Ercole and his wife, the Duchess Eleonora of Aragon. Both rulers are presented as active participants in the drama of Christ’s death. The duke is put in the role of Joseph of Arimathea, the wealthy donor of Christ’s tomb, while the duchess is cast as Mary Salome.

Figure \(\PageIndex{121}\): Guido Mazzoni, the Duchess Eleanora of Aragon as Mary Salome and Duke Ercole d’Este
as Joseph of Arimathea, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

The sculpture group was placed in a public church, Santa Maria della Rosa (now destroyed), in a new quarter of the city of Ferrara that the duke was actively developing. Through humble clay, Mazzoni created a work that reflected his patrons’ deep Christian faith, their privileged place within the political and spiritual hierarchy, as well as their noble generosity.

Art and Magnificence

In the princely courts of renaissance Italy, the display of magnificence through art and architecture made from rare and costly materials—marble, gold, silver, precious gems, silk thread and the like—was one of the ways a ruler might demonstrate his power. The more marvelous the objects that a ruler collected or spectacular the buildings that he sponsored, the more noble and learned he (and occasionally she) was understood to be.

Figure (\(\PageIndex{122}\)): Commissioned by or the wealthy Florentine banker, Palla Strozzi, Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This display of magnificent nobility was important to a ruler; it justified his position of authority over his subjects. Sculptures in bronze or marble, silk tapestries with silver and gold thread, paintings encrusted with precious gold-leaf and inlaid with gemstones—such works of art made from materials themselves thought to be “noble” helped a ruler to craft a persona of rightful authority. This performance of nobility through patronage was replicated by the wealthy elite of republican states, like that of Florence, where members of the rising merchant class sought to elevate their own social positions by emulating the patronage practices of traditional aristocrats. An example of this is the opulent—and expensive—altarpiece of the Adoration of the Magi created by Gentile da Fabriano for the wealthy Florentine banker, Palla Strozzi. With its extensive gold-leaf, elaborate gilded frame, and heavy use of expensive pigments such as ultramarine blue, the image spoke to the material wealth and fine taste of its illustrious patron.
Over the course of the early renaissance (usually designated in Italy as the fifteenth century), this emphasis on materiality began to shift. While the importance of the monetary value of artistic and architectural media was never fully eclipsed (people still wanted objects made from costly materials) new value was placed on the skill of the artist. New artistic theories were developing in the early 1400s, most famously recorded in Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise, *On Painting* (1435/6). In this text, one of the first theoretical discussions of art in the European tradition, the Florentine scholar explicitly advises against the use of gold or other costly media, calling upon the artist to ennoble his work with skill and ingenuity over raw materiality. Artists were tasked with rivaling or even surpassing Nature in their treatments of the visible world. Alberti further advised artists to appeal to the emotions of their audiences by creating figures that displayed believable feelings. The artist at the cutting-edge of early renaissance art was one who could suggest both physical and psychological reality.
Guido Mazzoni came of age as an artist during this period of shifting visual interests and new appreciation for visual artists’ creations as intellectual output. While little is known of his personal life, Mazzoni was fortunate in coming from a well-connected family (his grandfather was a member of the rural gentry and his father was a notary) and had close ties to the glamorous Este court. His privileged social position undoubtedly helped him to navigate courtly circles as an artist. Mazzoni worked for and was awarded marks of favor from Duke Ercole I d’Este of Ferrara, Duke Alfonso of Calabria (King Alfonso II of Naples), and the French monarchs Charles VIII and Louis XII. By all accounts, the sculptor enjoyed a highly successful career and was able to capitalize on the rising social status of visual art-making. He was well-paid for his work and well-recognized for the nobility of his profession, even being awarded a knighthood by Charles VIII of France in 1496.
Clay becomes Flesh

Terracotta was a popular sculptural material throughout the early renaissance. It offered unique mimetic and technical possibilities to artists and was known to have been used as an architectural and sculptural medium by the ancient Etruscans, lending it ancient authority.

Mazzoni’s sculpture group created for Duke Ercole was one of several terracotta groups the artist made in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. He created numerous lamentation groups, such as the one in the Church of St. John the Baptist in the crypt in Modena, as well as other subjects including the Adoration of the Madonna and Child in the crypt of the the Modena Cathedral. Although the figures are made from humble clay (a material far more readily available in the region of Ferrara than stone), through the artist’s skillful manipulation this lowly material was transformed into a virtuoso display of artistic ingenuity and refined, courtly taste.
Each figure is modeled with careful attention to physical and anatomical realism. The bodies are accurately proportioned, the gestures are graceful and naturalistic, and facial features and expressions are exquisitely precise. As the sixteenth-century author, Giorgio Vasari, made note, Mazzoni’s figures were “truly more than alive” (*veramente più che vivo*). [1]

The extreme realism of his figures and the superfluity of details in sculpted flesh, cloth, and gestures reflected not only the ultimate early renaissance artistic goal of surpassing nature but also the sophisticated taste of the Italian courts. At the Ferrarese court in particular, northern European art was highly valued.

The Este family had long collected the work of Flemish painters known throughout Europe for their extreme naturalism and emotionally charged imagery. Mazzoni’s richly colored terracotta sculpture group superbly captures the precise detail and provocative emotional displays of Flemish painting in three dimensions while also reflecting the latest Italian trends in bodily and emotional realism.

Art historians have often dismissed Mazzoni’s work as “popular art,” preferring the stoic idealism of the high renaissance to his emotionally charged and highly naturalistic imagery. This designation implies a lack of sophistication that does an injustice to the artist’s skill in manifesting renaissance artistic goals. Thankfully, recent interest on the topics of patronage, the history of the body, and the history of the emotions has prompted a new appreciation for Mazzoni’s accomplishments.

**Notes:**


**Additional resources**

Read more about expanding our understanding of the renaissance on Smarthistory

Read more about Italian terracotta sculpture from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Read about another famous sculptor, the Florentine Luca della Robbia, who who worked in terracotta


Guido Mazzoni and Renaissance Emotions

by DR. HEATHER GRAHAM

Figure \(\PageIndex{127}\): Guido Mazzoni, *Lamentation*, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

Why Mourning Matters

A life-size, terracotta sculpture group shows seven biblical figures gathered around the dead body of Jesus Christ. Created in the 1480s for Duke Ercole d’Este of Ferrara, Guido Mazzoni’s **sculpture group** also includes the duke and his wife, the Duchess Eleanora of Aragon, cast in the roles of Joseph of Arimathea and Mary Salome. All of the figures express a range of emotional responses to the death of Jesus. These emotional displays in Mazzoni’s Ferrarese sculpture group are key to understanding the work’s function as a display of the patron’s nobility and piety. Emotions are inherent to humanity, but they are not universal and unchanging. Emotions vary across time and culture. They are nurtured or suppressed, constructed and understood according to people’s ideas about the human body, the human psyche, and humanity’s place within the universe.
In renaissance Italy, displays of grief were expected to be moderated by Christian viewers' faith in their salvation through Jesus Christ. Although sorrow at the death of a loved one was expected and valued as a display of personal affection, there were definite limits to how extreme the public display of grief was supposed to be. Saint Paul, one of the leaders of the early Christian church, had explicitly prohibited excessive mourning: “I would not have you grieve as others do without hope” (I Thessalonians 4:13–14). Emotional moderation was so important that in various parts of Italy throughout the renaissance period laws were passed prohibiting excessive mourning behaviors at funerals. Works of art that showed people in mourning situations (as in the scene of grieving over the dead body of Christ created by Mazzoni) were one way to help guide Christian audiences in appropriate behavior. While each of Mazzoni’s figures displays a believable sorrow, none of them tear their hair, shred their clothes, gesture wildly, or perform other expressions of what would have been considered socially inappropriate levels of grief.
Gender and Emotions

While we may never truly know the inner emotional experiences of people living in the distant past, we may use works of art, like Mazzoni’s grieving figures, to understand how people were expected to behave in emotionally charged situations. Works like this may provide clues into how men and women were expected to behave differently, as were people of different social classes. In Mazzoni’s work, it is the women who display their sorrow most forcefully. This is in keeping with renaissance understanding of women as more naturally emotional creatures, who were thought to be generally unable to moderate their behavior as well as men. We also see how emotional control was nuanced across social class. Of the women displayed, the aristocratic Duchess Eleonora as Mary Salome is the most restrained in her sorrow.

A comparison between her figure and that of Mary Magdalen—the supreme example of an emotional woman in the Christian tradition—shows the duchess to be sorrowful, yet nobly restrained.

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Similarly, John the Evangelist is the most emotionally demonstrative of the men displayed. However, while the women beside him open their arms and mouths in expressions of sorrow, his hands are tightly woven together and his face in contorted into a tightly closed grimace. As a man, renaissance viewers would have understood John to be more capable of controlling his emotions than his female counterparts. Most restrained in his expression of feeling is Duke Ercole as Joseph of Arimathea. His head is softly tilted and his features are lightly strained in dignified grief.

**Model Mourners**

As rulers, Ercole and Eleonora were expected to embody the nobility of their princely status and also be models of Christian piety. A Renaissance prince lived at the political and spiritual center of his community. He was both secular governor and spiritual shepherd for his people. In Ferrara, this closeness was reinforced by the direct physical relationship between the Este castle and the city’s cathedral located in close proximity to one another.

Duke Ercole and the Duchess Eleonora are restrained and gender-appropriate models of grief in Mazzoni’s sculpture group. They embody fifteenth-century emotional behavioral ideals for their Christian community. Not only do they demonstrate rational emotional responses appropriate to the death of Christ, but their noble behavior served as a broader example of appropriate grieving for their subjects. They are models of moderation, soberly dressed in fine clothing, but not overtly magnificent; emotionally expressive, but not excessive in their demonstrations of sorrow. In Mazzoni’s skillful hands, Ercole as Joseph and Eleonora as Mary Salome are presented as ideal models of tasteful nobility and moderate emotion.

The history of emotions is a new and expanding field. Works of art populated by emoting human figures offer us one way to explore the emotional worlds of the past and, by doing so, may help us better understand our own emotional
world. For many in the present-day, death is often sanitized and grief compartmentalized. Guido Mazzoni’s *Lamentation* reminds us that our mortality is a burden shared by all, that great sorrow—like great joy or great beauty—is a precious part of our humanity.

**Additional resources**

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